INTRODUCTION

1.1 Snowdonia National Park is predominantly a rural authority and therefore the social and environmental prosperity of the rural area is important. A change in the rural economy can have far-reaching consequences.

1.2 The tradition of the family farm is still strong but the future is uncertain. With change likely, particularly in the light of the Brexit vote and the implications for the UK farming sector of the likely de-coupling from the Common Agricultural Policy and the existing farm payments system.

1.3 The results of these changes will not be confined to farming families alone. As has previously been witnessed, changes in agriculture can have a knock on effect on the wider society and economy of Snowdonia, as well as the landscape.

1.4 Climate change is likely to pose a great threat to the industry and the National Park’s assets in general. Although uncertainty exist on how the changes will unfold, there is certainty that it will have an effect on the rural economy.

1.5 Retaining the provision of employment opportunities is a key factor in encouraging young people to stay in the area and therefore maintaining a balance demography.

NATIONAL POLICY - WALES

2.1 Diversification of the rural economy is a way to provide local employment opportunities, increase the local economic prosperity and minimise the need to travel for employment. Planning Policy Wales states that local planning authorities should adopt a positive approach to farm diversification in rural areas irrespective of whether they are served by public transport.

2.2 Although consideration should firstly be given to converting existing buildings, it does not discount the erection of appropriate new buildings. Small-scale enterprises provide a vital role and promote healthy economic activity in the rural areas. Many commercial and light manufacturing activities can be located in rural areas without causing unacceptable harm to human or nature.

2.3 Further national technical guidance is given in Technical Advice Note 6 “Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities” 2010. This note generally supports sustainable projects in the countryside and states that many economic activities can be sustainably located on farms such as farm shops or workshops. It states that general diversification of the rural economy should, as far as possible be contained to designated settlements whilst diversification involving agricultural land and holdings (farms) can occur in open countryside subject to considerations.

2.4 The guidance document suggests that Farm Business Plans could usefully support applications for sustainable farm diversification. Such plans can demonstrate how the diversified activity fits into the wider farming picture, and in addition set out its social and environmental consequences highlighting how any significant adverse effects will be mitigated.
ADOPTED ERYRI LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (2011) POLICIES:

STRATEGIC POLICY H: A SUSTAINABLE RURAL ECONOMY

3.1 On a national scale more people migrate into Wales than outmigrate. This is particularly true for Gwynedd County Council area who see more outmigration of 20-30 year olds and more immigration of 45-64 year olds. Stemming the outmigration of young people is a key factor in maintaining a balanced demography particularly in rural areas where the Welsh language thrives.

3.2 One of the main objectives of the Plan therefore is to encourage sustainable economic growth by supporting the rural economy to provide new and retain employment opportunities.

3.3 A number of significant employment centres are in close proximity to the National Park boundary and therefore the LDP policies lean towards smaller scale businesses situated within the Park. New employment and training developments are encouraged with Development Policy 19: New employment and Training development which direct new proposals to re-use existing buildings.

DEVELOPMENT POLICY 20: FARM DIVERSIFICATION

3.4 Broadening the economic base of agricultural activities is recognised as a means of improving the viability of the family farm economy of the National Park. Diversification is described as any proposal, which seeks to supplement the income on the agricultural unit/working farm. There are a range of potential projects but are usually categorised into tourism, services, sport and recreation and renewable energy. The policy advises that the agricultural operation should remain the main business and the diversification proposal subservient to the main farm business.

3.5 The Authority prepared a farm diversification Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) note jointly with the two other Welsh National Parks. It was adopted in 2012 and the purpose of the SPG is to give some practical guidance on the planning issues which might arise when determining an application and to provide the applicant with a checklist at an early stage of developing a project. Diversification proposals will generally be supported by the National Park Authority providing they conform with other policies within the Local Development Plan.

TOURISM as farm diversification.

3.6 Short term holiday accommodation provided through the conversion of redundant rural buildings can provide a diversified income stream for agriculture units. ELDP Development Policy 20 provides a link to the economic benefit of short term holiday accommodation units that could be run as part of the farm business. In addition, increasing on farm accommodation can reduce the demand for second homes within rural National Park area.

