

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales  
Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a Materion Gwledig | Climate Change,  
Environment and Rural Affairs Committee  
Ailfeddwl am fwyd yng Nghymru | Rethinking food in Wales

RFW 27

Ymateb gan : Unigolyn  
Evidence from : Individual

The Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee asks the public "What is your vision for the future of food in Wales and what needs to be done to achieve it?"

I'm so glad you asked. It's encouraging that you want to know what the people think about such a crucial issue.

Wales is a truly special place, full of beauty, history, mystery and community. It is the *land of song*, with a rich cultural and spiritual heritage. I envision our future generations being able thrive in this land and to do that, we must carefully preserve this heritage for them, to keep it alive. Food and drink, amongst other things, play a very pivotal role in this endeavour.

But before I start to answer your question, I can't help noticing that it seems to be completely at odds with the following statement you have made, and it makes me wonder if the two can ever be compatible:

"The Welsh Government has ambitious targets to grow our food and drink industry and raise the profile of food and drink from Wales."

I'm all for ensuring the prosperity of our country. I realise that it's important to keep the economy healthy. It's just that the reason the global food industry is in such a mess, is because of "good old greed". It concerns me that on the face of things it looks like the Welsh Government is looking at food and drink purely from the point of view of economic growth, distilling the health of a nation down to a matter of maximum profitability both from the food industry and from tourism.. It feels at odds somehow to have ambitious economic targets linked to a concern for the environment because the two are distinctly polar opposites in my mind.

That being said, it's encouraging that it's the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, rather than the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee who is asking the question. Although it could in fact be a question posed by most of the Committees because food and drink, our most basic need, affects everything; children, young people and education; health, social care and sport; culture, language and communication; equality; and of course the economy and infrastructure. It really is a central focal point which has the potential to affect every area of society, for good or for ill, depending on how we steward it. I hope that this is a key time when our government will take action and be at the forefront of leading new initiatives to this end before it is too late.

My vision requires an investment into future generations, and that can't be measured by some tick box targets which fit neatly into a four year term. We may not see the real fruit for many years, or even in our own lifetime. My vision probably won't help you to meet your short term targets, and in fact that is precisely what I want to see changed in the food industry - yes, an obsession with meeting short term targets at the expense of the well-being of our people and our delicate eco-system.

That being said, your question is asked without stipulating a Government-imposed timescale. I'm afraid that by the same token, imposing a 2000 word limit to such a huge question is doing exactly that - wanting a quick fix to make a quick buck, and that will just add to the problem. And so I'll risk over-stepping the mark on that one, in the hope that you may feel compelled to keep reading to the end.

And so, my vision is to see Wales lead the way with putting food and drink where it belongs - with the people, connecting them together in true community, and bringing back our connection with the land, by valuing it highly and treating it with the utmost respect.

Firstly, from an economic and tourism point of view, it has to be said that in order to produce great food and drink, it needs to have great flavour and if you want to really impress people, it must be fresh, with a high nutritional content. It all starts by looking at how we care for the soil itself, and if we want to do that we must move away from mono-culture, which breeds disease and depletes the soil, requiring external imported fertilizers. Instead it's essential that we embrace *permaculture* (permanent agriculture) which is built upon the concept of creating a bio diverse ecosystem which makes for a much more stable, healthy environment in which to grow our food. I am advocating a bigger investment into market gardeners such as Riverside Market Garden in Coed Hills. Jean-Martin Fortier's book "The Market Gardener" makes a case for being able to make a good living through biologically intensive cropping systems geared towards direct selling, where they have no large machinery and are able to get a lot of output from just 1.5 acres. People need to be able to build their homes on agricultural land in order to do this, and I would urge the government to look into refining the One Planet Policy to make it more accessible to those who are serious about making a living in this way, and favouring investment into these growers over large mono-agricultural businesses on our rural land.

