

Cyhoeddir y papur hwn yn yr iaith y'i derbyniwyd gan Gynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru.

Paper by the Farmers' Union of Wales

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE, REVIEW OF RURAL DIVERSIFICATION; PLANNING

1. The Farmers' Union of Wales welcomes the Committee's decision to undertake a review of rural diversification and is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this process.
2. The Farmers' Union of Wales believes that the sustainability of Welsh agriculture is paramount to the well-being of the countryside, rural communities and a thriving rural economy.
3. The range of primary agricultural products capable of production in Wales is largely limited to milk, beef and sheep production, (87% of gross output of Welsh agriculture), although the scope for diversification into other areas such as tourism is possible for some.
4. Whilst the FUW recognises the importance of diversification opportunities to the future well-being of rural areas, it is also important to accept that diversification is not a panacea for all and that decisions to implement new enterprises must not be taken lightly.
5. Whilst the decline in agricultural fortunes has encouraged farmers to look at other forms of income generation, anecdotal evidence suggests that farmers perceive 'planning restrictions' to be one of the most bureaucratic and frustrating restrictions facing farmers wishing to diversify.
6. During 1996/97 the Union raised concern at the Welsh Office's moves to replace the Planning Policy Guidance system with a single document, Planning Guidance (Wales) (PG (W)) supplemented by a series of Technical Advice Notes (TANs(W)), arguing that the proposals contained insufficient detailed information to give adequate guidance policy interpretation between local planning authorities.
7. Based on details received from members in different local planning authority areas, this concern does seem to have been borne out through a range of interpretations to planning guidance within Wales.
8. The Union is also concerned at the proliferation of non-statutory designations in Wales ie Register of Historic Landscapes and Gardens, Green Wedges etc that can limit the opportunities for diversification and economic growth in rural areas.
9. As three quarters of Wales is already covered by some form of conservation/environmental designation it is vital to ensure that the diversification and development of agriculture and indeed the wider rural community is not allowed to stagnate under an overly-protectionist planning system.
10. The Union has noted a recent trend of tying buildings and land to agricultural occupancy conditions. Given the current economic crisis in agriculture many farmers may consider selling part of their land or buildings to alleviate pressures on their cash flow. Whilst recognising the importance of retaining the structure of family farms in Wales, the Union believes that there

should be a mechanism to allow for a simplified 'change of use' to reflect economic factors.

11. As a means of meeting the Assembly's commitment to the diversification of rural areas the following proposals are submitted for Committee's consideration:-
 1. The Union fully supports the proposals introduced by Elin Jones AM which would amend the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to enable agricultural buildings on farm land to be adapted for alternative uses and believes that these proposals should be re-visited as a matter of urgency;
 2. The Union believes there should be a stronger commitment to the desirability of change of commercial use for existing sites (including farms) to make it easier for non-agricultural diversification, allowing a range of light industrial uses without the need for planning permission.
 3. The Union would welcome changes in the Use Classes Order to include general leisure and recreation uses in farming to allow a degree of flexibility for farmers considering diversification enterprises.
 4. The Farmers' Union of Wales believes that planning guidance should reflect a commitment to the conversion of redundant farm buildings for commercial purposes.
 5. The Farmers' Union of Wales believes there is an urgent need to ensure that planning guidance is drafted to reduce the wide fluctuations in interpretation currently perceived around Wales. It is also vital to ensure that strong guidance is given to Local Planning Authorities on the importance of dynamic economic development in rural areas.
 6. Whilst recognising the importance of environment and landscape protection in Wales, the Union believes that planning guidance should reflect the need for a range of economic activities. To this end there may be some merit in the Assembly compiling a list (not exhaustive) of activities which could be considered as appropriate development in rural areas.