

Dyddiad: 5 Gorffennaf 2000
Amser: 9.00am - 12.30pm
Lleoliad: Ystafell Bwyllgora, Adeilad y Cynulliad Cenedlaethol

Nid yw'r cyfieithiad Cymraeg ar gael ar hyn o bryd.

FARM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY GROUP - PROGRESS REPORT

Purpose

1. The paper sets out the thinking that has been developed with the Farm Development Strategy Group on how more effective and coherent services can be provided to help farming adapt to the pressures it faces.

Background

2. The Group is one of the Agri-Food Partnership's strategy groups, and is chaired by Dr Fred Cunningham, Principal of Llysfasi Agricultural College. Membership of the Group is at Annex 1. The issues the Group is concerned with revolve around the skills and information that farming families need:

- promotion of best agricultural practice, in terms of business management; improving quality; lowering the cost base; and sensitivity to the environment and animal welfare;
- raising skills levels to support this;
- promotion of best practice on diversification of farm businesses.

Areas for action

3. The Group has identified five key areas for action:

3.1 Defining the models of agriculture that need to be promoted. FRCA is now working with the farming unions, and the other organisations involved in the Group, to define:

- current best practice models for Welsh agricultural production that need to be promoted;
- what these models might look like for 2020;
- research and development priorities to support this. These priorities will be fed into discussions with MAFF, who hold the R & D budget for England and Wales.

The models will be defined reflecting the need to promote sustainable agriculture. These models will

then be used to guide work under 3.2 - 3.5 below.

3.2 Raising business and IT skills, to help farmers run their farms more commercially. This will also give them the business skills to diversify more effectively. While perhaps 7 out of 10 Welsh dairy farmers know their unit costs and margins, only a very small percentage of sheep and beef farmers do. Wide variations in margins exist. Business and IT are therefore seen as the top skills priorities. Mid Wales TEC has, at the request of the Group, commissioned a study of current provision and recommendations for action. This will report in July. There are links between this and the opportunity in the JIGSAW project to help farmers to use IT to improve their record-keeping and paperwork for CAP subsidies.

3.3 A Wales network of demonstration farms. Objective 5b has supported a significant number of projects to transfer best practice techniques to farmers. Many of these involve demonstration farms, which are acknowledged as one of the most effective means of getting new ideas across to farmers. As a result, there is currently an uneven pattern of separate network of demonstration farms across Wales, all independent of each other. The organisations involved in the Farm Development Strategy Group have given their support to the development of an all-Wales network of demonstration farms, as a vehicle for more coherent technology transfer. Most of these would be ordinary family farms, which would be used to showcase best practice. Local facilitators would maximise activities, working with all forms of local groups where farmers and their families network, e.g. union branches, YFC, grassland societies, women's groups etc. The network would highlight good practice in terms of diversification, as well as environmentally-friendly and welfare-friendly agricultural production. Specialist organisations such as IGER, MLC, MDC, ADAS and WIRS would work with and through the network, which would give each of them a wider network than they could afford separately. A website would be created to support the network. Detailed proposals for the project are currently being worked up, in discussion with the relevant organisations.

3.4 Advice and consultancy. Objective 5b has, in the same vein, led to a wide variety of local schemes which provide subsidised advice and consultancy for farmers. More than 30 organisations are involved. Apart from the potential confusion, there is a danger that farmers will not be well-placed to hold organisations to account for the quality of their advice, in a situation where the organisation obtains funding direct under European programmes. The Group favours a more co-ordinated approach, in which:

- a standard of service should be specified which should be available throughout Wales, focusing on key priorities derived from the analysis in 3.1;
- there should be effective Wales-wide monitoring and evaluation of the service provided, involving the farming unions;
- consortia arrangements for delivery are encouraged.

Discussions are proceeding as to how this might be put into practice. To be effective, access to EU and domestic funding for the provision of services would need to be subject to organisations subscribing to

the specified standards of service, and being subject to external evaluation. One option is that the WDA regions might have the key role in funding service provision.

3.5 Promoting Innovation. Apart from advice on specific issues, the work done by the Cwysi programme under Objective 5b has shown the value of more general longer-term work with farming families to widen horizons and promote innovation. The Group feels it is important that this continues, Wales-wide, in future. There is also scope for closer involvement of the farming unions and YFC in work to help farmers grapple with the issues they face, and NAWAD will be considering this with them.

Business Connect

4. It is envisaged that all these services would be bound up with Business Connect. The Business Connect helpline for farmers which is being established will provide a simple "front door" to the range of services available.

Financial Implications

5. Provision for support for the range of services outlined has been written into the SPD for Objective 1, and the Rural Development Plan. Assembly match funding has been identified from existing baselines and the additional resources arising from the Prime Minister's summit on 30 March. All the expenditure envisaged will be accommodated within existing agriculture baselines.

Compliance

6. The necessary powers are those under Section 40 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 pursuant to the Assembly's function of implementing the common agricultural policy in Wales by virtue of section 2 (2) of the European Communities Act 1972 and the Assembly's designation in the European Communities (Designation) (No.3) Order 1999 (SI 1999/2788).

Next Steps

7. Subject to the views of the Committee, the thinking set out in this paper will be woven into the Regional agri-Food Action Plan that is being written for the use of Objective 1 funding, and will guide complementary action that is undertaken in the rest of Wales. A follow-up to *Farming for the Future* will be published in the Autumn, and this will include a statement of the plan for action on farm development.

Invitation

8. The Committee is invited to comment on the issues raised in this paper.

Contact Point

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