3.7 In recent years, application enquiries for alternative low-impact holiday accommodation have been received, such as yurts and shepherding huts. These new types of small scale ‘glamping’ accommodation are becoming increasingly popular and the Authority will need to consider this in the review. Any new developments would
need to be in suitable locations so not have a negative impact on the landscape and amenity of the National Park.

**A PICTURE OF AGRICULTURE IN THE NATIONAL PARK**

**Agriculture**

4.1 Agriculture in the National Park is almost entirely pastoral, predominantly beef and sheep farming, but with a small dairy sector. Arable and forage crops are largely confined to the valley bottoms and the more fertile fringes of the Park.

4.2 The tradition of the family farm is still strong but the future is uncertain. Change is likely, particularly in the light of the Brexit vote and the implications for the UK farming sector, the likely de-coupling from the Common Agricultural Policy and the existing farm payments system. The Government has indicated that farm payments will be retained, though the exact details have not been made explicit at present. What is certain is that there will be some profound changes.

4.3 The results of these changes will not be confined to farming families. As has previously been witnessed, changes in agriculture have a knock on effect on the wider society and economy of Snowdonia, as well as the landscape. These changes have already started to have an effect on some sectors. For example, increasing numbers of young people from farming backgrounds have to seek alternative incomes, very often away from the area, mainly due to the inability of the traditional Snowdonia farm to financially support more than one worker. Inevitably this will have a negative socio-economic impact on the area, including a reduction in Welsh speakers, falling school rolls and the closure of village shops and post offices.

4.4 These changes have culminated in the age profile of agricultural workers increasing, but often the worker cannot afford to retire or consider moving from the farmhouse to enable the next generation to take over. In addition, changes to the current landscape may become evident due to changes in farm sizes and farming practices. Labour availability may also become an issue. Wider commercial pressures are also having a bearing on the sector, such as the effects of low cost imports, although the reduction in the value of the pound after the Brexit vote means that UK farm produce is cheaper internationally and this may lead to greater exports.

4.5 Physical changes will also become apparent due to climate change. Again, these changes are difficult to predict and quantify, but they will have profound and long term effects on the industry. Climatic changes may bring new opportunities, such as producing renewable energy crops in suitable areas and introduction of less conventional livestock and crops. However climate change may also result in the appearance of greater numbers of invasive non-native species (INNS) along with increased risk of crop and animal pathogens as insect vectors find the UK climate more hospitable. Increased flood risk from more intense rainfall events will need to be addressed through adaptation and the adoption of catchment wide measures to reduce the impacts.

4.6 With much greater emphasis on natural resources management and the ecological services by Welsh Government the agricultural sector will be a key actor in how Wales and Snowdonia responds to climate change. One such example could be
through catchment scale projects, where farms can help alleviate extreme rainfall events through tree planting schemes, the creation of porous dams in watercourses and allowing some flooding of agricultural land. In the uplands of Snowdonia increased resilience to flood events can be brought about by re-wetting bogs and areas of peatland, thereby increasing water storage capacity leading to an attenuating of peak flows. These areas are already extremely important in terms of carbon storage. The National Park Authority in partnerships with other agencies has been carrying out works on the Migneint and Berwyn peatlands. Research also highlights how vital agriculture is in terms of effective CO² and water quality management.

4.7 Sheep enterprises remain the dominant livestock production in Snowdonia. More recently, falling economic returns and the impact of agri-environmental schemes have led to a reduction in stock numbers.

4.8 Agri-environmental schemes have created an increased awareness of niche markets and added value products which use the high quality environment as a marketing tool. This has lead to some growth in the direct marketing sector and organic farming. However, this has been negated by the loss of processing skills, such as butchering and processing from the area along with a reduction in product outlets. This has created a skills gap within Snowdonia. An additional issue is the mismatch between peak lamb production and the demand from home market. Small, light lambs are more attractive to the export market, a market which could grow if the level of the pound remains low in comparison to other currencies, but is dependent on economic conditions in the destination market and implications of Brexit and possible trade tariffs.

