



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Education and careers in land-based sectors, HC 165

Tuesday 5 March 2024, Harper Adams University, Shropshire

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Ian Byrne; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Cat Smith.

Questions 76 - 127

Witnesses

I: Ken Sloan, Vice Chancellor, Harper Adams University; Jeremy Gibbs, Founder, Forces Farming; Nina Prichard, Head of Sustainable and Ethical Sourcing, McDonald's; Martin Emmett, Director, Tristram Plants.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [McDonald's](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ken Sloan, Jeremy Gibbs, Nina Prichard and Martin Emmett.

Q76 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. We are on tour today at Harper Adams University. Before today's session, we had a very useful tour of the facilities at this rapidly expanding university and looked at some of the engineering and at the new veterinary school, which seems to be going great guns. This is the second session in our inquiry into education and careers in land-based sectors. We have four witnesses before us. I will ask them to briefly introduce themselves and then we will go into questions.

Jeremy Gibbs: Good morning, everyone. I am Jeremy Gibbs from Forces Farming and I facilitate the transition of ex-military personnel and veterans into agricultural careers and beyond.

Ken Sloan: I am Professor Ken Sloan, the vice chancellor of Harper Adams University. I have been here for two years, having previously worked in Australia. Thank you, Chair, for coming to the university and spending time with us.

Nina Prichard: Good morning. I am Nina Prichard, head of sustainable and ethical sourcing for McDonald's UK and Ireland. I have been with the business since 2011, and prior to that, I had 10 years in the Welsh Government working on policies of interest to the Committee. I am delighted to be here.

Chair: Thank you. Martin is an old friend of this Committee; you have been on a number of occasions, haven't you? Well, not here but before us.

Martin Emmett: Yes, and thank you again for the invitation today. I am Martin Emmett. I am a director of Tristram Plants on the south coast, growing garden plants. I am also chair of the education and employment group of the Environmental Horticulture Group, which represents the trade formerly known as ornamental horticulture. We think that "environmental" is a stronger title nowadays. That is an association of trade and professional bodies. I also chair the NFU Horticulture and Potatoes Board.

Chair: Yes, and you have quite a large business at home in the ornamental sector.

Martin Emmett: Yes, and we employ apprentices there.

Q77 **Chair:** I will start with Ken. To what extent are the Government taking a strategic approach to meeting labour needs and filling skills gaps in the land-based sector?

Ken Sloan: I think the Government are working to take a strategic approach. We have a huge number of ingredients that need to come



together to be able to address it. We have things like the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture, which has been established. We have support for the teaching of food and the awareness of farming in the curriculum in schools. Ultimately, the biggest thing we have to do is encourage more people to see these careers as things that they want to do and aspire to do. That takes an end-to-end look at the way in which we position food and how food is produced in all aspects of education.

The one thing that we have in common across all our tiers of education is that the people who are in education are fed, and too often food is a by-product of education as opposed to an integral part of the way in which we teach. We often look through the lens of particular disciplines, whether it is an agriculture GCSE or an agriculture T-level, or what we do in food and food science, but in reality we have a common currency across all young people and all adults when they go to education, which is they will be fed.

A strategic approach would be to take the opportunities where young people and adults are exposed to food and to understand how to position that as part of their education. That can cover all disciplines, not just the specialist disciplines like agriculture and food, but the sciences, economics, business and other things. I think—and I would say this—that the country needs to see food and food security as a national priority in the same way that it would look at the emergency services and the health service. It should take that integrated approach.

If that was happening, I would say that the Government were genuinely taking a strategic approach. The ingredients are there, but we are not necessarily taking all of the opportunities we have to expose young people and adults and educate them. That will help not just the future labour market but people's health. If they knew more about food and the impact of food on themselves at an earlier age, they would be in a position to make better choices later in life, which would help the Government not only in their labour supply, but in their health costs and other related activities.

Q78 Chair: When we arrived yesterday, we could not miss the fact that there was a big sign on the wall saying that 98% of your students have a job after 18 months. That could not be said of some courses at other universities. Does that indicate there is a pent-up demand for your graduates?

Ken Sloan: It says a number of things. It says that there is pent-up demand for our graduates, but it also says something about the talent and calibre of the students who are going through the university. Our students are turning down multiple offers to take the choice of employer they want, which is a desirable thing. When we know that there are plenty of young people who are still under-educated or under-stimulated, and yet on the other side, we know that there are employers that are yearning for labour, we have to do what is necessary to build bridges between the two.



This university recently announced that it will open a new digital skills hub in central Telford, working with Telford and Wrekin Council and Telford College. That is to enable us to access students who live in and around the university who might not necessarily see the institution as a natural destination for them. Even though the university is in an environment that is rural, we obviously have urban centres. We also have lots of urban centres of deprivation. I think that it is important in their place-making activity that universities do what they can to reach far and wide into communities and give them the opportunities that they need.

Q79 Chair: Nina, McDonald's is often seen as just a restaurant chain, but you have a very close relationship with your suppliers, going right back to farmers. I was at the McCain plant in my own constituency on Friday, where McFries were flowing out of the production line at the rate of a tonne a minute. They were very conscious of the need to have good-quality product coming in to make good-quality fries, and I am sure that your beef patty and bread suppliers are the same. What is your opinion on whether the Government have a strategy or need a better strategy?

Nina Prichard: McDonald's UK and Ireland have a big footprint in British agriculture. We source from over 23,000 British and Irish farmers and spend over £2 billion a year on food and paper for our UK supply chain. We recognise that we always call farmers our essential ingredient. Without skills, labour and the next generation of farmers and talent coming into the industry, there is a risk to the resiliency of our food supply chain as well. We rely on farmers for quality ingredients.

There are many challenges in attracting and retaining labour, so it is quite multifaceted. Having a clear and cohesive strategy, considering all the different challenges and strands, and also identifying where we can collaboratively work on the solutions would be very welcome. In McDonald's over the last 10-plus years we have recognised that it is important to have very long-term partnerships with our suppliers, but also with our farmers. Over 11 years ago, we set up our Progressive Young Farmer programme, as an example, and that was very much to make sure that we have new talent, new leaders, coming into the industry who can absolutely be there to provide us with quality ingredients in the future.

That is one element of how we attract talent into the industry, but the other challenge is brand perception. We have done some research over the last three years with young people from the age of 15 to 22 about their perception of agriculture and a career in agriculture. About 66% said that they would not consider agriculture as a potential career because of the negative perception. That could be unsociable hours, the challenges of understanding what the career pathway looks like or how you even enter into it. So there are multifaceted challenges that we need to break down, and McDonald's is playing its role in some of those initiatives, which we can come on to.

Q80 Chair: Thank you. Martin, horticulture tends to be at the more labour-



intensive end of the industry, particularly the ornamental area. Are there gaps that need filling in the strategy to bring people through into the workforce with the skills that they need?

Martin Emmett: There are certainly plenty. If we look at the work of the Environmental Horticulture Group, we estimate that about 674,000 people work in that sector. The NFU identifies about 429,000 people working in farming and growing. These are big industries, but one of the challenges is that a lot of the Government strategy in education now is based around local skills improvement plans. Although we are nationally a very important sector, we are very rarely a very important sector in a particular locality. We need a national strategy for the sector.

I totally agree with everything that is said about perception. Nina talked about 66% of the public not being aware of the profession. The RHS did a piece of work and 66% of the public did not think that gardening was a skilled profession, for example. I think that the key is to have a national strategy, not to rely on a local skills framework.

Q81 **Chair:** Do you think it is easier in larger companies where there is a career structure? You are never going to be promoted above Mr Smith, who is the farmer who owns the farm. Does it help in some ways in horticulture with larger companies where people can see their way through and move up and onwards?

Martin Emmett: Yes. It is a theme across all of horticulture and agriculture, as you know, Chair. We are becoming an increasingly professionalised sector. That is also behind the ethos of the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture. Anything we can do to promote that—perhaps I can just point out that we have the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture but that covers only the fresh produce supply chain. It does not cover all the other land-based areas, which I think could do with a similar level of support in developing professionalisation and giving so much more opportunity to the wider population.

Q82 **Chair:** That is looking at gamekeepers, environmental managers and all sorts of other jobs in the countryside.

Martin Emmett: Yes, absolutely. Back to the perception issue, of course the public's understanding and perception of food is very important, but there is also the experience of the outdoor environment and the opportunities there. There is a lot we can do to build perception about the wider landscape sector.

