

Session Overview – Unlocking value in rural spaces and places

Farm Business Innovation

The session, led by Louise Newton from Bidwells, focused on strategies for **rural diversification** and unlocking value in underutilised rural land and buildings. Louise covered a broad spectrum of rural property opportunities, including leisure, tourism, residential, commercial, and energy projects. She provided a practical **diversification checklist**, illustrated real-world case studies, and highlighted the importance of **planning, permitted development rights, and financial viability** in successfully delivering new income streams.

Key themes included maximising existing assets, understanding regulatory frameworks (planning permission, Class Q and R rights), integrating new ventures with existing farm operations, and exploring temporary or permanent diversification models—from dog walking paddocks and glamping to filming locations and energy solutions.

10 Key Audience Takeaways

1. **Diversification starts with a clear purpose** – Decide if your goal is generating income, releasing capital, or adding long-term value, as this will guide the route you take.
2. **Audit existing assets first** – Underutilised buildings or land may offer easy opportunities without new construction, reducing cost and risk.
3. **Viability is crucial** – Consider market demand, location, investment required, and who will operate the new venture before committing.
4. **Integration with farm operations** – Ensure leisure or tourism activities don't conflict with core farm activities; some ventures can complement existing offerings, e.g., farm shops + glamping.
5. **Planning permission and permitted development rights matter** – Know whether full planning consent or Class Q/R rights apply; early professional advice avoids costly enforcement issues.
6. **Leverage Class Q and Class R rights strategically** – Class Q enables agricultural-to-residential conversion; Class R allows agricultural-to-commercial/indoor sports conversions, including emerging sectors like paddle courts.
7. **Temporary uses provide low-risk testing** – Events, festivals, weddings, and filming can operate under temporary permitted development rights, allowing trial diversification without permanent changes.
8. **Dog walking paddocks are high-return, low-maintenance options** – Typically 2 acres per paddock, these can deliver £20k–£60k annual income depending on location.
9. **Energy and renewables are increasingly viable** – Opportunities exist for solar panels, roof-mounted systems, and electric vehicle charging, adding small-scale or commercial revenue streams.
10. **Plan ahead for long-term flexibility** – Agricultural permitted development rights for new buildings should be used strategically (often with a 10-year planning horizon) to allow future conversion to commercial or residential use.