

Written evidence submitted by Conwy County Borough Council (HIL0003)

Conwy County Borough Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence. Since its launch, officers have hosted a virtual meeting and have held discussions with internal staff, Councillors, and stakeholders to gather information on how best to respond to the consultation.

1. How unique are family farms and how significant is their contribution to Wales' cultural life?

The greater majority of farmers in Conwy are indigenous communities where Welsh is the spoken language both in the home and in which business is conducted.

Cultural connections with farming across Conwy are strong, and agriculture plays an important role in sustaining the Welsh language. A third of individuals working in land management sectors speak the language regularly (higher than any other employment category).

Any threat to small family farms will undermine WG's ambition to see the number of people able to enjoy speaking and using Welsh reach a million by 2050. It jeopardises the sustainability of our traditional, smaller Welsh Family farms and without those there is impact on our communities (rural schools, Churches and Chapels, SME's), the language and the landscape and habitats, which is an important element of our national identity. This is evidenced in the recent Farming Connect report on 'laith y Pridd' that evidences and explores the relationship between agriculture and the Welsh language. Any proposals for reforming an industry, must adopt actions that will work to safeguard the language, and ensure entry to the agricultural sector for the younger generation to be an attractive option. We have laboured the point in previous consultation responses around the valuable relationship between agriculture and the nature of family farming in Wales and the Welsh language.

Farmers / food producers manage 75% of the land in Conwy and there are over 1,200 businesses directly involved in agricultural in Conwy, with a 1,000 full time farmers / food producers and a further 1,500 workers and many more who are dependent upon the sector indirectly. It has long been acknowledged that farming communities have supported and reinforced all aspects of rural services, from ensuring schools, shops, and pubs remain open, to being a stronghold of the Welsh language. During 2017, the NFU commissioned research, which showed that for every £1 invested by government in agriculture the industry delivers a return of around £7.40 – that's a £1.5 billion return on the £200m a year currently spent on direct payments in Wales. If you add to this, the wider environmental, cultural and social contribution of farming there can be little doubt that the industry represents extremely good value for money.

Farming supports a great number of businesses which have set up in rural Conwy because of the concentration of farms. Again here, the family businesses are passed from generation to generation as farming maintains their sustainability; fabricators, fencing contractors, feed merchants, farm machinery sales and repair, contractors all of which go some way to retaining young people in our communities. A good percentage of these young people will derive such employment in parallel with farming to sustain their livelihood on the farm and to reside in their community of choice.

Any movement or support from our traditional family farms and rural communities will have a catastrophic impact on rural businesses, which are reliant on the agricultural sector, the dynamics of the communities, and on the Welsh language. Agriculture in its current form supports a wide range of Welsh industries and sectors, and this must be acknowledged. The industry is recognised

globally as one of the best for producing high quality foods, but must also be recognised as a valuable industry within Wales, where its contribution financially and socially has given so much security, reassurance, and underpins a number of other sectors.

Welsh tourism is sold to the world with advertising campaigns depicting Wales' mountains, coastline and various landscape images. Wales' distinct tapestry of various habitats and countryside is only achievable as our farmers / food producers have been the stewards of the countryside, and their centuries-old ways of managing our land has formed the beautiful countryside we have today.

Most farms have been passed down through the generations; the farmer's knowledge and understanding of living culture and heritage is invaluable and is passed on naturally to future generations from grandparents to grandchildren through their participation in traditional farming practices, sharing staff at shearing and gathering, retaining ancient field names, earmarks, selling stock at the weekly local market etc. They are active in Chapels/Churches, eisteddfodau, Young Farmers Clubs, School governors etc. Their significance to contribution to their cultural community is evidenced at the Nant Conwy Rugby Club where every team, without exception across the age range from mini teams, juniors, youths to the senior teams is coached by a farmer and participants are predominantly farmers, both male and female teams.

Traditional stock-proof boundaries are dry stone wall construction, hand built and a skill passed down through the generations with pride applied to the work to ensure that it is robust to stand for years and maintains the visual appearance of the landscape.

Children raised on farms have superior knowledge, understanding and awareness of the environment around their communities; they will at an early age know the names of mountains and hills, will recognise and can name plants and birds without the aid of a reference book because they are taught by their parents as part of day to day life on the farm.

The smaller traditional farms in Wales breed hefted stock, producing quality food naturally and economically by grazing native breeds, suitable to the terrain and climate and sets us apart from lowland arable farms of England where switching farm production focus is easier.