Q83 **Chair:** Jeremy, we seem to have been talking a lot about school leavers and graduates, but obviously, you are working with people leaving the armed forces. Could the Ministry of Defence do more to signpost people to jobs in the agriculture and land-based sectors?

Jeremy Gibbs: That is exactly why I started Forces Farming. It was because there was no clear pathway for people leaving the armed forces to get into agriculture. I never served but my background is farming and



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food production, with nine and a half years at John Deere, and I am also a graduate of Harper Adams, 20 years ago. The process of being an adult and changing career was a subject that was very close to my heart and from digging into that over the last four to five years, it was clear to me that the Ministry of Defence does not have a solid pathway into different sectors.

There are lots of different pathways into different jobs. Yesterday, for example, I was at Silverstone racing circuit and there were over 1,100 service leavers there. I would say that pretty much 50% of those people are not at the point of knowing what job they want to do. They are in the exploration phase. That is a long phase where we potentially miss, when we are looking at strategies and things, that decision matrix to even say, "I want to work outdoors and then I will potentially work out what I want to do". I have always said that the challenge in any land-based sector is that we look from the inside out and go, "Come and work with us, it is fantastic. There are so many different jobs", but if you look from the outside in, it can be quite intimidating when someone reels off 500 different jobs you can do in the dairy sector alone and you think, "I just wanted to stroke cows."

What I see, with the older career changers and people coming out of the Ministry of Defence, is that we could do a lot more with the preparation of people in that exploration phase to look at what jobs are there, but also, importantly, on the question—and this is where it is great to hear about the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture—"Where do I look for information? Where do I go for that sort of information?" That "where" is a huge part in the exploration phase, in terms of, "Where do I look for more information? What is my trusted source of advice? What are my peers doing? What have my friends done?" To me, that part is very important. A lot of career changers and a lot of older learners look at what their friends and people who have inspired them have done, and that can be the bit that gets them into a programme or a different career. Seeing is believing.

Yesterday, I had five service leavers on my stand at Silverstone talking to other service leavers. I said to the one who has been there the longest—he has been four years in the agriculture sector now—"Standing watching you yesterday, Will, you've gone from being a service leaver, and talking to your mates at a service leavers' event, saying, 'Remember this? We did this and we did that tour', to now being a service engineer for Ben Burgess, selling the benefits and how much you love that job to your old friends and colleagues". That bit is what brings people in because they are listening to him explaining it. I can sing the praises of farming and explain and break down the careers, but you have to understand and people need to identify with it. Some of those influencers, like friends and inspirational people, are the ones who can convince people to get into a job.



Looking at the MoD sector specifically, there are things like the Career Transition Partnership and the enterprise learning credits administration system. That is a very strict system—"It works like this. This is how it fits; this is what you need to do to achieve a qualification to get a job". Four years ago, I looked at it from an agricultural perspective and said, "That pathway doesn't really work for what we need in agriculture, so let me see what I can create and work out."

Over four years of lobbying, it has got to the point where the Career Transition Partnership, which is the Government organisation for resettlement, is now advising service leavers to talk to me. That is the element of building up a bit of a reputation and being trusted and reliable, so that you can advise people on their careers. In the MoD part, there are a few different areas—the resettlement organisations and the financial and funding administration—to get people the skills and the qualifications they need. But it is also about understanding the phase, "I am still making a decision; I don't know what I want to do", and putting people in those situations is massively important.

To add to that, if anyone is looking from a job-change perspective and thinking, "I am working and I can't take six weeks off or six months off", I have facilitated placements with people doing two weeks here, a week back at work or weekends—just trying to make their ambition or their focus fit a process, to get them into a job and get them to stay there. The key thing for me for getting someone to stay in a job is the three-year point. If you can get a service leaver or someone to change that job, after three years, their mindset changes to, "I am doing this now. I was doing this". Anywhere up to that three-year point it is very quick to go to, "I will just go back to what I was doing."

Q84 Chair: To what extent would a service leaver look at the skills they have acquired in the services, whether that is driving or as a fitter, and apply those into the land-based sector? Are people looking for a complete change and to leave behind what they have done? Has someone who is working for an agricultural tractor retailer doing repairs been fixing tanks before and just switched to tractors?

Jeremy Gibbs: There is a lot of overlap. It is a natural progression of big heavy machinery to big heavy machinery, or electrical engineering to electrical engineering. But it is interesting, because the more people you talk to, the more you come across people leaving the forces who might have a science degree or a physics degree and who want to get into land management, hydrology or soil science. Then you start opening up doors—"Go and speak to the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board and some of the agronomy companies".

The main thing that I see is for them to identify what they want to do. Yesterday, the first question I asked them was, "What kind of life do you want?" They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "How many days do you want to work? How many hours a week do you want work? Do you want to go on holiday in August?" You can start to break down what is



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important to you in life, before you have even said, “Do you want a job?” I will keep referring to yesterday. There were over 250 employers there and I was one of only a few organisations that were promoting a sector— “Before you even look at the jobs, talk to me, come on an insight day and then down the road in maybe a month or two, we will identify the career options.”

Q85 Chair: Martin, the Government commissioned John Shropshire to produce a very valuable piece of work: his review of labour shortage in the food supply chain. What takeaways from that report should the Government pick up and incorporate into their strategy for the workforce?

Martin Emmett: The urgent takeaway is seasonal labour. We urgently need confirmation that we are going to get a five-year rolling programme. If there is one factor that is holding this sector back, it is the assurance that we will have the people to pick our crops in the future.

Q86 Chair: It is pretty much overseas people at the moment.

Martin Emmett: Yes, it is, and that is where you have the seasonal worker permit scheme. In my business, we employ a lot of local people seasonally as well. It is not exclusively overseas people, but there is an absolute dependence to make up the numbers we need. Out of that, we have recommendations on expanding the use of the apprenticeship levy, for example. That is critical and links to the fact that a lot of the employment in our sector starts seasonally, but at the moment you cannot use the apprenticeship levy to train a seasonal person, because apprenticeships simply don't last that long. Opening up that fund to wider access, particularly for seasonal workers, would be extremely useful.

Essentially, the NFU supports the whole review. In one area—an NHS levy on seasonal workers—there is a slight difference of opinion, but essentially, we support the whole review and we are looking forward to the Government publishing their response to it.

Q87 Chair: Nina, what are your thoughts on John Shropshire's report?

Nina Prichard: We certainly welcome that multifaceted strategy. There are lots of different challenges. One thing that came out is the long-term approach to technology and innovation and automation. Looking at the short term, we can think about the brand perception of farming and the different careers. You are not just a farmer, as one of our young farmers said to us—there is this huge range of different skills and opportunities. In the short term, it is how to collectively communicate—market, if you like—the opportunity, particularly with an evolving landscape of climate and the environment. We often hear from young people through our research that some of the areas that excite them are what they can do to protect nature and biodiversity and the planet—all things that farming does daily—as well as the very important role of food production.



It is how we brand the opportunities in different sectors in the short term, and it is the focus on automation and technology in the long term. From speaking to a number of our suppliers, they are supportive of some of the recommendations in the review.

Q88 Chair: Jeremy, your experience is with service leavers, but a number of people in their careers will lose their jobs or maybe have a period of economic inactivity for various reasons, including, possibly, mental health issues. Do you think that some of the lessons that you have learned from your work with service leavers could be applied more widely and bring more people—particularly, economically inactive people—into an industry that can often be seen as being not only very rewarding work, but, certainly in the horticulture sector, quite therapeutic in many ways?

Jeremy Gibbs: Yes, absolutely. A particular goal of mine is to do with defence work and pension schemes. We have over 100,000 veterans on benefits, some of whom could be working at least a portion of the time, in theory. Those are the two points that I am trying to marry up. If you take the farming sector as an example, farmers across the country would take someone for two or three days a week, allowing that person to come off some of the benefits and increase their independence. To me, that is a huge opportunity, not only in the armed forces sector, but across the employment potential profile, basically.

There are sectors of people who don't know where to start and who don't have the confidence. One of the big things I recognise is that farmers are not good at on-boarding and training people. Farmers are very quick to go, "It is taking you too long. Sorry, excuse me, I'll do it" and step in. If you are not a robust sort of character, you think, "Okay, fine, I won't come back tomorrow", whereas someone from the armed forces has the character to say, "I'll show you I can do it" and then get involved.

That element of getting someone on to the right farm has a massive role to play. I don't consider myself a recruitment company. I work with partner farmers that I know have an on-boarding procedure, a good structure of training, a good retention policy and three-month reviews. Last year, I had a chap who wanted to do six weeks of shepherding experience. A friend of mine is the head shepherd at Dyson Farming. I rang him up and asked, "Can you take James for six weeks?" "Yes, no problem."

