

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Land-based education, HC 1318

Tuesday 23 March 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies, Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Julian Sturdy.

Questions 1 - 93

Witnesses

I: Tom Bradshaw, Vice-President, National Farmers' Union; Shireen Chambers MBE, Executive Director, Institute of Chartered Foresters; Alex Payne, Chief Executive, Landex.

II: Lord Inglewood, Chair, Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership; Jo Lappin, Chief Executive Officer, Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership; Dr Tim Whitaker, Chief Executive Officer, Askham Bryan College; Judith Clapham, Director of Governance, Askham Bryan College.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [National Farmers' Union](#)
- [Institute of Chartered Foresters](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tom Bradshaw, Shireen Chambers and Alex Payne.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the EFRA Select Committee. We are investigating land-based colleges this afternoon. We are delighted, first of all, to have a panel of Tom Bradshaw, Shireen Chambers and Alex Payne. I will ask the ladies to introduce themselves first. We will start with the first panel, and then we have a second panel after your good selves.

Shireen Chambers: I am Shireen Chambers, executive director of the Institute of Chartered Foresters. We are the royal chartered body for foresters in the UK. We have about 2,000 members who work right across the broad spectrum of the forestry discipline, from plant pathologists to general forest managers, conservation foresters, urban foresters and specialists in carbon biodiversity. They work throughout the public, private and third sectors. We regulate the standards of entry to the profession and provide support to members, the public and the four devolved Governments.

Alex Payne: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Alex Payne. I am the chief executive of Landex, which is a membership organisation made up of 39 land-based colleges across the United Kingdom.

Tom Bradshaw: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Tom Bradshaw, NFU vice-president, representing 47,000 members across England and Wales.

Q2 **Chair:** Welcome, all three of you, to the panel this afternoon. The first question is relatively short but quite taxing, in a way. What are the current and future challenges for skills in the land-based workforce? Tom, I am going to throw that ball straight at you; it is a nice, easy ball.

Tom Bradshaw: Yes, it is one of the easiest challenges we have had yet. To try to build a picture, you will know that we have an incredibly rapidly challenging landscape for agriculture in the UK. To deliver a successful agricultural industry, we are going to need a different skillset to that which we have had over the last decade and more. We have technological developments, new agricultural policy, net zero and the new environmental land management scheme. All of these contribute to the changing skillset that will be required.

We have also seen a consolidation in the delivery of education across the country and across regions. We have surveyed all of the regions to make sure that this is a picture that we are seeing across the country, and it very much is true that this consolidation is happening. From what was at a local level, it is now being delivered at a regional level, which means that it is not as accessible for a lot of school-leavers to get the education that they need.

We all need to bear in mind that the agricultural industry is the foundation for the largest manufacturing industry in the UK, producing £120 billion of food and drink. Without the raw ingredients produced here



in the UK, that industry, which employs 4 million people, would not be located here on this island. It is of strategic importance for the future that we make sure that there is a provision of education that really can help a thriving food and drink sector in the UK and make sure that we are producing those raw ingredients over here.

Q3 Chair: Shireen, with forestry, we are looking to plant more trees and to nuance the planting of trees. It is not just about planting trees now but about managing water, soil erosion and all of these things. Some of these will need new skills. Are you confident that we have the right systems in place to produce young people for these new types of jobs in forestry?

Shireen Chambers: We simply do not have enough of them. They may be new skills to others, but forestry has been practising many of these skills for a very long time in terms of carbon mitigation, water and all the rest of it. The core of forestry professionals we have are up to speed with their skills; the main problem is that we do not have enough at all. There are only about 100 forestry graduates coming out of higher education at the minute throughout the UK. 10 years ago, there were three and a half times that. When I graduated 40 years ago, there must have been five or six times that. We have seen closures at main universities like Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Oxford, none of which any longer teach forestry.

It is the same in further education. We do not even have data on the amount of forestry students coming out of that, but they are very low numbers. Again, there is a very limited number of providers. It is really about the numbers and building up those academic institutions again that have the lecturers and teachers there to teach.

On top of that, we need to provide these skills to new entrants who are perhaps not studying forestry. There is a real need to try to upskill landowners and farmers who may be changing, as Tom has just said, in terms of what they are doing. In public bodies such as Natural England or the Environment Agency, there are going to be so many people required to meet the Government's ambitions now for tree-planting; it cannot just be at all limited to specialist foresters. There needs to be a much greater spread of land-based skills.

Q4 Chair: Not only is it a challenge to get the numbers, but are the colleges and the training waking up to the brave new world where we are? At one time, after the First World War, forestry was just about planting as many conifers, as thickly and in as many places as you could. Now, it is very much about a mixture of trees, and about looking at holding back water and soils and doing more for the environment. Although tree-planting in itself is laudable, it is a much broader idea now. Are we embracing that in the college and training systems?

Shireen Chambers: We are to an extent. This really is not new. 40 years ago, I was taught about creating woodlands for flood prevention and for biodiversity. Carbon mitigation is new, I will grant you, but those skills have been learned and are within the forestry profession at the



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moment. What I am very concerned about is that there are not enough forestry trainers and lecturers. That is the main concern: that they are not there. There are so few people to fill the current jobs that there are in forestry. There are fewer and fewer graduates going on to study forestry at postgraduate level and then to move through into academia. That is the concern. We can all learn new skills. We all need to learn more about keeping our professional credentials up to date with new learning, but it is not so much brand-new to the forestry profession as a numbers game at the minute.

Q5 Chair: Alex, do young people see agriculture, land-based management and forestry as the right career move? How do they view coming into our sector?

Alex Payne: That is an interesting question. One of the barriers that we see at the moment is that a lot of entry and a lot of the training that is being delivered within colleges is at level 2. That would indicate that it is not seen as enough of an attractive proposition for those who have achieved well at GCSE. The FE skills White Paper and the Gatsby benchmarks that are being introduced represent a real opportunity to be getting into schools and really ensuring that everybody understands the opportunities that exist within land-based. That is one of the significant barriers that is there.

Q6 Chair: Yes, definitely. Is there anything else that you would like to add about challenges to skills in the future generally? That is what my question started off as.

Alex Payne: We have been able to see the strategic review in land-based that Landex commissioned in 2020. There is an appendix in there that shows the distribution of specialist providers for level 3 and above in forestry, for instance, and there are four of those specialist institutions nationally at the moment. That shows the level of challenge. Within the industry, the agricultural sector is marked by a highly skilled workforce, but one that perhaps lacks formal qualifications. Therefore, there is a real push now in terms of recruiting to the industry, retraining and upskilling within the industry and, almost more importantly than any of those, retaining. We want to retain within the industry and ensure that those who are employed are invested in to upskill in order to meet the emerging agendas in terms of science, technology, sustainability and so on.

It is important to define the land-based sector at the start of this. It is a £91 billion economy from production to the service economy as far as the land-based sector goes. As farms and agriculture have diversified, so has land-based education, and the offer from land-based colleges is mirrored. They have also diversified, with more than half of the offer that is given to learners now being more in the service economy, including amenity horticulture, animal management and equine, et cetera. That is another important thing.



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We know that the line of sight is to upskill and to ensure that we have a workforce that is trained at levels 4, 5 and 6. That is what we now need to be working towards in order to meet the agendas and challenges that we have in the sector.

Q7 Robbie Moore: Following on from the introductory comments that you have given to do with the challenges associated with this, and coming to you first, Tom, just to drill down a little deeper, what specific skills and training will farmers need in order to benefit from the Government's new agricultural policy?

Tom Bradshaw: There is a wide range of skills. The thing that we have always seen with agriculture is that the skillset is one where you are jack of all trades, master of none, in some respects. The business management skills are going to be absolutely crucial. The practical, on-farm delivery and trying to attract the workforce into those roles is very challenging, as Alex was saying. We have a job to do to make sure that we really sell the opportunities that exist within the industry. It is a really exciting time to be going into agriculture, with all of its multifaceted elements and the opportunities that are going to lie there. We have a job to do to make sure that we sell that to those school-leavers who are looking for career opportunities, as Alex has said, before they leave school and while they are in education and trying to decide what it is they want to do.

There is no single skillset, which is one of the beauties of agriculture. However academically minded you are, there are a number of different roles that you are able to do. Whether that is the technician on the ground planting the crops or looking after the livestock, the agronomist or the person controlling the robots, there are so many different opportunities. How we communicate that message is the biggest challenge that we all face, because we have been pigeonholed into, "Those who are not academically gifted go into agriculture". We really need to change that somehow, because there are some amazingly exciting opportunities. What can be more energising than creating and growing the food that is supporting a nation? That is a job that we have to do, but it is not one single skillset.

Q8 Robbie Moore: Following on from that, in terms of Government policy, the agricultural transition plan has identified some mechanisms to try to incentivise and increase that range of skillsets but it has been criticised by, for example, the Farming Forum Grassroots Group, which has said that too much emphasis has been put on capital grants for technological solutions rather than education for land managers and those wanting to upskill. Do the measures in the agricultural transition plan, including the new Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture, go far enough to meet the skills challenges for farmers?

Tom Bradshaw: I was just going to mention the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture. I sit on the board, so I probably have to declare that interest. The focus there on lifelong learning is something that is really



interesting. We are talking about the changing opportunities and the changing skillsets that will be required, but we often think about education as ending when you have left college or university. The focus on lifelong learning is something that we really need to drive right the way through the industry. There are not many industries across the country that do not have that CPD element—the need to show continuing professional development.

When it comes to grants, I have been pretty keen on how we look at incentivising or rewarding those that really are showing continuing professional development and training, probably by an enhanced grant level. Something that we could do with those productivity grants is to reward businesses that show that they are investing in their people and making sure that the training is taking place. We could do that via an enhanced grants system. It will be much easier once TIAH is up and running, because you will be able to demonstrate that you really are taking part in CPD. You will have your training log there on the site, so it will be very easy to achieve. We should look in more detail at how we could incentivise the uptake of training beyond college and formal education.

Q9 Robbie Moore: Finally, I am pleased that you mentioned CPD in terms of having that annual crosscheck and requirement that might be needed going forward. Once people have gone through land-based learning at ag colleges, et cetera, how do you keep them incentivised, and particularly those who might not have gone through that learning and who want to come back and get involved later on in life to learn new skills? How do you incentivise that and then keep that CPD requirement going?

Tom Bradshaw: At the moment, I would much rather try to reward those who are doing it, rather than making it a statutory requirement. We have to look at how we can incentivise that. As an agronomist, I am agronomy-trained and have to get X number of CPD points per year. The same goes for our sprayer-operator courses: we have to get a certain number of points throughout the course of a year. There is a way that we can incentivise that. The grant scheme is one way we should look at to see if we could make it work, by enhancing grants for those businesses that really are demonstrating a commitment to professional training and development.

Q10 Robbie Moore: Coming on to tree-planting, Shireen, and drilling a little deeper into some of the comments that you have already made, what specifically is needed in the way of skills provision to deliver the Government's ambitions for tree-planting?

Shireen Chambers: The first thing that we need is a concerted campaign for rural skills generally. Forestry is only one part of it. Land-based skills generally need this marketing and promotion, as much from Government, to try to make a concerted effort. I do not know how it ever got relegated to, "Those who did not want to achieve more at school should go into rural skills". It is partly because we have become quite an



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urbanised society. As we know, it is not; it is everybody from technical staff to those who really want to go in and work on drones, machinery and all sorts of areas right up to postgraduate work. We need it in forestry and in our land-based sectors.

I would certainly like to see a concerted campaign. Right now, a lot of young people are very interested in the environment. This is the time to catch them. In our situation, a lot of them do not even know that forestry is a career. They think it is simply hairy men with checked shirts felling trees, and we need to get beyond that. We need to get them into really understanding the whole breadth in this and in agriculture, as you have heard. They can have a very broad and full career.