Smaller traditional farms, unlike larger units, support a greater number of families and in-turn, support the retention of rural schools which are community schools and where community activities are held and intergenerational social interaction ensured.

We call for a robust language impact assessment as part any planning to ensure that whatever is proposed for our family farms and taken forward has a positive impact on our Welsh Language and thus adhering to the Well Being of Future Generations Act goal of "a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh Language".

2. What are the main challenges facing family farms specifically, and farming communities more generally, in Wales?

Red meat producers view as totally unfair the acceptance of foods produced in countries where lower levels of animal welfare and husbandry standards are practiced and which are acceptable to other countries and competing markets via trade deals.

Farmers in Wales are proud of the high standards they maintain at a high food production cost. High standards of animal welfare, bio-security, transportation, inspections at market and slaughterhouses are costly but are adhered to without exception. This contributes to the superior quality and taste of the meat sold.

The unknown long term effect of the EU Transition and the uncertainty of future support-payments post 2023 makes it difficult for farmers to plan for the future. It appears unlikely that support will be available for meat production which the terrain and which climate in Conwy is suitable but instead on public goods.

As uncertainty continues, where possible, farmers have diversified to egg production, chicken production, renewable energy, holiday lets/camping and large scale automated dairy units but there is a threat that this will reach a point of saturation.

Particularly since the EU Transition Government policies and criteria particularly involving farm diversification is very restrictive and the planning system is slow to adapt and to accept the needs and changes within the industry. Governments could look at how other countries support their agriculture to maintain their rural communities; i.e. Switzerland.

Aberystwyth University annual survey of farm accounts in virtually every sector shows that without the Single Farm Payment farms would be trading at a loss. Removal of the Single Farm Payment could result in de-population as farms become unviable. Such payments maintain a presence in the countryside and capacity to produce food, and also keep the food affordable.

Wilding of left lands will be detrimental to the tourism industry in Conwy which is attractive to walkers because of the many miles of well-maintained paths and scenery.

Farming supports a great number of businesses in the community which have set up in because of the concentration of farms. Again here, the family businesses are passed from generation to generation as the farming industry maintains their sustainability; fabricators, fencing contractors, feed merchants, farm machinery sales and repair, agriculture stores and contractors all of which go some way to retaining young people in our communities. A good percentage of these young people will derive employment in such business' in parallel with farming to sustain their livelihood and to reside in their community of choice. There is a real risk that without such opportunity they will be forced to leave to seek employment elsewhere.

During the late 50's, thousands of acres of farmland in rural Conwy was purchased by the Forestry Commission and planted with non-native fast growing trees to meet post war demand for building materials. The trees have now reached maturity and removed through large scale felling. This land, which was previously in food production is now unsuitable to revert to food production but suitable for the planting of native trees would be step towards becoming carbon positive communities.

As farmers leave the land for a more certain future outside farming or retire, there exists a threat of further agricultural production lands being purchased by investment companies for tree planting to take advantage of promised generous support payments.

Such lands are in the remotest parts of rural Conwy where quarrying was once a major employer and which historically, where farmers would work to sustain their income and the small farm. As the quarries closed, families left the area to seek employment and once vibrant villages such as Cwm Penmachno & Penmachno fell into decline, and its traditional quarry cottages were left empty. The cottages were eventually sold cheaply as second homes and presently, the houses are largely unoccupied during the week but full at weekends as owners escape to the countryside from the stress of city life and employment. A disproportionate number are too available to hire on Airbnb.

High quality restoration of the cottages demands premium sale price which is beyond the affordability level of the indigenous community which leads to depopulation of such communities to neighbouring towns where affordable housing is available. This affects school numbers, cultural and heritage events and organisations, the Welsh language is reflected in reducing numbers of pupils and traditional social groups, activities and events.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) was designed to give us the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being. A prosperous Wales means developing a skilled and well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through securing decent work. There is therefore an obligation placed upon us here to support people to enter employment. The aims of the Act are long-term but this proposal poses very few options for people to enter agriculture, therefore Welsh Government are at risk here of failing themselves. Opportunities for young people to enter the industry must be a priority, and Government are now in a position to introduce new schemes or adapt current and past schemes that will see a migration in the average age of farmers / food producers down from 60. These must be tangible schemes with tangible results being that young farmers / food producers are allowed to be in charge of their own farm, not desk-based schemes that could see more emphasis put on young farmers / food producers but nothing happening in reality.