Q89 Chair: Was it lambing time, by any chance?

Jeremy Gibbs: No, it was June-July, so it was summer. It was weighing lambs. He is going back this spring for lambing. He will do 10 weeks as part of his resettlement looking at shepherding. We have not even talked about qualifications and things like that.

It comes back to the point, "Where are you on your journey? What do you want out of life? You could go and do seasonal work and pick vegetables"—and people will do that if it is a potential part of a career



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path. When I started Forces Farming, I had so many people get in touch, saying, “We are desperate for people to pick vegetables. The Army must be able to do it because they are used to being outdoors”. I said, “Yes, but the challenge with looking at who you want to employ is why they are leaving that job”, and 90% of the time, they are leaving the armed forces because they don’t want to be rolling around in mud and out all hours and so on. They want to develop themselves in a career.

I think that farming and land-based is one of the very few sectors that offers a fantastic opportunity for development. I always say that 90% of farmers like to be involved in the process of someone’s development. They like to see someone go on and get another job—get a better job—but it is getting that commitment and security for 18 months to two years to invest in someone, give them the training, know they are not going to leave and know they will go on and do something better in the industry. Farmers have quite a lot of integrity with people development and moving forward. If you are a business that wants to keep people and hold people, that is the issue we need to address, not the fact that you can’t find people. That is a separate issue.

I had a veteran hired by Jeremy Clarkson—for “Clarkson’s Farm”, a massive supporter of veterans. It took a year for the business to decide it needed someone and to say, “Let’s get them on board”, but the other element that I add is an element of trust. They came to me and said, “We are looking for a service leaver”. They could advertise but they would probably get hundreds of thousands of applications to work at Diddy Squat Farm. They said, “Who do you have who might fit the profile?” I had a veteran I had been in touch with for two years. I connected the two and he has been there for nearly two and a half years now, which is fantastic. It comes back to why people change jobs. He messaged me a few weeks ago and said, “You’ve not only given me the job I wanted to do but you’ve given my family the environment to grow up in”, which is outdoors, around animals, fresh air and being able to walk across fields.

That could be the potential hook for anyone to move into agriculture, food or land-based skills—“I will grin and bear it and do the hard work but it is my family who are growing up outdoors and getting the better life”. That point of, “Why do you want to change jobs? What do you want to do with your life?” is a different way of approaching someone than saying, “Come and work in agriculture. It is a great place to work”—“Well, yes, but you are saying that because you know it.” That is the bit that I find. It could work across any sectors, basically.

Chair: I am sure we are not all as competent as Kaleb and not as incompetent as Jeremy when it comes to being on the farm.

Q90 **Barry Gardiner:** I want to focus on data and the skills gap. We have seen the Shropshire review, which said that there is a need for better supply-side data to understand what is happening out there. The NFU has done its own report and come up with figures of 74% reporting vacancies



and 87% saying there will be prospective vacancies. Do you agree that we don't have the data? What can we do to get the data that we need? I will start with you, Professor Sloan. You have given me the one glorious quote of the morning, as far as I am concerned. In this general election year, you said that there were people out there "yearning for labour", but that is the only party political point I am going to make, Chair.

Ken Sloan: I think that the scarcity of data affects all of us. In an institution like mine, I am trying to plan for what the scale should be and how we can meet the demand that is there. We know—the Shropshire report tells us this and there are a number of other reports out there, as you suggest—that there is a scarcity of labour. We don't have enough detail of what the skill needs are of the individual jobs to be able to match them appropriately. All employers must be reporting data somewhere in a way, even from the point of tax receipts or other things. Data repositories somewhere must be able to tell us where vacancies are and where the needs are.

We also know, which also comes out in that report, that if you look at the early-level qualifications, these types of subjects are in high demand. We do not see growth in the progression demand in those particular subjects. Sir Robert asked a question about strategy. Strategy in the end is about understanding what change you are trying to make and then what it takes to change it. We know that we potentially have young people, adults and others who could work in these sectors. Employers out there are in demand. We also know that smaller enterprises predominate the sectors we work in. Their ability to join themselves together to make a compelling story about the jobs that are available and the opportunities that are available is somewhat limited.

Nina is in a fortunate position, because McDonald's has a wonderful story to tell, as an employer, about what it will provide for people who want to pursue a career in food or in anything to do with agriculture and all the other types of careers that you can develop within McDonald's. But if you are a small organisation with a handful of people, your task is focused very much on what the company is doing and the doing of the job.

I would say to Government—maybe this is part of the observation—that if food was seen as a pan-Government issue as opposed to a single Department issue, which is how it is positioned at the moment, maybe all of the data sources that would help the Government to know the real labour demands would be available.

Q91 **Barry Gardiner:** You are saying that on the demand side, we have fairly reliable data about what will be needed and who needs it, but on the supply side the data is poor—is that right?

Ken Sloan: I am saying that there is data on both sides, but we are not necessarily able to pull it together. If I were launching a new university at this time—numerous people have done that over the years—I would want to know, in a sense, the gap that I am trying to fill and where I will fill it.



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The success of that institution would be driven by my ability to make those two things meet.

At the moment, we are witnessing employers saying that they do not have the labour, and they do not have the adequate labour. The narrative says that we have underemployment in the country. We have young people who are still not progressing to fulfil their potential, and we have adults, service leavers and others who are not finding their way easily to the opportunities that are there.

It takes a cross-departmental approach to narrow the gap. The benefit of doing that is that we all get access to secure food. Knowing that we have put our heads together, and our practical hands together, to ensure that when people go to the supermarket, the food that they need is there would unite the nation.

Martin Emmett: In 2019, the Environmental Horticulture Group commissioned a big piece of work about the skills requirements in those sectors. In 2020, the AHDB commissioned further work looking at other parts of horticulture and TIAH commissioned some work looking at the demands from industry in the last couple of years, but that has not been matched by an audit of the available provision. Although there is a lot of published provision and nominally a lot of courses happening across the country and a lot of disciplines, a lot of them do not run and others do not deliver what the employers were looking for. The whole land-based sector urgently demands an audit of the provision out there and how fit for purpose it is.

Q92 **Barry Gardiner:** Yes, but the modelling tool that TIAH developed said that it would try to predict the impact of policy changes on the future of farming and the workforce. It wanted that vision and reliable data. Again, we come back to data.

You are you making what could be a recommendation for this Committee to make to the Government. Try to formulate that for me. We are in the business of trying to make sure that our report gets some strong recommendations to the Government. Can I tease that out from you a bit more?

Martin Emmett: This has two strands to this, because I believe that TIAH does want to commission such an audit to look at the provision that is within its scope. One problem that we have across land-based as a whole is that TIAH supports food and fresh produce, but all the other land-based sectors do not have a similar structure to support their needs. First, if a parallel structure to TIAH can cover the other land-based sector requirements, and particularly environmental horticulture because it is such a large employment base—

Barry Gardiner: And of strategic national importance. We will come on the LSIPs later.



Martin Emmett: But it is about an audit of what provision is actually happening. You can look at the provision published by all the colleges and what they deliver and how appropriate and fit for purpose the employers find that.

Q93 **Barry Gardiner:** Do you guys agree with that, or do you want to add anything to that?

Nina Prichard: Yes—there are two elements of this discussion. We know from our suppliers that 46% of dairy farmers say that the applicants they have don't have the right skills that they need to perform the job. On the other hand, we know that the skills required for the future of farming may evolve. We talked earlier about the climate challenges facing farming, the new technological skills and all the different subjects. How do you marry the skills required for each particular sector and even each particular farm business? Every farm business is different. Requirements will be different regionally and sectorally.

The skills required and what that means is interesting. Is it more behaviours and that sort of enthusiastic person who wants to join the industry and have that career pathway? We think about animal health and welfare. We think about environmental improvements. We talked about the potential negative perception of unsociable hours, but others would see a great opportunity to work outdoors at harvest time or milk the cows and be close to animals. In terms of the skills required within the industry, how we attract people into the industry will be important and—

Q94 **Barry Gardiner:** Tell me what McDonald's is doing to identify those growth areas and the future land-based requirements that you have and to source the skills. How are you trying to develop that labour force?

Nina Prichard: We launched our plan for change strategy back in 2021. A key goal was to kick-start careers for 100 young people from diverse backgrounds. Prior to that, we had already been working on our Progressive Young Farmer programme. This programme is unique. It provides young people with a 12-month placement across the value chain, predominantly spending time on farm with a progressive farmer, learning all the skills required—

Q95 **Barry Gardiner:** What does a progressive farmer look like?

