

National Assembly for Wales' Rural Development Sub Committee's Inquiry into Rural Tourism

Response from the Farmers' Union of Wales

INTRODUCTION

The Farmers' Union of Wales welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Rural Development Sub Committee's inquiry into rural tourism, and it responds with particular emphasis on the farm tourism sector.

Agri tourism is an important diversification enterprise in Wales, and the income generated can provide a significant contribution to the viability of the farm.

Agriculture and tourism are well integrated, as farming creates and maintains the landscape which visitors enjoy, as well as producing the food which helps enhance the visitor's experience.

The FUW believes that there is significant potential for the rural tourism sector, although its members believe that farm and rural tourism should be marketed as separate entities within Visit Wales.

Questions

Q1. Is support for rural tourism being effectively co-ordinated by the Welsh Government?

The FUW represents farmers and landowners in Wales, many of whom have diversified into farm tourism as a means of improving market returns from agriculture. The Union's Farm Tourism and Diversification Committee (now known as the Farm Diversification Committee) enjoyed a close working relationship with the Wales Tourist Board and was actively involved with consultations and stakeholder engagement during the development of tourism-related strategies.

The overwhelming response from the Union's members is that, since the merger of the Board into the Welsh Assembly Government, there has been less engagement with the industry and a loss of synergy between stakeholders and Government.

Whilst recognising that the avenues for supporting rural tourism have changed over recent years, the introduction of the Single Investment Fund has created a great deal of confusion within the industry. The industry believes that there is a lack of information and guidance, and the process of application is perceived as complicated and bureaucratic, particularly in the case of micro businesses.

The FUW also believes that there should be greater integration between Departments within the Assembly so that existing structures, such as Farming Connect, are fully conversant with the support opportunities available for those considering diversification into tourism and those seeking to improve existing facilities.

Concern was also expressed that the support available under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Plan is often overlooked or missed by operators, and that, overall, there were opportunities to improve the co-ordination and dissemination of advice and guidance on available support.

Q2. How could the Welsh Government improve the way it delivers support for rural tourism?

The FUW believes that the Welsh Assembly Government should increase stakeholders' engagement as a first step in improving the delivery of support for rural tourism.

The FUW also believes that there should be closer integration between Government Departments so that existing communication channels can be fully utilised and exploited without having to create new structures.

The FUW believes that Farming Connect could play an important role in co-ordinating the delivery of support as it is a recognised brand within the farming community. The FUW also believes that its remit could be expanded to include the dissemination of information on alternative support avenues, including local initiatives run under the Axis 3 programme.

Q3. What progress has been made on the actions contained within the various Welsh Government strategies relevant to rural tourism?

As highlighted above, Union members feel disenfranchised from many of the Welsh Assembly Government's strategies relating to rural tourism because they have not been involved in the consultation process.

The FUW is also concerned that, whilst there are a number of tourism-related strategies, little progress has been made in carrying out the recommendations or providing updates on outcomes achieved. For

example, actions highlighted in the 'Action Plan for the Countryside Experience' seem to have made little progress and, indeed, rural tourism seems to have made little impact within the wider tourism priorities for investment outlined in the Welsh Assembly Government's Tourism Investment Strategy 2008-13, which seem to focus on golfing developments, the business sector, and high-end hotel accommodation.

Concern has also been expressed that many farm-based rural tourism businesses are usually run as part of the family business, which means that job creation is not necessarily an outcome of investment, which may be focussed on retaining existing farming family members on the holding.

Whilst recognising that job creation is an important factor in viewing tourism's wider economic contribution to GDP, the FUW believes that Government should, when weighing up potential grant bids, consider job security and the economic viability of SMEs as equally important factors.

Q4. Have these strategies been sufficiently updated in light of a number of organisational and policy changes over recent years?

In the light of feedback from its members and the points raised above, the FUW does not believe that the strategies, particularly those pertaining to rural tourism, have been updated sufficiently to reflect organisational and policy changes over recent years.

Rural farm tourism has great potential to be marketed as a niche product but there is a perception amongst operators that changes to grading standards, for example, mean that the unique nature of farm accommodation can be lost as facilities are homogenised in order to retain grading standards.

Many visitors choose farm-based accommodation expecting to trade some amenities for character, and it is felt that the strategies should reflect the unique opportunities farm tourism can provide.

The FUW believes that strategies should be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances, but notes that most of the strategies have not been revisited in recent years.

Q5. Have the organisational changes of recent years assisted in delivering the objectives of the various strategies?

Given the level of disenfranchisement expressed by its members during its recent internal consultation, the FUW does not believe that the

organisational changes of recent years have assisted in delivering the objectives of the various strategies.

The FUW believes that there is an urgent need to revisit many of the strategies to ensure they remain relevant and fit for purpose.

It is noted that a number of strategies are due to finish in 2010, and the FUW believes that this provides a good opportunity for a thorough review of all documents to ensure that the strategies and action plans continue to be fit for purpose.

There is a perception amongst rural and farm-based tourism operators that priority is being given to promoting facilities around urban areas, and, whilst the Union acknowledges that high profile events such as the Ryder Cup will inevitably attract media attention and public investment, rural tourism operators remain unconvinced that they will benefit from these initiatives.

Q6. What contribution has the Cultural Tourism Strategy made in developing rural tourism?

The FUW believes that there is considerable scope for farm tourism to attract 'cultural' visitors as there is a wealth of historic landscapes, buildings, and archaeological sites in rural Wales. Rural areas remain the heartlands for the Welsh language and culture, and there are many opportunities for taking forward many of the aims of the strategy within a rural context.

The FUW also believes that the Cultural Strategy should also be updated to include aspects of the Food Tourism Strategy as the market audience for cultural holidays is also likely to be looking for opportunities to visit food fairs, farmers' markets, and enjoy locally or home produced produce.

Given the lack of readily available monitoring data, it is difficult to assess whether the Cultural Tourism strategy has had any impact on the development of rural tourism.

Q7. What is your opinion of the proposal contained within the Farming Food and Countryside strategy for a reinvigoration of the Adfywio type of approach to rural tourism?

Adfywio was a grant scheme set up by the Welsh Assembly Government following the Foot and Mouth disease outbreak of 2001. Managed jointly by the Countryside Council for Wales and the Wales Tourist Board, it aimed to stimulate the rural economy through the provision of financial support for

projects which helped integrate tourism businesses with open-air recreation, outdoor leisure, and the natural environment.

The FUW believes that the scheme contributed to the development of rural tourism and, in conjunction with other Wales Tourist Board investment support, proved to be a successful tool for those wishing to enhance or develop the countryside experience.

If a successor to Adfywio is introduced, the Union believes that it will be important to ensure that it is updated so as to enable support for other projects, such as food tourism.