

Statement by the Chair on the Committee's inquiry into the future of agricultural and rural policies in Wales

If we are to secure the best possible deal for our rural communities, agriculture and environment following our exit from the European Union, then we must be bold and clear in what we expect from the UK Government.

We, the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, have reached an early consensus based on expert advice and the views of our stakeholders.

The Committee and I agreed to make this statement in order to send a clear message to the UK Government about what Wales wants at the outset of the exit process.

We are seeking two commitments from the UK Government.

The first is in relation to future funding. We believe that Wales must continue to receive the level of funding for agriculture, environment and rural development that it currently receives from the European Union.

This was, after all, the promise made by a number of senior campaigners on the Leave side in the EU referendum. Whilst we recognise that the Leave campaign did not speak for the UK Government, several of its senior campaigners now do, notably the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State at DEFRA.

The second commitment is in relation to policy freedom for Wales. Decisions on future agriculture, environment and rural development policies should be taken in Wales. After all, responsibility is devolved.

Should the case be made for some level of UK-wide policy framework then this should be done on the basis of agreement between the devolved administrations and the UK government. We also support bilateral discussion between the Welsh and UK governments.

Agreement on any over-arching policy framework should be subject to scrutiny by the devolved parliaments and assemblies and require their consent.

If the UK Government does ensure a continuation of prior EU funding to Wales in full, then we call on the Welsh Government to make a commitment in return.

We ask that the Welsh Government agrees to protect funding, once transferred to Wales, for the support of agriculture, environment and rural development policy.

On behalf of the Committee, I have written to Andrea Leadsom MP, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to seek a commitment to maintaining the funding envelope for Wales.

I have also written to Lesley Griffiths AM, Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs to ask for an assurance that such funds would be protected and continue to be used to support agriculture, the environment and our rural communities.

Only with these undertakings from the UK and Welsh Governments can we with confidence propose future policies. It is crucial to recognise that current EU funding for agriculture and rural development is several times higher than it would be if subject to the Barnett formula.

The continuation of prior EU funding is needed to ensure the economic and environmental sustainability of our rural areas. Without it, we risk losing the unique cultural, social and linguistic cohesion that characterises rural Wales.

The Committee's work on our post-Brexit agriculture and rural development inquiry has been about more than future financing.

We have held discussions with farmers, foresters and environmentalists. In September we visited farms and food producers in Ceredigion. Last month, we held a workshop with stakeholders from across Wales, as well as convening a seminar of leading academics. Later this month we will be visiting farms in Snowdonia.

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a Materion Gwledig

National Assembly for Wales

Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

In addition to the position on future finance, our committee has reached an initial view on two further high level principles. Both are intended to support evolutionary change, rather than a sudden shift in policy.

First, we support a continuing shift in financial support away from payments based on acreage and historical production, and towards agreed environmental and land management objectives.

Second, we are particularly keen to support more marginal farms, including in upland areas. Helping poorer farmers especially should also help maintain a public and political consensus for farm support.

However, development of policy principles such as these will be meaningless unless we secure the requisite future funding.

I hope that all parties in the Assembly can support our work and the call we make today on future funding.

Subject to that, we can all make the best of the opportunities to deliver for the people and environment of Wales.

Mark Reckless AM

9 November 2016