

A Vision for Agriculture Five Point Plan

Ambition, Action, Achievement

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Produced and promoted by the Welsh Conservative Group in the National Assembly for Wales
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Introduction – Five Point Plan

Welsh Conservatives believe that agricultural support in Wales must be more effectively administered and directed. We have identified five key actions that the Welsh Government could and should take today in order to help Welsh farmers and make payments fairer and more equitable across Wales:

- 1. Simplify Glastir**
- 2. Boost on-farm support**
- 3. Promote the introduction of educational visits**
- 4. Clarify the boundaries**
- 5. Develop a stand-alone Less Favoured Area scheme**



1. Simplify Glastir

We must ensure that there is an on-going process of simplification with regard to the process of farm payments and agri-environmental scheme objectives. There is still concern that the volume of paperwork, record keeping requirements and complexity of the application process continues to deter farmers from entering Glastir.

Glastir: Part-farm element - Currently Glastir does not allow farmers to enter part of their farm into the scheme. Glastir should be more responsive to the needs of each individual farm and allow flexibility for applications on a part-farm basis. This 'part-farm basis' would encourage farmers to reconsider their decision not to enter Glastir. This would result in greater environmental benefit as well as greater compliance.

Record Keeping - The majority of farmers accept the principle of a farm diary as a necessity for ensuring the progression of the agri-environmental scheme. However, as the Farmers' Union of Wales highlights, record keeping must be "more farmer friendly" and there must be a "will to reduce the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork"¹. It has been suggested that farmers should only be required to undertake record keeping on areas in the scheme, not the whole farm.

Regional packages - The regional packages offered as part of Glastir did not receive a high uptake in 2012, only nine applicants were approved. Regional packages have been criticised as overly-complex and condensing them in size would simplify the application process.

Proposal: In order to encourage more farmers to enter Glastir we believe that many elements of the scheme must be simplified. This includes allowing farmers to enter the scheme on a part-farm basis. The record keeping process would be significantly simplified freeing farmers to keep records of the areas involved in Glastir and not the whole farm.

The value of regional packages must be examined and consideration given to removing them from the entry level application in order to reduce paperwork and simplify the process. Regional packages should be targeted at specific farms in suitable areas.

¹ *Assembly Environment Committee evidence, 17 May 2012*

2. Boost On-Farm Support

Wales has a varied and complex landscape and farmers will often wish to consult on which agri-environmental options are more suited to their land. Under the previous scheme, Tir Gofal, project officers were allocated to each applicant and these officers would visit the applicant farm and advise on which environmental options were most appropriate for that particular area of land.

When Glastir was established project officers were deemed too expensive leaving Glastir without significant on-farm resources. Without meaningful support and advice on the ground it is often very difficult for farmers to know which option is best suited to a particular piece of land. There is a lack of on-farm guidance and follow up support, as well as an absence of sharing best practice. The Country Land and Business Association (CLA) stated that without a project officer you will not be “able to tell whether there is an existing habitat that is valuable in that area”².

It is acknowledged that the bureaucracy that supports agri-environmental schemes must not be too costly. Whilst savings have been made by not having project officers, this has resulted in a lack of on-the-ground expertise and habitats are not necessarily being created. There is an important balance that must be struck in order to ensure Glastir is a success as well as ensuring value for money. On-farm support should also involve a clear point of contact on the ground. This is important for coordination and effective support.

Proposal: Farming Connect is a network of regionally based staff providing advice, guidance and training for farm and forestry businesses and is funded through the Rural Development Plan for Wales. This network must be utilised, alongside existing support structures such as ‘Commons Development Officers’, to offer on-farm support and guidance to those wishing to enter Glastir. This support must reflect the support provided by the project officers under the Tir Gofal scheme and ensure that there is a clear point of contact on the ground. It is important that there is a rebalancing of what is deemed too expensive and what is necessary for effective on-farm support.

² *Assembly Environment Committee evidence, 17 May 2012*

3. Education

Agri-environmental schemes often have educational elements which connect people to the natural environment and improve understanding of farming and where our food comes from. Educational opportunities highlight the importance of rural habitats and educate visitors on the effects of the seasons and the wide range of farming activities.

Under the Tir Gofal scheme there was a funding option for educational purposes. This part of the scheme gave farmers the opportunity to establish farm visits with school groups and non-educational groups like photographic societies, Women's Institutes and Scouts and Guides. Under Tir Gofal, 222 contracts took up the educational access option.