It is about getting that knowledge out there. We can do a lot more on information hubs, on land-based careers and on forestry in particular. We can try to take transfers from other graduates in forestry or environmental science. We can move these into tree-planting. We need support to do this, because we need to upskill these people who may be transferring from other careers or other qualifications that they have had at university. We have so few forestry graduates; we simply do not have enough at the moment to meet Government ambitions. We can set up all sorts of e-learning to try to upskill land agents, for example.

We need to integrate forestry into farms a lot more. There is a huge polarisation between farming and forestry at the minute. In the new farming that is going to come forward, we will not have that, and younger people may want to look at how they can integrate trees on farms in a way that they have not before. A lot of the woodland that is on farms presently is not managed, because farm advisers may know nothing about woodland management. It is about teaching skills in different ways to different people and not just training them in forestry.

Q11 Robbie Moore: Picking up on some of the points that you made there, does it worry you that we do not have that skillset in terms of meeting the Government's ambitions? What do you reckon the lag time associated with that is? It is okay for targets to be set by Government at a national level, but if we all know and are having conversations around the deliverability of that perhaps not being achievable, how much of a concern is that for the industry at the moment? What is the associated lag time that might be added on to those ambitions?

Shireen Chambers: It has been concerning me for years, and before the current Government had their current ambition for 30,000 hectares a year, when we are achieving much less than that at the moment, at about 13,000 hectares. It does worry me, never mind stepping up our ambition. In terms of the lag time if we want to train traditional foresters through university or further education, we cannot simply wait for that. You will not meet your targets. You will not get that ambition. That is why we need to start immediately on some quick wins.



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The institute, along with some others in the sector, has put forward ideas to Defra, but we need funding to do them. We need to start developing some e-learning straightaway for those people who could already perhaps be working for Natural England or other land-based public sector agents. We need to start training those, even working with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors to get their rural surveyors a bit more geared up in forestry.

There are things that can be done quite quickly and we want to start those immediately, but we do need some funding to do it. The lag time just to train a new workforce at a technical level in planting, establishment and forest management is a number of years off. We need to put that in place, but we certainly cannot wait for that to happen if we want to meet our targets.

Q12 **Robbie Moore:** Finally, is the challenge more to do with recruitment in skillsets specifically, in terms of meeting those targets, or is the concern also to do with land availability? What I mean by that is convincing arable farmers, for example, that tree-planting and taking land out of production for planting trees is a good thing, and having those sorts of conversations as well.

Shireen Chambers: There is a big cultural shift to be had, but the new environmental land management scheme should be working on this. As Tom and you have said, farming is going to change. My understanding is that the Government ambition is not to remove arable land and put it into trees, but there is a huge opportunity to include agroforestry, and the new ELM scheme should make that much more attractive. You have already heard, in other committees where you have been seeking evidence, how public money is paying for public goods.

This is the way that agricultural subsidy is moving, so we need to start integrating the woodland-planting and the agricultural production. It cannot be a polarised debate. We have to start working together on it, and that is where we really have to start working with all these different incentives and to try to match them up. At the moment, they are a bit separated and people are very unclear as to how they are going to work together. We need to do a lot more on that.

Q13 **Rosie Duffield:** This is mostly directed at Alex. In the 1980s, there were over 50 agricultural colleges, including Wye College near me in east Kent, but now, sadly, there are only 11 such specialist colleges left. Some FE colleges have land-based wings, but the sector has shrunk desperately. What are the main reasons for this?

Alex Payne: Yes, you are right. In 1980, there were 50 separate colleges; now, there are 11 specialist independent colleges and four universities, but there are also 22 general further-education colleges with specialist land-based campuses that were previously independent colleges. There is a generalised landscape of reasons for that happening, a lot of it driven by finances and by critical mass in terms of learner



numbers and average class size. Resource and investment need to be consistently invested to provide, exactly as you are discussing here, the very best experience for those learners within those land-based institutions.

Yes, that is true, but there are some examples of very good GFE mergers that have taken place, but there are some critical elements to that. There needs to be an understanding from those GFE colleges and their senior leaders of what the mixed economy of land-based education is. By that, I mean that the colleges that have done the best, and those independent colleges that have thrived, are those that have understood the critical mix between higher education, further education, residential, semi-commercial, and expanding and diversifying into other land-based areas that we discussed earlier on.

There are some critical issues there as well in terms of geography. We can see that all specialist land-based institutions are recruiting from over 100 local authorities, which just shows the vast geographical dispersal of that. There are many longer-term impacts from that as well. We have 8,500 residential beds associated with that land-based provision as well.

As Landex and as a wider sector, we have realised the importance of those senior leaders really understanding that mixed economy and the essential elements of it. Therefore, along with the ETF, we have designed middle and senior leader programmes that are designed specifically to ensure that the senior leaders within the institutions really do understand the importance of that mixed economy.

In addition, successive Governments have recognised the need for land-based colleges to have additional funding, because of the 365-day nature and the associated farms. As a result, we have 33 colleges and universities receiving ESFA criteria-based, land-based status. What we need to be really careful of—this is another critical element of mergers with GFE—is that the college weighting factor, as received from the ESFA on the doorstep, as it were, is an average throughout GFE. We need to make sure that that increased weighting factor is correctly directed to that land-based provision in order to ensure that they benefit from that additional funding to develop the resource further.

We can see some really good examples, one of which would be the current investment taking place at Wiltshire College around the dairy. It is specifically directed to improve the resource for land-based education, which is as it should be.

There is a range of reasons why that historical picture has developed. Mergers are not necessarily always terrible, but they require a good amount of knowledge about land-based, and for that additional funding, where it is received, to be correctly directed to invest in resource moving forward.



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funding, because Government spending on agricultural research has reduced by about a third in real terms since the 1980s, from around £600 million to £400 million, and investment in research is a third less than the OECD average. That must play a really big part. Is this decline in the number of colleges and the fact that they are being sold off for land mostly for financial reasons and because of the financial burden of, like you said, keeping them going 24/7, 365 days a year?

Alex Payne: In more recent years, the idea that there has been asset-stripping to sell off college farms or other elements just to plug financial holes is less true than it was historically. In recent years, any selling off of resource has been done to reinvest directly back into that land-based resource. In the longer term, if it is not funded, there will be an impact on that research.

What is interesting to think about and is worth raising in the room with Defra here is that, in terms of investment in resource and in innovation, land-based colleges have been in a position where they have almost fallen between two stools. From a Department for Education perspective, they have not had the investment in farm resource, because it did not meet the criteria for that. At the same time, it has not met the criteria from a Defra perspective for that investment.

If I take something like the innovation fund and sustainability, I know categorically that I could have a range of Landex members at the drop of a hat who are absolutely desperate to come together as a concerted force to really showcase what the land-based industry and those land-based colleges can do to really impact that sustainability agenda. My number is always there and I am more than willing to engage in anything like that, because that is exactly what we need. We need the sector to be pulling together and showing best practice, and the colleges are an excellent conduit through which to do that.

Chair: Thank you, Alex, for that point about it falling between two stools. We will bear that in mind.

Q15 Geraint Davies: In terms of the growth or decline in educational provision for land-based businesses, given that we have now left the EU, there will be all sorts of challenges and opportunities in terms of agricultural development. Do we need more resources rather than less from institutions to support our industry?

Tom Bradshaw: We do need more resources, just because of the challenges. Ultimately, challenge creates opportunity, so we are entering a very different period. During this period of change, different skillsets will be required. We talked about the range of alternatives that will be out there. For us, food production will be the critical one, but, whether it be forestry or net zero, farming and land are going to be such a critical part of the sustainability agenda. These are all going to require skillsets.

One of the fears is that we end up in a downward spiral of investment, particularly when we look at things like apprenticeships. If we are not



very careful, we always take the lowest-cost denominator and the lowest offer coming forward, and we drive down the value that is given to the colleges to provide the education. That spiralling down of costs then ends up making it impossible to deliver for the value that is then given to the college.

We need to look at what the true cost of delivering the apprenticeship is and how we make sure that colleges are really able to access the full funding required to make it an attractive proposition. If it is not an attractive proposition for the college, the education that is given on the back of it is also probably not going to be first-class. One of the dangers that we are in at the moment is this downward spiral and looking at the lowest offer coming forward, rather than the cost of delivery and making sure that we can really meet that, while creating a thriving education sector that is able to employ the best people to deliver the future education and to inspire for the future.

Shireen Chambers: I wonder if I could jump in there, because this is very relevant. Just this morning, we heard back from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. We have been pursuing a couple of new degree-level apprenticeships in forestry and arboriculture. It has come back with, exactly as Tom said, a very low figure of £16,000 over three years to deliver a degree-level apprenticeship. The University of Cumbria is just saying, "We cannot do this". There is a drive to just undervalue what we are trying to create here, and that worries me. I wanted to say that because we heard that just this morning, and we are going to have to push back on it.

Q16 **Geraint Davies:** Is what is being said that, at a time when we face new challenges and opportunities post the EU, institutions such as Newton Rigg, which we are going to look at later, that have been established for 100 years should be supported and empowered to provide new value for new markets in the future rather than simply being allowed to be sold off?

Tom Bradshaw: Rather than focusing on Newton Rigg, we would like to focus on making sure that there is a network of training provision that ensures regional and national coverage that is available to all. We need to invest in that national framework to make sure that it is available and accessible. With over 100 years of experience at Newton Rigg, it seems a tragedy that, at a time of opportunity, we have a college with that history that is going to end up closing. If you focus on Newton Rigg specifically, we need to look at all the reasons surrounding it and everything else going on around it. It is about making sure that we have a national framework that is accessible to all, and that we are not making people travel further and further to try to find their education. Ultimately, that will be off-putting in itself. If you have a 70-mile journey to do your apprenticeship, is that something that people will genuinely consider as a realistic opportunity?

Q17 **Geraint Davies:** Alex, with greater challenges, is this not the time to re-



empower and not to sell off jewels in the crown like Newton Rigg?

Alex Payne: It is definitely the time to look at that national framework. We are in a brand-new position with regard to the FE White Paper and the local skills improvement plans. We are concerned—and we have raised these concerns a number of times—that, in a sense, the industries that are likely to be funded from a capital perspective are those that are most prominent in the area. Historically, some LEPs are very active and very aware from a land-based perspective; others are less aware and have less of a focus on that. As a result, that national framework is needed, so that the national agenda that you are discussing is delivered at the local and regional level.

This is the third institution that has tried to make a go of Newton Rigg, and it comes down to the critical mass that we have discussed around average class size in order to be able to run it on a break-even or profitable basis. That is the key aspect there. We can see that the institutions are drawing on a large geographic base, which means huge transport networks as a result, which are very costly. That is part of the diversification, along with the residential that colleges have to do, along with the mix of qualifications and areas offered, in order to come up with that agile, alchemist's mix that gives you a sustainable college.

Geraint Davies: You would support the LEP supporting Newton Rigg, in a nutshell.

Chair: Stop leading the witness, Geraint.

Alex Payne: That is not what I said.

Q18 **Geraint Davies:** You would, would you not? It would stand to reason, would it not?

Alex Payne: I started in my current role as CEO of Landex in January of this year and I have not been privy to the full detail with regard to the FE Commissioner's investigation with regard to Newton Rigg. Therefore, I would not feel fully informed enough to give you a full decision on that. I am aware that it is the third institution that has tried to run it and that there will be challenges around the critical mass that is there.

