

REUSING FARM BUILDINGS

Introduction

Traditional farm buildings make an important contribution to the character of our rural landscape and play a central role in the symbolic self-understanding of Irish people as rural, self sufficient, and resourceful. This image has come under threat, with many of these buildings now underused for modern farming purposes, leading to disrepair. A wasted asset is difficult to invest in but if you don't use it, you'll lose it!

They have important potential for the diversification of the rural economy in terms of branding, amenity, environmental improvements and economically viable new uses, and create an additional source of income. Some opportunities for new uses of farm buildings include:

- industrial workshops;
- recreation/agri-tourism;
- residential;
- artists' studios/craft workshops; and,

- training centres.

An underused resource can be converted into a valuable asset. Although there can be a substantial financial and environmental reward for landowners able to convert for these purposes, there are a number of important considerations. A landowner should carry out a feasibility study themselves to establish the implication of proceeding with the conversion, and the potential benefits.

The market

First think about the use that you want for the building and how it might impact on you and your farm.

Conversion into residential use remains the most popular option. Many older farm settlements have the advantage of a good location due to their early establishment in terms of shelter, orientation and views. While it is becoming more difficult to get planning permission for new houses on rural greenfield sites, it's easier to get approval for conversion of existing buildings within a farm settlement. Some planning authorities actively promote the re-use and refurbishment of existing buildings over new development sites.

Over the past few years diversified farm and



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rural businesses have opened up to visitors. Setting up on-farm holiday accommodation, by adapting an existing building into a holiday self catering let is a popular choice for diversification. Many tourists want the personal experience of living in close proximity to the family farm and being a part of the experience. There are also opportunities to develop complementary activity businesses such as kayaking, fishing boats, gillie services, cycling, heritage talks and walks, etc.

Retail uses of converted agricultural buildings can include craft and clothes shops, farm supply shops, warehouse-style retail outlets, and retail units linked to tourism attractions. Franchises are another option where the farmer can buy into an already successful retail business and replicate it at the farm. A number of market factors should be considered when assessing the viability of a change of use. These include location, accessibility for customers, proximity to centres of population and local competition. Market research is essential to assess demand for the type of retail unit that is likely to succeed, and that is more likely to obtain planning permission. You should first have informal discussions with your local county council and gain advice on the planning procedures needed.

07: Reusing Farm Buildings

Requirements

Successful adaptive reuse of any farm building depends on understanding its importance, its relationship to its landscape setting and its sensitivity to and capacity for change. Generally, you need planning permission if you are building, demolishing, or altering a building, or making a “material change of use” to structures. For more information on planning in your area see ‘Agriculture and Farm Development – The Planning Issues’, available from your local county council, as well as other general planning guidance. Experience indicates that planning permission is more likely to be gained if the road access is reasonable, the proposed use is in line with current zoning, the building is close to existing buildings, will not affect the neighbours, and will retain the same or sympathetic appearance after conversion. Most county councils provide guidelines to what is acceptable in rural areas.

It is unusual in rural areas to have access to main drains or combined sewage schemes, so the size of the site and the type of access to it can become an issue. You need to check your county development plan if the building you propose to alter is a protected structure. The use of the site for purposes not



June Bourke, a sheep farmer and spinner based in Mayo, received grant aid to update old farm buildings, which she now uses for lambing, dyeing and spinning wool.

associated with agriculture may be contrary to the deemed agricultural zoning of an area and could represent a material contravention of the county development plan and may be problematic. Where it is proposed to extend a farm building, proposals must comply with the standards for waste water disposal and access, if a new access onto a public road is required. Councils can also invoke the provisions of the Derelict Sites Act 1990 as appropriate.

Many traditional farm buildings serve as wildlife habitats for protected species and are protected under the Wildlife Acts 1976-2000. If the work proposed will disturb a bat roost, a licence will need to be obtained in advance. Seek advice from your local National Parks & Wildlife Service ranger before carrying out any work.

The methods of achieving energy improvement on existing buildings can vary depending on the construction and age of the building. The EU Green Deal and Ireland's commitment to cutting CO₂ emissions from buildings means that new rules may be in place for all building projects. An existing building is a host of embodied carbon and a life-cycle assessment methodology is something that can be applied to refurbishment projects. Reusing buildings can be part of the circular economy.

Expenditure and income

Expenditure on conversion will vary considerably, depending on the construction of the building, its location, the new use proposed, the works needed and whether the work will be outsourced to contract or undertaken directly by the owner.

Income will be determined mainly by the use to which the conversion is devoted. Guidance is given in other fact sheets as to some of those uses. If you are considering leasing the building, contact local auctioneers to assess price and potential demand.

Funding

The local enterprise offices support micro-enterprises of ten employees and less with grant-aid.

The LEADER programme is specifically intended to help enterprises in rural areas and has in the past supported many conversion projects. If you have an idea, you can contact your local county LEADER board and apply for grant assistance. Some

previous LEADER-assisted conversions

include modern craft studios, Montessori schools, hostels and self-catering holiday homes.

Check with Fáilte Ireland to find out about any tourism incentives or tax schemes. The Heritage Council manages the Green Low-carbon Agri-environment Scheme (GLAS) Traditional Farm Buildings Grant Scheme on

behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). Funding depends on how the use relates to agriculture.

Business plans need to be completed in advance of starting your venture. Teagasc's Rural Enterprise Service provides specialised training courses, seminars, support and individual advice to rural enterprises.

— DON'T LOSE THEM, USE THEM! —

Further information

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The following resources are also helpful
🌐 www.heritagecouncil.ie

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