Nina Prichard: Our Progressive Young Farmer programme is about progression, regeneration, diversity of thought and entrepreneurial spirit, focusing on the behaviours and the enthusiasm required to progress in any industry, not just farming. They spend time on farm, understanding how the business functions, getting hands-on experience. They also spend time in our supply base with the suppliers in different departments, learning about HR, people management and all the skills required that only perhaps big businesses can support with. That goes back to the point around how that is probably more challenging for smaller family



farm businesses. They also spend time with us at McDonald's in head office and working in our restaurants.

That placement opens up a whole host of different opportunities across the agri-food industry. Many of the young people—we have had over 60 now—go back on farm. Of young farmers, 25% are from non-farming backgrounds and over 60% are female. It is fantastic to have that gender balance. They are not just from agriculture colleges. We had a young farmer from Bath University. A young farmer from north London was interested in farming and wanted to dive straight in, even though she faced a lot of challenges. Through our programme, we are able to support that process and support the farmers who are also part of it through that joined-up approach.

Q96 Barry Gardiner: That sounds great, but you talk about 100, and we need a heck of a lot more than 100, don't we? Again, to bring it back to the report that we have to produce and the recommendations we have to make to the Government, how would the Government initiate something like that? What needs to be done at a national level to replicate what you do? I will bring you in in a moment, Professor Sloan—please continue, Nina. Give me the guts of what we could do to see that sort of programme happening at a national level.

Nina Prichard: It is quite specific as a 12-month placement. We have already piqued the interest of those young people before they go on to that placement. Some of our work through LEAF and the School of Sustainable Food and Farming with Harper Adams, NFU and Morrisons is about reaching the masses more, perhaps. Certainly, the age of 14 to 16 is when young people probably decide what that career pathway looks like for them.

Through some of our research with LEAF and through engaging directly with school-aged children, it is clear that having access even to farm visits and farmers spending their own time going into schools is important. Could the Government support something more formalised, such as career advisers and a hub to support that? We know that mentoring is positive. That hands-on experience piques the interest of young people of that age and plants the seed, if you like. Scaling starts there.

Q97 Barry Gardiner: Professor Sloan, you are keen to come in on that?

Ken Sloan: As Nina referred to, we have a collaboration across Harper Adams University, McDonald's, Morrisons and the National Farmers' Union—and recently Tesco and a number of others—called the School of Sustainable Food and Farming. A primary pillar of the school is to encourage new entrants into the market, but in the end, people look at these careers and opportunities up against every other choice in front of them. If the Government are serious about it, incentivise it. Put in a match-funding opportunity where, if the employer puts some funding in to create an opportunity for a young person or an adult returner to go in,



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and if the company puts in a match-funding element, you would have a whole raft of opportunities.

Charities like Farms for City Children create life-changing opportunities for young people all over the country to go from urban environments into farming backgrounds. They are given a credible and realistic experience, but they rely entirely on donor funding.

I keep coming back to the same points again. Food is the common good across all of us in society. We don't do enough to position it as a common good. If we want to see all these different programmes—Nina's programmes, what the NFU does, what Jeremy is doing—come together, the Government should create some sort of future food taskforce or future food workforce to pull all these things together, put some incentives in and encourage people to participate.

Q98 **Barry Gardiner:** There are some recommendations. Yes, Mr Gibbs.

Jeremy Gibbs: I will add a couple of things. First, it is about understanding who is training that person. Who is that new person? Regardless of age, who is that role model who will show them, for argument's sake, which potato makes good chips? If you don't have the right person there, you miss an element of inspiration. Looking further down the line, it is about understanding what that person with their background can add to your business.

If you look at our reserves, the Government have a direction that our armed forces numbers are reducing and don't have the retention they would like, so the shift is to focus on having a strong reserves network. Being a land-based employer, I talk to a lot of people about the strategy work included in the Armed Forces Covenant, and then I start discussing with employers their reserve policy. A lot of reservists, for example, in existing employment will use their personal holiday to meet their training commitments. They sacrifice 15 days of holiday minimum to keep that reserve status. I then explain to employers that, going forward, having a strong reserve policy and putting yourself above the parapet could start to attract a different source of labour. By the way, when an average reservist comes back to you, they bring about £15,000 worth of soft skills into your business. You have then brought someone into the business who is not from a farming background and is still working in the armed forces.

The other element of that is around the cadets and the younger sector. By looking at increasing those numbers, you potentially offer people two career pathways. One is the armed forces, as the cadets, and the other is a land-based sector. Those two groups of people marry up very well. It is understanding who you are targeting and what you want them to do—for example, reservists and cadets from my perspective and young farmers would be another one—and then what value-add they can bring to a business. The final point is who will deliver that as a first experience.



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I don't know how to formulate that into an exact recommendation, but to summarise, instead of grouping everyone into 16 to 24-year-olds, we need maybe to look at structuring who they are and what they want to do differently. A lot of people say, "You need to send people back to college" but that is not the right learning environment for a lot of service leavers with an average age of 29. They do not want to go back to college. They cannot fit into that learning environment.

Adapting and making the recommendations going forward is where I am at the moment, but it is about that reserve policy, especially for agriculture. A reserve can do up to 267 days a year and then do the rest in agriculture on farms. To me, that is a perfect potential solution for marrying up a lack of people who have work potentially in the winter months, and then a peak seasonal requirement in the rest of the year and some sort of flexible working arrangement there.

Q99 Barry Gardiner: That range of recommendations was great, thank you. I wanted to pick up, Mr Emmett, on what you said about the Local Skills Investment Partnerships. Can you probe that a bit further with me? You criticised their focus on localised needs without that national purview that you suggested they ought to have.

Martin Emmett: Yes. For example, if you look at coastal West Sussex, the coast to capital area—I forget how it has been redefined now within the LSIP framework. The area is strong in horticulture, but the main employer is Gatwick Airport and the focus of the outputs is on Gatwick Airport. It reaches into each subsector within the region as well, but the net effect tends to be a drift towards locally important industries. As I said, we rarely have a locally important industry across the whole land-based sector.

Could I come back to your previous point about how we get—

Q100 Barry Gardiner: Of course, but I want you to give me a recommendation about how we can deal with the LSIP issue.

Martin Emmett: Okay. It comes back to this idea of recognising that certain industries need national strategies to sit above that. If we don't do that, we will get a lot of replication and duplication. We do not have large cohorts to go into all the colleges covering agriculture and horticulture. Basically, this needs to be nationally co-ordinated. This sector needs a national rather than a local strategy, I advocate.

Q101 Barry Gardiner: Thank you. Lots of nods across the panel on that. Sorry, did you want to add something to the other discussion?

Martin Emmett: There was a point about access to schools especially to promote the messages about our industry.

Barry Gardiner: We will come on to that, so I will not press you on that because I know some of my colleagues want to pursue those themes with you. Chair, thank you very much.



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Chair: Thank you, Barry. We are not doing too badly for time, but we may up the tempo a little bit. If our witnesses agree with one of their colleagues, don't be frightened to say, "I agree" and not necessarily repeat what they said.

Q102 **Ian Byrne:** Thanks very much for the evidence so far; it has been excellent. I totally agree with what you were saying, Ken, about the priority politically and what we were talking about. Martin has touched on it as well.

I was struck by something when reading some of the papers we were given by our wonderful Clerks and from the first evidence session. City & Guilds said, "In order to survive, the whole land-based sector will need a wide range of young people to commit their futures to the industry and opening the eyes of younger people to the wealth of career paths available to them needs to be a priority". That is a call to arms for everybody. What we are discussing here today is important.

You can hear from my accent that I am not from a rural constituency. How can the Government help to increase public awareness of the variety of roles available within the land-based sectors

Martin Emmett: This area has been problematic. If you look at the quality of the information that has come out of the careers enterprise service, for example, it often mischaracterises what the jobs are about. The level of pay that is available certainly has not been accurate. Time and time again I see jobs where I know plenty of people are on very good salaries and it is suggested you might earn a maximum of £28,000. Some of the output has done more harm than good, so we need to better resource and better research how the careers enterprise service markets the industry.

One problem there, by the way, is that when an industry struggles to recruit, it often uses agencies and it does not use advertising. The consequence is that there are few published rates of pay. It needs a deep-delve approach to get accurate information. The starting point is more accurate information about the opportunities in the sector, characterising the jobs and also the pay and rewards associated with those jobs.

