

Thoughts from the tour bus

The CLM tour bus has come to rest after another successful series of seminars across the South East with the Country Land and Business Association.

One of the highlights of these tours is the chance to take the temperature of the industry – to gauge the mood on everything from the chaos around the basic payment scheme (BPS), local enterprise partnerships, planning, cereal prices, rates and rents.

There is a grudging acceptance, almost a perverse respect, for BPS and the mess DEFRA and the Rural Payments Agency have conspired to produce. It's rather like knowing that Great Uncle G is coming to stay. You know that he will irritate your wife, the house will look like a bomb has gone off, and he'll borrow your cricket whites or gun depending on the season and cap it off by nicking your beloved car for the weekend to take his new girlfriend to Burgh Island. Despite all that you like seeing him because he always brings plenty of excellent wine, leaving you with enough stock to keep the wife happy and more often than not some very good tickets to something entertaining which no one else seems to be able to get hold of... "rugby world cup final old boy?"

DEFRA is the same shambling relic as Uncle G and on the whole we put up with it because the reward is worth it in the end.

Pernicious business rates levied without warning are one of the other hot topics of conversation for property owners from East



Kent cold stores to Buckinghamshire holiday lets via Isle of Wight livery yards. The fairly recent change in legislation which resulted in local authorities and councils being able to keep more of the rates they collect has resulted in a rather over zealous approach by some councils and district valuers.

If that wasn't bad enough for the beleaguered property owner what really gets their goat is that there is no consistency between councils and officers. Properties no more than half a mile apart can receive very different treatment. Newly levied rates on holiday lets, cold stores and stables are causing alarm across the region. It's an interesting conundrum when considering the risk of sub-letting and trying to gauge the point at which your cold store or stable yard becomes rateable.

If you have the misfortune to come across a ratings officer the question then becomes how do you challenge? There have been a number of different but successful approaches adopted. The general consensus is to defend directly and vigorously. On an individual case by case basis, it is not an exact science, but it's a nasty, costly tax particularly if

no tax was levied before and it is therefore always worth the battle.

Having spent a lot of the tour talking about business and life planning – for the two are entwined completely in our sector – it seems that for some in a world increasingly full of technology our suggestion that you do away with the laptop is a revelation. Our preference is that you start with a mark one pencil when writing a business plan. Keeping it simple when starting to review what comes next for business, life and family helps maintain clarity and focus.

A large sheet of white paper and a pencil. Liberating. Spreadsheets, flow charts, cash flows and budgets are functional tools for what should start out as a philosophical set of objectives. It is perhaps obvious but cash flows and budgets will reflect back at the user the information they contain. Therefore writing a business plan based on the contents of a one dimensional budget and cash-flow is a very hollow outcome. Unavoidable by most – let's leave Uncle G out of this – tax is a consequence of a set of decisions and, if possible, shouldn't become the tail that wags the dog. There are always

exceptions to rules and our view is that the only acceptable pure tax led plan is when considering inheritance tax and even in that instance an overall objective, such as getting the farm from A to B and the cottages and holiday lets from A to Z must be known first before thinking about inheritance tax.

End of an era

Finally, with much affection, we note the end of an era in Hartfield as our last "proper" tenant retires and hangs up his calving ropes. They taught this green, Wye College graduate a lot, including how to swear, chase cattle by moonlight, tell the difference between good and bad bullocks and many other things beside. They even introduced my then girlfriend, now wife, to traffic duty while chasing cattle round the village. Twenty years later I will miss the regular bollockings I continued to receive until recently but at least I will still know where to go for a good cup of tea and some eggs.



▶ by **MARK WEAVER**
Director,
CLM
01892 770339



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Call us on **01892 770339** or email info@c-l-m.co.uk
www.c-l-m.co.uk