

Farmers Refuse to Give in



Despite strong negative feelings about the future of farming in its current state, Kent's farmers have shown their mettle in a new survey by revealing that only six per cent of them intend to give up.

The survey, undertaken by Business Link Kent as part of a wider rural report commissioned by Kent County Council, worryingly discovered that 65 per cent of the county's farmers are aged over 50, while only one per cent are under 30.

However, 46 per cent expect a family member to take over the farm business and another four per cent expect it to be

a colleague.

Diversification and gaining added value from their property were identified as the main way forward for many farm operations. Although only 30 per cent of farmers in the county have, so far, diversified 57 per cent admitted they would consider it.

Many farmers questioned said that obtaining planning permission for diversification was often not easy. The survey results were unveiled by Tony Buddin, Business Link Kent's Marketing Director, at a rural conference on September 12, chaired by Alex King, Kent County Council's Cabinet Member for Regeneration (see box story). There was a healthy interest reported from farmers for more information on diversification.

One farmer who recently made headlines by using lateral thinking was Countess Sondes, owner of the Lees Court Estate, near Faversham, who has started growing a flower called echium, whose oil is used in wrinkle-reducing cosmetics.

She has also boosted biodiversity on her estate by planting more trees, laying hedges and allowing areas to run wild – thus attracting more butterflies and bees.

While branching out into the cosmetics field has proved profitable for the Countess, other farmers might consider better use of brownfield sites on their land.

David Parry, of property experts Cluttons, said: "The intention of this conference is to outline, in understandable language, the practicalities of exploiting a brownfield site to its full advantage, including an economic overview, how land value for development is assessed, the principals of funding and disposal strategy."

Of Kent farms which have diversified, the majority have been either for tourism or letting/selling buildings for commercial use.

Graeme Kemsley, Business Link Kent's Farming Business Adviser, feels that in recent years people have begun to concentrate on the potential of redundant farm buildings.

"Farmers have been tightening their belts over the years, initially reducing variable costs and laterally reducing fixed costs like labour and machinery," he said. "The further deterioration of the economic viability of the industry has led farmers to seek more novel or extreme

ways to return their businesses to profitability.

"That has meant farmers looking anew at all their assets especially their buildings. The planning system is still inhibiting this process but the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) grants have certainly helped. Kent has done exceedingly well since their introduction in 2001, having claimed £3.1million out of a total for the South East region of £8.8 million. These grants are planned to increase dramatically over the next two years and will be most welcome not only by farmers but the general rural economy"

Business Link Kent, through the Farm

Business Advisory Service, can help those investigating diversification by steering them towards the grants available from the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and DEFRA's ERDP scheme.

"SEEDA offers a competitive grant of up to 25 per cent of the cost of renovating a redundant farm building for business use e.g. converting chicken sheds into small office units. It can't be used for converting buildings for residential use," said Graeme. "Also the money has to go on the actual structure, not on the fittings or equipment that will be housed within."

However, one handicap farmers are

still facing when it comes to converting disused buildings into office space is the lack of high-speed Internet services. While broadband is available to about 80 per cent of the population, this percentage is much lower in remote, rural areas and this can discourage companies from relocating into the countryside.

"We support the industry through help with utilising redundant or surplus buildings and providing independent specialist advice," he added.

For more information on how Business Link Kent can help your farm contact 08457 226655, e-mail: info@businesslinkkent.com or visit www.businesslinkkent.com

GARDEN OF ENGLAND GOES GLOBAL

An exciting plan to create a World Class Centre of Excellence for the land-based economy in Kent has been unveiled.

Kent organisations which provide some of the best expertise to be found anywhere in the world in education, knowledge and research associated with the rural economy, have joined together as a unique 'task force' to promote their strengths and invigorate Kent's rural economy in the process.

Imperial College London's campus at Wye, the East Malling Trust for Horticultural Research, Horticultural Research International at East Malling, Hadlow College, the Brogdale Horticultural Trust and the Kent County Agricultural Society have joined together in a move co-ordinated by Kent County Council.

Outlining the idea publicly for the first time at Kent's Rural Challenge Conference, the county council's Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Alex King, said: "World class expertise and opportunities associated with horticulture and agriculture have grown up in Kent and nurtured the County's

reputation as the Garden of England. Bringing that expertise together with a united aim of promoting what is available on a world stage is one of the most exciting ideas I have ever been associated with.

"The world is changing, rural economies have to adapt to survive. Now is the time to capture the expertise and opportunity available in Kent and promote it jointly as a co-ordinated and exciting concept."

The organisations will continue in their existing formats, but will work closely together through the new task force to explore co-operative working and joint-venture opportunities.

Mr King said: "They are largely bucking the national trend of declining interest in the land-based sector. Student numbers are up and interest in horticulture and agriculture in Kent is growing. Harnessing these organisations and institutes together for maximum impact is a bold and challenging move.

"Just think of the potential – the possibility of the County Showground becoming an international centre for promoting excellence in the rural economy; the best horticultural research found anywhere in the world, already available at our research centres and colleges; the unique and justly famous Brogdale fruit

collection; the Kent County Agricultural Society's membership base and the opportunity it provides for networking."

It was decided that the task force chairman should come from the land-based sector, and Sarah Ward, a Kent farmer and hop grower who is a former Countryside Commissioner and currently Chairman of the South East Regional Committee for the Heritage Lottery Fund, was elected.

She said: "History does not stand still. Kent has one of the most varied, interesting and fulfilling agricultural histories that can be found anywhere. The countryside of the Garden of England is beautiful but, like the farmers and people that work it, has to earn a living and thrive if it is to be preserved.

"Farming, horticulture, tourism and rural businesses all have a vital part to play. Finding the best way to nourish our unique legacy of expertise and marketing it as a world-class asset is the task before us. A daunting challenge but a vital one."

The task force has already commissioned a feasibility study of what could be achieved with a report back expected by the end of the Autumn.

To contact the Landbase Sector Group call 08457 226655 or email info@businesslinkkent.com