FASHION ROUNDTABLE

Welsh Wool Report

Recommendations for the fashion, textile and manufacturing sector

Source: Herdwear

Introduction

A roundtable in collaboration between Fashion Roundtable and Menter Môn was instigated as part of their scoping studies. The purpose was an opportunity for an open and collaborative conversation about the issues facing rural economies, wool producers, and brands across the wool value chain. The objective was to enable solutions and strategies to be realised for greater usage of wool from Wales' regional fibre flock of 10 million sheep.

Fashion Roundtable

Over the last year, Meg Pirie, the lead on our Wool Regeneration Programme, has completed research through qualitative interviews with key stakeholders within the wool supply chain in Wales—as well as some wider conversations within Scotland and England.

Wales is a particular place that has deep historical roots in relation to wool, with community and localism at its very core. However, as the market has continued in a globalised direction, Welsh wool has been unable to compete. It is acknowledged that Wales has many unique factors which need support, including loss of language implications as the industry continues to decline. Farms including those such as sheep agriculture, for example, have been in some families for generations and house a role for the Welsh language with 43% of Welsh speakers working in the agricultural sector.

Evidence from our research suggests that there is a diversity of approaches in the wool sector, however, this is currently too fragmented. Farmers are receiving very little for their wool and this needs to be incentivised—as of 18th October this was around 78p per kilo (roughly 1-2kg per sheep). There is a uniformity that scaled-up business often leans to and we can see this very clearly with wool, where wool is blended into large homogenous quantities with little care of its origin or place. In Wales, this has particular cultural implications in terms of a loss of place and identity, of which we believe that smaller and localised supply chains would be beneficial in connecting this sustainable fibre with a provenance narrative. In the present day, wool represents only 1% of the global fibre market, and therefore showing a very clear decline in both brand and consumer uptake.

In this regard, the Welsh Government's 'Welsh Wool Pledge', was tabled back in 2020, urging for a mandatory procurement of Welsh wool as insulation as well as a development of wool in the fashion industry. While the insulation market appears to be progressing, our research shows that the fashion sector seems to have completely fallen from this initial agenda.

The majority of current fashion practices, from education to manufacturing, are dominated by a 'fast fashion' business model and 'just-in-time' production, to provide near-weekly fashion seasons. These practices are destroying vital elements of the earth's finite resources. This race to the bottom has led to worker exploitation and low wages at one end of the supply chain, brands escalating production to try to keep in profit with ever increasing retail "drops" to entice the consumer to buy more and seismic waste and environmental degradation at all levels.

The fashion industry does not have to remain rooted in this flawed business model. It is a creatively rewarding sector, one which is filled with innovative approaches. These have the potential to contribute positively to lives and livelihoods across the UK and in our working partnerships across our global supply chains. The UK are global leaders in fashion tech R&D. All the key players in the online retail market, such as YNAP, Farfetch[1], ASOS, M&S and matchesfashion.com are headquartered in the UK.

The UK Textile and Fashion Industry is one of our largest sectors, worth over £30bn annually. However, 90% of the UK garment and textiles manufacturing industry has been lost in the last 30 years and the Government needs to invest more into UK manufacturing in order to encourage onshoring. Fashion Roundtable's Board Member—Kate Hills, from Make it British, has reported an 83% increase in interest in onshoring manufacturing, with many citing 'transparency' as a key driver in this decision.

The industry is crucial to our economy and there needs to be a clear understanding of the policies needed to ensure jobs and livelihoods, sustainability, and to maintain best-practice which is part of Fashion Roundtable's work.

Our objective at Fashion Roundtable has always been to provide a full-scale mapping and framework of the wool sector, which should be open access. This is something which focuses on replicability and not scalability, and is particularly compelling for other fibres to follow suit. It is worth mentioning that we are currently working very closely with localism,

[1] Although Farfetch is relocating to Portugal.

craft and policy in mind, something which is fundamental to a revaluing of wool in Wales and the wider UK. To find out more: meg.pirie@fashionroundtable.co.uk

Source: Herdwear

Findings from the Roundtable

"Welsh wool is low value in monetary terms, but not as a material." Dafydd Jarrett, NFU Cymru.

Welsh wool is rich in history with a once vibrant industry of 217 mills dwindling to 5 in the last century alone. Therefore, there is a story to be told in regards to Welsh wool's diverse breeds and provenance. This connection to place is also particularly powerful in threading place, language and sheep breeds together.

Key Takeaways

- With the reduction in the mill supply chain, it is now difficult to get Welsh wool woven in Wales.
- It is challenging to achieve a stock-supported range in Wales—in order to achieve this 5-10 tonnes of yarn would have to be purchased at a time, once the correct quality and colour was agreed upon.
- Issues with the scale of processing due to minimum order quantities, requiring large upfront monetary investments.
- Mills want their own UK-based supply chain—currently the supply chain is too disjointed and Covid and Brexit have caused chaos.
- Shearing costs for farmers are higher than the cost they receive in return.
- There is a knowledge gap in the supply chain—who is doing what?
- There is a need to step away from the term 'British' wool and instead focus on the provenance story, connecting unique and limited edition finite breeds with appropriate end users to achieve a greater value. Generalisation of Welsh wool is impeding on the narrative around quality.

  A clear example of a successful brand doing just this is Harris Tweed in Scotland. The brand is instantly associated with quality and provenance. For more than 100 years Harris Tweed has been handwoven in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, with a focus on passing skills down through generations.