4.9 Dairy farm numbers have continued to decline within Snowdonia and the trend is likely to continue. Few traditional small scale producers and may exit the sector due to high production costs, and the need for expensive modernisation.

4.10 Fringe areas of the park have seen the development of fairly substantial dairy herds being established and operated on a New Zealand style system based on spring calving and milking off grass during the growing season with cows dried off during winter and either housed or away wintered. Some of these units have land use within the National Park.

4.11 Suckler cows remain important with numbers remaining relatively constant. While the number of beef cattle holdings has declined, the decline has not been as dramatic as when compared with dairying. This may partly be a reflection of dairy units converting to beef production. More specialised, high quality product with added value presents a limited opportunity for some enterprises. However produce must also be competitive internationally and able to compete favorably with imports.

4.12 From an environmental point of view, the advantages of cattle grazing on unimproved or partially improved land have long been recognised and rates of subsidy payments in agri-environmental schemes have reflected this. Uncertainty regarding future post Brexit support leaves questions for the viability of some units.

4.13 Arable cropping is insignificant and decreasing in the National Park primarily due to the unsuitable climate and rugged landscape – the most prominent production areas skirt the northern National Park boundary. This has meant a loss of environmental, ecological diversity and skills. However this trend could be reversed if agricultural units
look towards adopting a more self-sufficient management system or react to agri-environmental schemes. There has been an increase in the land given over to root crops, some of which are used for "in-situ grazing" however, there are constraints to more widespread planting due to land quality, topographic and climatic factors. The production of energy crops is not anticipated in the Welsh Less Favoured Area regions because it does not provide optimum growing conditions for such produce.

4.14 Although there will be fluctuations in income, the pressures on the agricultural industry are likely to remain. It is too soon to speculate on the agricultural sector in Snowdonia post Brexit. It is likely, however, that pressure on both production and income will continue, with increasing emphasis on the environment, fewer full-time farms and those that remain becoming larger.

4.15 There is likely to be continuous pressure to cut costs and become as self-sufficient as possible, ultimately this will mean making the best use of grass for both grazing and silage. Full time employment within the sector will probably decrease, although conversely this has already opened up opportunities for contractors to do maintenance work on farms, such as hedge laying and walling; this has been a result of a number of agri-environmental schemes such as Tir Gofal, Tir Cymen and Tir Eryri.

4.16 In the case of agricultural land, land of grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Department for Environment, food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Agricultural Land Classification system (ALC) is the best and most versatile, and should be conserved as a finite resource for the future as set out in Planning Policy Wales (para 4.10) and TAN 6 (para 6.2). In development plan policies and development management decision considerable weight can be given to protecting such land from development. On the whole there is very little, if any, agricultural land of higher grade 1, 2 and 3a (best and most versatile) within the National Park.

**Common Land**

4.17 Around 11% of Snowdonia is common land. These areas suffer from a variety of problems. Some are poorly managed and experience overgrazing whilst other areas are undergrazed. These issues are often related to the fact that there are decreasing numbers, of increasingly older commoners, along with a lack of skilled labour within Snowdonia. Better control of stock numbers and management would lead to environmental improvements.

4.18 Improvements are being witnessed in several areas of Snowdonia National Park, with grazers, farming unions and public sector bodies combining to forge grazing partnerships and societies. This has led to more coherent and agri-environmental grazing patterns. It has also encouraged land managers to set up purchasing co-operatives which enables them to buy goods direct at lower cost; this blueprint may provide agricultural units with an opportunity to cooperate on larger land based projects which will rely on members offering their skills for the good of their community.

**Forestry**

4.19 Tree cover in Snowdonia National Park extends over 32,380 hectares i.e.15% of the land area; this consists largely of coniferous plantations which were established
for commercial forestry during the last century. Native woodland was once extensive. During the 13th century it may have covered up to 80% of the National Park; today it has shrunk to only 3%. The 6,486 hectares of native woodland that remain are mainly classified as upland oak woodland. These are internationally important wildlife habitats and many are protected by European designations.