Q19 **Dr Hudson:** I have an allied point to some of the comments from the witnesses so far. The Covid crisis has brought into sharp relief the importance of food security and being able to produce sustainable, high-quality food locally, and the importance of the rural sector and training people up in it. It has brought it into sharp relief. We have talked about the challenges, national strategies and having regional delivery, but would you agree that we need to have local delivery of that land-based training to upskill local communities to produce the food that we eat locally and to train people up to look after their own environment? To what extent is it important to have that locally?

Tom Bradshaw: You are absolutely correct. People have reconnected with the countryside and food production in a way that they have not



done for many a generation during the past year. That gives everybody an opportunity to focus on what it is that is important to society. Many things that have been taken for granted have been brought into perspective much more, and people understand the importance of them. For us, it is critical that we are able to access a network of training provision across the country. In terms of whether that can be done on a local or regional basis, it is very difficult to say what is local and what is regional. The critical part is that people are able to access the courses that drive things forward for the future.

When we look at the new vocational A-levels coming forward, the T-levels, they need to be deliverable on a local basis. They could be a really exciting part of engaging our future workforce—those who want to provide food for the future. That needs to be delivered at a local level. I cannot see that it is really going to replace or be an alternative to A-levels if it is going to be a long commute and round trip to be taking part in that T-level education. Once we get to that level, local will be very important.

Shireen Chambers: I would like the Committee to remember that it is not just food that we want locally. Britain is the second largest importer of timber in the world after China. We import 80% of our needs. That has to change.

Going back to education, where apprenticeships are concerned, one of the problems we have found is that you cannot expect 16-year-olds to travel 70 miles. It is not like an apprenticeship in hairdressing or something, which is much more local. They need to have it locally. Work placements definitely should be local. For further education it needs to be local. For higher education, forestry is a bit different. We are used to having universities spread throughout the UK, and of course graduates from those universities are not restricted. Even though forestry is devolved, you may graduate in Scotland and work quite happily in the south of England, Wales or wherever. With forestry that is slightly different, but with younger, further education, it absolutely needs to be more local.

Alex Payne: It is a difficult question in so far as, really and truly, if we look at the technical qualifications that are out there, which in theory will be phased out as we move towards the T-levels, and the T-levels themselves, the amount of specialist resource and specialist knowledge that is needed to deliver that is critical. That requires investment. Therefore, as a result of that and due to the critical mass of numbers of learners involved, there have been specialist areas, certainly at level 3 and above, that have emerged throughout the country. For example, with viticulture there is one college in the country that is delivering that at level 3 and above. That is because of the huge amount of specialist resource and investment that is required against the critical mass of the number of learners who are involved there.



We need to recognise that, by the nature of the investment that is required to deliver exactly what you are talking about, which is that high-quality science and technology base at levels 4, 5 and 6 and obviously starting off with a good FE provision, it is important that it is well resourced. As a result of that need for it to be well resourced, that has resulted in a number of specialist institutions developing for a number of areas. That is partly down to critical mass and partly down to the need for the investment in resource. It would be unlikely that you are going to be able to get a huge number of local institutions develop that are going to have the type of resource at the level and investment that you would want in order to deliver the policies that you need. Therefore, that is why that specialism has resulted.

- Q20 Chair:** That is a very good answer; it is just getting a bit long. Shireen you stirred me up with your answer. When you talked about forestry, about which you are quite right, you also talked about timber production, which was also quite right. Do we, in this country, when we are planting trees now, have enough emphasis not only on where we plant the trees but what type of timber we are going to produce? I do not think we always treat trees like a crop. Do you think we have the balance right between planting the trees and having the trees for a wood crop at the end of the day?

Shireen Chambers: That could be another whole session. Broadly speaking, I would be very concerned, if there is any ambition from Government to create 30,000 hectares of new woodland a year, with a sole objective, whether it is climate mitigation or timber. That would worry me. As you well know, trees provide many benefits. It will completely depend on the owner of that land as to what their objectives are. The wonderful thing about woodlands is that they can provide multiple benefits from the same piece of land.

We need to be very careful now that we are not just driving numbers of trees created solely for climate mitigation reasons. We import so much of our timber and all other cellulose needs. Remember that those needs are increasing as our plastic use decreases; we now use cellulose for toothpaste and coffee sweeteners as well as clothing, cardboard, paper, timber and all the rest of it. Our usage is going up, so we do need to look very closely at what species we are planting and why.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is exactly the answer I wanted.

- Q21 Mrs Murray:** Panel, if I could turn to the role of the local enterprise partnerships, are local enterprise partnerships effective in ensuring an adequate provision of land-based education in their areas, in your opinion? Could I perhaps go to Tom first?

Tom Bradshaw: You can come to me, but on this one it is probably going to be quite short. The role of local enterprise partnerships unfortunately has varied across different regions, with some being much more actively involved than others. I am not 100% convinced I can give



you much of an answer that is going to be meaningful to that particular question. It might be better to hand over to the others on the panel who might be more forthcoming.

Alex Payne: As I alluded to earlier, there are some local enterprise partnerships that have been really active. We have seen some investment that has taken place in agri-tech centres across the country and it is seen as a priority for that area. In other areas, it is not, and many of our members and senior leadership team spend a lot of time lobbying and really banging the door to raise the profile of the land-based industries with those LEPs.

Subsequently, as we look at the FE skills White Paper and we see that we are moving towards a potential position of devolving the capital allocation towards those local skills improvement plans, that raises some concerns. When we are looking at the agendas that we are discussing here today, plus those land-based policies, and when we are really aware that we are creating those specialisms within certain geographical areas, we need to make sure that the national agenda is what is looked at: the provision on a national basis to make sure that all of the areas of the land-based sector are covered and considered, and that those are driven down from a national framework to those local skills improvement plans.

Shireen Chambers: I have a very short answer because I have not worked with as many local enterprise partnerships. I know a very successful collaboration called Routes to Prosperity was set up a few years ago in the north of England. I believe that involved the LEP along with the local authorities and all the forestry interests, public and private, in the north of England to promote forestry as a sustainable business. I understand that was very successful. Perhaps lessons could be learned from that one.

Q22 **Mrs Murray:** If I could just come back to Tom and Alex, do you think, because of the very nature of the way LEPs are set up, the difference is because of the specific interests in various areas? Perhaps some are more engaged in land-based skills than others.

Tom Bradshaw: That is absolutely right. Some LEPs have focused much more on the urban areas. Some have taken a much wider view of what it is that can contribute to the economic growth within the region. Clearly, we would see a strategic importance for the land-based economy for the future and believe that all LEPs should be actively looking at how we can encourage and support that. Certainly at the moment, they are not all treating it equally and they are looking at it very differently.

Alex Payne: That is absolutely right. You would expect LEPs to look at the industries that are prominent, but you would also wish them to look not just at the prominent ones but the ones that in the longer-term planning are going to be important to their area, as Tom says. Therefore, the land-based sector needs to be considered at all LEP areas and subsequently in those local skills improvement plans.



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Q23 Mrs Murray: Following on from that, do you think the Government should be doing more to set a national strategy that perhaps the LEPs could follow?

Alex Payne: Yes, absolutely. I would welcome the opportunity, as I know many other colleagues would, to look at a national skills agenda for land-based that could be disseminated down to those local areas and meet the national agenda as well as the FE skills White Paper.

Shireen Chambers: We would absolutely support that. I would go further than that. I would like to see forestry woodland examples in the national curriculum, in education, not just post-school. I would really like children to learn about their local woodlands, not just the Amazon, and how it is affecting us in this country.

Tom Bradshaw: For us, things like the national food strategy are going to be very important, in terms of how that sets the framework for future food production. As I have said a couple of times already, we obviously believe that food and farming is of strategic importance to the UK, but it will be very interesting to see what the national food strategy comes up with, and then how that is implemented. Clearly, education is going to have to be a part of that, in delivering the ambitions.

Q24 Chair: Tom, I agree with you. At the moment there is not enough emphasis on this. Perhaps the environment is beginning to seem a lot more essential for young people, but we have to try to make sure we link the food production, the delivery of good-quality animal welfare and all of these things into the curriculum. Is that there yet, or do we need to do more?

Tom Bradshaw: We definitely need to do more. There is a real concern that the environment is clearly cutting through but that the importance of sustainable food production, animal welfare and environmental protection probably is not cutting through yet in terms of education. The last thing any of us want to do is down-scale UK agriculture, export our footprint overseas and see no net improvement for the globe. That is the threat with all of these things: if we treat them in isolation, rather than looking at them with the global impact and then down to a local level, we really do not see the challenge that is faced and then look for the solution. The solution has to be about that sustainable local food production based here in the UK.

Chair: Yes, there is definitely a link, is there not? I do not think we are necessarily making it as a country yet. We will be doing some more work on this. Thank you for that answer.

Q25 Barry Gardiner: It has been fascinating to hear what our witnesses have said on this so far. It seems to me there is a tension between the number of land-based colleges we have available and what everybody was saying was really important—T-levels and young children not having to travel miles to get that education. I just wonder how they resolve that tension:



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is it through the national strategy? If you have only a few colleges dispersed very widely over the country that are capable of providing this education, inevitably you are not going to get that local feel that all the witnesses said was so important.

Tom Bradshaw: Alex set the structure out perfectly earlier on: as you move higher up the education chain, the provision at a local level is clearly going to be more challenging. That is why the T-levels, which are designed to replace or be instead of A-levels, need to be available at a local level. Otherwise, it is not going to have the uptake that it needs to in order to be successful. When we look at the new upcoming T-levels, we have to work out how they can be delivered at a local level but accepting that the delivery is critical, because if you do not deliver it to the right standard, ultimately it is not going to have the desired outcome.

When you move to higher levels of education, we all accept that it is going to be more difficult to do that at a local level; some of the enjoyment is because it is not done at a local level and you want to move away and experience other places and viewpoints. You cannot expect everything to be done at a local level, but it is important that, where we can, particularly for that 16 to 18-year-old bracket, we keep it as local as possible.

Alex Payne: We need to recognise that the reason for a lot of that residential provision is also down to the 365-day nature and the fact that we are wanting to expose many of those learners to real-life experience, many of them in the semi-commercial environment that our land-based colleges are able to offer. The one thing we have missed out so far is the push we need with regard to health and safety within the sector as well, and how land-based providers and education are at the forefront of that, in terms of really being able to expose learners to a wide range of resource that they would not necessarily see within a single employer in terms of animals, machinery and technology. That is a really important element of it as well.

While I understand the local element from perhaps the level 2 perspective, once we get into the level 3 and when we look at the content of that T-level and the resource that is potentially going to be required, that is something that requires considerable investment. When we look at our range of providers, certainly within the Landex membership, we are looking at providers that perform well above that of GFEs with regard to quality when they have external assessment. That is something we really need to embrace and take forward—that there is a huge amount of investment in the quality in terms of Ofsted and OfS, 90% of them being good or better. We need to embrace and support those institutions to continue to deliver and invest in the very best of resources for these learners.

Chair: Are you happy, Barry?

Barry Gardiner: I still think there is a tension, but it is one we should



perhaps explore further at a later stage.

- Q26 **Ian Byrne:** For the purposes of the report, this is a short but hugely important question in the context of this session. I direct this one first to Alex. Is there sufficient demand from the land-based industries themselves for the education and training that the sector needs?

Alex Payne: There is demand, but the demand needs to be in the right places. In terms of an upskilling perspective and the employers that are out there already, we really need buy-in from those employers to see the value of the upskilling of their employees. There is demand out there in the sector that we have seen, certainly at levels 4, 5 and 6. When we look at the apprenticeship provision—it is being driven, as we know, by the trailblazer groups, which are employer-led—we can see that, while we have a range of new standards that are being developed currently, the ones that are in development are more focused on levels 4, 5 and 6. We can see that the demand from industry is at that level and therefore we need to make sure that we roll out the apprenticeships and other qualifications at that level to ensure that we can meet that demand, to meet the science and technology and sustainability agendas moving forward.