3. What are the potential implications of free trade agreements for farmers in Wales?

The potential implications of free trade agreements will hinge on whether the same welfare standards are demanded on imports and what weight governments put on food travel miles in tackling climate change.

Travel miles from local farms to market & slaughterhouses are low in Conwy due to the volume of red meat produced and availability of such services within close proximity.

Welsh farmers have shown an ability to produce products equal to any in the world but it requires Government support in marketing and opening up new markets.

Farmers in Wales are proud of the high standards they maintain but at a high food production cost. Clearer food labelling reflecting the above would give the buyer a choice of purchasing high standard meat or the alternative, possibly cheaper, meat produced via lower standards.

Given the impact of COVID19 on supply chains and the integrity of production standards, we struggle to accept why the Welsh Government fails to recognise food security, food safety and maintaining high animal health and welfare standards as key 'public goods' that warrant recognition and support as part of the future farm support scheme.

Public perception of how farmers produce food must also be highlighted as a priority for Welsh Government. If any scheme is to succeed then there must be alliance between the Government, practitioners, rural managers, and anyone who support the industry through eating or purchasing meat, dairy, cereal, fruit or vegetable produce. The public must have access to regular information on the positive attributes that Welsh agriculture will implement through this scheme on to the environment. Now more than ever farmers need the support of the public and the public's encouragement for farmers to continue doing what they do best in the face of such uncertainty.

Greater emphasis must be put on highlighting that in addition to managing land for conservation purposes farmers' primary role is to produce food. There has been a sense of disconnect between farmer's role and public perception in recent years. An educational "bridge" is needed to inform the public of food provenance, traceability and of the high standard food are being produced in Wales. It could be argued that it is the Government's role to facilitate how positive messages should be conveyed and Conwy County Borough Council would support. High standards of animal welfare, bio-security, transportation, inspections at market and slaughterhouses are costly but are adhered to without exception.

Unfortunately, trade between Wales and Northern Ireland remains unsorted since the EU Transition.

Furthermore, we see that agricultural sector is being managed stricter than any other sector and some argue that the agricultural industry may be one of the most regulated industry in the UK. Whilst we welcome standards and audits, the agricultural sector are continually being scrutinised for small infringements where other sectors may not. All recipients of public money should be managed to the standards and accountability that the agricultural sector continually experience.

4. How, if at all, is the UK Government's climate change policy agenda impacting on family farms, including the future generations of farmers, and rural communities in Wales?

One of the main concerns expressed is that agriculture and food production may be de-valued by Government with the environment and climate protection taking precedent. With the possibility of landowners taking advantage of environmental schemes and sell their land, which is currently used for food production, to various businesses and industries this have a detrimental effect on the food production industry.

Traditional custodians of the countryside, farmers have for generations been looking after their holdings with nature and the conservation of habitats central to their farming practices. As the number of some farmland species have declined, farmers have withstood the worst of relentless abuse by the public, who see the decline as the fault of the farmer.

Farmers take environmental and conservational issues extremely seriously, and have pledged to improve on any actions that will see an increase in environmental standards through greening. The truth is, that the agricultural industry has done nothing but follow government policy. To reinforce how serious farmers take these issues, the National Farmers Union and its members have pledged that agriculture should strive to be carbon neutral by 2040.

In May 2019, Conwy County Borough Council declared a climate emergency and is leading the way on protecting the environment. It was unanimously agreed by the council that the Greening Programme Board develop the Council's plan to become net zero carbon within 10 years. In Conwy, all schools are accredited to the Eco-schools standard, and since 2010, there has been a 32% reduction in carbon emissions by the authority. This is a reduction of 7,240 tonnes of carbon, which is equal to powering 567 houses in a year. This demonstrates the authority's commitment for a cleaner environment, and a healthier climate.

Farmers wishing to plant trees have faced increasing barriers over the past decade and there are concerns about whether the proposed changes would genuinely overcome such problems.

We question whether there is evidence to support the need for more trees, and whether the carbon footprint should be addressed first. There is a real risk that trees are perceived as the only answer, but science has moved on. Would Government investment in EV charging points along the strategic travel routes leading into and out of Conwy equally contribute to reduction of carbon footprint as tourists travel to enjoy the landscape and associated activities?

