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DM/sh/1602
21 June 2024

Mr Paul Davies MS
Chair
Economy Trade & Rural Affairs Committee
Synedd Cymru
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Dear Mr Davies

Thank you for inviting TFA Cymru to give oral evidence to your Inquiry into the Sustainable Farming Scheme on 9 May 2024.

During the discussions, Wales Young Farmers discussed the frustration of new entrants trying to get started in farming, access to the Sustainable Farming Scheme and lack of engagement with Welsh Government.

Time intervened before I could highlight the importance of County Council farms to new entrants, and the decision of many County Councils to dispose of their farm estates to make up the shortfall in their budgets.

Access to funding from the proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme for County Council farming tenants will be severely restricted by virtue of clauses in their tenancy agreements, as it the case for all tenants.

In particular, compliance with the Agri-Pollution Regulations—a requirement of the proposed Scheme is proving a major hurdle with most Councils unwilling to commit funds to update fixed equipment when there are so many other demands on their budgets.

Powys County Council have indicated that if pushed into a corner, they may have no alternative than to dispose of their entire farming estate (some 140 holdings).

Assembly member Alun Davies, when Environment Secretary, engaged Charles Coates, Properties Officer for Cardiff to conduct an Inquiry into the state of Council farms in Wales and to recommend a course of action to encourage County Councils to invest in and retain their farms.

Prior to Charles' appointment to Cardiff he was Properties Officer for Gloucestershire County Council.

The Tenant Farmers Association were able to work closely with him and came up with a plan to invest in, and retain their Council farms profitably rather than sell the farms off as had been the policy.

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE:
GEORGE DUNN

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TFA Cymru and Wales Young Farmers attended a number of stakeholder meetings with Charles in the course of his work.

The Inquiry was hosted by Powys County Council financed by a loan from the Welsh Government. Unfortunately, when Alun Davies lost his post Welsh Government recalled the loan so that Charles's Inquiry was never completed.

He did, however, produce an interim report in addition to various papers with statistics on the extent of County Council farms in Wales, condition, etc.

At the recent World Nature Event in the Senedd, Cardiff I had a brief conversation with committee member, Jenny Rathbone. She confirmed that stakeholders could submit further evidence and that she thought the Committee would be interested in Charles Coates' interim report.

Thus herewith a copy of this report. If you think any of the other papers produced by Charles would be of interest, we will be happy to try and locate them.

Any loss of Council farms due to Welsh Government policies would be regrettable and counter-productive to encouraging young people to enter the industry.

I am sorry to have been rather slow at getting back to you but hope you find this useful.

Yours sincerely



D R A Matheson MBE
Chairman TFA Cymru

Welsh County Farms: Way Forward Initiative

Service Improvement Development Plan

Introduction:

Following 10 months of background research; effective engagement with key stakeholder bodies; and in depth consideration of the key issues facing the County Farms Service in Wales, it is now timely to crystallise this into a realistic improvement development plan to meet the approved recommendations arising from the 2010 Welsh Government's Finance Sub Committee of Inquiry, and to positively address the key objectives for the Initiative set out in the original project brief. This Paper summarises the key areas for further work to be undertaken to build on the momentum generated so far, and identifies under each area the anticipated Service benefits arising for both councils and estate tenants.

Recent meetings of the Industry Representative Group and the Council Stakeholder Group demonstrate there is an appetite for developing a more cohesive, joined up approach to the management of the estate across Wales, and it would now be timely to translate this into a tangible, realistic, timelined, costed, risk assessed, and outcome based Plan containing key performance measures and milestones.

Governance:

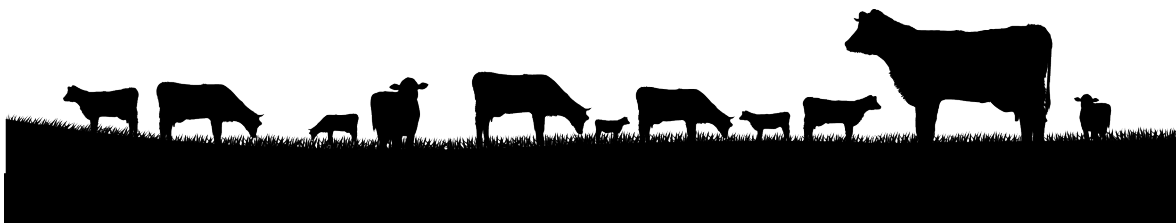
The Initiative operates under a transparent and accountable framework where governance is managed through the vehicle of the Strategic Programme Board providing clear access to relevant Welsh Govt. policy officers, together with operational coordination exercised by Powys CC's County Farms Board. This ensures the project remains grounded in reality providing a context and environment to test out new ideas and concepts for potential wider application across the estate nationally.