There is the demand within the sector for levels 4, 5 and 6, but we still need to address the fact that the majority of the training taking place at the moment is at level 2.

- Q27 **Ian Byrne:** I have a supplementary question on what you just outlined. With the advent of ELMS and Brexit, do you think the demand will grow even more?

Alex Payne: As far as Brexit goes—and the pandemic—while the majority of employment is full time, it has really brought into sharp focus that seasonal aspect of employment as well, which is obviously at a lower level of qualification, and our vulnerability on that sort of basis. Brexit, in a sense, is a slightly different thing, as far as that seasonal worker demand that we need to meet as well. On the other end of it, there is the science and technology side as far as the agendas and meeting the Agriculture Bill moving forward.

Shireen Chambers: Yes, absolutely. There is huge and growing demand. We are in the midst of a climate crisis. Trees are seen as one very obvious way to try to mitigate; there are not really any obvious other ways at the moment, so it is part of the solution. Governments around the world, not just in the UK, are very much looking to tree-planting to try to ameliorate some of that, but we are also waking up to the benefits of trees to our health, in our cities and in rural areas. As I said, our demand for timber is growing exponentially; we are finding all sorts of new ways to use it and we want it to replace steel and cement, which are less carbon-efficient. We want to use more in our buildings.



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It is not just chicken-and-egg: not only do we need more workers to create woodlands, right down the whole process line into wood products at the end of it, but more young people and more people generally are understanding that this is a career.

Ian Byrne: That is an excellent answer.

Tom Bradshaw: We will see more demand as we move forward. There has been a challenge. Obviously, you cannot afford to put on the education provision if the course is not full, because otherwise it does not make financial sense, so there is a bit of a chicken-and-egg there. If you start increasing the provision, that will always be the case as well. It comes back to that strategic importance: are we going to invest in this for the future. If so, how does that work? If we are not willing to invest in it, the courses will never be available. There is a little bit of chicken-and-egg going on there, but the demand will definitely be there for the future even if it has not always been taken up in the past, because of the new skillsets that are going to be required.

We are also at this pivotal time where there are many different avenues of opportunity. Viticulture has been mentioned; if 10 years ago somebody said to you that viticulture was going to be a big industry, we would not have contemplated it. We know that it is. We have talked about tree-planting, but making sure that we produce the nursery stock here in the UK is going to be of critical importance so that we do not import diseases. That is another opportunity; we need to make sure we are providing that sort of training. Right the way through there definitely will be demand growing in the future.

Ian Byrne: That is excellent. Thank you for those answers.

Chair: With the ash dieback, we found that the seedlings had been exported to Holland and grown on, and then they caught the disease in Holland and came back again, did they not? I know Owen Paterson, when he was Secretary of State for Defra, was quite keen on trying to create much more of our own growing facilities in this country and trying to keep disease out. That could be a real challenge for us in the future and something we could do more about.

Can I thank Shireen, Alex and Tom for a really good session? It has set us up very well to bring in our next panel. We have got some really good evidence about delivering education in food, the environment and agriculture across into the future. It has given us an excellent opportunity to move us into the second panel. You are most welcome to stay and listen, or leave us, whichever you wish to do. Thank you very much, all three of you, for today's session. It was very useful evidence.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Inglewood, Jo Lappin, Judith Clapham and Tim Whitaker.



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Q28 **Chair:** Can I swiftly move on, then, to the next panel, please? Do we have with us Lord Inglewood, Jo Lappin, Dr Tim Whitaker and Judith Clapham? Would you like to introduce yourselves, please?

Lord Inglewood: I am Richard Inglewood. I am here in my capacity as chair of the Cumbria LEP.

Jo Lappin: I am Jo Lappin. I am the chief executive of the Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership. We are the Government's endorsed body for strategy, investment, co-ordination and advocacy on all issues economic in our geography.

Dr Whitaker: I am Tim Whitaker and I am the principal and chief executive at Askham Bryan College.

Judith Clapham: Good afternoon. I am Judith Clapham, the director of governance at Askham Bryan College.

Q29 **Chair:** Thank you, all four of you, for joining us this afternoon. With our questions this afternoon, we want to do a combination of drilling down on what is happening at Newton Rigg and in Cumbria, but also, as you saw with the first panel, looking at the situation across the whole of the country. Barry will ask the detailed question, but I wanted to say whether you feel that there is a need for a land-based college in Cumbria, like Newton Rigg or at Newton Rigg, before we go into the details of Newton Rigg itself? From a LEP's point of view, Richard, how do you feel about delivering agriculture and environmental education in Cumbria?

Lord Inglewood: The short answer to your question is yes. Newton Rigg has been very important in our county; it is very important to our county's collective identity. It is very important because the combination of the environment, agriculture, forestry, food production and the visitor economy is one of the two main pillars of the county. The kind of things that Newton Rigg College has been delivering are central to that part of our economy's success. Jo might like to elaborate a bit further.

Jo Lappin: It would be totally counterintuitive not to have specialist land-based provision in Cumbria. Cumbria is the most rural county in terms of its landmass. To ensure that provision is taken up by young people, it has to be available, attractive and accessible. We in our geography make up half of the landmass of the north-west of England. We are not talking about 70 miles; we are talking considerably beyond 70 miles. Whatever provision we have going forward needs to really meet my three tests of making sure that it is available, attractive and accessible to young people.

Q30 **Barry Gardiner:** I was really heartened to hear the words of Lord Inglewood and Jo there. That was a real plea from the heart of Cumbria. Mr Whitaker, there are a lot of people we know in Cumbria who are very unhappy about the proposed closure. They are unhappy in part because they feel that Askham Bryan has played something of a three-card trick on them by getting around all the terms of that original prospectus.



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I do not want to spend too much time raking over the history: why the University of Cumbria agreed to an occupancy agreement and to pay Askham Bryan £3.4 million over the next three years for the right to use Newton Rigg's premises, when the original heads of terms said the university would be able to share the usage of the assets for a fee of £1; or how the University of Cumbria ended up transferring those assets to you for the cash sum of £636,000, as recorded on page 2 of the transfer agreement, when they had paid over £9 million for them.

I want us to focus not on the things that are rankling there, because people feel that the goalposts were moved, but on this particular issue of the asset deed. I would like to ask you, if you can, to put people's minds at rest about that. Cumbria County Council originally insisted upon the asset deed to ensure that the college and all its lands could not be sold off and that the facilities had to remain for further education and training purposes into the future. That asset deed was passed on from UCLan to the University of Cumbria, and it was in the original prospectus for the sale in 2011. At clause 4.3.2 it states, "The new provider will also be expected to enter into a new asset deed with the chief executive, to ensure that the FE assets transferred continue to be used for further education and training purposes in the future".

It did not happen, did it? After Askham Bryan became the preferred bidder, that new asset deed was abandoned. In fact, the original deed simply continued in force, so a new deed probably was not necessary, although it might have been good legal practice. Why did it not happen? How did you nullify that asset deed, and why?

Dr Whitaker: Thank you, Barry, for your question, which I will come to answer. Just on the previous question, it is really important to state that the importance of continued land-based education in Cumbria is something I absolutely agree with. We are not in a position where we are saying there should not be a continuation of land-based education in Cumbria. Through the FE Commissioner's report and the recommendations, we are working with other providers to ensure that happens.

With regard to the asset deed, we are talking about activity that occurred in 2011, way before my employment with the college, and indeed the transfer between UCLan and the University of Cumbria in 2007. I really cannot comment on what happened at that time, because I was not there and I was not involved in those processes. I can confirm that we have had definitive legal opinion that those incumbencies were removed at that point of transfer in 2011.

Q31 **Barry Gardiner:** How did you do that, Tim? How did the college do that?

Dr Whitaker: As I said, we are talking many years before I was employed by the college.

Q32 **Barry Gardiner:** Yes, but you have read the papers, like I have.



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Dr Whitaker: That is a question better asked of the people that made those decisions at that time.

Barry Gardiner: With respect, you are now the chief executive of the college. You have access, as I do—I can pull it out here—to the transfer agreement. I would refer you to the deed of release that was supposed to nullify the asset deed, because that deed of release was signed on 29 July 2011, was it not? That states, at clause 2.3, “All provisions of the asset deed, including any which are expressly stated in the FE asset deed as surviving its termination, or which might otherwise have done so by implication, are terminated”. You really want that parrot dead—deceased—do you not?

The trouble is that the deed of release went too far, did it not? It recites as consideration for the release that “each party hereby releases and discharges the others from all claims or demands under or in connection with the FE asset deed, including without limitation claims for negligence or fraud, whether arising before or on the date of this deed, in each case whether known or unknown to the releasing party”. Mr Whitaker, why would two Government bodies and two educational charities sign a document that purported to release themselves from negligence and fraud?

Chair: Barry, let us give Dr Whitaker a chance to answer.

Barry Gardiner: I would like him to answer.

Q33 **Chair:** Over to you. Answer the parts that you believe that you are able to answer. Dr Whitaker, Barry makes a very good point that, while you were not privy to the situation of being a chief executive at the time, you must have a reasonable knowledge of what happened. Can you give us your best endeavours, please?

Dr Whitaker: I do not have a reasonable knowledge of what happened, other than that evidence that has been talked through there, because that evidence is there. I was not involved—

Q34 **Barry Gardiner:** You have read the deed of release, Mr Whitaker, have you not?

Dr Whitaker: Yes, I have read the deed of release. What I am saying is that those questions need to be directed to those people who made those decisions at that time, because that was many years before my employment with the college. All we have is what you have.

Barry Gardiner: Mr Whitaker, I am not trying to apportion blame to you for it. What I am saying is that it is of material consideration when we now consider the actions of the college. Given that fraud is a criminal offence and contrary to public policy, and given that it is the only consideration stated under the deed, does it not vitiate the entire deed and make it null and void, which means that the original asset deed would still be legally valid and you cannot sell the farms and the land at



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Newton Rigg for housing, as you are seeking to do? Is that not your understanding of the vitiation of the deed of release?

- Q35 **Chair:** If Dr Whitaker says he does not have the knowledge, we cannot necessarily prove he does. What we can expect is to have something in writing to absolutely clarify the situation. The points that Barry raises are very pertinent, because you are selling off assets. Do you have the legal right to do so? This has been done in other areas of the country as well. We are very interested in this. What can you answer of Barry's question? For the rest, we will have an answer in writing, please.

Dr Whitaker: I am very happy to provide an answer in writing. What I can say is that we have taken due legal opinion and view, and we have been told that we are free to sell the assets. I am happy to come back with further detail.

- Q36 **Barry Gardiner:** If you would, it should be around that specific issue of the consideration—

Dr Whitaker: Yes, absolutely. I am more than happy to do that.

- Q37 **Barry Gardiner:** I have only one further question. It relates to Askham Bryan's accounts for the year ended 31 July 2020, which were approved by members of the corporation on 25 January this year. They state, at page 44, that "a potential delay to this property sale" at Newton Rigg "indicates a material uncertainty...which may cast...doubt over the College's ability"—that is Askham Bryan's ability—"to continue as a going concern". Does that not suggest that the sale of the assets of Newton Rigg is actually an attempt to stave off insolvency on the part of Askham Bryan, and that the reason for the deed of release was always to enable just such an asset strip? In October 2019, the FE Commissioner's report noted that Askham Bryan was "not a sustainable position in the long term". As far back as 2017-18, the ESFA asked Askham Bryan to be an early intervention for weak financial health. The Newton Rigg campus actually showed a £300,000 profit for the four years up to 2016, before the accounts were amalgamated in such a way that it was very difficult to disentangle what was Newton Rigg and what was Askham Bryan.

