

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Cathy, thank you.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this our third annual CLA Rural Business conference.

Thank you for coming, and congratulations – tickets have been hot property again this year selling out earlier than ever, a clear reflection of the stellar line up of speakers and the momentous backdrop of events just at this moment.

Today is all about Inspiring Investors and I am looking forward to hearing from an assortment of our colleagues who have invested creatively in the future of their land, business or community.

Each speaker's aspirations, challenges and opportunities are unique.

But they share a willingness to embrace change, to look to the future positively and with passion, and to make the bold decision to do things a little differently.

We also welcome this morning the Secretary of State for Defra Michael Gove. He will tell us how the Government is helping pave the way for inspiring investments across the countryside, as it forges a new post-Brexit future for the whole country.

And this afternoon we can look forward to an alternative perspective from the creator of the LEON food chain, Henry Dimbleby, who is also currently leading the development of the Government's new Food Strategy.

LEON is a tour de force in healthy, natural fast food: I would venture to suggest the future if my daughter's Kale and Avocado smoothy is anything to go by. I am sure that Henry will challenge us to think afresh about how we can anticipate trends and invest in success.

And what I really hope, is that we all go home, inspired to think how we can make the most of our own assets by doing things a little differently too.

Change

But let us start the day with a fundamental question. Is now really the right time to consider the types of change that we are talking about today?

Change is inevitable, and embracing it is not just the right choice, but the only choice.

Our business of land management and rural enterprise is a long-term concern. The land we live off today has seen generations come and go, farming practices evolve and political environments fluctuate. And now, mankind's footprint on the planet is ever increasing, and what our society wants from the countryside is changing.

All this transcends Brexit, but our hopes and ever increasing fears about leaving the EU, certainly add an intense new dimension.

Looking at agriculture, Government expects farmers to move to a more market-facing world, less supported by public funding. The acreage-based payments of CAP will be replaced by payments for public goods work. To counter this we are promised measures focused on driving up the profitability of farming. How substantive these are, and exactly what

they will cover, remains to be seen but they are critical for a successful transition. Perhaps the Secretary of State can enlighten us this morning.

One thing is for sure, we farmers need to react to the imminent changes. We must forensically examine our businesses to guarantee margin is created, focusing squarely on the changing demands of our customers.

And this new era dawning does not just apply to farming. The entire rural economy as well as our landscapes, environment and communities will be marked by recalibrations of the relationships between town and countryside; between Westminster and rural voters; between landownership and food production; and between farming and nature.

But changes for rural businesses are also being driven by a raft of major political concerns pre-dating the vote to leave the EU:

- Successive Governments struggle to tackle the Productivity gap;
- Pressures mount on housing supply in both town and countryside;
- Growing concerns over ways to pay for the NHS and social care;
- Not to mention dealing with the rising threat of climate change.

These changes will create new challenges, but with them comes opportunity.

So, now is an important time to take stock of who we are as landowners and rural business owners. We should be proud of our leadership within the communities, our custodianship of the countryside for future generations, but we should consider these crucial questions.

- How can we get the best from our land and assets?
- How should we invest for the future profitability of our businesses?
- What are the best ways to support our communities and enhance the natural environment?
- And how can we bolster that vital bond of trust between landowners and society?

Today

Now Today is all about exploring these questions with some of our industry's leading lights – our Inspiring Investors.

In today's discussions, and the Inspiring Investors report you will have found on your chairs, we are showcasing how the leadership and investment of landowners shapes the countryside and its communities,

that so many have come to treasure. Particularly in so many cases they are in places where public services are most stretched.

The people, projects and enterprises featured in the report and on stage today are very different from each other – ranging from on-farm diversifications, to investment in rural homes, new forestry projects, and changes to farm business structures.

But they have all recognised and responded to change, helping them secure a strong future for their businesses, their local communities and the fabric of the countryside.

Some are Place Shapers – coming together with local communities to find the best routes to growth and vibrancy, working together to achieve fulfilling employment, attractive places to live and a sense of belonging.

Others are Risk Takers – committed to innovation, taking calculated and considered risks after recognising a need for something fresh, often outside of their ‘comfort zones’.

Finally we have the Future Planners – addressing the challenges of succession and the responsibility of making far-reaching decisions, so

harnessing the opportunity for growth. One of my reflections during my first year as President is that the most successful businesses have involved the next generation at an early stage.

All of their investments are set in the context of long-term, often multi-generational business plans and are backed by practical preparation for change: such as embracing new skills, advice or technologies.

They challenge past practices, trying new approaches to best use the unique strengths of each business, land holding or family.

And they all put their local community at the heart of their plans from the outset – each taking responsibility to ensure they and their communities can be proud of what has been achieved.