Original Project Objectives:

Those enshrined following the 2010 Inquiry, and more recently embodied in the Core Objectives of the Initiative, are summarised below:

- Welsh Govt to work with councils to develop better links with the private sector to overcome lettings barriers;
- Issue guidance to councils to conduct estate reviews; and
- Use examples of good management practice elsewhere to promote more strategic management of estates.

The Initiative has built on this by adopting additional objectives of: modernising the service; providing business support to new entrants; stimulating greater internal and external tenant mobility; reviewing current estate management plans; developing meaningful working relationships with industry representative bodies; facilitating



judicious estate rationalisations; positively promoting the service; and exploiting opportunities to develop broader dimensions for the service such as energy renewables and using estates as educational resources

The Initiative also sought to explore scope for greater inter authority collaboration in the operational management of estates as a means of reducing management costs and achieving improved operational efficiencies. However, at this stage, possibly as a consequence of future uncertainties if local government reorganisation is pursued, councils currently consider it would be premature to positively promote collaborative management of estates unless there is local will voluntarily to do so. In many respects managerial linking up now might divert attention from putting in place a range of initiatives to promote more effective collaboration between councils in relation to developing a shared vision and common set of values, which in turn might eventually, and more naturally, evolve into a variety of collaborative managerial arrangements between councils. This Service Improvement Delivery Plan will, therefore, as a key plank of its work, explore and evaluate potential options for collaboration in the future management of estates.

Progress to date (Phase 1):

Work to date has primarily focused on:

- Developing an in depth understanding of the current state of the Service across Wales.
- Forging constructive links with a wide range of representative organisations, seeking their views on the future direction for the Service.
- Identifying key areas where improvements could be made to service delivery.
- Generally raising the profile of the Service within the farming industry of Wales.
- Effectively engaging with the Welsh Government with particular regard to improving the format, content and credibility of the Annual Smallholdings Report and exploring ways in which the next version of the Young Entrants Scheme could be made more accessible to prospective county farms tenants.

Service Delivery Plan Objectives: (Phase 2)

To:

- Develop a clear vision for the future direction of the County Farms Estate Service across Wales
- Put in place a suite of best management practice guidelines;
- Establish appropriate meeting forums to share best practice, discuss matters of prevailing interest, and improve communications with industry representative bodies;



- Improve the collation and dissemination of core performance related information regarding estates;
- Implement the Welsh Government recommendations for improved service deliver;
- Positively raise the profile of the Service across Wales, and embed it as a vital niche component of the Welsh rural economy.

Action Plan:

It will be a key requirement of the Project Manager to build upon progress made to date and to pursue these objectives by working on each of the action points summarised below:

1. Develop an in depth Vision for the future direction and development of the County Farms Service across Wales.

Benefits: Greater clarity of purpose, shared identity, and raised Service profile.

2. Promote the adoption of the ACES Service Rationale across welsh councils.

Benefits: Clear exposition of role of estates and the services they provide to the rural economy.

3. Promote the TRIG Best Practice in Asset Management Guidelines, and offer a critical friend facility to councils seeking to put in place or update their estate asset management plans.

Benefits: Achieves Welsh Govt recommendation of developing a more strategic approach to estate management.

4. Work with Welsh Govt to improve the format of the County Farms Annual Report, and to forge closer links with CIPFA to ensure a coordinated approach to information collection and dissemination is put in place.

Benefits: Production of credible key performance indicators to facilitate effective peer and trend review analysis, and to use the report as a key profile raising vehicle.

5. Work with Welsh Govt to better align the Young Entrants Scheme to the requirements of new entrants to the county farms estate.

Benefits: Availability of grant aid through accessible means to assist new entrants to council farms establish viable businesses.

6. Forge closer ties with Industry Representative Organisations and maintain a regular dialogue with them on matters of prevailing interest and concern.

Benefits: Improved links with representative bodies to harness support, improve communications, and develop effective partnership working between councils and estate tenants.

7. Establish a Welsh County Farms Forum, possibly under the ACES umbrella (Welsh and Rural Branches), for Members and estate managers to regularly discuss matters of prevailing interest, and to develop and share best practice experiences



with the ultimate objective of expanding the Forum to include industry representative bodies at an appropriate time.