When was it decided at Askham Bryan that, by running down Newton Rigg, it would be possible to take approximately £12 million that originally belonged to Cumbria County Council, which gave it freely for land-based education in Cumbria into the future, and use it to prop up a financially failing college with no benefit to Cumbria at all?

Dr Whitaker: There are many parts to that question.

Chair: Answer the parts that you are able to.

Dr Whitaker: On the first part, which is around our year-end accounts, and the solvency of the college in terms of the auditor's comment, that relates to the fact that we are closing Newton Rigg and we have a liability that is in relation to the redundancy that will come from that. It is not in



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relation to anything more than that; it relates to the redundancy charge that the college will fall due at that point in time.

- Q38 **Barry Gardiner:** That is not what it says, with respect, Mr Whitaker. It says that it may cast doubt over the college's ability to continue as a going concern if you do not get those sale proceeds.

Dr Whitaker: Yes, because if we do not get the sale proceeds, we will not be able to meet the redundancy.

- Q39 **Barry Gardiner:** You would not be making them redundant if you were not getting rid of Newton Rigg, would you?

Dr Whitaker: No, we would not, but that comes back to the work that we have undertaken with the FE Commissioner over an extended period of time, which has clearly demonstrated and shown that the position at Newton Rigg is one that is creating a significant deficit position.

- Q40 **Barry Gardiner:** I am sorry, but that is not what your accounts show, is it? If you go back to your accounts between 2013 and 2016, for four years there was a period of £300,000 profit being shown by Newton Rigg. It was only when you amalgamated those accounts so that there was no distinction, so that they were lumped in with Askham Bryan, that it became much easier to say, "Newton Rigg is the problem". Other colleagues may be talking about different aspects of the health of Newton Rigg during that period, so I will not tread on their toes, but I do not think you can say that it is Newton Rigg that has brought you down, particularly given that, in 2017-18, the ESFA said what it did about the weak financial health of the college.

Dr Whitaker: Yes, it did in 2017-18, and that is the reason we were in consultation and brought the FE Commissioner's office in to look at the accounts. We undertook an independent assessment of the college's financial position, and particularly the position at Newton Rigg, which indicated that there was a significant deficit position. The FE Commissioner's office and their expert financial advisers looked at that piece of work and confirmed that it was the case. The local-provider needs analysis report that they undertook again confirmed that there was a significant deficit position.

- Q41 **Barry Gardiner:** Is what you are telling me that it was when the FE Commissioner came in in 2017 that the decision was taken that the only way to bail out Askham Bryan was to get your hands on the £12 million from those asset sales—which I again remind you that you had got for £636,000, not the full value—and that that was the point at which this whole enterprise was commenced, to run down Newton Rigg, to sell off the assets and to prop up Askham Bryan?

Dr Whitaker: No, we have not run down Newton Rigg. We took on Newton Rigg in 2011. At that point people were very happy and very grateful that we did that. We went through a process where we managed and treated Newton Rigg in the same way as all of our campuses. We



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ensured the student experience was the best it possibly could be. The student outcomes were very good. We invested money. We undertook some detailed work with the FE Commissioner in the last 18 months, which indicated a significant operating deficit position for Newton Rigg.

Q42 Barry Gardiner: That was once you amalgamated the accounts.

Dr Whitaker: No. That was in the 2018-19 position and beyond. The work we have done indicates that there was still a deficit position. I can provide something under a separate note, if you wish: I know we have a governors' minute, going way back to 2014, that indicates a £750,000 deficit position. I can provide that as a separate note afterwards.

Chair: We will have that one in writing. I think we had better leave this questioning there for now.

Lord Inglewood: Chairman, can I make one additional point?

Chair: Yes.

Lord Inglewood: As I think you will know, I am also a member of the Bar. In recent days and weeks, thinking about this, I have become concerned about the relationship between what is being proposed and charity law. In 1896, Cumberland and Westmorland County Councils bought this for the purposes of taking forward agricultural education in the two counties. It has rolled on from there and that purpose, which is a charitable purpose, has been attached to the activities associated with the land since then.

That being the case, when Askham Bryan, which itself is a charity, acquired this land, it acquired it as a bare trustee for the purposes of agricultural education in Cumberland and Westmorland. That being so, which I believe it probably is—probably, but not necessarily; I may be wrong about this—it means that, while a charity can sell land and has to get the best price for it, it does not follow that it can then use the proceeds of sale for the purposes that it would seem Askham Bryan wishes to apply them to.

I am not saying I am right, but I am saying it is very possible that that is another aspect of all this.

Q43 Barry Gardiner: That is extremely helpful. Of course, if funding were being used to plough back into the purposes for which it was originally intended, land-based training in Cumbria, that would be entirely acceptable. I believe there was something called the Haddon report, which you may well be aware of, in which various scenarios were put forward for where that might happen, and yet, on its website's questions and answers, Askham Bryan chose to put out the figure of capital investment required as £20 million, when one of the options that would have put that resource back into the land-based economy in Cumbria would have only required, I think, £4.5 million, which I would have thought your LEP might easily have found in its back pocket.



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Lord Inglewood: As Jo Lappin said, we have engaged with this process as much as we have been properly able to. We did not have any money at our disposal anyway, but we have been kept rather at arm's length from most of it. Interestingly, the nature of this process is that it was triggered by Askham Bryan approaching the FE Commissioner. The FE Commissioner then took it on. We have been very much on the periphery of that, because it was his process, not our process.

Chair: Thank you; that is very useful evidence for us this afternoon.

- Q44 **Geraint Davies:** Again, this is a question for Mr Whitaker. We know Cumbria is in fact 85% of the size of Wales. It is a very large bit of land, and a jewel in the crown, in terms of educational institution in land-based education, is, of course, Newton Rigg. My understanding is that in 2010 the 1,015 acres and the buildings were given for virtually nothing, on the basis of this covenant, because it would continue to be used for educational use. Now, of course, as we have just heard from Barry Gardiner, the accounts of Askham Bryan show that, unless it is sold pretty sharpish, Askham Bryan will not be a going concern, and Askham Bryan are looking to get £12 million from an asset that was generating £300,000 a year of profit up to 2017.

Given that and the upset in Cumbria about this, would you not think, Mr Whitaker, that it is the right thing to do now to simply hand back this county-wide asset, for the good of the nation, to Cumbria, so that the LEP, commissioners and others can take charge of it and take it forward for the intention that was already required? Especially in light of the evidence we have just heard about how important these sort of institutions are going to be for the UK's as well as Cumbria's future, would that not be the right thing to do, as opposed to asset-stripping it and selling it off?

Dr Whitaker: Over an extended period of time, there has been over £4 million invested in capital on the site. Additional to that, our works have shown, verified by the FE Commissioner's team and its work, that there is somewhere between a £5 million and £7 million cost over the entire time the college has had the Newton Rigg campus. I am not sure that asset-stripping is how I would define what the college is doing, in any shape or form.

In terms of the charitable element of our responsibilities, I will defer to Judith Clapham, who is our director of governance and can give what our charitable obligations are as an educational provider.

- Q45 **Geraint Davies:** Just so I am clear, you got £3.5 million from the University of Cumbria given to you as well, for helping to run things, did you not?

Dr Whitaker: We entered into an occupancy agreement with the University of Cumbria, which was following the transfer, where they paid the college an amount of money, which I believe is in that region of about £3.5 million. That was for continued use over a number of years for



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teaching at the campus and continuing the use on the campus. It was an occupancy arrangement. Again, it was in 2011; I know the detail that it was an occupancy arrangement and that the university continued to use the site and the campus for a number of years after.

- Q46 **Geraint Davies:** So that I have got this right in simple terms, Cumbria gave you this asset with a covenant that said it was for continual educational use; that covenant was changed in a very strange way, as Barry Gardiner mentioned, saying that people should not have liability for fraud and negligence; the university gave you £3.5 million; the asset was making £300,000 a year until you merged the accounts; and now we are in a situation where you are going to sell it off for £12 million because your accounts show that otherwise Askham Bryan would not be a going concern. Is what you have done not an absolute disgrace in terms of Cumbria?

Dr Whitaker: In terms of the figures you have talked through there, I do not recognise the £300,000 surplus that it was generating. That is certainly not what the work that we undertook or the FE Commissioner's work confirmed. In terms of the transfer arrangements at that time between the University of Cumbria and Askham Bryan, I cannot answer; I was not employed at the college at that time. That would be a question better directed at the people that were directly involved in that transfer.

- Q47 **Geraint Davies:** What would be a reasonable price to give it back to Cumbria, for the LEP to run?

Dr Whitaker: We have obligations under the Charities Act. Whether we want to give it back for nothing or not, there is an obligation. As I said, I will defer to my director of governance, Judith Clapham, to give you a bit more information on that.

Judith Clapham: As Richard has mentioned and Tim has referenced as well, the corporation has to act in the best interest of the charity, and that is the charity as a whole. Newton Rigg does not actually exist as a separate entity; it is part of Askham Bryan College. I appreciate you are looking back at previous documents. Obviously, that transfer was overseen by the funding agency at that time. I am not sure I can shed much more light on why that particularly happened, but I know that, from 1992, all further educations became incorporated, which removes that local authority control. As a result of that, there have been further changes in education policies.

There are quite a few different things that intertwine here. If we are looking at it in the wider context of land-based education, it is a welcome opportunity, from the first session, to look at how those funding opportunities for colleges could be considered as well.

- Q48 **Geraint Davies:** What would be a reasonable price for Cumbria to have it back, as opposed to you selling it for £12 million, having taken it over for nothing and then hidden the £300,000 of profit up to 2016-17 in the



merged accounts?

Judith Clapham: Like Tim, I do not recognise that, but I am sure we can look at some detail of that. I do not think it is that straightforward, and I do not mean to be disrespectful about that. The process we have been through with the FE Commissioner has shown that there is not a viable option with the people that came forward that were willing to look at Newton. That was the whole process that we wanted to go through. The intention of the corporation was to find someone that would take it on as a going concern in that process. We undertook two very extensive, very comprehensive processes, the first being the local provision needs analysis, and then the corporation asked the FE Commissioner to undertake a strategic review, which it did. Out of that, there was an unequivocal recommendation that demonstrated that it was unable to achieve a high-quality financially viable option for Newton Rigg.

There is a difference between land-based provision in Cumbria and having Newton Rigg as such. We absolutely understand the depth of feeling about Newton Rigg and the impact on students and staff, but a lot of it also, in terms of that provision, needs to look at what that student experience is for those students. As we heard in the first session, for it to be a viable, vibrant environment for those students, there needs to be a lot of investment to do things like agri-tech and all of that provision that they all talked about in the first session; it requires funding.

Q49 **Geraint Davies:** If it is such a problem and we need all this investment in it, how much would you agree to give it back to Cumbria for, so that they could manage it and grow it? They could take it off your hands. You are denying it was making £300,000, so let us assume it was not. How much would you sell it for?

Judith Clapham: That would not be my decision. Nobody came forward in any of that process to do that, to my knowledge, and I was quite involved in that process. There was also not anybody who came forward, to my knowledge, that had the same charitable objectives and wanted to take it on. The corporation would have considered any options that were given to it for that. Unfortunately, that did not come forward in the process that I was involved with, and certainly not from the recommendations. As I say, it was a very comprehensive and thorough process.

