

Inquiry: The economic and cultural impacts of trade and environmental policy on family farms in Wales. Evidence from the Welsh Language Commissioner

Background and introduction to the Welsh Language Commissioner

The Welsh Language Commissioner's role is to promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language. The role was established in 2012 following the introduction of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. The Commissioner works towards increasing the use of the Welsh language in relation to the provision of services and increasing other opportunities for people to use the Welsh language. The Commissioner gives attention to the official status of the Welsh language in Wales and the principle that people in Wales should be able to live their lives through the medium of Welsh if they wish to do so. The Commissioner can provide advice to any person, and is responding to this inquiry because of the importance of the farming community in Wales to the viability of the Welsh language. We answer your questions below.

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

Family farms are central to the rural economy, to Welsh culture and to the viability of the Welsh language. Welsh farms are significantly smaller on average than farms in England and Scotland.¹ According to National Census figures, 43% of agricultural workers speak Welsh, compared with 19% of the general population. This is the employment sector with the highest proportion of Welsh speakers.² Agricultural businesses support many rural communities where Welsh is the everyday language.

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

The main challenges faced at present result from Britain's exit from the European Union (EU). EU funding supported Welsh farms and uncertainty around the establishment of new systems is concerning for the farming community. It should be noted that the average income of Welsh farms is lower than the average income of farms in England and Scotland.³ Different systems within the United Kingdom, as well as differences between the UK and the EU, could affect farmers' ability to compete. The Public Policy Institute for Wales has identified a risk to the ability of sheep and beef farmers, specifically, to compete following Brexit. As a result of the threat to sheep farmers, it is envisaged that Brexit will have more negative effects on north and west Wales compared to other parts of the country.⁴

Family farms in Wales support hundreds and thousands of jobs in the food supply sector. Developments that are detrimental to these farms could, in turn, have a negative influence on employment in general in rural areas. There is already concern that young people are leaving rural areas due to a shortage of work. There is also concern that young people are unable to settle in their local area as a result of house prices that are beyond their reach. It is believed that the second

¹ <https://senedd.wales/media/m10e2dfw/farming-in-wales-web-english.pdf>

² [Securing Wales' Future Summary \(gov.wales\)](https://www.gov.wales/government/secure-wales)

³ <https://senedd.wales/media/m10e2dfw/farming-in-wales-web-english.pdf>

⁴ [The Implications of Brexit for Agriculture Rural Areas and Land Use in Wales-1.pdf \(wcpp.org.uk\)](https://www.wcp.org.uk/publications/the-implications-of-brexit-for-agriculture-rural-areas-and-land-use-in-wales-1.pdf)

homes market is contributing to this situation, which is leading to rural depopulation. Due to the close link between the farming community and the Welsh language, all of these challenges could threaten the viability of the Welsh language as a community language in many areas, particularly in north and west Wales.

- **What are the potential implications of free trade agreements for farmers in Wales?**

Agreements without tariffs or quotas could lead to a drop in the price of British meat over time, with high standards of food production in Britain making it difficult for farmers to compete with their foreign counterparts who produce food to lower standards. There is no certainty that buyers would support Welsh farmers. Lower prices could be far more important than higher production standards, especially to customers who are not on high salaries. In addition, if free trade agreements were to allow the sale of food produced to a lower standard in Britain, the EU could halt exports from Britain in order to protect the Union's food standards. As a result, Welsh farmers would not only be competing with increasing imports to this country, but they would lose access to markets in other countries.

- **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?**

Emphasising environmental benefits at the expense of socio-economic benefits poses a risk to family farms as they generally have less land. There are concerns that farmers are facing increasing pressure to move towards developing forests and providing ecosystem services. The risk with such a policy is that it could lead to rural depopulation as a result of changing agricultural land from food production to the provision of environmental goods only. There are also concerns that large companies are buying farms to plant trees in order to offset carbon, thereby transforming rural communities. These are further challenges that could threaten the viability of the Welsh language as a community language.

There is a close relationship between sustainable environmental development and protecting minority cultures and languages. It is not a case of one or the other, both go hand in hand. A number of studies refer to this relationship between language and sustainable development, for example [“Linguistic diversity of natural UNESCO world heritage sites: bridging the gap between nature and culture”](#), which provides views on the role of indigenous languages in managing natural resources and sustainable development.

- **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?**

The UK Government should ensure that its policies consider the specific needs of Wales and the differences between the agricultural sector here and in the other devolved nations, especially England. For example, the relatively small size and income of Welsh farms, as noted above. We also note the significant difference between the quality of land in England and Wales. Statistics from 2018 show that 80% of agricultural land in Wales has been designated as less favourable areas,

compared with only 16% of land in England.⁵ It should be ensured that farmers in the devolved nations are able to compete fairly against each other in a way that promotes trade.

In terms of business and the Welsh language as a marketing tool, there is general recognition that the Welsh language can support business growth and the development of innovative produce. Specifically, there is widespread evidence of the value of the Welsh language in terms of promotion, branding and marketing in the food and drink manufacturing and marketing sector. Research undertaken by the Welsh Language Commissioner in 2014 found that the use of the Welsh language makes the product stand out; reinforces brand image; offers opportunities to sell in new markets; and is considered a sign of quality. According to more recent research into the attitudes of small, medium and large-sized businesses in Wales in 2018, 82% strongly agreed or agreed to some extent that the use of the Welsh language adds value to a product or service; and 84% strongly agreed or agreed to some extent that the use of the Welsh language is beneficial to the business' brand. These conclusions are also supported by Welsh Government research findings. In this context, it is considered that an opportunity is being lost to maximise the use of the Welsh language as a unique feature of Welsh farm produce in a competitive market. Therefore, the value of the Welsh language as a marketing tool capable of increasing market potential should be highlighted, and farmers should be supported to use it.

Data should be collected on the Welsh language within the agricultural industry in Wales in order to ensure that policies can be developed based on current evidence regarding the position of the language. The impact of any proposed policy or initiative on the Welsh language should also be assessed. Family farms and rural enterprises should be supported and young people helped to stay in their local area, if they so wish, in order to maintain the viability of communities and protect the Welsh language. It should be ensured that there is no reduction in the funding given to Wales, particularly the agricultural and rural sectors, following Brexit. It is essential that a long-term financial agreement is established to reassure Welsh farmers and enable them to plan and develop their businesses confidently. It should also be ensured that the interests of the farming community, and high standards of agriculture in Wales, are protected in any proposed new or revised trade agreements. Action should be taken in accordance with the objectives of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and its well-being aims, as well as the Welsh Government's *Cymraeg 2050* strategy, which aims to create a million Welsh speakers by 2050. In order to achieve this, good communication between the UK and Welsh governments is essential.

⁵ <https://senedd.wales/media/m10e2dfw/farming-in-wales-web-english.pdf>