Nina Prichard: Going back to the time that a 14 to 16-year-old makes that career choice and has that interest piqued, farmers spend a lot of their time perhaps going into schools or hosting visits. How can they be rewarded and incentivised to potentially do that more through existing schemes and so on?

Q103 **Ian Byrne:** Not a lot of farmers go to Liverpool West Derby. How do we ensure that the kids within my constituency see this as a viable plan? It is of national importance. We saw some fantastic jobs yesterday in the university. How do we ensure that people understand the scope and the scale of the potential of what they can achieve in this sector?



Nina Prichard: In the research we have done with LEAF with over 2,000 young people, over 50% said that they did not know where to start looking for career opportunities. There was a disconnect between knowing where food comes from and how it is produced to start with. It came out clearly from that research that hands-on experience—getting people out and about to farm to places like Harper Adams, understanding and starting to connect where food comes from—starts that curiosity and conversation around the range of skills and opportunities available within agri-food in different sectors and different farm businesses, but also across the supply base, be it maths or computer science. We need such a range of skills and such diversity of thought in the future, so that the industry will be able to tackle some of the big challenges facing us, particularly around climate.

Q104 **Ian Byrne:** I agree with everything you said. You are in such a position at McDonald's with so many opportunities to talk to so many different communities and the messaging you can put through advertising campaigns. How do you encourage young people to go into these careers? Are you looking at that? Do you do that?

Nina Prichard: It goes back to the original point. It is multifaceted, so we tend to have a multipronged approach to how we talk about where food comes from in the beginning. You can imagine the above-the-line TV ads and marketing focusing on our support for British agriculture and our support for young farmers who feature in our TV ads, right through to social media, using influencers and communication channels that resonate with young people from diverse backgrounds.

Q105 **Ian Byrne:** We will come on to that in the next question. That is interesting—I am sure Neil will ask about that. Go on, Jeremy.

Jeremy Gibbs: I want to add two things there. First, from the armed forces perspective, there is the veterans' strategy action plan, which also encompasses, for example, forces families' jobs. You then have a communication into a sector of, as you say, your constituency of younger people who may never consider that. The veterans' strategy action plan is the Government direction that I look to for support to help service leavers and their families move into roles.

Secondly, this year I have kicked off, slowly but surely, the 6x6 programme, starting off with a simple logo, "What interests you?" It is language-neutral. It is—

Chair: I am afraid we cannot see slides.

Jeremy Gibbs: That is no problem. Basically, there are six sectors. The logo is predominantly not using words and not using language, so it avoids certain skill levels. I structured this to be either six weeks or six months. If someone is interested—I always wanted the six-week programme to be applicable for summer holidays, for example—offering kids in your constituency specifically the ability to partner up with farms



for a six-week summer holiday is a lever to pull, so that they say, “Yes, I will go away on a summer camp”. We used to have it post-war, where you would go on an agricultural summer camp. It was healthy and helped the harvest and so on. That may make kids say, “Okay”—if they can go somewhere for six weeks with accommodation, if their parents know where they are, with the right farmers, as Nina has explained with some of her McDonald’s farmers. We have a summer holiday of six weeks traditionally to help farming and help the harvest. That is a potential idea for summer holiday camps and a huge opportunity.

Q106 Ian Byrne: Very good. Ken, it was suggested to the Committee in evidence that we need a national awareness campaign. It probably touches on what Martin said and all the elements of what we have touched on here today. Jeremy, you talked about potentially going into this sector as a lifestyle choice for your family, and we saw during covid the importance of outdoor spaces. It is a selling point now. People want to completely change careers. Is a national awareness campaign viable, Ken? If so, what form should it take?

Ken Sloan: It is viable. I recommend the Committee look at the GuildHE-Landex manifesto for land-based education, which was released last week and has some recommendations in it.

There are a couple of things. First, behind me—I know, because I saw them as I came in—are some very inspirational people who have come through and are going through this institution. Some of them have already done their placements; some of them have done others. A national campaign should tell their story and the story of people who have already made those choices. If you did that, you would also find the people who have come from inner-city Birmingham and inner-city Liverpool. It is harder for them to find it, but they do come, so their stories are there. Secondly, do not ask us about how to influence young people. Talk to young people about it. It has to use the channels that young people use. It has to use the language that young people use.

I went back before over the campaigns that we have done. What have the Government done over the years? Teach First was to encourage people who might have gone into a different career to go into teaching. Where is Food First? Where is the incentive to get people to look at it as a career? Where are the bursaries that should be available to people to go into shortage-based careers, particularly at the moment when students incur the full cost of their degrees? They have had below-inflation increases in maintenance loans for a number of years. The cost of being a student is significant at this time.

Also, a lot of the courses that people will go into will have placements attached to them, and in some cases, the employers are generous in paying for those placements. In some cases, we have a development trust with donors from industry and other places who provide funding, but a significant number of students will go into unpaid placements for a year. Because of how the placements operate, they will not be able to get



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a full maintenance loan for that year. If you tell a child in West Derby that they will have to fund themselves through part of their degree and not get access to a maintenance loan, they will go to the auto industry, where they will pay for it. They will go to something else.

It concerns me a little bit that we tend to talk the sector down so that it is more manageable and simpler. We talk about colleges. We have colleges, but we have specialist universities. People can do everything from an entry-level qualification to becoming a doctor of letters or a doctor of science in these particular areas. You will have seen yesterday, when you went around the campus, that some of the most advanced careers are in this area. Some of those things about—

Q107 **Ian Byrne:** That messaging is not getting out.

Ken Sloan: Exactly. Finally, I would love to be able to send every single one of the students sitting behind me into a school in a different area, but they currently use any spare time that they have to earn money. In the end, create a national ambassador scheme on behalf of this sector to send role models to see young people in different parts of the country, tell their story and inspire them to get on board.

Ian Byrne: I could not think of a better way to finish that question, thanks.

Q108 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you to all of our witnesses today. Thank you to Ken and all his team for hosting us here today and yesterday to see the fantastic work going on at Harper Adams and also at Harper and Keele Vet School—an exciting development.

I want to get on to outreach and career influencers. This follows on nicely from Ian's questions and your answers that we have had so far—we have covered this a bit. Ken, you have said that you would like to use your young student role models more, if you could have that available, but what outreach work does the university currently do to try to connect with people in the outside world—career influencers, parents, teachers and careers advisers in schools—to raise awareness of the opportunities and the career pathways and where to go from there?

Ken Sloan: Aggregated organisations out there like LEAF and, as I mentioned, Farms for City Children are national organisations that undertake school-focused outreach. As a university, we work in partnership with them and we support them as an integral part of what we do.

We have our own outreach programme to schools. We will touch thousands of students either directly in their school or in events like *New Scientist Live*. We go out to the vast majority of agricultural and rural shows in different areas, but as a small institution, we have to balance our time between the communities that traditionally send students to Harper and the communities that do not send students to Harper. We



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make sure that in all the events we do we get either access to parents or messaging to parents so that we can influence them.

Teachers are key though. A couple of weeks ago, through the British Nutrition Foundation, we had a cross-section of teachers from right across the UK here for the day to get up to speed on the latest thinking in school-based food education for teachers to make sure that they can go back with real clarity and insight on what is there.

I mentioned this in a response to a question I was asked some time ago, and it partly goes back to what my colleague said before. If you look at the Office for National Statistics classification of careers, many of the careers we talk about are still classified as either mid-skilled or low-skilled. Those classifications are reviewed only periodically. I encourage the Committee to ask the Office for National Statistics to revisit those classifications. A high-aspiration teacher or a high-aspiration parent will not recommend a mid to low-skilled career. A number of those classifications are inaccurate. If you think about either a farmer on the land or anyone in industry and the complexity of what they have to grapple with, Germany does not classify that as low-skilled or medium-skilled. Australia does not classify it as low-skilled or medium-skilled. As well as this outreach work that we do and all the conversation that we do, we need to tackle these structural barriers—for example, the way these careers are classified—head on.

Chair: The banks are also guilty of that. When people open accounts, they cannot find a classification necessarily and you get put down as “farm worker” even if you are a highly skilled technician.

Q109 Dr Neil Hudson: Coming back to the outreach strategy, the solution lies with more dollars and cents, and pounds and pence, to come into the system to get a strategy to free up your staff time and to free up your role-model students to do that outreach.

We have been thinking as a Committee about the barriers that there might be for people wanting to come into this sector. If they see an easier pathway that may be funded—you said about other industries and sectors where they will fund the students to come in. What are the greatest barriers to people coming into these sectors? I will start with Nina, in terms of some of the research that she has done. As a Committee, what can we recommend to the Government to try to overcome some of these barriers? I will throw that open to the whole panel, but I will start with Nina.