I manage a tight budget and in recent years have had to forego enjoying my organic veg box delivery in favour of shopping for non-organic produce at the supermarket. I'm grateful that I can afford to buy food, but frankly, much of the "fresh" produce is just dull, flavourless, uninspiring, and at times, depressing stuff. I want to feed my family with food that is going to nourish their growing bodies and that tastes good enough that they will actually enjoy eating it. But I don't feel that way about supermarket produce. I remember going to Florence and being amazed at the vibrancy, colour and taste of their produce. I'd never experienced anything like that over here. Despite the cost increase, I recently decided to sign up to a weekly box scheme by a local market gardener, and just eat less fruit and veg to try and manage the budget while buying organic. I tasted a tomato from the box and it was just an explosion of flavour you just simply won't get in any supermarket. I gave one to my husband to try and his response was "wow". My toddler, who won't normally eat tomatoes, ate it in seconds. If you want to lead the way with great food, it needs to be fresh and bursting with flavour, and this in my experience will only come by buying directly from an organic grower, or by growing your own.

I'm a big fan of Guy Watson of Riverford Organic Farms in Devon. If you want a great business model for growing top quality food, ethically and organically this is the one. His expertise and passion is inspiring, and he has a genuine and honest relationship with his staff and customers, as well as his growing partners. This is someone who ought to be recognised for his expertise and his knowledge ought to be passed on. In fact by the looks of his blog posts he would dearly love to see the next generation carry on his good work. I would love to see a farm co-op like this one in Wales. On a recent video, Guy, holding a bunch of carrots, says:

"...horticulture has forgotten that, you know, someone's gonna eat these at the end of the day, it's not just a pound note, it's someone's supper. Carrots - they're grown entirely for yield, uniformity, and robustness during the packing process with a total disregard for flavour, and as a result, the

number one variety in the UK, Nairobi, is just horrible. Its great virtue is that you can drop it out of an aeroplane, it'll hit the ground and it won't break." He goes on to say that at a carrot trial he attended, he noticed that no-one actually tasted a carrot they just whacked it on their boot and if it would break, they weren't interested. (1)

And so, back to my point about investing in the soil first, Guy also states that great flavour, freshness and nutritional content comes from allowing things to grow slower, rather than trying to get the maximum yield. "An absolute founding principle of organic farming is that you look after and feed the soil and the soil then looks after and feeds the crop as opposed to viewing the soil as something to get it to stand up in and feeding the crop as much as possible with soluble nutrients....The best thing you can do to try and get your hands on some decent tasting vegetables is to buy it directly from the grower." He then goes on to speak about the benefits of creating a relationship between grower and customer being a motivation to actually produce something that tastes good rather than something that just looks right and is cheap. "Let's get back to growing vegetables in soil that has really been loved and looked after, soil that's really gonna bring out the flavour and produce the most tasty vegetables....." (1)

In these days of fast food, fast lives, high stress levels and a lack of free time, the idea of slowing down to obtain better flavour and nutritional content from our food is pretty tough to digest. But there are no quick fixes, and we have two choices - invest in the root of the problem now or pay for our carelessness later in our health and in our climate and ruined eco-system. I believe people are slowly coming round to the idea that simplifying our lives and working together in community, like the good old days, may actually be much more fulfilling and better for our health and relationships. That's not going to feed the capitalist machine, but how can we continue to increase economic growth by robbing the earth of its resources? At some point, soon I would imagine, the earth is going to have nothing more to give. The beauty of permaculture however is that it is possible to take what we need from the earth as long as we obey the rules of nature, which is cyclical. Why can't Wales be at the forefront of developing systems which work in synergy with nature, so that we are investing and enriching the earth as we are growing our food. Permaculture specialists are out there finding ways to do this; we need to tap into these developments and make them happen here in Wales.

These days, we have lost the element of apprenticeship, where a skilled person would pass on their knowledge to the next generation. Only the other day our local barber was lamenting at how the craft he learned as a young apprentice 40 years ago would not be passed on to the next generation. This is happening in many of the lost arts of cottage industries which were linked to food production. Once the industrial revolution took place, after the railways made transporting food possible, we lost the need to teach the next generation how to grow food, make clothes, build houses and live together in community. However, one day, we will regret losing all of this knowledge, when the global food market collapses, when the land is exhausted of nutrients from the abuse of agribusiness, or in the event of a severe economic downturn.

