



Organic Centre Wales
Canolfan Organig Cymru

Response from the Welsh Agri-food Partnership Organic Strategy Group
prepared by Organic Centre Wales, IBERS, Aberystwyth University SY23 3AL
to the Welsh Assembly Government consultation on:

Options for a Strategy to Support Young Entrants to Farming

<http://new.wales.gov.uk/consultations/currentconsultation/envandcouncurrecons/supportforyoungentrantstofarming/?lang=en>

Organic Centre Wales (OCW) was established in 2000 as a focal point for the dissemination of information on organic food and farming to producers and other interested parties in Wales. In 2003, it was agreed that it should extend its focus to public education, public procurement, policy and strategy development, thus providing support to the whole of the organic community in Wales. It is based at Aberystwyth University.

OCW is run by a partnership of three organizations actively involved in organic farming research and knowledge transfer in Wales: ADAS, The Organic Research Centre Elm Farm and Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences at Aberystwyth University.¹

General comments

The organic sector has a disproportionate number of new entrants to farming in its numbers. As well as young farmers, others are professionals either returning to a family farm later on in life, or setting up new holdings as part of a change in lifestyle. The benefits from new entrants to business sectors apply equally to older people and it is our view that specific support should be provided to older new entrants; they bring professional business skills, capital, and very possibly opportunities for younger new entrants as partners. This is borne out by applicants to the Soil Association's apprenticeship scheme who are mostly in their 20s but include some in their 40s and 50s.

We are therefore clear that the RDR criteria for young entrants should not be applied across all the support proposals, save where unavoidable and there should be a separate programme aimed at new entrants, to quickly inform them of the structures and support for farmers in Wales. In considering support programmes, there should almost be 3 definitions of entrant: i.e. new entrant, new young entrant (under 40) and young entrant i.e. young person who is not new to farming but new to taking on the responsibility, at the helm. All 3 are really quite different.

It should also be noted that despite the RDR definition, those in their late 20s and 30s may not recognise themselves in the descriptor of 'young' so that a different title should be considered even if there is a limit to the under 40s.

The key issue in increasing opportunities for younger farmers is to encourage succession. The recent Anderson's study for the Dairy Development Centre provides some useful pointers which should be actively adopted, and points to a first step in allowing established farmers to step back.

¹ The funding for OCW comes from the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and Farming Connect (with additional support from the European Union EAGGF Objective 1 funds) to carry out the co-ordination functions, with additional funding for delivery through a separate WAG Organic Conversion Information Service contract and the Farming Connect Organic Development Programme.

“There would appear to be a ready supply of enthusiastic dairy farmers to take part in collaborative ventures in respect of farm growth, but the key area to address is to promote the benefits to those farmers who may be looking to cease dairying but wish to remain on the holding.”

Some support for a retirement scheme has been expressed, although it is appreciated that this has been considered and rejected as prohibitively expensive, but a concerted programme to support succession seems essential. Consideration should be given to making this a specific programme within Farming Connect, so that it receives the focus necessary.

Notwithstanding the above, it should be recognized that the main driver to encourage young people into farming would be the prospects of a decent income.

The situation for employment in farming is particularly difficult at the moment, as many farmers are laying-off staff due to high input costs, and are cushioned by the high SFP which reduces the need to farm. This relates to other CAP Health check considerations concerning increased modulation and the switch from historic to land area payments and speaks for the importance of starting the adjustment sooner rather than later. Further the current farm support arrangements do not necessarily offer the necessary flexibility: farmers want to hang on to their SFP, for example, and in one case, the automatic loss of entitlements (to both parties) if a tenancy were created during the 5 year use of entitlements allocated from the National Reserve.

Finally in our general comments, we consider that some resource should be directed to explore best practice in the UK and in other countries so that case studies can be used as positive models. There needs to be a commitment to building policy capacity; looking for exemplars should be an on-going exercise.

Response to questions asked

Part 1 – Initiatives aimed at improving decision making.

1. To what extent will these initiatives help ensure that the views and needs of young entrants to farming are taken into account in the development of new policies and in the Assembly Government's decision making process more widely?