“The educational aspect of agri-environment schemes has always been important in the past but yet Glastir All-Wales Element fails to recognise and build on the achievements made by many farmers in communicating the message to young people and the general public. This needs re-examining” - NFU Cymru Evidence to Assembly Inquiry, April 2012.

Scotland - The Scottish Rural Development scheme offers an option to farmers entitled 'Information and Awareness Raising'. The aim of this option is to improve public understanding of the countryside through farm visits, open-days, guided walks and on-site displays. The option emphasises the importance of raising awareness of the countryside through 'first hand' experience.

Proposal: Promote the introduction of an 'educational purposes' option which encourages suitable farms to introduce a farm visits programme for Glastir Advanced.

4. Clarify the Boundaries

Stone walls - Under Tir Gofal there were options for the creation of dry stone walls which are beneficial for habitat management as well as tourism and were a very popular option. However, due to the popularity of the option and the subsequent cost, Glastir currently has no dry stone walling option.

Stone walling is part of a wider debate on supporting the rural economy. The option under Tir Gofal helped create a whole stone walling industry which involved training and the development of local businesses. It is important to support all forms of rural activity; stone walling is part of a wider sustainable rural economy which should be adequately supported.

There is also a danger that the current exclusion of dry stone walls will damage those farms in Less Favoured Areas because they are more likely to have these traditional boundaries as habitats.

Boundary Hedges - Boundary hedges are good for tourism, bio-security, road safety and generally have a positive impact on the rural environment. There remains some confusion about the inclusion of boundary hedges in Glastir as a result of exclusion in the initial development of the scheme; therefore we believe there should be clarity as this is an option which is very much supported by farmers across Wales.

Proposal: Explore the idea of introducing stone walls as an option in Glastir, however to satisfy cost concerns they should be introduced on a limited points basis. There must also be clarity over boundary hedges to ensure that there is no confusion over the options available to farmers.

5. Less Favoured Areas (LFA)*

Approximately 80% of agricultural land in Wales is designated as a Less Favoured Area³. The loss of Tir Mynydd, which previously provided payment to farmers in LFAs, means that Wales no longer has a scheme which recognises the difficulty and cost of farming in Wales' LFAs.

Wales is the only country in Europe that does not have an LFA compensatory allowance payment. Hard working farmers in Wales' LFAs are therefore at a distinct disadvantage to the rest of Europe.

Severe weather has a significant impact on rural Wales, most notably LFAs. The recent heavy snow highlighted the need for LFAs to be adequately supported. March 2013 was the coldest on record for nearly 50 years, with parts of Wales devastated by heavy snow and freezing temperatures. The Welsh Government was questioned over what appeared to be a slow to response to the severe weather and this indecision betrays a complete failure to understand the challenges facing rural Wales, particularly those farming in LFAs.

Scotland - The Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS). The Scottish LFASS compensates the farmers who farm in the most disadvantaged areas of Scotland with annual area-based payments. The scheme aims to ensure continued agricultural land use in LFAs and promote sustainable farming systems.

Northern Ireland – The Less Favoured Areas Compensatory Allowances Scheme (LFACAS). The LFACAS is a compensation measure to support farmers in naturally less favoured areas in Northern Ireland. LFA land is divided into three classifications, common land, disadvantaged land and severely disadvantaged land.

Proposal: Develop a stand-alone LFA scheme to support those farming in the most challenging areas of Wales.

* Recognising the term 'Areas with Natural Constraint' as defined under the new Rural Development rules
³ CCW, Less Favoured Area Policy Review, accessed 27 June 2013

Conclusion

This action plan puts forward five key areas for improvement that the Welsh Government must address as a matter of urgency. Glastir continues to be viewed as overly-complex and burdensome for farmers. Simplifying the scheme – and targeting it at the areas that really matter – is absolutely critical for a successful and sustainable agricultural economy in Wales.

We must also strike the right balance between the value and cost of on-farm support by utilising existing structures, such as Farming Connect and the Commons Development Officers. An educational element to Glastir Advanced would provide wider social benefits, helping to connect people to the natural environment, and providing an understanding of how food goes from farm to fork.

There must also be clarification over boundary hedges as well as the inclusion of stone walls as an important element supporting the wider rural economy.

Finally, it is vital that an LFA support scheme is developed in order to assist farmers in the most challenges areas of Wales.

References

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