Q50 **Chair:** On the occupancy agreement, Dr Whitaker, is it true that in the original prospectus and heads of agreement for the occupancy, it was allowed for £1 and not for the value of £3.4 million? We are talking about what you can do for the college, what you can do for charitable status and all of these things. Surely if you got the college for virtually nothing, you have a real reason or an obligation to deliver a college and keep a college going, or certainly deliver some clear educational purposes for that money you are taking out of Newton Rigg. What is the situation as far as you are concerned? How have you seen that? I am getting slightly concerned that you seem to have knowledge of some things and not



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knowledge of others, so I would quite like an answer to this question, please.

Dr Whitaker: Sorry; could you just repeat the question? I am not clear.

- Q51 **Chair:** We believe that originally you took over Newton Rigg and the asset was provided to you for £1, in order for you to keep education going at Newton Rigg and delivering land-based education in Cumbria. The site, I suspect, was worth about £3.4 million. I am not going to quibble over exactly how much it was worth, but this is the issue we are trying to get to the bottom of. Why is it now that you do not feel you have that liability or the need to deliver this education, when you received a significant asset for £1, or did you not receive it for £1? Let us have an answer, please.

Dr Whitaker: In terms of receiving it for £1, I am not aware that we received it for £1.

- Q52 **Barry Gardiner:** If I may, they did not receive it for a pound. The point was this: under the heads of agreement and in the original prospectus, it was always the intention that the University of Cumbria had shared occupancy for those three years for the consideration of £1, if £1 was even demanded. Suddenly, when Askham Bryan became the preferred bidder, instead of the University of Cumbria being able to share those facilities for three years for £1—for a peppercorn, basically—suddenly it was changed the other way around: the University of Cumbria paid £3.4 million to Askham Bryan in order to occupy what had been its own premises.

In terms of what Jo is saying about other bidders, there were other bidders at the time but they were operating on the basis of the prospectus; they were operating on the basis of the heads of agreement that had been drawn up and that were then changed after Askham Bryan became the preferred bidder. There has been a lot of jiggery-pokery going on there; the goalposts have shifted as soon as Askham Bryan became the preferred bidder.

Dr Whitaker: You are asking me to comment on something over 10 years ago.

- Q53 **Barry Gardiner:** You knew about the occupancy agreement, Mr Whitaker. You cannot say, "I knew about the occupancy agreement. I just did not realise that there had been a heads of terms before that".

Dr Whitaker: Could I just finish what I was saying? On the specifics of any changes or alterations that were made at that time, those questions should be directed to the people that were there at that time, from the University of Cumbria, from the funding agencies and from Askham Bryan College. I cannot comment on the specifics of why they changed. All we know is that they did change. I cannot comment on that.

In terms of the costs that the college incurred when it took on Newton Rigg, between 2011 and 2013 it paid somewhere in the region of £1.2



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million or £1.3 million in relation to stock transfer, the purchase of a building, some servicing of some pension liabilities and suchlike.

- Q54 **Barry Gardiner:** Mr Whitaker, I have the deed of transfer here. The sum that was given was £636,000. What you are referring to is the live stock and dead stock, and also, very interestingly, there is the £400,000 payment that was offset against it for the drive to be in some way taken out of the deed of release, because Askham Bryan was deeply worried that the deed of release might not be effective over the drive. I have not got to the bottom of that, but I would be very grateful if you could give me further information on that one in writing as well.

Dr Whitaker: We can provide further information. As I said, beyond the documents that you have and that are available, you are asking me to make comment on potentially why things were changed when I was not there.

Chair: We will have that, please, in writing.

- Q55 **Julian Sturdy:** Tim, I really want to drill down into Newton Rigg's financial viability going forward and the wider implications on Askham Bryan. In some of the evidence that was submitted, I am led to believe you talked about the numbers currently at Newton Rigg. I just wondered whether you could run through those and run through where the numbers need to be for Newton Rigg to be financially viable first, please.

Dr Whitaker: Over the last six years, the numbers at Newton Rigg have been around 550 to 600 students: 601, 608, 591, 662, 604 and 424. That is the core funded 16-to-19 students over that period of time. The ESFA—the Education and Skills Funding Agency—suggests that to make a college viable, it needs 1,000 16-to-19 core funded students. Newton Rigg has not been anywhere near that number over many years. Indeed, prior to Askham Bryan College taking ownership in 2011, two universities and Newton Rigg, as an independent college, all failed to generate the critical mass of students that was required to make a campus of that size work.

To give you some indication in terms of teaching income or total income for Newton Rigg, it is somewhere in the region of about £5 million as a campus, but effectively operating as a college in its own right, in terms of where it is located and the distance from the main site at Askham Bryan. Of the 183 colleges that returned their financial statements to the ESFA in 2019-20, there is no college that is operating on a turnover of less than £8 million—that is Kensington and Chelsea College, and that college has subsequently been merged into Morley College. There really is an issue with the critical mass in terms of the number of students that you need to generate to create that vibrant campus.

We heard in the first session about the land-based provision. It requires investment. It is an expensive form of provision. We already have a higher weighting because it recognises that the provision is expensive to run. There are a combination of additional factors around the Cumbrian



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demographic. Young people there are one of the largest declining demographics of any county in England.

- Q56 **Julian Sturdy:** Just on that, Tim, can I just ask further? You have touched on the numbers. You are saying that you need to be around about 1,000, basically; colleges need to be running at about 1,000. Newton Rigg has been running well under that for some considerable time now, under previous guises as well. Is there an opportunity to get those numbers up at all over this period of time that you have been operating, or is the issue— despite the site being in a very good rural location and a very important rural location for agriculture and the environment—about the physical catchment area that it serves?

Dr Whitaker: It is about drawing in a critical mass of students. We have worked extremely hard to try to grow the cohort of students there, which has resulted in hitting a top level of around 600 students. It is important to recognise that in terms of agriculture students specifically, over the last five years the number of agriculture students has been between 90 and 100 students attending over that period of time.

- Q57 **Julian Sturdy:** Newton Rigg did have some contact with schools as well, did it not? It had a partnership with one of the schools in the area as well, I am led to believe.

Dr Whitaker: Yes. We have done some schools work with Ullswater Community College and Sedbergh School historically, but there have been relatively small numbers of students.

- Q58 **Julian Sturdy:** Is there no scope for increasing that?

Dr Whitaker: No, not in terms of changing the overall operating position of the site.

- Q59 **Julian Sturdy:** On the situation going forward in terms of the financial viability of Newton Rigg, how does this impact on Askham Bryan College and the future of Askham Bryan College? You say that Askham Bryan is subsidising Newton Rigg at the moment to the level of 14%; I think that was quoted in the details.

Dr Whitaker: I entirely understand the strength of feeling in Cumbria and beyond for Newton Rigg. I went to two land-based colleges myself. I have worked in four land-based colleges. I understand and I get their importance. I certainly did not come into this job to be faced with making this really tough, challenging, and difficult decision. However, I am the principal of Askham Bryan College and I am accountable for the whole of Askham Bryan College, which is over 5,000 students. The college is an independent body. Ultimately, we have to remain solvent. Judith elaborated a bit about our responsibilities around solvency. We have had to make a really difficult decision around Newton Rigg.

I wanted to make sure that you all understood we have not gone into this in any way other than looking at the overall position of Askham Bryan



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College as a whole. We have worked with the FE Commissioner's office over an extended period of time. We have taken their advice and guidance and we are in an improving financial position. In the longer term, from an Askham Bryan College point of view, this has been a really hard decision for us to have to take.

Q60 Julian Sturdy: Just to clarify, are you saying that if the current arrangement continued or was going to continue, that would affect the viability of Askham Bryan going forward and could actually mean both colleges could close?

Dr Whitaker: Yes, absolutely.

Q61 Dr Hudson: Thank you to the witnesses for being before us today. I first of all should put on record and declare a strong interest in this situation as the constituency Member of Parliament for Penrith and The Border, where Newton Rigg College sits. It is at the heart of our community. I also, over the last year, have been leading a campaign to try to secure a future for provision from Newton Rigg. We are still working on that to secure provision for the learners of Cumbria. I am in contact and lead discussions with stakeholders as we are trying to do that. I just wanted to put that on record.

Can I also just say that, in those deliberations and in that campaign, I can very much confirm for the record that there is the strong demand for places within Cumbria, from a college such as Newton Rigg, for young learners and mature learners to come in and learn some of these subjects, on the land-based education and the wider educational side of things.

As Julian touched on in terms of links with schools, we have started. There is a partnership that has now come to fruition between Myerscough College in Lancashire and Ullswater Community College, which is the big high school in Penrith, to secure some lifeline provision of some of these land-based subjects moving forward. That is an innovative partnership that we are working on and hoping to develop.

For the record, I am aware of a lot of what is going on in terms of future provision, but that is what I want to tease out now in terms of the discussion with Dr Whitaker. For the record, Dr Whitaker, how do you feel land-based further education in Cumbria will be provided when Askham Bryan departs from Newton Rigg?

Dr Whitaker: As you have laid out, there is a partnership arrangement that has emerged between Myerscough and Ullswater Community College. The strategic review and the local provision needs analysis FEC report both recommended that that sort of partnership arrangement be explored. It is something we have been able to be part of in terms of those discussions around onward progression for students that are currently at Newton Rigg. They are highly positive discussions. Myerscough is a land-based college. It has a very strong reputation in



terms of its land-based provision and, working with Ullswater College, will be able to provide a significant amount of level 2 and 3 provision.

We also know that Kendal College, another local college, is advertising a portfolio of land-based provision as well. I believe that it has already entered into partnerships with local farms to provide that provision as well. There is an emerging portfolio of provision available that mirrors that which was at Newton Rigg.

Q62 Dr Hudson: I just want to explore that further, Dr Whitaker, in terms of that portfolio and exploring it. There is an emerging portfolio that we are working on, but it is going to be a smaller portfolio, sadly, for the learning community of Cumbria. Are there any courses that you are aware of that Cumbrian students will no longer be able to access when Askham Bryan departs Newton Rigg?

Dr Whitaker: We have done an awful lot of work on this. As I said, we have worked with those partner colleges. I should have mentioned that there is a progression event occurring next week, which will be a real signposting event for students.

In terms of the numbers, there are 424 16-to-19-year-old students currently at Newton Rigg. We have done a mapping exercise of the provision there against the opportunity of the new provision. There is a 95% match in terms of the students that can move on to that new provision. There are a few areas around equine and gamekeeping; it is a very small number. For those students, where that provision is not available within county, they would have the opportunity to study elsewhere as a residential student. That is something that happens already; we would take students from other parts of the country where provision is not available for them. There will be the opportunity for that provision to be met, the vast majority of it in Penrith and Cumbria. A small amount may require students to become residential but, as I said, that is something that happens already.

Q63 Dr Hudson: I would like to move on to future educational provision. Barry, Geraint and Julian had asked about your intentions about disposal of the assets, the crown jewels of Newton Rigg. I just wanted to explore with you the extent to which future educational provision comes into your decision-making as stakeholders come forward and potentially bid to take these assets off your hands. To what extent does future educational provision come into your thinking about whether you would grant that transition?

Dr Whitaker: As Judith alluded to in one of her previous answers, we are very open and would be delighted to speak to anyone that comes forward with those proposals. That is why we entered into the local provision needs analysis process with the FEC, where all other providers in the region were contacted and discussions were had about potentially their interest in taking on provision or maybe the site, and none of them wanted to do that. We then entered into a strategic review process that



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looked at some other potential options, but, again, none of those met the criteria that were laid out in that strategic review process. We would always be willing to talk to anyone that was coming forward with that sort of proposal.

Q64 Dr Hudson: You could give assurances that, for stakeholders coming forward that want to carry on educational provision, you would go into negotiations with them in good faith.

Dr Whitaker: We would go into negotiations in good faith with anyone that comes forward.