It is not clear that the Task and Finish group should be a ‘task and finish’ group, as the issue will need some longer term planning and monitoring, so a group with some longevity should be established. Further, this group should compromise innovators and those familiar with new approaches to encourage young entrants i.e. share farming and collaborative ventures and include existing established farmers willing to explore succession issues and exit strategies. There is a need to explore opportunities for collaborative working with charities such as Prince's Trust, who would also be useful participants of the Advisory group.

The Register of Candidates is also a good first step, but individuals that are not part of organisations do not necessarily provide representative views, and it is important that within the Welsh Assembly Government there is a mechanism to ‘check’ policy initiatives and ensure particular attention is paid to impacts on younger and/or newer farmers. The YFC Rural Affairs Forum as an established group used to tackling policy issues should be consulted as a matter of course.

2. What prevents you from attending meetings of groups and advisory bodies and what would encourage you to attend?

Many younger farmers will be unable to take time away from farming operations to attend meetings. Waged and self employed workers will need financial support and recompense.

3. *What key questions should be asked to ensure that all farming, food and countryside policies take account of the impact on young farmers?*

“Will this policy act as an incentive or deterrent to new entrants to farming?” would be a good start. Then “How can we mitigate any negative impacts?”

4. *What additional measures or alternative approaches could be taken to ensure that young peoples’ views are fully considered across the whole of the Rural Affairs policy agenda?*

It would be helpful to provide financial support to the Wales Young Farmers Club to enable them to employ extra staff such that they are able to provide a point of liaison, provide representatives at meetings, and engage with Welsh Assembly policy making on a more consistent basis.

Consideration of greater focus of the Leader approach and Axis 4 projects should be given.

Part 2 – Improving access to information, training and advice

Co-ordinated Communications Initiative

5. *What are the most useful sources of advice and information for young entrants to farming?*

Other young/younger farmers especially through mentoring networks and the internet.

The WAG pages are rather difficult to negotiate, and not designed to attract younger people who are more sophisticated web users, therefore consideration should be given to out-sourcing this work, or perhaps hosting such information on the YFC site, with the provision of adequate funding and support.

The WAG pages could then be used for new entrants more generally, providing specific legal, administrative and information on training opportunities.

6. *What are the difficulties experienced in obtaining advice, new knowledge and training?*

There is a severe lack of availability of short courses, which as well as providing a great deal of information, provide a forum for discussion and learning amount the attendees.

7. *What information do young farmers require on educational opportunities and wider career choices and how should this be provided?*

Careers advisors in schools need to be more aware of the career and education opportunities and they need help in providing this information. This should involve continued face to face engagement such as the guided tours given to a number of careers advisors at the Royal Welsh Show in 2007. These were facilitated by Lantra and drew on the services of industry representatives from the Lantra Wales Advisory Group.

It should be noted that both Gelli Aur and IBERS had substantial increases in the numbers of agricultural students in 2008, against a backdrop of falling figures in the recent past. The reasons for this may be worth investigation.

8. *What should the ‘Young Entrants Pack’ comprise?*

This should be a ‘New Entrants’ Pack’ rather than young entrants – or there should be two distinct packs.

New entrants will need:

Step by step guide to the CAP, SPS and available agri-environment schemes

Information on the delivery of public goods and services and policy support

Summary of relevant support available, how to access it, and sources of further information

Summary of relevant legislation applicable, including cross compliance and EIA

Access to training in animal health and welfare plans

Information on benchmarking, business tools and how to access support

Information on training and short courses available

Information on planning regulations for new buildings and accommodation.

9. *What are the priorities in terms of education and training for new entrants to the farming industry?*

New entrants need training in organic farming techniques and the organic approach, cross compliance, benchmarking and management skills, animal health and welfare planning, biodiversity and BAP targets, agri-environment support and climate change issues. This is not to say all farmers will be expected to be organic, but that there are many useful techniques which assist sustainability and good planning that can be adopted by all farmers. Of particular importance and general benefit is the attention organic farmers give to soil; the soil's role and importance is the basis of almost all farming systems (organic or not).

A particular focus should be on the provision of public goods and services and policy support and drivers for such.

10. *How should we acknowledge or accredit the successful completion of training including prior learning?*

There are existing schemes for the accreditation of prior learning and experience (APE) operated by colleges and other training providers. The existence of such schemes should be promoted and publicised. They tend to work in conjunction with existing mainstream qualifications, most notably NVQs, and will cover most areas. In those areas where there are no formal qualifications (organic farming and organic horticulture are cases in point) there is a case for developing stand-alone qualifications (preferred option) or add on modules and units. This is already happening in areas such as fencing so a precedent would appear to have been set. WAG support for such moves in discussions with Lantra and others would be much appreciated.

