

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

**Paper from the National Farmers Union Cymru Wales**

**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES - AGRICULTURE AND RURAL  
DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

**DEVELOPING A MORE DIVERSE RURAL ECONOMY  
PLANNING - A BARRIER TO DIVERSIFICATION?**

1. NFU Cymru Wales, on behalf of the 16,000 farming and rural businesses we represent in Wales, welcomes the opportunity to offer evidence to the National Assembly for Wales on the issue of whether the Town & Country Planning Act 1991 acts as a barrier to diversification.

2. **Introduction**

Whilst on farm diversification is not a new phenomenon, it is only within the last two decades that it has been promoted within National Policies as a way of maintaining the viability of some farm businesses. The need for businesses to search for sources of additional income has heightened as income from mainstay agriculture has declined in the last four years or so.

Although not a panacea for the economic ills of agriculture in general, diversification will form an increasingly important consideration in the future strategies of many individual farm businesses.

3. **What farming expects of the planning system**

Whilst it is always difficult to generalise on behalf of some 16,000 individual businesses - each of whom hold their own expectations of what it wants the planning system to deliver, it is contended that Local Planning Authorities should demonstrate a thorough understanding and appreciation of the role of farming - not only as primary food producers and owners/managers of the countryside, but also an understanding of the critical economic relationships between the appearances of the countryside and the need for profitable businesses to sustain it.

4. **The farming experience of Planning to date**

Whilst stressing the difficulty of generalisation, our own survey undertaken in 1999 indicated that some 17% of farmers who had not diversified cited Planning as the major factor influencing their decision.

## 5. Issues of concern

The issues of concern to the farming community about Planning Policy and decision making can be identified at a number of spatial scales:

- a. National Agenda;
- b. Regional Agenda;
- c. Local Agenda.

In relation to a) NFU Cymru w Wales is not convinced of the need for a major overhaul of Primary Legislation and its relative Policy Guidance, however, we consider that Local Authorities should be required to:

- Give due weight to the social and economic dimensions of the Government's sustainable development agenda;
- Give greater emphasis to the increasing importance of diversification to the future viability of farm businesses;
- Give recognition to the need for existing diversified enterprises to develop as appropriate.

On the issue of Regional Agenda b) we are heartened by the interest demonstrated by this Committee of the National Assembly for Wales on this matter. It however appears to us that rural diversification is viewed by many in authority as in the band of tourism and craft based industries alone.

In the local sense c) it is within the local interpretation and implementation of Planning Guidance Notes that the farming community expresses it's most concern.

Initial 'face-value' analysis of Structure and Local Plans often provides little evidence to substantiate such concerns since such plans always contain policies that support diversification of farming and other rural businesses. Such diversification policies however never 'stand alone' - they not only have qualifying criterion but also have to be read across to other specific and general policies, which tend to negate their central economic objectives. The most obvious tension is usually found between policies that seek to encourage diversification and those that exist to protect and enhance the landscape.

Transport policies are another area, which increasingly seek to restrict land uses that generate additional traffic in what is deemed to be inappropriate locations.

Local designations are another issue which emerges as grounds for refusing proposals and the increasing responsibilities the Local Planning System is expected to play in delivering the policies of other bodies and agencies such as the Countryside Council for Wales and the Environment Agency. Whilst tension between diversification policies and those policies that seek to protect are often resolved at local level by refusal or approval, again, imposed conditions often make the proposal uneconomic or over-burdened. Even in cases where a proposal might be accepted, refusals can also result based on the fear of a successful growth and subsequent development of a diversified business.

## **6. Suggested measures**

- Forces for change dictate that those who have the ability and facilities to diversify must consider the options which emerge;
- The background need for diversification be positively recognised by Local Planning Authorities who should be encouraged to produce planning guidance aids to assist rural businesses in understanding what activities were considered acceptable in planning terms;
- There should be dialogue between the Planning and farming communities to identify the scope for diversification opportunities and how best these might be taken forward. In that regard, considerable merit is seen in organising farm visits for Councillors and Officers in order to demonstrate ‘first hand’ experiences of current and future challenges facing the Industry and the relevance of planning policies and decisions to farm businesses.
- The issue of transport policies needs to be revisited - particularly strategies designed to improve the rural road infrastructure;
- Consideration be given to the introduction of a ‘Rural Business Class’ into the Use Classes Order to distinguish such activities as indigenous grown timber processing facilities from the conventional industrial process class that such activities currently fall under.

**7. NFU Cymru w Wales** therefore concludes that for the reasons stated, the Planning System is a barrier to diversification.