Nina Prichard: Based on the research that we conducted with LEAF with over 2,000 young people, 52% said they would like to learn more about how to enter the agri-food industry. Often, they do not know where to start. Even young farmers coming through our programme who have been successful talk about that beginning stage being quite challenging. I feel that that can then demotivate people to continue on that journey, unless they are curious and enthusiastic individuals.



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Our research has shown that lack of awareness and knowledge about where to even start and where to signpost. How do you create a hub of careers advisers and material? What channels will resonate with young people—social media, TikTok, Instagram—out of all the different channels that provide the right level of information to start with? How do we link that farm experience to understand the range of skills and experience so that it is not low-skilled but medium or high, from operating a £500,000 potato harvester through to animal health and welfare?

We also asked young people about the positives associated with a career in farming. They said things like caring for the environment, a passion for food and working in the outdoors. They also talked about the mental health and wellbeing aspect of being out and about. When we asked them about the negatives, they talked about how they did not have the right skills requisite to even enter the industry. There is this perception that they have to be already skilled to even start a career in farming. They also said it was physical work, they did not necessarily want to be out in all weathers and there are unsociable hours. Again, that will vary from sector to sector and from farm business to farm business.

What we can do goes back to changing the perception, going away from some of those negatives into the positives, and also things like the LEAF national schools programme, which is a competition whereby young people get involved with particular projects around agri-food. That has been successful for 14 to 16-year-olds. Some 66% of the finalists went on to apply for or enrol in a land-based college or university. Again, it is multifaceted, but it is about creating that awareness and curiosity around skills and behaviours, as opposed to thinking about it as technical.

Q110 Dr Neil Hudson: Thank you; that is helpful. I will come back to you, Ken, and then go to the rest of the panel. One key area we have discussed is transport; our Committee looked quite closely at it. I am a constituency MP in Cumbria. We tragically lost Newton Rigg College, which served a wide area. Young people and older people came from all over the north of England and further afield. Transport is a big issue.

You represent a big institution here. You are in a rural area, but you have towns nearby. Your students would come in, but they need to get here, and when they are here, perhaps they will live off site in their second and third years. We have detected that transportation is a huge barrier. Is that your experience? What could be done to overcome that huge barrier for people? People out there want to come, but if they can't get there, they will not do it.

Ken Sloan: It is an incredibly challenging barrier. Only yesterday, we were advised that Arriva will cancel a bus that goes from Shrewsbury, one of our main towns, past the university into Newport, the feeder town. That will affect employees; it will affect students; it will affect anyone in that area who does not have car transport. It will prevent them coming.



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It is ironic. To some extent, we are one of the best-connected institutions to London outside London. To explain that, if you can get from here to Stafford, you can go to Manchester, Birmingham or to Wolverhampton. You can go to any of those places. You can get into London in an hour and 20 minutes, but you cannot get from there to here. Any institution of whatever specialism that operates outside the heart of an urban environment will experience this.

It was said that certain things need to be looked at on a national level through the LSIPs. Access to these opportunities needs to be looked at on a national level as well. We deregulated transport, so that it is looked at only through the economic needs of the operator relative to the environment it is in, as opposed to the workforce, labour and other needs, which is a real barrier.

My previous institution in Australia, Monash, was a 3 billion Australian dollar institution. That is the funding it had and generated. Harper Adams is a £60 million institution and we are expected to also pay for the transport for people to come as well. I want to put all of the funding that we have either into encouraging the next generation to come or into making sure that the people behind me have the best experience that they can have. We should not be expected to pay for the transport that gets people here.

Q111 **Dr Neil Hudson:** If students coming here have halls of residence near here, but then in their second and third years have to come in for different courses, and are potentially coming into milk the cows in the middle of the night or whatever, do a lot of them have to car-share or have cars paid for by the bank of mum and dad? Are those barriers?

Ken Sloan: These are real costs that people pay. They have to have access to a vehicle or access to a person who has a vehicle. At the same time, we want to work towards being a net zero university, so we want to discourage them from using their cars—we want to discourage them from having to use their cars. I would love to see every one of our students living in Newport having an easy bus ride to get here. It would help us with the management of the campus. It would help the local environment and road infrastructure, but we do not have those options.

Q112 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Coming back the point in your introduction that food security is a national security issue, you could argue that looking after our planet and the environment is a similar security issue. Producing good food locally and looking after the environment can and should go hand in hand. If you had cross-Government working—DEFRA working with the Departments for Transport, Health, Housing and Local Communities—we could say, “We are trying to train people up. Can we have joined-up thinking to overcome these barriers? If transport is one of them, how can we address that?” Would the panel agree with that? Would that be a possible recommendation for us?



Ken Sloan: From my perspective—I can't talk for everyone else; they will either nod or not—this is now of sufficient importance. It is already of sufficient importance because of the common currency across the entire nation. It is of sufficient importance in a post-Brexit, pro-environmental, pro-food security, pro-food production necessity, when we know that we have the disruption through the illegal war in Ukraine and we know what is happening in the Red sea. If this is not the time for people to come together and realise that the firepower of every Government Department needs driving behind this strategy, I don't know what circumstances are necessary to make the point.

Q113 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you. I am aware of time. Can we go through a quick-fire round about barriers, what we can do and strategies?

Martin Emmett: I have a quick one on barriers—it is about basic familiarity, so just not being aware of that possibility, not having someone to talk to. Jeremy mentioned that the best influencers are people you can talk to. A lot of passionate people in this industry see it as a vocation. If they get a chance to go into schools and talk to people, it can make the difference. Our Young People in Horticulture Association has over 800 members. The NFU has over 250 school ambassadors. They are waiting to have that opportunity; give them that opportunity.

Another key barrier is around the idea of green jobs. Time and time again we seem to be excluded from that definition. Not including us in it could do us quite a lot of harm. We see a lot of coalescing of Government policy around promoting green careers and green jobs. We need to be absolutely clear. This is a green industry that the Government should promote as such.

Q114 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you. Jeremy, can you talk a bit about the pathways to get under-represented people in? You work with people from the armed forces as well. I was struck by a point you made—that for the people you try to help, coming into a university sector or college sector may not be the most comfortable experience. How could that pathway into Harper Adams or another institution be made smoother for someone of 29 or 30 to come in and retrain and upskill? Maybe they could come in for a short course or something else. How can we make that pathway smoother and overcome those sorts of barriers?

Jeremy Gibbs: That is a good point. I have enquired with colleges and looked down that route before and it is very much, "This is what we have. Fit in with the current programme". If I have someone on potentially two years of resettlement, is there an opportunity to do a block programme in the summer months? Ex-military people do not have a harvest time. They do not have peak times at work when they need to be there.

Again, things like, potentially, the college environment could be good not only for one person coming in to look at it as a career—when I put people on placements, I say, "On the Saturday and Sunday, invite your family down. Get them involved". As we said, get the family unit involved in



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going to explore this as a career, as a way of life, coming back to Harper Adams. It is about having the discussions as well about, "If you take the college course environment, this is what it costs. These are the implications" all the way down even to payment plans potentially and how they fund themselves.

I had a gentleman yesterday of 37, married with five kids, who cannot afford to go back into higher education because he needs a wage. He said to me yesterday, "If I can't get this shepherding sorted, I will have to forget the farming idea, because I need the money". It is that security of how you put a proposition to someone. It does not need to be at the right time of year in the right environment with the right family to understand that this is a good commitment.

You mentioned incentives, if I can go back to that. To me, it is amazing that the sustainable farming incentive has no social or labour element. We cannot have a sustainable farming incentive if it does not include people, employment and skills, as we said. It is the same thing with ELMs. I have always said that the "s" in ELMs, in my opinion, is "social". It is on the land; it is people; it is development. I believe that if we start to maybe incentivise it, farmers will look into supporting us. I am asking farmers to maybe work at half their pace for a couple of days to teach someone. Subsidising helps to absorb the little blow of not getting the work done and needing to get on quicker.

Finally, on the armed forces side, I wanted to mention the national insurance relief at the end of 12 months. In employing a veteran, the employers get the national insurance relief. Some people use that to offer up additional training courses or even as a retention bonus at the end of 12 months—about 10% of your salary as an extra bonus at the end of your first year if you have stayed—because that retention is as important for getting people on to the courses. I could have 1,000 people enter a farming job, but it is a loss if 50% of them stay there for two weeks. If another 70% of that 50% stay there for six months and then leave, and if I end up with only 10 people out of 1,000 in a job, I have not done my job. They have all had a nice journey and a nice time, but they are not in employment and adding value.