Notwithstanding this, and whilst the farming industry is keen to plant more trees, major concerns exist regarding the effect of inappropriate and large scale planting on the long term viability of individual farms and entire communities. The target is to increase woodland from 80 hectares to 2,000 hectares a year but where does this land come from? According to the Farming Unions, a hectare of farmed land produces more Gross Value Added and employment than the equivalent of hectares of trees. Once planted, trees cannot be felled for 25-30 years so farmers will potentially lose land for decades with no economic stimulus in doing so or benefit for the economy. An increased focus on planting implies the loss of funding from agriculture during a period of incredible uncertainty and potential price volatility.

With UK and global population set to increase over the next decade, equally the demand for high quality foods raised to the highest welfare standards will also increase. However, with climate change playing an important role in agricultural food production, it is likely that we will see a reduction in the amount of quality grades 1 and 2 pasture land. Flooding and droughts will according to forecasters become more common. With these scenarios playing a role in sustainable

land management, governments must show a degree of flexibility and support farmers who fall into a situation that may be out of their control.

Agriculture and the practice of producing food must become more tolerant of environmental factors and the environmental threats that the global community now face. Agriculture must be seen to mitigate rather than to provoke any environmental damage and climate concerns. CCBC do not hold the view that farmers are actually practising in an environmentally damaging way – to the contrary, Conwy county farmers are indeed very responsible in their undertaking and understanding of environmental concerns.

Public perception of how farmers produce food must also be highlighted as a priority for WG. The public must have access to regular information on the positive attributes that Welsh agriculture has on the environment. Social Media blames agriculture for their contribution to greenhouse gases, primarily methane which has a relatively short recycle period. It is questionable whether the mitigation provided by farm woodland and hedges is truly accounted for. Now more than ever farmers need the support of the public and the public's encouragement for farmers to continue doing what they do best in the face of such uncertainty. It could be argued that it is the Government's role to facilitate how positive messages should be conveyed and CCBC would support this approach.

By default farmers are food producers and producing food is a public good and needs to be recognised. However this element also needs to be elaborated upon, as providing food security is the real public good. Security in ensuring the volume and yield of food produced is sufficient; security in ensuring that the animals reared have been done so in a safe, healthy, clean environment; and that crops and animals are treated to the highest quality of care and all that can be done is done to minimise any risk of disease or contamination.

Public goods which could have a beneficial outcome such as farm infrastructure improvements should be encouraged. Mitigating against harmful gas releases from manure stores by adopting technology to capture the gases would also be welcomed, such as the placement of on-farm anaerobic digesters (more practical for dairy units) or the building of roofs / shelters for open manure stores. The adoption of adequate drainage systems around silage clamps and dry manure stores to reduce the risk of leaching effluent should also be applauded so as to avoid any polluting of water courses.

Although there may be planning regulations to adhere to, it may be environmentally beneficial in some instances to create visually acceptable, low impact farm tracks to access some remote areas. By ensuring there are direct routes from point A to point B (farm yard to fridd / mountain) it is less likely that further damage would be done to key habitats. Tracks would ensure that farmers / food producers would use those routes as opposed to traversing along, and through habitat-rich land. During the wet winter months, this practice would reduce any potential damage to habitat, reduce potential soil run-off and any vehicle rutting.

Due to the uptake in the number of on-farm biomass boilers, it is recommended also that support be given to the planting of new coniferous woodlands (currently not supported through any Agri Scheme). Fast growing coniferous trees are harvestable crops that can and do sustain numerous biodiversity interests. Although a weakened habitat when compared to broadleaved woodlands, coniferous woodlands would assist in achieving any decarbonisation targets and would greatly help in the reduction of water flow thus supporting any flood defence targets.

As a harvestable crop, these plantations would also ensure a financial return to the land owner in 20-30 years, as opposed to 80-100 for broadleaved woodland. As a resource they could become recreational areas, and for a further economic activity would support local contractors to plant, harvest and maintain the plantations.

A concern that was also expressed is the need to safeguard and support our traditional family hill farms. If a farm is 600m above sea level, very few environmental interventions fit the land and environment for that farm. Given Wales's landscape, circa two thirds of the farms in Wales will fall into this category. If farmers won't stand to benefit from an environmental scheme then these are concerns that deeply affect Conwy as a county, and the traditional family farm.

In recent years there has been an increase in interest from community groups developing renewable energy schemes such as Hydro-electric schemes for community benefit. The benefits to the communities from developing such schemes have been multiplied due to the economic return those groups receive. Private investments and collaboration between land owners and community groups to develop schemes which demonstrate community benefit should be encouraged.