Benefits: Provides a vehicle to share ideas, promote best practice, effectively engage with representative bodies, and to positively promote the service across Wales.

8. Undertake a skills, experience and competencies audit across Welsh councils' estate management teams.

Benefits: Provides a potential pool of specialist expertise which could be shared amongst councils where spare capacity exists or there is a will to enter into commercial working relationships to improve operational management of estates, with the possible additional benefit of providing broader experience for estate management staff to work in different environments.

9. Develop a model Service Level Agreement for application where a Lead Council is to provide an estate management service to another council.

Benefits: provides a template for application where there is a local will to pursue collaborative working.

10. Identify scope for the introduction of a Procurement Framework to facilitate more cost effective provision of specialist professional services, e.g. legal or valuation advice; and to package new capital investment projects to secure more cost efficient delivery of new building schemes across estates.

Benefits: Financial savings from securing more competitive delivery of services.

11. Pool council experiences in the exploration of opportunities and options to encourage older A.H.A. tenancy tenants to retire from their holdings by the provision of Exception Site retirement homes; nominations rights to Housing Association accommodation; or the creation of small retirement holdings on estates.

Benefits; Increases internal tenant upward mobility by removing the bottleneck created by older tenants' inability or unwillingness to vacate their holdings.

12. Establish, at national level, effective links with larger landowning bodies (C.L.A., Institutional Landowners, and traditional landed estates) to provide more opportunities for able and ambitious estate tenants to progress to larger tenanted farms, coupled with exploring the practicalities of developing Nomination Opportunities between individual councils and other landowners.

Benefits: Increases upward mobility for estate tenants, thereby freeing up more opportunities further down the line: The Farming Ladder in operation.

13. Explore the potential of the Welsh Govt's EPIMS Property Database to promote the availability of estate holdings to let.

Benefits: Improved information regarding farm availability, facilitating increased inter-authority movement of tenants across council estates.



14. Adoption of New Entrant Database, Business Support and Training Initiative, including provision of adequate resources to ensure application, possibly linking in with the Farming Connect Initiative.

Benefits: Better equipped new entrants to council holdings; streamlined re lettings process; and enhanced support to enable tenants to exploit the commercial potential of their holdings.

15. Adoption of Proposed Tenant Mentoring Scheme, with adequate funding, to ensure effective implementation, possibly linking in with the Farming Connect Initiative.

Benefits: Pastoral care and support for estate tenants and their families during times of stress and difficulty and to help alleviate isolation.

16. Undertake research to identify the level of future demand for available holdings, and to assess the capabilities and suitability of potential applicants for council farms.

Benefits: Collation of vital intelligence regarding the true level of need for council farms to help define the future shape, size and disposition of the Service across Wales.

17. Undertake research to identify the number of jobs sustained by the estate across Wales, both direct and indirect;

Benefits: Collation of core intelligence to better define the extent to which the Service supports the rural economy.

18. Establish a comprehensive Knowledge Database of key information, working practices and relevant information regarding the operation of council farms across Wales, together with forging links with Universities and other training Institutions to explore new techniques and business management practices.

Benefits: Information is key to effective service delivery.

19. Explore the potential to use social media to raise service profile, share information, and introduce more modern ways of working; e.g. publication of regular newsletters etc.

Benefits: Exploits the use of new technology to expand the horizons of the service

20. Identify scope to create estate product branding and collaborative produce marketing.

Benefits: Potentially improves commercial viability of farm holdings.

21. Explore opportunities for collaboration with English councils and with DEFRA to promote examples of best practice and jointly modernise the service.

Benefits: Potential exposure to a larger pool of expertise, knowledge and sources of funding to assist develop the service.



Implementation:

If the general thrust of this Paper is supported the Project Manager will develop a costed, timed implementation plan, and will use this to secure financial contributions to the Invest to Save Programme from industry representative bodies and from estate owning councils. Clearly, there will be those councils, especially those with very small estates, who may not wish to participate, but it is anticipated there should be sufficient critical mass support to take this initiative forward in an incremental manner by introducing a range of measures which will bring tangible benefits to both councils and estate tenants, thereby achieving one of the core objectives of the project:

A modern, fit for purpose, dynamic, forward looking, relevant Service fit for the 21st century, with a vital niche role to play in both the tenanted sector and the rural economy of Wales.

