

Year of Food and Farming is education opportunity

When thinking of raising capital and generating income from redundant farm buildings, an office or storage development seems most appealing. However, as the Year of Food and Farming launches next week, another option brings itself to the table.

Creating educational facilities and attractions could prove to be a great opportunity – not just financially – for farmers and landowners.

The conversion of buildings or an extension to an existing building could prove a worthwhile investment.

Developing a simple farm walk or small education centre could bring in 300 to 500 visitors per year, without taking up too much of your time.

Larger scale farm attractions, typically of a more commercial nature, can attract, on average, 50,000 plus visitors per annum, dependant on the facilities and scale of development.

A ‘living classroom’ with a small souvenir/farm shop allows farmers and producers to market local produce, goods and services while educating, schools, organisations and visitors on all aspects of agriculture and the ‘gate to plate’ process.

There are various government planning statements and guidance to consider. Planning documents such as Planning Policy Statement 7 – Sustainable Development Within Rural Areas and the Good Practice Guide on Planning for Tourism cover the main areas when considering a small educational centre or attraction.

There may also be other government planning statements and local planning policies to consider.

From our experience, local authorities want to ensure ‘living classrooms’ follow the national curriculum and are keen to assist farmers in such projects, offering support to develop these attractions in some areas.

Health and safety, environmental assessments and the use of farm accreditation schemes such as The Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation Scheme are other factors that need consideration.

It is great putting something back into the community, but what about the cost? Typical conversion costs for converting redundant buildings or extending existing buildings into an educational centre will typically be very similar to converting buildings into offices. They can attract grant funding towards conversion costs, upkeep and maintenance or for installation of new facilities. Business rates will need to be assessed by the local valuation office.

Typical timeframes for such developments can range from six months for straightforward developments through to full-scale attractions, which are best phased in over a longer time period.

Diversifying into educational facilities on your farm requires good connections with local schools, councillors and other organisations.

Full support on farm accreditation, and development, including informal help and advice is available from the National Farm Attractions Network, Leaf, Face, and other individual advisors and companies involved with this growing industry.