It may also be useful and relevant to consider developing new units and modules through the Open College Network. Once validated completion of such modules can receive credits towards nationally recognised qualifications. Reference is made to the Soil Association Apprenticeship Scheme below but it should also be noted that despite the success of the Modern Apprenticeship Scheme and its offshoots in other vocational areas there are comparatively very few operating in the land-based sector. Providers will argue that this is because of resource issues as well as a perception that they do not deliver what is required.

11. *How could discussion groups be used to best advantage to assist young entrants? What are the advantages / disadvantages of specifically targeting groups of young entrants rather than mixed age groups?*

Mixed age groups can benefit from the experience of older members and the energy of younger members, but the focus must be on making the younger members welcomed and providing special consideration to those less experienced at networking.

12. What other innovative learning ideas could be adapted from industry / other sectors?

Reference has already been made to the Soil Association Apprenticeship Scheme although it should be noted that this has been developed in association with the Organic Growers Alliance and the advisory arm of the Organic Research Centre, Elm Farm (an OCW partner organisation). This scheme has been developed entirely in response to representations from producers and is therefore genuinely 'grass roots' in nature. The initial cohorts of apprentices are working on organic horticultural holdings in England but it is intended to extend the scheme to agriculture and to other parts of the UK. The organisers of the scheme would be more than willing to discuss its adoption in Wales. The scheme most resembles a traditional apprenticeship where the greatest focus is on learning in the workplace – this requires that the grower (or farmer in the future) takes on a degree of responsibility for guidance and explanation rather than treating the apprentice as just another worker. Specialist background training modules are delivered on weekends by acknowledged experts in the field.

13. What difficulties if any will the eligibility criteria outlined in 14 pose for young entrants in accessing Farming Connect services?

It may be difficult to demonstrate that people are considering setting up for the first time, therefore denying access to the support.

14. Are there omissions from these proposals both in terms of alternative approaches to providing information, training and advice and also the menu of services that could be made available?

Some aspects of training should be compulsory for new entrants accessing public funds, whether or not they come from a farming background: this should include animal care and health and welfare planning, cross compliance and EIA regulations.

Part 3 – Overcoming Barriers

15. What are the most significant barriers to young entrants wishing to farm?

Access to land and capital and accommodation.

16. How effective is joint venture likely to be as a step on the ladder for young entrants setting up their own business and what other options are there to gain access to land?

This may be important, but needs investment in publicising case studies and examples from elsewhere in the UK or overseas. There is nothing inherently within joint ventures that will lead to success; joint ventures covers a multitude of different types of enterprise, so development of case studies and publicity is necessary as part of any support offered.

Of great help would be the provision of opportunities to share capital costs (eg machinery, IT systems etc.)

Currently some new farmers are able to rent on a FBT or buy a small parcel, and then take on more land around as it becomes available. This causes particular problems for organic farmers and entry to other AE schemes, as each parcel has a different conversion start date and OFS agreement, and they often find extreme difficulties in getting long term commitment from farmers such that they can enter the OFS (with its 5 year obligation) with confidence.

17. How can established farmers and their families be provided with succession advice and do you think that this will create more opportunities for young entrants?

An accessible professional advice service which will visit farms f.o.c. for one or two meetings; they could facilitate discussions within the farming family on issues of forward planning and succession. This could adopt the Organic Conversion Advisory Service where the first visit could outline issues, and if the family are interested, a second visit would

investigate the different possible options for the farm, a report would then be provided which it would then be up to the family to pursue the ideas or not.

YFC state that 50% of farmers do not have wills: there should be a campaign to encourage and support making wills, linked to support to start discussion of succession.

18. How can more farmers be encouraged to enter joint ventures or contractual type farming arrangements with young entrants?

There needs to be a concerted campaign throughout Farming Connect to promote these arrangements, to highlight case studies, and encourage discussion of succession planning.

There should be the development of a range of share-farming options and support for a central matchmaking / arbitration body to give confidence when entering into agreements with new (and relatively unskilled) farmers.