- Brand Herdwear stated that historically Britain was a supplier of wool yarn and fabric into the Italian garment industry and was for centuries recognised globally as supplying the best wool (great climate and grass, knowledge of sheep farming, infrastructure + knowledge built up over time). The reason the entire industry collapsed was the invention of plastic fibres and the successful economic drive of the Australasian countries to produce wool. Consumers had no awareness of where wool came from, because British wool did not have any brands. Instead Italy and France mastered the creation of luxury brands and 'Italian' and 'French' are very much still by-words for quality, heritage and opulence.

- From a commercial perspective, there is a huge opportunity for brands to set up around wool, due to the potential for sustainable and transparency credentials.
- Herdwear offered that its Bluefaced Leicester wool is providing high-quality pieces with no returns, suggesting longevity.
- The Wool Library suggested it is important to not compete with merino wool and instead focus on what makes Welsh breeds great.
- Buyers in many of the top brands that we spoke to actively chose merino wool because of the ease that this was available; the guaranteed quality; its fineness and its availability in a range of colourways. Welsh wool was deemed itchy, scratchy and bulky and did not feature on their radars, however, sourcing a sustainable and transparent fibre closer to home would be preferential, if this was available at the right quality and within better timeframes.
- We were told that even Welsh mills could not utilise 100% Welsh wool and this was due to lead times, the supply chain being far too long and wool at the right quality not being easily attainable.
- A demand for a Welsh-producing plant in Wales exists, however, this is dependent on huge throughput, regulations on the disposal of water and therefore comes with environmental implications.
- Potential exists for synergies between wool and sheepskin that would create jobs in rural economies and reduce waste. We were told that small abattoirs are closing in Wales. NFU and Leather Co suggested it was very important to increase skin values as small abattoirs are now really struggling and anything to help their income/reduce their costs would help.
- There is an education piece that needs to happen to tell Welsh wool's story and connect this with consumers. Consumers will pay more for clear sustainable characteristics that create a story. Therefore, there is a missed opportunity in terms of marketing the provenance story of Welsh wool.
- With the advancement of the new curriculum in Wales, including the 'Expressive Arts' which encompasses craft and fashion, the tide could be turning on the initial 'Welsh Wool Pledge' Agenda having missed the fashion sector.

Recommendations and next steps

While a number of challenges and opportunities became apparent within the roundtable, we have focused our attention on a clear set of recommendations and next steps.

1. Potential for collaboration between mills and those working in the sector to buy in bulk together, therefore aiding in a localised supply chain and accessibility. To achieve this in the short-term, mill Melin Tregwynt would be very keen to be part of a small-scale pilot study or R&D project, where 100m of wool is trialled.
   We recommend considering:
    - Whether the right quality of yarn to suit several makers could be sourced:
        - Demand would need to be scoped: is there interest from other makers?
        - We would recommend a two-pronged approach where:
            - The Wool Library would consult on appropriate sheep breeds;
            - The current work with Cambrian Wool Initiative is continued.
    - One of the major issues is whether a spinner with capacity could be found.
    - Colours would need to be agreed, however Melin Tregwynt reminded of the need for individual mills and makers to specify their own colours. While this would mean smaller dye lots and more expense, this would keep things distinct. If this does not happen there is a danger that a similar price competition to that of the 1960s - 1970s could occur where mills lowered their prices to remain competitive and it would be vital to avoid that mistake.

2. The move away from 'British' wool as an all-encompassing entity. To action this, we recommend a further set of roundtables or focus groups, of which we would be happy to assist, around the following:

    - ***Marketing issues:*** Wool used in fashion should understand what it is and what it is offering. Herdwear offered that this requires a consumer-focussed identity, perhaps it's a 'Woolmark' style organisation that clearly expresses what is so special about it? The Wool Library would be a key resource to tap into as they have a strong awareness of diverse breeds, properties and provenance.

- ***Certification:*** It would be very helpful for brands who are using or considering British wool in clothing to have some kind of certification which had a very clear meaning attached to it. A Welsh certification for all wool in Wales was recommended by a stakeholder. 'Responsible Wool Standard' would also be viable, however, there are no auditors in the UK. Therefore, Herdwear suggested the following pillars:
    - Luxury;
    - Animal welfare;
    - Locality/farming.

3. Multiple brands reported that British wool (encompassing Welsh wool) is only utilised in small and niche runs. This is because merino wool is favoured due to how accessible it is; the cost; the available colours; and also the fineness of the wool. We would recommend a showcase focused on showing brands the possibilities of Welsh wool, which we are set up to assist with this education and marketing remit.

4. An education piece to consumers showing that Welsh wool can meet a number of market needs. We recommend a campaign roll-out focused on its sustainability benefits, the local and circular economy benefits, as well as the benefits environmentally of utilising a local fibre.

5. Governmental support for full mapping of the sector and shared open access data share, with free access to allow for replicability over scalability. Mapping the sector allows for data from every facet of a particular sector to be gathered, mapped and analysed. The purpose of this is to connect the fragmented nature of the woollen industry so that gaps can be identified and tackled. Fashion Roundtable are seeking to lead on this.

6. With the advancement of the new curriculum in Wales, including the 'Expressive Arts' which encompasses craft and fashion, a report on how this could support the 'Welsh Wool Pledge' Agenda having missed the fashion sector should be developed.

7. Separate to fashion—Procurement lobbying: A local government option should be explored to buy from a certain distance to ensure local-purchase practices now that the UK has left the EU. To do this, we recommend a showcase at the Senedd to show the MS the possibilities of Welsh wool. Menter Môn has already begun actioning this to an extent with the innovation aspect, this should be explored further based on distance, rather than price. E.g. reforming and simplifying our public procurement rules so that the public sector can buy more local goods and services.

Source: Herdwear