Lets take the bread industry. The writer of "Classic Sourdoughs", Ed Wood points out that:

"For eons, all new doughs required a bit of old dough to "start" the rising process. In villages around the world, bread literally supported life. It was the staff of life. They baked it in their homes and every town had a baker and a bakery where the people could take their dough to be baked or buy it....Then the industrial revolution took bread out of the home and put it in factories that manufacture something labeled "bread" that neither looks like nor tastes like the staff of life....Within just the last hundred years there have been monumental changes to what we call bread, and these changes are mostly bad". (2)

The writer goes on to lament that the process of flour making has had to change to accommodate the large machinery. In order to get the dough through a machine without sticking, and have a longer shelf life, flour has all sorts of chemicals added to it with zero nutrients. The type of wheat grown too will be selected in terms not of flavour or nutritional content but in terms of its suitability for the factory and the supermarket shelf. No wonder so many of us are suffering from digestive problems. In ancient times, the wheat would have been left to sprout slightly before being threshed, adding to its digestibility. Now that we have lost the long fermentation process, the good bacteria are not having a chance to break down the nutrients within the flour and to make it more digestible. Most people do not have the money to pay for artisan sourdough bread, and neither do they have the time to make their own sourdough bread. And yet I wonder what price we are paying to make these short cuts? I'm sure that when bread was home-made, every scrap would have been used up, despite its short "shelf life", and how ironic that with a longer shelf life we in the UK waste the equivalent of 1 in 5 households dumping a loaf of bread every day. (3) With people going hungry in this country, this is just unacceptable.

As a busy mother I am struggling to make the time to prepare food from scratch, to make fermented foods and sourdough bread and grow my own food. In fact, I am simply not managing to do it at the moment. The answer, I believe must lie in getting back to our roots which the industrial revolution destroyed - working together in local community, learning from one another, benefiting from one another's skills and knowledge, supporting one another. In short, growing, preparing, preserving and sharing food together. This is what I want to see happening here in Wales. This isn't an easy option, it's fraught with difficulties, but I feel passionately that it is worth the effort.

I'm fascinated by a Welsh master roof thatcher called Alan Jones from [thatchingwales.co.uk](http://thatchingwales.co.uk). He is yet another example of a highly skilled craftsman desperate to pass on his knowledge to the next generation, and yet struggling to do so. I guess you're wondering at this point why am I going off on a non-food tangent. This is where our compartmentalised thinking has got us into trouble. The fact is that food is not in a vacuum. It affects and is affected by many other things. Thatching being one of them. Thatched roofs usually use straw from wheat. The reason that it's difficult to get hold of the right length of straw these days for thatching is because the wheat is no longer harvested by hand and it is cut too short by modern machinery. And so Alan has started growing his own organic wheat which is both suitable for thatching and great for making bread. He is selling the flour which is very popular with artisan bakers.

*Now 60, Alan works to pass on what he knows to a new generation. He is the longest-serving tutor for the Prince's Foundation for Building Community, which equips people with the skills they need to design and build sustainable environments. As you'd expect from a man who spends so many days up a ladder, he sees thatching's place in the big picture. "We really can't let it all go," he says. "A crop that feeds you and puts a roof over your head. It gives people work, supporting the community. You can't get more sustainable than that, can you?"*(4)

Alan speaks of the value of looking back in order to progress forward -

*"With close observation of materials preserved in historical thatched roofs, lessons can be learned about our ancestors farming methods and preferred crops. This shows us today how to recreate a sustainable /renewable attitude to how we deal with our thatched built environment, re-establishing the continuum with our farming past and linking it to the future, providing income in the countryside as well as insuring the knowledge remains alive."* (5)

We must not allow these age old traditions to die out. In our history the Welsh people lived in thatched roundhouses. They would grow their own wheat and thatch their own roofs. There is a growing movement of people who are wanting to rekindle this tradition of building homes made

from natural, sustainable materials, and to live off the land. Due to government legislation it is not easy for them to do so, but nevertheless there is a surge in interest. Courses are springing up all over the place, especially in Wales, teaching people how to build houses out of cob and straw, how to grow their own food, how to live off grid. (6) Although we have the One Planet Policy to help people to be able to live simply and in a sustainable way off the land, it is still mainly prohibitive to most people. How is this enabling the Welsh people to be at the forefront of keeping alive the traditions which produce not only great tasting and nutritious food, but could well mean that in the event of a disaster, we in Wales survive through producing locally grown food and using natural building materials, when the rest of the West is still dependent on the global market.

