**CONSULTANCY REPORT**

**Activity in current period**

As in previous years three consultancy visits were made in April, July and September with 8-10 growers visited on each occasion. After each consultancy visit a report was sent summarizing discussions and any action required. Apart from the consultancy visits contact was maintained with Island growers by telephone and increasingly by email. Most discussions continue to be of a technical nature but also concern over the challenges in increasing production, marketing opportunities and support from the Department, particularly over changes to, and availability of, the Farm Grant Scheme.

**Mood of the industry**

As always, growers tend to be optimistic but there are obviously ongoing concerns related to the general uncertainty at present. There continues to be a desire for business development but there is a realization that this has to be in the context of the total market size being a limiting factor. Those in the nursery stock/amenity sector tend to be reliant on the activity of the construction industry and any downturn has an impact on profitability.

**Key themes and challenges**

* Availability and cost and of labor. One example being weed control in both vegetables and nursery stock where an alternative to expensive hand weeding and hoeing is required.
* Horticultural producers are very aware of the need to develop market opportunities but this is constrained by the population on the Island, though in the past there has been exporting of flower crops. The only avenue for expansion or changes in cropping would be to grow crops currently not available.
* One possibility, but a very challenging one, is of course to supply more produce to supermarkets but supplying multiples is a specialized and technically demanding market.
* Availability and cost of pesticides. The range of pesticides for some horticultural crops is now very limited and often those that are available are sold in quantities too large for the scale of production on the Island.

**Opportunities**

* Alternative crops, but there has to be a market demand and also the ability to provide continuity together with confidence in being able to replace the current source of the commodity.
* Scope for more soft fruit production but the problem with small berry fruit is the period between establishing and first harvest which is a
* Minimum of 2 years and can be as long as 7 years with no income coming in.
* Co-operation between growers to produce a wider range of produce and for a longer period but with consistent quality and freshness.
* Are there any opportunities in the Islands public sector?
* The key requirement is of course to identify and research the market as scope for some crops may be limited.

**Any areas to look at**

* Increase efficiency/productivity but not an ease one to pursue. Would there be any scope for machinery sharing if alternative techniques such as precision vision guided hoes were the way forward? Membership of a Machinery Ring? Availability of Grant aid?
* Enterprise energy use audit particularly relevant to glasshouse businesses with high-energy use for heating and soil sterilization.
* Irrigation/water is an increasing issue on the mainland both in terms of availability and demand now that prolonged dry spells seem to be more frequent. Availability of Grant aid to update distribution and for application equipment?
* Adoption of techniques to minimize reliance on pesticides.

**Meetings/video links**

* Marketing could be a topic but the challenge would be an agenda with something constructive and positive that has not already been tried/discussed.
* The idea of benchmarking is one that has been used in the past on the mainland for some vegetable crops. On the Island all the businesses are very different in terms of cropping and size/complexity and comparisons would therefore be difficult.
* Any topic would need to be of relevance to at least six growers.