Q115 Dr Neil Hudson: Thank you. They are some amazing recommendations for how we look at some of these funding structures. I like your idea of the S being "social capital".

I have a quick-fire round for my final question. We have touched on mentoring and role models. How can we harness the people who have made these journeys? It could be the student body; it could be someone who has come from the armed forces. As you said, you had someone in your stand yesterday who has made that journey and they are the best person to sell it. How can we harness those role models and mentors to do that outreach work and to say to people, "Give it a go. This is doable"? We will go to Martin first.



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Martin Emmett: I want to stress that they are ready and waiting. They need the opportunities, the scope in the curriculum and the school timetable, for example, among the other environments they could be in. People are waiting. If we can create opportunities, we can put people into the channels.

Nina Prichard: Create that more formalised structure around careers advisers but also understand that a career path is not necessarily going straight on to a farm. There are all sorts of different routes into the agri-food industry. Often it is peer-to-peer as well. Young people talk to young people from both non-farming backgrounds and farming backgrounds to explore the opportunities available.

On the diversity piece, it is important that we look not just in agriculture colleges and universities, which are extremely important for that next pipeline of talent, but also much more broadly. Within the Oxford Farming Conference, we sponsored the Breaking Barriers programme, which did a Nuffield scholarship with us at McDonald's. Understanding the range of talent out there, from nutritionists to soil scientists to mathematicians, and giving them the access and opportunity to the industry is impactful.

Ken Sloan: Kick off your national campaign across TikTok and other channels and put a call out to everyone currently in the industry to do a one-minute "to their phone" video. You will get the content quickly.

Jeremy Gibbs: I am looking at piloting an apprenticeship scheme this year, with the idea that the estate I partner with down near Andover in Hampshire has a shepherd who is 73. He will retire in August. I was chatting to him the other day and I asked, "What will you do in your retirement?" He said, "I don't know; I don't want to retire". For 40 years he has worked on that estate, always doing sheep. I have a service leaver who is coming up to 18 months of resettlement and I proposed to the estate manager that we put him on to an apprenticeship, if his Career Transition Partnership adviser resettlement officer says yes. During his resettlement period of 18 months, he will be paid by the MoD, so the farm does not have to find his salary.

The final part is I have asked the estate if we could use its 73-year-old shepherd as an apprenticeship mentor. It brings me out of the situation of having to be this one person's go-to crutch. The ageing population of agriculture is linked up. Some 40% of the industry is over 60. We can use that massive area of the industry to inspire people. Whether they are the type of people we can get into schools, I do not know, but we certainly know that peer-to-peer learning works and that vocational learning works for agriculture. Utilise that. I have said to the estate that we will maybe use a 73-year-old apprenticeship mentor as a pilot this year, because he has 40 years of shepherding knowledge. He gets a purpose for retirement and the new person coming in, who is 37, has an older person to liaise with.



In terms of the college environment, it worked well to connect up a service leaver with Eastern College over in Norfolk. He went in as the estate operations manager. Having him in the college gives me a point of contact to send people to. People started going to him and talking to him. We had that at Silverstone yesterday. Anyone who is asking about college courses, introduce them to another James and get him to explain it, and he translates the college chat and the college talk. For example, if I had someone at Harper Adams that I could direct all my service leavers towards, it is one point of contact. We would then have a service leaver in an organisation who other service leavers listen to and trust and will take their advice. Suddenly it is not me telling you; it is not Ken telling you; it is not Nina telling you; it is not Martin telling you. It is someone you like and relate to, another service leaver. That element of peer-to-peer learning and the influence of people you will listen to—friends and so on—is important.

Q116 Dr Neil Hudson: That is helpful. Nina talked about some of the benefits of coming into these professions—the mental health benefits of working outside and so on. Equally, we have to be cognisant of retention. We ran a full inquiry on rural mental health and the stresses and strains in many of these occupations. It is about having people who have blazed these career paths, who can talk about their resilience and coping strategies, so that people know, if they are coming into these professions, that there is a support network there for them. People need to be realistic coming in, but a support network will retain people. The last thing we want to do is do not want to pull people in and then they leave because they are not aware of all the stresses and strains. There is a balance, but the support network with role models can help with that.

Jeremy Gibbs: You mentioned mental health, which is massively important to me. I am a great believer in this, and I stand on a soapbox quite often, but farmers will not ask for help. They will not ask for mental health support. I heard a line in New Zealand when I was over there. They said, “The only way a farmer will ask for help is if they see the farmer over the hedge asking for help”. That is it. As soon as the farmer over the hedge starts combining, every other farmer gets the combine out.

Getting veterans and people with mental resilience on to farms will give farmers more people on farms to listen to. I always say that farmers will always listen to three people: the emergency services, people from the NHS and the armed forces. They pretty much don’t listen to everyone else. When you start bringing veterans on to farms and bringing in that level of mental resilience, farmers will say, “Crikey. You did 12 tours of Afghanistan on the back of a Chinook. Now you want to come and work with me?” You change the perception. They can share some of their challenges with this person who has been to the other end of the dark times and the bad times and come back from them. That inspiration can be rewarding to a farmer.



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I see it at shows and events as well. I see a farmer talking to a service leaver who might be missing a limb or be wounded, injured or sick. They stand there with their jaw open saying, "Wow, I thought I had a tough job at harvest, or lambing or calving" and then you start to bring that into the team. Suddenly, you have the benefit of having a veteran in your team as a mental health champion, if they are happy to do that. I am glad you brought up mental health, because it is a massive part of me trying to bring veterans on to farms.

Dr Neil Hudson: Thank you for that, Jeremy. That was powerful. Apologies, I digress, but it is powerful to get that testimony.

Chair: Thank you very much. It is interesting. We have a neighbour who gets his combine out, and we always think, "I bet it is too wet". He goes once around the field and, yes, it is too wet, but he does it every year.

Q117 **Cat Smith:** I will move on to some questions around schools and curriculum. I will say from the outset that we are aware from our written evidence, particularly from the NFU, of the variety of curriculum differences in different types of schools. For example, in Liverpool West Derby, my colleague Ian Byrne probably does not have many forest schools, whereas in my more rural constituency most of our rural primary schools are forest schools. Ripley, a high school in my constituency, has a 40-acre farm that the pupils can access, and it is integrated into the curriculum. The students there have a farm club. There is a geographical difference between what you get where, but as an opening question, Ken, how well served are land-based sectors by the primary and secondary education systems? How can they work better? Do you have any examples of good practice?

Ken Sloan: Yes, I am happy to take that. Land-based organisations like LEAF and others do a huge amount to provide materials to schools to help them and support them with their education. That helps at primary and secondary level. No specific curriculum area covers some of the things that we talk about. It is important that we train, support and encourage teachers to draw out from their individual curriculum areas the examples and the signposts to encourage people to know more about what happens. That is why I talk rather obsessively about food as education. If you have food in every school, you can educate someone about where food comes from regardless of the experiences around them.

If you move to secondary, we are in a process of transition. A teacher is coming to see us on Friday. He is teaching in Northern Ireland the GCSE in agriculture. This is the first year that has been opened more generally within that school. They see it as attractive. If a West Derby school suddenly decided to do a GCSE in agriculture, it would not necessarily find its way to the top of the list of things there.

If I have a question at the secondary school level, it is about the transition from BTECs to T-levels. The route through BTECs into further



and higher education or tertiary education has been popular. Concerns have been raised about the defunding of BTECs. The Government have helped by delaying the defunding of some of these particular areas, but we have used BTECs to get people into the courses we do.

I encourage the Committee to make sure that the Government does an early evaluation of the transition from BTECs to T-levels to make sure that we have not shut off a route and the demand hasn't carried—

Q118 Cat Smith: Can I pull you back a bit, Ken? I know that the Chair's final question is probably on this topic. Focusing far more on primary and secondary education, which I have been asked to keep to, you were saying there were differences. How well do schools integrate land-based or food-based education into all the different aspects of the curriculum—for example, into geography and biology? Is that strong generally in schools?

Ken Sloan: It is inconsistent across schools. It relies on the experience of the teachers and on the environment where the school is. You can't take it for granted that in every school setting, the areas around land-based education are flagged in different places. We need to make sure that materials are created to support teachers to do that. At the moment, it is highly inconsistent. That is probably then reflected in the demand for land-based education that goes on from that. To some extent, we limit what we describe by even calling it "land-based education". If you are in Singapore talking about agriculture and horticulture, you are not talking about land. You are talking about vertical stacks, city-based farming and other things. At best, it is inconsistent.