But the landowner's inspiring commitment is one thing, it needs to be backed by a positive political and economic environment that encourages rural business growth and instils the confidence that is crucial to making an investment.

Policy

This is why today we are calling on Government to deliver a new post-Brexit “Enterprising Countryside Charter” – five core policies that will create a better environment for rural businesses.

Firstly, the establishment of local frameworks specifically designed to give better support to rural businesses planning to grow.

Secondly, an obligation for planning authorities to take account of an applicant’s long-term business plan. This will help give greater consistency, certainty to those grappling with the planning system, and will deliver a less piecemeal approach to development in our communities.

Staying on that sticky wicket, the outdated criteria for a ‘sustainable village’ in local planning needs to be brought into the 21st Century.

These criteria need to evolve from a barrier, to a catalyst for the delivery of urgently needed homes in the right places, in places where people actually want to live.

Fourthly, we continue to press for better digital connections to help unlock the enormous potential of the countryside. Not least the

introduction of 'Rural Roaming' to improve mobile coverage, as described by a national newspaper reporter at a Conservative Party Fringe event this year, "A No Brainer".

And finally, this time of preparation for Brexit should see the Government extend the remit of the Minister with responsibility for rural business. This vital role is critical to meeting the challenges and opportunities of leaving the EU, and it should cross both Defra and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Look out for more on these asks of Government in the CLA Policy Report that we publish online today, we will send you all a link by email in the coming days.

And on the subject of policy, I should briefly touch on the Agriculture Bill currently progressing through Parliament.

The Bill's importance cannot be overstated. It is the marker for the Government's approach to farming and the countryside, possibly for several decades.

As you would expect, the CLA has excellent links with both the team in Defra developing the Bill, and the Ministers directing their work. We are heavily involved in discussions with them and with other farming, environmental and professional groups to ensure the policy sets the parameters for a healthy supply of home-grown nutritious food through profitable farming, but also maximising the opportunities for enhancing the environment.

Whilst too numerous and wide-ranging for me to go into this morning, I would highlight just a few big ticket items.

First and foremost, we need cross-party pledges to funding plans for the industry beyond 2022.

Delivery of the new policies in the Agriculture Bill and the aspirations of the 25 Year Environment Plan will require us to make changes and investments. Without this commitment to the future from both major parties, how can we commit to reshaping our businesses profitably, whilst delivering widely for society?

Secondly, with the days of BPS payments numbered, securing a commitment to the Land Management Contract scheme was a key CLA

success. We campaigned long and hard to make sure that the loss of direct payments can be off-set by payment for delivering public goods.

The concept now needs turning into reality with the scheme firmly in place as acreage payments start to decline. Farmers and land managers must receive proper reward as part of a broad and smoothly-managed scheme, with profitable farming sitting alongside the provision of public benefit. More simply put, “The Best Gross Margins deliver the best Grass Margins”.

And finally, the help to accelerate farm productivity that Defra has proposed, must materialise into opportunities that can have a real impact on individual farms and the industry.

So, with an Agriculture Bill that delivers for profitable food production, and a rural economy framework fit to deliver the support needed for investment in the countryside, a resilient future dawns over time.

Today’s spotlight on Inspiring Investors is not about patting ourselves on the back. It is about ensuring that we all think about how to deliver a robust future for our communities and countryside as well, with:

- high quality food from profitable farms;

- conservation and heritage;
- a healthy environment and iconic landscapes;
- recreation and leisure;
- stable jobs;
- good homes and offices;
- and technological innovation.

So as CLA members, let us now embrace these challenges and opportunities of the coming years and beyond.

Closing remarks and thank yous

So to close, my thanks to today's speakers for coming to share your experiences and insights, and my thanks to all who featured in the thought-provoking Inspiring Investors report.

But also to our partner organisations at this year's CLA Rural Business Conference – without whom today would not have been possible.

During the breaks throughout the day, do make the most of the opportunity to speak with these partner organisations. Do also visit the CLA "hub" area too, where you will be able to meet our colleagues from

CLA Insurance and CLA Healthcare, as well as some of the CLA's expert advisers.

At which point, it gives me great pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State Michael Gove to the stage. I have been delighted to engage with him and his officials to help fashion the emerging policy during my time as CLA President. His drive to understand the intricacies of our rural workplace has been impressive, always keen to listen to our proposals, to firmly challenge, but equally accept the evidence. Thanks to his decisive contribution, WE have a clearer direction of travel than most.

Now normally a past master at giving nothing away, and I would not fancy playing poker with him, nevertheless I very much look forward to hearing some of his latest thoughts on the way forward for our businesses and the countryside.

Secretary of State, thank you for your time with us today.