4.20 Following devolution, state owned forestry within Snowdonia National Park became the property of the Welsh Assembly Government. This amounts to approximately 54% of the total woodland area. In 2013 Natural Resources Wales was formed, largely taking over the functions of Forestry Commission Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales, and the Environment Agency in Wales, as well as certain Welsh Government functions.

4.21 Although coniferous woodlands are the dominant tree cover, they are not native to Wales. Most of the commercial tree species originated from North America. To meet the government policy of the time and for economic investment these species were often planted in, less agriculturally productive areas, but ecologically sensitive habitats, thus detracting from the natural landscape.

4.22 Recent changes in Welsh Government policy, environmental concerns and a certain volatility in the market for low grade softwood have led to a Strategy for Trees and Woodlands. The strategy focuses on specific issues, these are: woodlands for people; a new emphasis on woodland management; Wales as a location for world-class forest industries; a diverse and healthy environment; and tourism, recreation and health.

4.23 To improve the landscape, climate change resilience and to allow native vegetation to return, some of the upland forest blocks, particularly on deep peat sites, are being cleared of non native tree species. There is also a change in policy emphasis from clear felling large areas to a more sensitive continuous cover approach. Elsewhere, work is underway to restore ancient woodland sites which were previously planted with conifer.

4.24 Modern forestry practice looks at the wider benefits that coniferous woodland can offer. Public recreation is an important feature and extensive networks of access paths and mountain bike trails form important tourist attractions and help support the local economy.

4.25 Similar to the agriculture sector, the forestry sector faces a future very different from its past. High quality cheap timber is imported from Eastern Europe and increasing use of recycled paper has had a severe impact on the traditional demand for softwood. Much of the poorer quality UK timber goes to the production of particle board. However, there is increasing interest in the use of forest material for biomass as an alternative to fossil fuel for heat and power production.

4.26 Climate change also poses a threat with outbreaks of disease caused by Phythoptera ramorum and Chalara fraxinea affecting ash and larch trees respectively. Measures to control the spread of these diseases include clear felling of affected stands. Research continues into discovering genetically resilient strains of these species.

4.27 Some native broadleaved woodlands in the National Park may well be protected by statutory designations (e.g. as Sites of Special Scientific Interest or Special
Areas of Conservation). However, Ancient Semi-Natural Woodlands (ANSW) also occur in areas which are not designated, policies in the Eryri Local Development seek to protect these woodlands from inappropriate development. Poor management and past neglect has meant that some woodlands have suffered from over-grazing which has hampered natural regeneration. Many are also under threat from invasive non-native plants, the most serious of which is *Rhododendron ponticum*. This has colonised vast tracts of semi-natural habitat in Snowdonia and is a host to *P. ramorum*. The NPA has published a strategy for the control of *R. ponticum* and working in partnership with other organisations, groups and private landowners, efforts to eradicate the plant in some areas began in 2012. Stakeholders in the project include Natural Resources Wales, the National Trust and Gwynedd County Council, as well as several voluntary groups and individual landowners, the vast majority whom are highly supportive of the work.

4.28 Agri-environment schemes and woodland grant schemes have encouraged landowners to expand and to manage native woodland for the benefit of biodiversity and landscape. The National Park and the Forestry Commission (now incorporated into Natural Resources Wales) have entered into a Local Accord. The objectives are to increase the area of native woodland within the National Park by 50% within a 50 year period, and to ensure that all existing woodland is appropriately managed within the same period.

4.29 Today the forestry/woodland industry is a major land user and a significant element in the rural economy. Closer integration between agriculture and forestry is an important factor for the future of the landscape, biodiversity, culture and economy of Snowdonia National Park.

**Commercial equestrian activity.**

4.30 Horse riding and other equestrian activities are popular forms of recreation in the National Park. There are three existing riding centres within or adjoining the National Park who are long established and provide a service to tourist and local alike. Horse training and breeding businesses play an important cultural and economic role as takes place more informally within existing agricultural businesses rather than separate entities.