One day, I believe these skills are going to be needed again. Is Wales going to be the place people turn to in order to learn about sustainable building and growing?

If you look at Permaculture, which I believe is the key to creating a truly thriving food culture and economy, you will see that it is the study of how nature works together to one end - indeed it is like the perfect model of community. Everything works in rhythm and harmony together for mutual benefit. There is no robbing and pillaging stemming from competitive greed. This could be a great model for our government's approach to such a central issue as food and drink; rather than each department having it's own targets which can sometimes work in competition with one another, to instead work together towards making sure the people and land of Wales is thriving.

So what is permaculture? It is, in the words of Bill Mollison, it's founder, "a design system for creating sustainable human environments". Briefly, the aim of permaculture is "to create systems that are ecologically sound and economically viable, which provide for their own needs, do not exploit or pollute, and are therefore sustainable in the long term. Permaculture uses the inherent qualities of plants and animals combined with the natural characteristics of landscapes and structures to produce a life-supporting system for city and country, using the smallest practical area. In brief, it is a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature". (7)

I want to apply the precepts and principles of permaculture to our food culture because I see it as our only hope towards growing a sustainable food industry. For example, a food forest, which is becoming quite popular especially in community gardens, is a food production strategy that mimics a woodland ecosystem. In a healthy forest setting, humans aren't needed for weeding or fertilizing. In permaculture, we let nature do the work in many cases, we just have to consider the best design first. Permaculture looks at the cyclical design of nature, so that all waste goes into creating new life, rather than the linear journey of much current household waste. Everything works together to keep life thriving.

I'm proposing that we in Wales invest in being at the cutting edge of developments in permaculture, and ensure our people are trained and knowledgeable in the ancient arts and crafts used for growing, building, surviving and thriving. Most importantly we need to be set up to pass this knowledge and experience on to the next generation, by engaging them proactively.

In this vein, we need to get growing into schools. I'm not just talking about planting a few seeds but immersing them in the whole experience. If only children could just get outdoors and really experience a growing environment based on permaculture principles, linked with bush craft and good old outdoor fun. This experience would not only teach them these important life skills, but they would connect in a new way with the food and the eco-system, learn how great food tastes when freshly picked, and also benefit in their physical and mental health too. How sad that my son said to me today that he had a salad wrap for his school lunch rather than chips because the queue for the healthy food was shorter and he was hungry. Why was the queue shorter? If the food served tasted as delicious as my aforementioned organic tomatoes, maybe the children would be more

inspired, but my guess is that if they had grown the salad themselves they would be making that queue grow quite substantially. For some amazing examples of this sort of work please refer to the inspiring work of Whitney Cohen gardening with school children (8) (9).

My local hospital is raising money to plant an orchard for patients' mental and physical well being. The food served in hospitals is not renowned for it's nutritional value or flavour, and yet these are the people who need nutrition the most! If at the very least these patients might get to eat some of their orchard fruit this would not only be good for their bodies but for their souls too - I can vouch for the fact that there is something so heart warming about picking fruit fresh from the tree and eating it!