Q65 Dr Hudson: You have mentioned as well, Dr Whitaker, that, in terms of your duties under the Charities Act, you feel that for Askham Bryan College you need to secure market value for the assets. Equally so, if stakeholders come forward with charitable intentions and wanting to carry on future educational provision within the county under the same auspices of that, then you would not need to achieve full market value. If someone is going to take over the college and carry on with the same charitable guidelines, you may not need to secure full market value. Is that not the case?

Dr Whitaker: That would be correct. I will pass over to Judith as our director of governance to give you a more detailed answer.

Q66 Dr Hudson: Judith, could you confirm that?

Judith Clapham: Under the charity law, the corporation would consider any offers, but they do have to market-test. It is not just a case of just the first offer and that is how it works. They have a duty to the whole of Askham Bryan College.

Q67 Dr Hudson: The educational intention of the aspirant stakeholders coming forward would certainly be recognised, and actually you may not need to secure full market value. I also wanted just to talk about value. You are well aware—it is good to get this on the record—that the local planning authority, Eden District Council, has said that development that can go on at the main campus site has to have educational provision at the heart of what it does. The whole site cannot be used for other purposes. That surely comes into your thinking when you are doing the valuation of that particular site: it is actually the value for its educational purpose, rather than its pure commercial purpose.

Dr Whitaker: Clearly, we have had professional valuations undertaken on the site and they are fully aware of the potential constraints around the site. The answer to that is yes.

Q68 Dr Hudson: It would be for existing use for educational continuity then. That again talks about the value that you would be trying to get from the asset then.



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Dr Whitaker: We have taken the advice from our planning advisers. They are aware that there are potential constraints on the site around continuation of education on the site. Yes, we are aware of that.

Q69 **Dr Hudson:** Finally, I just wanted to ask you something, as the chief of Askham Bryan College. Askham Bryan College came into Cumbria in good faith in 2011 to take over Newton Rigg College and now has signalled an intention to depart. Do you consider that you have an obligation to the learners of Cumbria to ensure a smooth transition that will facilitate continuity of educational provision in the heart of Cumbria? Do you think you have a moral obligation to do that?

Dr Whitaker: Yes, we have a moral obligation about the continuation of that educational provision. That is why we are working with Myerscough, Ullswater, Kendal and Carlisle colleges to ensure that occurs.

Q70 **Dr Hudson:** Is that equally the case with your deliberations about what you do with the assets? Yes, the Myerscough-Ullswater Community College partnership, which we are very excited about, will be delivering out of the local high school in Penrith, while, in parallel, stakeholders are trying to then come forward to secure the assets for a longer-term solution for a new Newton Rigg College to emerge in the future. You can give us the assurance that you feel some obligation to help that transition work.

Dr Whitaker: Through the process that we have been through with the FE Commissioner over an extended period of time, with the fact that we have remained open for a further year, that we have been through a local provision needs analysis to look at options, that we went through a strategic review and that we then went through three further delays that the corporation approved to try to find an alternative solution, there is a track record of us as a college and a corporation showing that we will listen, and we have listened and tried to find a solution.

Q71 **Ian Byrne:** Dr Whitaker, I just want to drill down into the figures that you have just outlined to my colleague, Mr Sturdy, just for clarity and also for our report. On your website you have given a number of reasons for the closing of Newton Rigg. You talk about the low population density in the rural location of Cumbria and the future low demographic growth of 16 to 18-year-olds, which you just outlined to Mr Sturdy. The Cumbria area review sets out a 7% rise of 16 to 19-year-olds over the period to 2027, and the ONS predicts a 20% rise in 16 to 18-year-olds wanting to access further education in the decade to 2030.

Again, on your website it states that student recruitment over the long term is falling, with insufficient local demand. Actually, recruitment at Newton Rigg rose from 432 in 2012-13, just after you purchased it as a going concern, to 648 in 2016-17. Last October, there were 729 applications for Newton Rigg. Why did you only offer 599 places to students? If you had given the places to the other 130 students, your income would have increased by £450,000. That £450,000 would have



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gone a really long way to solving the operating deficits you say are forcing you to close. Within that context, if it were worth buying Newton Rigg in 2011, with 432 students, why is it so important to sell now, when you would have 39% more students, with 69% more applying to be students?

Dr Whitaker: To be fair, to answer that question I would really want to see those figures, because you have given me a whole range of figures there; I would need to understand how they had been calculated. You were talking about a 20% increase in 16 to 19-year-olds. Is that national or is that in Cumbria?

Q72 **Ian Byrne:** That is the ONS, the Office for National Statistics. That is national.

Dr Whitaker: That is national. For fairness for me, I would more than happily take those figures away. You have also talked about an income, and I would need to understand how that income was derived. While we can talk about enrolled students, the core income is driven by the 16 to 19-year-old students on long courses. You may have more enrolments but the income may be much less for those students. It is not just a simple case of X number of students multiplied by a number; it is much more complicated than that. I would happily take those away and respond to that, if that would be all right.

Q73 **Ian Byrne:** Just building on what we are speaking about, what I have just outlined there is in direct contrast to the evidence that you just gave, certainly about the low population density and the future low demographic growth. That really goes against what we have just heard in the first evidence session as well, where they were talking about the potential for growth within the industry. If you back that up with what was said in the Cumbria area review, which set out a 7% rise, that goes against what you have just outlined. There seems to be a contradiction between what you are saying and what we are getting from the Cumbria area review.

Dr Whitaker: Is this the area review of 2017 that you are referring to?

Ian Byrne: Yes.

Dr Whitaker: I would happily take those figures away and come back to you on that, but I do not think it would be fair for me to respond now.

Ian Byrne: I will accept that. You can put that in writing for us then, in terms of how your evidence contradicts what I have just outlined.

Q74 **Geraint Davies:** I would like to ask Lord Inglewood a few questions. In particular, in our first panel we heard that the need to move towards a sustained food production in the future as a country post Brexit and the challenges of climate change and so on will require still greater demands on the agriculture and food industry, to provide a proper skillset. In light of that, do you think that the need for training and skills in land-based businesses is likely to grow in Cumbria, as has been signalled by the first



panel? In that context, might it be a good idea to keep Newton Rigg going and empower it for a more challenging future?

Lord Inglewood: The short answer is that I am very much on the same page as you. Clearly, in any rural county the roles of agriculture, the environment and the nature of the modern world are going to become more important and more generally scrutinised. That is because leaving the CAP has disguised the fact that society's aspirations for what goes on in the countryside have changed and got greater. There probably not merely is, but will have to be, a greater willingness to pay, because a lot of the things that we want to see happen in rural Britain are going to cost a lot of money.

It is not merely training youth, for want of a better word, for the future. One of the weaknesses of the FE Commissioner's approach to Newton Rigg was that he was very much focusing on FE. There is a whole range of other stuff, including apprenticeships and particularly lifelong learning. There are lots of existing farmers, as we heard in the previous evidence session, that are going to have to acquire new skills. We are moving into a different sort of world. In some ways it is very akin to—using the word in the vernacular sense—levelling up. There are different emphases across society, which are going to require different outputs and different inputs. It seems to me that, where we are now moving into a world where money is being deliberately redirected, we should see money redirected into the wider rural economy to bring about the kind of things you are talking about. It is entirely consistent with a lot of other things that are going on.

Exactly how you would deliver this in the future, as was touched on previously, is still out. Jo may want to elaborate on some of these points. In the case of Newton Rigg, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that over the last decade, as things evolved, a number of decisions were made or not made that now seem to have been an error. The way that a lot of those skills will be delivered in the future is going to change. On the other hand, if, as they do at Newton Rigg, you want to learn hill farming, you have to have a hill to learn it on. With other things, you do not necessarily need that.

Q75 **Geraint Davies:** There is a specific question I now want to ask you, because I know you are a big supporter of Newton Rigg and you have written an introduction to the history of Newton Rigg, *Seeds of Change*. I read that.

Lord Inglewood: I am amazed you have read it.

Q76 **Geraint Davies:** I know you are a great supporter of Newton Rigg. Can I ask you this now, as chairman of Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership? Askham Bryan is saying, "It is very difficult and does not make any money". If we were able to secure Newton Rigg assets to be returned to Cumbria, would the local enterprise partnership, perhaps with the commissioner as well, be able to aim to commit to an allocation of maybe



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up to £7.5 million of borderland funds for the enhancement of education and farming assets at Newton Rigg? If it were given to you, would your LEP put money into that to make it work for Cumbria, alongside the commissioner?

Lord Inglewood: As you may know from the papers, we have offered to do that in the future. As of today, we are very broke, but we will have money access. I am on the borderlands economic forum, and it will certainly get my support. The answer is that we are four-square behind Newton Rigg and it matters a lot to us. We will bust a gut to see what we can do to ensure proper land-based training in the county of Cumbria for the future.

Q77 **Geraint Davies:** If you have the money there, you are willing to put your hand in your pocket to make Newton Rigg work for the future, with, as you say, a more challenging and interesting future for all the people of Cumbria in land-based business.

Lord Inglewood: As long as I get my board to support me, yes.

Q78 **Geraint Davies:** Jo, did you want to add anything?

Jo Lappin: I was just going to add, in terms of the offer of financial support, we were working in 2019 to try to provide growth deal funding when it was available. Unfortunately, there was no proposal that came forward from a number of parties. Clearly, that funding is now fully committed. This is Government money. It runs out at the end of March. If the LEP was looking at doing anything, which we would clearly want to do, it would have to be borderlands and other finance that sits outside of this, because our current capital programmes are fully committed.

Q79 **Geraint Davies:** I was specifically asking whether, if they had £7.5 million of borderland funds, the LEP would consider putting that in order to make Newton Rigg work. The answer was yes.

Jo Lappin: Just to be clear, because this is a specific departmental Committee, the borderlands funding actually goes through the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal. Although Richard is a member of the economic forum, it is a different governance structure, which we do not directly control ourselves, but we would certainly work with all of our partners to influence that investment.

Q80 **Geraint Davies:** The point is that, from the perspective of this Committee, we want to the strategic assets of the United Kingdom in a challenging world to fit with a national food strategy, climate change, post Brexit and all the rest of it, and to grow. Therefore, we want to make recommendations that make sense. If we thought that, given the awful background that has been painted by Barry and others, the LEP would be a good friend to work with borderland funds to take forward this asset, that is something we would want to recommend. You think that if we pass it in your direction and borderland funds of £7.5 million could be found, the LEP would support that.



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Jo Lappin: Yes, absolutely. We would do everything we could to bring partners together to make something happen.

Q81 **Geraint Davies:** Lord Inglewood, would you like a final comment on that?

Lord Inglewood: Yes, I can endorse every word that Jo has said about being behind this.

Q82 **Chair:** Richard, how important are institutions like colleges and universities in providing training and skilled staff for local business needs, especially in the new agriculture environment world that we find ourselves in? Now we have left the common agricultural policy, we are moving much more into public money for public good. Do you think our education system is up to speed for the new world that we live in, without leading you too much?

Lord Inglewood: Clearly, everything is changing, although some of the things that have been constant, like the need for food, are going to remain. As the world changes, not only are techniques and technology changing but the desired outputs are changing. There is a need for a very considerable amount of education, both at the start of people's careers and throughout them, in order that the sector as a whole can remain profitable and also deliver all the various things that society wants.

A particular point it is worth remembering is that we may move into a world where we see, particularly in places like Cumbria, perhaps more integration between both the visitor economy and also other bits of the economy, where there are kinds of part-time working. The effect of that is going to be that the demand for skills will be greater still. If you do not get them from organisations and institutions like Newton Rigg, where are they going to come from?