See also conclusions from the Anderson's work for the DDC.

19. What alternatives do you suggest to encourage established farmers to relinquish control of the farm business?

This can only be done by offering support to encourage engaging in discussion on the issues, such as succession, partnership or collaboration schemes, as suggested above. Once older farmers see other farmers able to step back and enjoy life, they may be encouraged to follow. Older farmers could also be trained as mentors, thereby providing some respect for their experience and feelings of self worth.

Less rigorous planning rules to enable a second home to be built on a holding so enabling the older farmer to retire but still live on the holding may help encourage older farmers to step aside; or to enable a share farming arrangement whereby the new entrant could also live on the holding. It needs to be appreciated that a farm is not just a place of business but a home and many do not want to give up their home.

20. How can starter farms such as council holdings be used effectively to give young entrants a route into farming? What should comprise the 'letting criteria'?

Many Councils have got rid of their holdings and there should be encouragement for such holdings to be re-established.

These should be then be allocated to young farmers on limited period lets (but long enough to provide confidence in making investments), to prevent them from being locked up and to encourage progression. Priority could be given to those adopting organic techniques with plans to provide produce to local communities and to engage with the public through open days and farm visits.

There are also some land trusts, such as that of the Soil Association, which may be encouraged to prioritise lets to young people.

Agri-environment schemes

21. What do you think about offering easier or preferential access to agri-environment schemes to young entrants?

Within the current structure, this could only apply to Tir Gofal, and this could be useful to encourage young farmers to understand the habitats and ecosystems on their farms, and the merits of taking care of them. The OFS and Tir Cynnal are currently open to all with no limitations. This issue should be considered in the design of any new Axis 2 schemes.

22. What benefits do you think would result if higher environmental payments were offered to young farmers?

This would be difficult to justify as calculations are made on income foregone and there is no reason that young farmers would forego any greater income than older farmers. Any support for young farmers *per se* should be targeted directly and not through indirect means.

23. What would be the merits, if any, from offering a part farm environmental scheme to young entrants?

Under the circumstances when AE schemes are being reviewed, it is difficult to see the advantages in supporting part farm schemes, although consideration of young entrants should be given during the design of the new schemes.

The greatest benefit to young farmers would be if the obligation could be shortened, such that repayment penalties were not applied if, for example two years in the scheme had been delivered. See response to point 16.

Part 4 – Providing Financial Support - £2m budget

24. Which is the greater problem for young entrants - access to borrowing or the ability to service loans?

25. Which, if any of these supports (interest rate relief or single premium/grant type payment or business development loan) would make the best use of the £2m budget?

Given the size of the pot, a loan guarantee combined with repayment holiday would seem the best use of funds.

26. How do you think schemes that provide direct financial support can be effective towards helping young entrants? How can they be implemented to prevent people from taking on excessive commitments?

27. Would the approach in paragraph 20 advance innovation more rapidly than other proposals and should the budget be ring-fenced, for entrepreneurs for example, rather than spread thinly amongst large numbers of young entrants?

This is a good option, and likely to have more impact than the money thinly spread, although the criteria for judgement should be clear and decision making process transparent.

28. What additional eligibility criteria would you suggest to ensure that financial support is directed at genuine young entrants and not towards established farmers achieving eligibility through altering partnerships to include a young entrant for example?

Measuring Success

29. Age range in farming represents a weak baseline from which to extrapolate innovation. How can an innovation and entrepreneurship baseline be sensibly defined at the time of strategy introduction?

Qualitative surveys of feelings of well-being amongst young farmers will indicate progress, together with numbers of new entrants that are still actively farming within 5 and 10 years.

Although age is a weak baseline from which to extrapolate innovation, this entire consultation assumes some correlation. Separate measures are needed to promote both young entrants and innovation; then monitoring and evaluation is needed to make an accurate assessment of whether they do go together as assumed. Measuring success will be difficult as it seems there is lack of a solid baseline. There are consistent figures quoted for the average age of farmers in Wales, but we are not aware of the existence of accurate figures, which would be useful in measuring progress.

30. How could increases in innovation and entrepreneurship in the farming industry be measured after strategy implementation?

Increased number of young farmers

Reducing average age of farmers

Increased number of partnerships

High take up of Management Development Programme

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