Q119 Cat Smith: Thank you. Nina, you have done quite a lot of research on young people's attitudes. Can you share with the Committee any perceptions you have about how this is taught in primary and secondary education?

Nina Prichard: Certainly in primary—I would go back to that experience—whether you have farms in schools or the ability to visit farms, feeling the earth and planting the seed at a primary level is important. I am not close to the detail of the curriculum, but when we asked young people what subjects they felt linked to agri-foods careers, they mentioned engineering, environmental science and chemistry/biology. Business studies, maths and computer science did not come through. When you go out to a farm business or a supplier of agri-food, you get to see the application of all those subjects. The challenge is bringing to life the opportunity, if you are interested in computer science, technology and innovation, and the multifaceted skills and talent that you need to run a farm or work in the value chain.

At a secondary school level, it is about linking those strands together and opening up the opportunities, as well as the opportunities for apprenticeships as an alternative to full-time education to get hands-on practical experience. How do you make the pathway more accessible?



Q120 **Cat Smith:** Martin, the NFU do quite a bit of work engaging school students with farming through the Farmers for Schools programme and the NFU education team, as well as the support and promotion for Open Farm Sunday. Could anything be done better in terms of teaching at primary and secondary schools?

Martin Emmett: Thinking more about primary and the RHS gardening for schools initiative, which is important, I like to believe that every child, by the time they have left primary school, has grown something because that is a basic skill. It is a responsibility as well. Growing something is unique. Making sure in the curriculum that that happens would be brilliant.

Cat Smith: That is a brilliant idea. It is a colourful recommendation for the Committee to make. Jeremy, I know that you do not have particular expertise in this area, but feel free to jump in if you think something is relevant.

Jeremy Gibbs: Did you have a question?

Cat Smith: I did not have, a question because I know that you do not work with school-aged children, but do jump in if there is anything. I am not asking you, but don't take it personally.

Jeremy Gibbs: Thank you, Cat. I appreciate that. I will add one quick comment. We segment people by their age group and not by their knowledge level. I had a conversation yesterday with an organisation. Its education department said, "There is no point in us going because we focus mainly on schools". I said, "Yes, but the people I am talking to have that same knowledge level. The fact that you have said this document or this initiative is for schools does not mean that that knowledge level does not apply to people of 25 or 30 who know nothing about food and farming."

Q121 **Cat Smith:** A lot of schools do a lot more now than a few years back around promoting apprenticeships. Do you feel that apprenticeships in the land-based sector are promoted? I am conscious that Friday is International Women's Day and I want to give a plug to my constituent, Louise Bainbridge. She has had an apprenticeship with North Pennines National Landscape since last year. Nina said something about the proportion of women taking up apprenticeships. Would you like to add anything about how we can do more to encourage school leavers who don't plan to continue in formal education to instead take an apprenticeship route?

Martin Emmett: I have a slightly vested interest in this because before I took the role at the NFU, I was the vice-chair of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education group panel. It is a unique bridging opportunity into employment. We have seen this in my own business. We have recruited 16-year-olds. We have to promote the message about the validity of what apprenticeships can do. I hope that,



eventually, we will have degree apprenticeships as well, because we are a bit bereft of degree apprenticeships in this sector. I would also like us to have that as part of the offer. It is a valid pathway and a useful pathway, as evidenced in my own businesses.

Q122 Cat Smith: What are the main challenges for employers to take on apprentices? Or what perceptions put people off? Perhaps that is better phrasing.

Martin Emmett: The classic one is the 20% off-the-job training. In the programme we have with Pershore, we do that primarily as block release and then two to support on-site. That turns out to be quite workable in the end. To be honest, a lot of employers—especially the larger employers—are so desperate to get people that the barriers are not there. Smaller employers and smaller farms of course find it difficult to host an apprentice, but they could be in a flexi-job type of programme where the apprenticeship is shared by several employers and administered by a college. There is a way around that, yes.

Cat Smith: Thanks. I am conscious if I go any further, Chair, I will take your questions around T-levels and BTECs. I will hand back to you.

Q123 Chair: Thank you. I have one last point. We have covered most of the ground. This is to Ken in particular. When I went to Newcastle University—you will be surprised that other universities offer agriculture courses apart from this one—there were three courses. Agriculture was pretty much all men; agricultural engineering was all men. The agricultural and food marketing course had a few women. What is your gender balance here? What trends do you see in the courses you offer? Are some courses difficult to fill? Are some oversubscribed? Is that driven by the demand from young people wanting to study particular subjects, or the demand from employers looking to take people on?

Ken Sloan: We have no shortage of demand from employers. In terms of the subject mix, we broadly do consistently well across most of our different areas, whether that is agriculture, in our business courses or in engineering. The areas that tend to struggle a bit are food and food science courses. At the school level is a lack of understanding of what a food degree can enable you to do. A food degree that is focused on being a chef or something like that is clear to people, but the broader science base of food is harder to communicate. In places like Australia, it is increasingly becoming a postgraduate rather than an undergraduate degree.

The demographic of our institution has more women than men, if you look at it across the courses. Part of that is to do with some of the veterinary courses, which have a female majority. We get adequate demand for the courses that we have to enable us, in the main, to meet our targets, but we do not get a surplus of demand that a business school in somewhere like Warwick or Nottingham might get for a business course. Something definitely happens between the ages of 14 and 19.



These areas interest people when they are younger, but when it comes to making a firm commitment to go on and study them, the numbers do not hold up as much as they—

Q124 **Chair:** How does that affect your entry grades? Do you have to take lower A-level results?

Ken Sloan: No. In the end, we will admit students who will be successful. If you trace it through to the employability rate of 99% of our students going on and getting a job, they need to have the skills and capabilities. However, if someone has a real passion and a real interest, and has demonstrated that and might have had some work experience of that ilk, we will do what we can to get them on to a course and then support them through that particular course.

There is no point taking on people who have no prospect of passing a degree, particularly when they pay £9,250 a year to go through that degree programme. We admit students we think have the potential to continue and then the potential to complete. That is shown through our institution's continuation rates. We exceed our benchmarks on all of those. Employability is the highest in the country.

Q125 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Is there anything else our witnesses want to add before we conclude?

Nina Prichard: From our research, 64% of young people said that not having a role model was quite a pivotal deterrent from considering a career in agri-food. Particularly on the gender side, when we started our Young Farmer programme over 10 years ago, it was veering towards being more male-dominated, and now we have over 64% female young farmers who have come through that system. They are equally capable, male or female, but that role model piece is important, which is why we support things like Breaking Barriers with the Oxford Farming Conference as well. We showcase the art of the possible and the career path, and it is important for others to follow suit.

Chair: Thank you. Neil has a last point.

Q126 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I have one final question. These courses are expensive to run. You have practical classes and you have to run farms and so on, but this is part of food security and national security. Do you have any recommendations that we can make to the Government for addressing some of your financial issues with these expensive courses?

Ken Sloan: First, make sure that any funding formula for courses reflects the actual complexity and the scientific and technical nature of those courses. Secondly, our institution is in the fortunate position that we bid for the funding competition that is run through the Office for Students for world-leading specialist teaching. We were successful and that increased our funding, but it increased it only for the period of time that it gives us that funding. It is not an embedded reflection of the costs. In my first year here, I waited to find out whether we would get that funding. Not



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getting that funding would have meant an immediate 12% cut to our funding. Other specialist institutions out there did not get access to that funding. That uncertainty needs to be taken away.

Q127 **Barry Gardiner:** What about the profitability of the farm? Does the farm contribute to your bottom line and, if so, what percentage of your budget does it make up?

Ken Sloan: We have three challenges on the farm: to be a commercial farm, to be a place of education and to be a place of research. The farm has to absorb the costs of every hour that a student is educated and every research project. No net contribution comes from the farm back to the university.

Chair: Any farmer will tell you there is no money in farming.

Barry Gardiner: You say that often, Chair.

Chair: A farmer who won the lottery was asked what she would do and she said, "I will keep farming until it is all gone". Anyway, could I particularly thank the witnesses today for coming here, especially Professor Sloan? You have made us welcome here at the facilities at the college. We have been impressed by everything we have seen at the college. I also thank the *Hansard* technicians who are out of their Westminster comfort zone and have come and made sure that this could be broadcast. Everything has worked absolutely smoothly. Thank you very much.