What we don't need is a market for carbon sequestration that will be driven by businesses and industries. This raises a concern for Welsh farmers who lease land, due to landowners possibly selling their land to businesses and industries so that they can offset their carbon by planting trees. If this happens it could have a socio-economic effect on rural communities and the economy as there is no need to work on the land once the trees are planted, thus removing employment from the land. Once planted, trees will stagnate land for thirty to forty years.

We hear very little mention of utilising pasture for sequestering carbon, as various studies prove that it is as good or even better than woodland; and we do question if planting trees is the best resolution to deal with the carbon market as the science has moved forward over the years. There is an opportunity to research and trial various new scientific developments. This trailing could be achieved through such rural programmes as LEADER. Carbon Audit services are also available through Farming Connect to which eleven farmers in Conwy have signed up to which indicates their willingness to review their farming practices to better understand and redress any negative impact.

We firmly suggest that further investment in the research and development of new technologies and initiatives be of significance to Government. If Welsh agricultural products are to compete on a global scale, and be recognised as having high standards and quality, then research into new technologies, and support to trial new ways of producing, must be explored.

Research and development at Bangor University into animal genetics, feedstuffs, fertiliser and fuel is conducted to reduce the effect on the environment which in-turn reduce production costs and carbon footprint. There are many opportunities to research into various cattle breeds and how much methane they release or with the feed and fodder the cattle eat and digest.

We are concerned that food production is belittled although farming and food production remain the backbone of our rural communities. Not everything should be driven by environmental and land management initiatives, food production and food security needs to be a core component of any future payment system.

Future plans or targets which place Welsh producers at a disadvantage - or which are met at the expense of food production - will inevitably offset the efforts made by the agricultural sector towards mitigating climate change by importing more food, thereby intensifying environmental issues elsewhere whilst undermining the viability of farm businesses here in Wales.

5. What practical steps can the UK Government take to support these communities and how should the UK and Welsh governments work together to support these communities unique culture, including their contribution to the Welsh language, and heritage?

We have covered much of this within the response of the previous questions but add the following:

Support the production of quality food which in-turn protects the countryside to be living landscape and preserves the Welsh language culture and heritage through continuation of traditional farms for future generations.

To reconsider the concept of trade deals until such time as it becomes a level playing field

Secure continued support to knowledge transfer through Farming Connects business support and training programmes which has 500 members in Conwy but no assurance to its continuation beyond August 2022.

Promote not only the more expensive cuts of meat but too the cheaper cuts by educating the population of affordable quality food through use of such meats. This would go some way to changing the mind-set that locally produced quality meat sold at local butcher shops is expensive (somewhat like the stigma relating to of Organic vegetables being expensive.)

We call for Governments to look into schemes such as 'exit strategy' for farmers who want to retire and an 'entry scheme' to assist new individuals wanting to enter the farming industry. Support post agriculture is needed for people wanting or needing to exit the industry and this in an opportunity to address this very sensitive issue. There are a number of reasons for wanting to exit an industry, but for some the uncertainty can be a reason to stay, thus affecting morale and possibly increasing financial burden. The average age of a Welsh farmer is over 60, with just 3% of farmers / food producers under 35 years of age. With the average age of farmers / food producers so high, it could be perceived that this comes with an unwillingness to embrace new technologies which Wales' industry need if we are to compete on a global scale.

Opportunities for young vibrant minds to enter the industry with enthusiasm and fresh ideas are restricted due to the lack of opportunities available for other farmers / food producers to step aside. Passion and enthusiasm towards the agricultural sector is there among young farmers / food producers wanting to enter the industry, but opportunities are few and far between.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 was designed to give us the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being. A prosperous Wales means developing a skilled and well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through securing decent work. There is therefore an obligation placed upon us here to support people to enter employment. The aims of the Act are long-term but this proposal poses very few options for people to enter agriculture, therefore Welsh Government are at risk here of failing themselves. Opportunities for young people to enter the industry must be a priority, and Welsh

Government are now in a position to introduce new schemes or adapt current and past schemes that will see a migration in the average age of farmers / food producers down from 60. These must be tangible schemes with tangible results being that young farmers / food producers are allowed to be in charge of their own farm, not desk-based schemes that could see more emphasis put on young farmers / food producers but nothing happening in reality.

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