As a Christian, I often hear it said that sharing food and drink helps us to connect with one another during fellowship, community events and also in more intimate house based gatherings. I am a vegan, and although this means I can end up not feeling so involved with communal eating, I usually make sure there is something available for me to eat with others, and share with them too. But it doesn't just need to be the eating of food which binds people together in community and fellowship. What about the growing and producing and cooking and preserving of it as well? I will reiterate the point, because I think it needs to be repeated, that there is a "growing" interest among the people in creating more of a sense of community generally, and there is a very central place for the growing, preparing and sharing of food together in community. I used to have an allotment, and because I am a very busy mother and had just had my third child when it was offered to me, I was unable to tend it properly alone and I had to give it back. It was then that I started to feel that even growing food in allotments was a very segregated thing to do, despite others being around to offer a hand now and again. We are not meant to do everything alone and I sense a real stirring among the people for more connection and authentic community. The Church needs to be at the forefront of this, and ought to be the first to combine community outreach with community growing, preparing and sharing of food. It's interesting to note that the Bible speaks of the church as being like a "body" with each person playing it's own unique role in the working for the good of whole being, and then the body of Christ when working effectively in this way is well-placed to serve and bless outside of itself. This is what community should look like.

Today I took my children to the local countryside where we are responsible for feeding rescue pigs. The toddler loved the treasure hunt for acorns where she was taught how to spot an oak tree, and then the sheer delight of seeing the pigs going crazy for these acorns was a magical experience for her, as well as the picking and eating of blackberries along the way, and lime tree berries to make tea. How many children get to experience this sort of thing? And yet if we were to have community farms and gardens for families and schools, this would be made possible. Places like D Acres in New Hampshire, USA, which is a community-scale permaculture farm "which serves as an educational centre that researches, applies, and teaches skills of sustainable living and small scale organic farming" (10). This place has community at it's heart. And it is through valuing and cultivating an authentic community that I believe we can truly make this vision a reality. In these days of busyness and isolation people are craving community. We have realised that living independently of each other is leading to loneliness and burnout. But creating true community goes deeper than organising the odd picnic or planting a few communal herbs in the local park. These are just token gestures and are not really making an impact. Through social media people are organising more and more community support and I have experienced it. But what I want to propose is that Christians in the community, and the churches they are a part of, are an underused resource in both the need for deeper community connection, where people feel truly supported by one another, and with the new drive towards community growing.

I have already suggested that we invest in more local market gardeners and ecologically sound farming practices with direct relationships between the growers and their customers. But my real

heart is to see people working together on community growing initiatives. Where families get to learn together, and people forge friendships and support networks. Let's plant forest gardens and even dream big with projects like D-Acres. But I believe that the church (not just one denomination, but any with a desire to reach out to the community with their message of hope and practical love) is missing an opportunity for reaching out to their local community through sharing the growing of food together. Foodbanks are great, but how much better if churches would also provide fresh produce, and even prepare it together for those in poverty, while also teaching people in poverty how to grow and prepare and preserve food cheaply. What a wonderful way to really get to know people and to then be able to help them in real concrete ways, and be a real positive influence in the community. Let's not forget to that the God of the Bible is also the God of the land and the weather.... surely with such a God-honouring venture there would likely be a bountiful harvest! Jesus was often reported to have been sharing food with the people, or even cooking it for them. He even spoke of himself as the bread of life. So the Christian Church, more than any other people, ought to be at the forefront of community food growing and sharing in Wales. If the Welsh government were to support such initiatives led by many churches in Wales, what a wonderful partnership it could be, seeing as both parties exist for the benefit of it's non-members. My long term dream is to see a Christian D-Acres in Wales, or many of them, bringing physical and spiritual nourishment to the people of this land.

Footnotes -

- (1) Guy Watson video <https://www.facebook.com/riverford/videos/10155751162245815/>
- (2) Classic Sourdoughs, A Home Baker's Handbook - Ed Wood (pages xi-xii)
- (3) Taken from the Olio Food Sharing Revolution Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/olioex/>
- (4) <http://www.thatchingwales.co.uk/pdf/country-file-feature-thatching-2015.pdf>
- (5) <http://thatchingwales.co.uk/pdf/article1-ThatchingWales.pdf>
- (6) A pioneering eco-village in West Wales - <http://lammas.org.uk/en/welcome-to-lammas/>
- (7) Introduction to permaculture by Bill Mollison. Page 1
- (8) <https://www.urbanfarm.org/blog/2016/10/04/whitney-cohen/>
- (9) <http://www.lifelab.org/>
- (10) The Community-Scale Permaculture Farm by Josh Trought (page XI)