

If you were to ask a class of primary school children to define the role of the farmer you would probably expect them to say that they keep livestock and grow crops, i.e. farmers produce food. But, if you were to offer the same question to a group of farmers the answers would vary. Some would be proud that their core activity is primary production whilst others would admit that their businesses have changed beyond recognition.

For a long time “diversification” has been the buzz word and many businesses have focused on non-food enterprises such as the redevelopment of buildings, telephone masts, paintballing, tourism and so on. In fact, and particularly since the introduction of the Single Farm Payment, it is easy to argue that the industry has been discouraged from producing food. The now defunct RDPE diversification grants were primarily designed to promote investment in rural redevelopment and even the Environmental Stewardship Schemes – ESA, CSS, HLS – have, for many, provided an opportunity to generate revenue from land without producing anything.

It is worth reminding ourselves how this started – it was not because farmers wanted to let 25 units to all and sundry or because they particularly wanted a camp site. No, it was because food production was so unprofitable that there was no alternative.

However, is this all set to change? Recently income from diversification has come under pressure – industrial units on out of the way holdings are difficult to let, income from telephone masts has dropped and farm shops are feeling the impact of consumers having to count their pennies. Government is not helping either. Farmers are finding it harder to access HLS as CSS and ESA schemes draw to a close and those that are awarded agreements get less than they did two years ago. Perhaps then “diversification” has run its course? This is, of course, highly unlikely. Farmers have always adapted to change and new enterprises will quickly emerge.



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Diversify into farming!

Perhaps though this is where the story has turned full circle and the headline is the re-emergence of the “food producing farmer!” After years of negativity production is profitable and prospects encouraging.

This is the point, however, where some very clear thinking is needed. Simply put, if you want to be a profitable food producer you need to decide exactly what you want to do and then take the right action to achieve it. Throughout the South East there are many shining examples of farming businesses that have always concentrated on production – whether cereals, dairy, salad crops or fruit. Many have bucked

the trend and have focused on their core activity when perhaps “easier” diversification opportunities were open to them. If you take a close look they all share the same attributes – they are usually big, they are well organised, they are structured for efficiency (labour and machinery) and, perhaps most important of all, they are always technically first class. And there is something else, they are usually better than their neighbours, their friends and definitely their competitors, who are often all the same people. It is, if you stretch

your imagination a little, like Formula 1 motor racing. Sebastian Vettel and Red Bull recently tied up the drivers and constructors title for the second year in succession. Red Bull have been consistently faster than everyone else by making sure everything was as good as it could be and by focusing on their sole objective, no matter what. Nothing is left to chance, they employ the best people, use the most up to date equipment and ensure the whole team is focussed on winning. And if something changes, like the weather, they have an alternative strategy already prepared. Not so different then!

So, if you have decided to refocus on production, what next? First, decide what you want to do. You will achieve nothing without this first step. Then make a master plan. This will change as circumstances never work out quite as expected but you have to start somewhere. Set realistic goals and do what is necessary to achieve them. Make sure you have thought about the detail. What investment is required and is the business structured to fund it. Is the right machinery available and are the staff capable of using it. Are you making the most of up to date technology? Finally, think about the team around you. Do you have the right help – on and off the farm – to make this happen? If there isn't a family member with the right skills find someone from outside the business. Then win!



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