Q83 **Chair:** Further, we are looking at a world, are we not, where we are very interested in creating greater biodiversity, greater tree-planting and enhancing the environment? We also are inclined, if we are not careful, to forget food production. This is my pet subject, as you can imagine. How do you see the colleges and universities feeding into getting the balance between environment, carbon sequestration and food production?

Lord Inglewood: I wish I knew the detailed answer, because I have been working on it myself in the context of my own affairs. You are right: agriculture is moving from being very much the sole sector of the economy in the countryside to being an activity in the countryside that has a whole series of multiple outputs, many of which are going to be paid for in completely different ways than the ways that we are used to.

At the end of the day, it is not a matter of being exclusively any one of these things. Every agricultural land management or farming business—call them what you will, because it is all morphing together—is going to have a portfolio of outputs, much more wide-ranging than has been the case in the past. This requires more skills, and a lot of balls have to be



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kept up in the air at the same time by farmers. You might even become a Member of the House of Commons; you never know.

Chair: You would have to renounce your title first. You cannot come here with a title.

Lord Inglewood: I am going to be pushed out soon.

Q84 **Chair:** We made a few rules about that a few years ago. Seriously, it is really something quite important. It has been very interesting this afternoon. Jo, from a LEP's point of view, along with Lord Inglewood, I feel that some of the rural LEPs are very into delivering agriculture and environment-based education. I am not sure some of the other LEPs are quite so keen. How do we get the LEPs to work together to deliver this education we want across the country?

Jo Lappin: All of the LEPs have a skills advisory panel. The purpose of the skills advisory panel is to make sure that they are very au fait with the makeup of their economy, and that their FE, HE and specialist providers are absolutely looking at what is required from each of the sectors in the whole economy and working with the industry base to provide the skills that they need.

We have to be realistic. If you have a very small percentage of your economy that is land-based and rural, and you have large swathes of your economy that are focused on other sectors, they legitimately will consume the time. In Cumbria, if we look at our economy, over two and a half times the average concentration in our economy is for rural. That is why it matters so much to us. The reassurance that I would give is that every LEP looks at this. It looks to work as hard as it can to make sure that the provision in its geography meets the requirements of its businesses. That is the purpose of the skills advisory panel that DfE gives each of the LEPs funding to manage each year.

Q85 **Chair:** On the role of training provided by business or individuals, when they want to continue professional development, will they pay for it? How would it be paid for in the future?

Jo Lappin: One of the difficulties that we have is something that was picked up by Shireen earlier: we need a far better integrated system. If we were looking at Newton Rigg, in an ideal world we would bring together all departmental investment and policy to decide what the right outcome for this is. One of the other challenges we face in delivering what you have just described, which is agile training that is responsive to the needs of the economy, is that we have an increasingly centralised system to deliver training, which means that we cannot have the level of agility that we would want to support the development of specific skills in subsectors within the economy. That is a personal view. All of this is very doable, but we need to be a bit more joined up and integrated across departments and across policy agendas.

Q86 **Chair:** The problem with Newton Rigg is that we have had different



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figures bandied about this afternoon about whether it is viable or not. When another university or college takes it over or amalgamates, it is quite difficult to stop that new college taking a decision that will close Newton Rigg. How would you be able to bring pressure to bear to stop this happening in the future? I know it is a very difficult question. It has not only happened in Cumbria; it has happened in Devon. Seale-Hayne was taken over a few years ago and then the assets were sold. It is not the first time it has happened. Dare I say it to my Labour colleagues, that happened under a Labour Government, not under a Conservative one, so we are not all guilty of all sin.

Seriously, it is something that has been going on for quite a time now. How do we make sure that land-based, environmental, tourism and all of these things that are interlinked are considered important enough to be maintained in education across our counties?

Jo Lappin: It goes back to a point that you raised. One of our six priority themes for economic recovery is the future of food and farming, looking very much at the change in diet and the value that young people place on the environment, and really looking to say, "How do we start to make it extremely attractive?" If we are going to avoid this happening again, it goes back to my initial points at the outset. One of them was about attractiveness of provision. Unless you have a really good, up-to-date, modern environment for learning, it will be very difficult to attract learners. Young people have high expectations. If we want to avoid it, we need to make sure that we have a top-quality campus that is invested in.

We also need creative and innovative management to think about how you operate certainly some of the land assets on a very commercial basis. It is that kind of integrated approach. Something that Lord Inglewood and I have said is that Newton Rigg was looked at as a skills issue. For us in the LEP, it is a major strategic site; it is a major employment site. You will be familiar with the site. It is within minutes of junction 40 of the M6. It is a huge asset that we need to think about as such.

Q87 **Chair:** Those are some really good points. Thank you for that. Richard, I want to try to bring this to a conclusion now, so over to you.

Lord Inglewood: Having thought about the process that has taken place over the last couple of weeks or so, trying to stand back from it, as I touched on, what was interesting to me was that the whole thing was triggered by the college getting in touch with the FE Commissioner. A process was set in hand that has led to the outcomes we have seen, for better or for worse. One of the characteristics of that was that it has been rather parochial in the way that this issue has been handled. As Tom Bradshaw said earlier, these have regional and national perspectives, which are at least as important as the parochial.

It is not only a matter of training for people leaving school. These establishments and what happens there have implications not only for



skills more widely but for place, identity and a whole range of things right across the piece. I also sense that we tend to have been fighting the last war and not the next one in the way the thought processes have been deployed, looking at what happens here. As I said earlier, as changes are taking place of extreme significance, that is something we want to try to avoid. We must look forward and fight the next war, and not try to refight the old ones.

Q88 Chair: Invariably, that is what our generals always did. In political life and education, we have to try to move forward in that direction. That is really useful information. Dr Whitaker and Judith Clapham, we have given you rather a tough time this afternoon. Are there any last things you would like to say to us before I leave it and ask for the written information that you are going to provide us?

Dr Whitaker: It is very interesting hearing what Jo had to say, because I do not disagree with an awful lot of what she is saying and what was talked about in the previous session about the future of land-based provision. I had hoped I would be given more time to talk through, as a sitting principal of a land-based college, where I think the challenges are for the future.

Q89 Chair: Why do you not very quickly give us some of those ideas? I know you have been in a pretty hot seat this afternoon. Not all of it has been of your making; I am conscious that you have had a tough time. Very quickly, because time is going on, just give us your ideas of how we go forward on education at land-based colleges.

Dr Whitaker: If you look at the 11 remaining land-based colleges, there are some real commonalities between those 11 colleges that are left. It is not exclusive to all of them, but they are of a size between £20 million and £30 million. They tend to be very well located in term of connectivity with transport links. They are often located next to a very large population mass—a city region—but also have really good access to rural hinterland. That has not necessarily evolved by design. It has been on an ad hoc basis.

If you look across the country, there are some significant areas. If you look at the breadbasket of England, in terms of Oxfordshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, none of those has an independent land-based college. There are other really significant agricultural production areas such as Somerset, which has a provision out of Cannington but no independent college. We have ended up with a real mix of different sorts of provision and providers. There is a really strong opportunity, particularly through some of the work that is coming out of the FE White Paper, to look at a really joined-up approach to how we deliver for sustainable food production, food security and a sustainable environment. It is really important that we do that.



We potentially need to look at a hub-and-spoke model, where you have much larger colleges. There are a number of those that are in existence. There are some regions that are better served than others. In that hub-and-spoke model, you could probably direct the specialist funding in a much more concentrated and effective way to deliver a really quality experience, but also have the spokes where people could be drawn into that provision. That is really important. You could look at some specialist designation of those colleges. Some of them have some really advanced facilities in specific areas.

There needs to be a co-ordinated approach around the funding of the sector through ESFA. We also have the LEPs; we have Defra. How do we all work together as a sector? There needs to be a national co-ordinated response to how we provide skills training and provision going forward. It is crucially and vitally important that we engage in careers information and guidance, as well as at key stages 3 and 4. It is really important that we understand what motivates young people and what drives them to take certain career paths. It is important that we engage with the advocates and influencers of those young people. There is a big job of work to do.

Q90 Chair: I am sorry to interrupt you, but there also is a need for young people to see environment, agriculture, food production and all of these things as subjects for them to go into. I do not know what we can do to make it more interesting for them. How do you see that one? It is a difficult one.

Dr Whitaker: We have a fantastic opportunity. If you speak to young people, their connection with the environment, climate change and the need for net zero is there. They absolutely understand the importance of that. If you go and speak to a group of 13 or 14-year-old young people, if you ask them what their biggest worry is, invariably climate change will be near the top of the list. We have that opportunity; we just need to ensure that we connect and that we also show them, their parents and their advocates at school that there are viable career paths that are not just going to college and doing a level 2. There is a really significant onward trajectory for those young people into some really worthwhile, fulfilling and vitally important careers.

Q91 Chair: Judith, do you want to make any last comments, please?

Judith Clapham: That joined-up approach would be really helpful. There is a lot of misinformation or a misunderstanding, particularly in relation to Newton Rigg. For example, the colleges are in the private sector, or categorised in the private sector. There is a lot of feeling that it is public and we get public money. That would be very welcome.

With things like the insolvency regime, it is not a surprise that Hadlow College, which was a land-based college, was the first to go insolvent. It just shows the need for that greater investment if we are going to deliver



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the kind of platform that Tim has just referenced, for what young people actually want.

Chair: Dare I say it, Hadlow had some interesting methods of running finances, but I will not go into details. I do know a little bit about that, so we will not go into Hadlow. I know what you mean. It is a real conundrum, because they are private colleges and they raise money privately; you all do. Of course, it gets you into massive debts if you are not careful, and then you become insolvent. It is a real issue.

Q92 **Geraint Davies:** I just want to give the chair of the LEP, Lord Inglewood, the last word on whether he felt that, given that we face now changing, growing and more complicated challenges with the interaction of climate change, the environment, food needs, food strategy and so on, and given that we have an institution that has lasted and evolved over 100 years, we would be better off adapting that to change to the new requirements of a new future, rather than just selling it off. How are we going to confront these new problems?

Lord Inglewood: As an alumnus of Newton Rigg, it would be very sad for me if it disappears. It is considered a possibility and a real tragedy in the locality; I live close by to it. It is something that Cumbria feels strongly about. It is the nature of my view of the world that evolution is always going to work better in the medium term than revolution. In an ideal world, what I would like to see is an evolution of what we have at Newton Rigg now into something that carries forward the best of the past and picks up the best of the future. In that way, you can serve those who are going to be taught by it best.

Q93 **Geraint Davies:** In other words, reinvigorate and re-empower Newton Rigg, rather than sell it off.

Lord Inglewood: If you transfer it to another organisation that becomes Newton Rigg, fine. Just simply to dismember the estate in an indiscriminate, rapid way and then say, "Who cares?" is not the way to do the best for Cumbria or the country.

Chair: Richard, that is a really good place to finish. Thank you very much for some great evidence this afternoon from you all. Dr Whitaker, you had a tough call. There is quite a lot of written evidence we would like from you, please. Can you make sure we have that in order for you to put forward some of what happened previously to when you were there? We understand that. Let us be absolutely clear: perhaps Barry Gardiner got a little bit carried away when he was accusing of fraud and things, because we have to be a little careful. I want you to be able to explain yourself.

Barry Gardiner: I simply said that the deed of release was such that it released all the parties from any liability for fraud. I could not in all conscience understand why two Government bodies and two educational charities would have needed to have released each other from that.

Chair: Barry, thank you for that clarification. We have had a really tough conversation, and rightly so, with everyone this afternoon. We want to



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park it there. Dr Whitaker, can we have the written evidence that you promised us? Can I thank Lord Inglewood, Judith, Jo and Dr Whitaker very much for your evidence this afternoon? Thank you all very much for coming in this afternoon. We have had a very good session, albeit a difficult one at times.