HOUSE OF COMMONS

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Labour in the Food Supply Chain, HC 231

Tuesday 15 September 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 September 2020.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 50 - 108

Witnesses

I: Tim Rycroft, Chief Operating Officer, Food and Drink Federation; Simon Doherty, Senior Vice President, British Veterinary Association; and Richard Griffiths, Chief Executive, British Poultry Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– Food and Drink Federation

- British Veterinary Association

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tim Rycroft, Simon Doherty and Richard Griffiths.

Q50 **Chair:** Welcome to EFRA's inquiry into labour in the food supply chain. Welcome to our three witnesses, Richard Griffiths, Simon Doherty and Tim Rycroft. Richard, would you start off by introducing yourself, please? Then we will start the session.

Richard Griffiths: Thank you, Chair. I am Richard Griffiths. I am the Chief Executive of the British Poultry Council, the trade association for the poultry meat industry in the UK.

Chair: Thank you, Richard. Simon, please.

Simon Doherty: My name is Simon Doherty. I am the Senior Vice President of the British Veterinary Association. We are the membership organisation spanning the veterinary profession. We have around 18,000 members representing different sorts of vets, from small animals through to farm animals and equine, as well as government service.

Chair: Thank you. Tim, please?

Tim Rycroft: Good afternoon, Chair, and members of the committee. My name is Tim Rycroft. I am the Chief Operating Officer of the Food and Drink Federation, the trade association representing Britain's food and drink manufacturers. We sit in the food supply chain between the primary producers and growers and the retailers. As the committee knows well, food and drink manufacturing is the UK's largest manufacturing sector.

Q51 **Chair:** Thank you very much to the three of you for joining us this afternoon.

I will start off with the first question, which is quite a general one. How important is access to labour from the EEA and what would happen if it was limited without a substitute being available? Who wants to start off with that one? Simon, do you want to start?

Simon Doherty: Yes, I can start. It would have a huge effect for the veterinary profession. Over 50% of the vets registering each year with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons are EEA qualified. We are just under 50% self-sufficient in the supply of veterinary surgeons in the UK. That figure becomes even more distorted in the food sector in that roughly 95% of vets working in abattoirs and meat plants are EEA-qualified nationals. Without that ongoing supply of vets, we are reaching a problem situation. We already have a roughly 11.5% workforce shortage across the UK. That figure is based on a piece of work that was done a couple of years ago by our major employers group, which represents the larger corporate veterinary practices as well as some of the larger charities.

Starting off with that base of already having a shortage, we are then looking at significant problems if we have anything that will affect the supply of vets coming in from the EEA to work in the UK. On top of that, we will also have some concerns about the additional work that will be required of vets with the EU exit, things like certification. That is something we may come back to.

Q52 **Chair:** Yes, there will be questions on that. This is probably quite a leading question. Do you feel that there are enough places at the veterinary colleges? Are we training enough vets? I know that it is a five-year process at the very least, but surely we need to get moving more than we are. Are we moving in the right direction or not?

Simon Doherty: There are a couple of ways I could answer that question. I think we are moving in the right direction. We have a new veterinary school opening this year at Harper Adams and Keele. An additional number of vets will be coming online through a partnership between Aberystwyth and the Royal Veterinary College. That will increase the numbers, but there will be a five-year lag before those vets appear on the job market.

One of our big issues is that a number of our UK veterinary schools have a significant number of students coming in from mainly North America to take up full fee-paying places. The reason that the vet schools have had to go down that line—obviously we are very proud of the standard and quality of veterinary education in the UK—is to basically cross-subsidise some of the UK students. There is quite a significant shortfall in funding. In round figures, roughly £10,000 a year comes from Government and £10,000 comes from the student. That gives £20,000. Most of the vet schools will tell you that it probably costs in the region of £27,500, at least, per student, per year, to train them. One of the ways of cross-subsidising the UK students is to have North American students coming in and paying full international fees. Do we have enough places? Yes, we do. But a significant number of those places are being taken up by North American students who, largely, go back to North America after they have graduated.

In some ways we are moving in the right direction, but we definitely have a shortage of vets coming on to the market.

Q53 **Chair:** Okay, Simon. We have that on record, so thank you very much for that answer.

I will move to you now, Richard. What are the implications of the uncertainty over immigration policy for business planning and investment, especially in the poultry industry?

Richard Griffiths: The plans for investment are still going forward but they are very much based on technology and innovation, improving that side of the business. There is some cause for optimism about the technology for food production and the ability to produce food. The issue we have with labour is that we have around 40,000 direct employees, of

which about 60% are from EEA countries. That workforce cannot be easily replaced in the short period of time that we have. We need certainty, not just on the business side but also certainty to encourage those people who are here to stay for the long term and to encourage new people to come. We need to emphasise that this is not an either/or; this is not either EEA labour or UK labour.

Simply put, if we did not have the EEA labour, it could not be replaced with UK labour. That is the fundamental underlying problem that we face. Whatever we can do to make things more efficient and less labour intensive—and there is a limit to that—without that flow of labour, it will be incredibly difficult. Ultimately the impact is not just on labour and businesses but, we must remember, it is interconnected with trade discussions and food standards discussions, and ultimately what it leads to is whether we have food security and affordable food. That is the ultimate impact.

Q54 **Chair:** That will be interesting when we have the Secretary of State coming in next week; we will be able to raise with him some of the questions you are talking to us about and the points you are putting to us today. Tim, what would you like to add to the debate?

Tim Rycroft: Access to labour is absolutely critical. Food and drink manufacturing employs about 430,000 people, of whom about 30% are EU nationals at present. Of those roughly 100,000 EU nationals, about one quarter are educated to degree level or above and only about 10% have no formal qualifications, so they are represented at all skill levels.

Five years ago, before the referendum, FDF was talking about the challenge of demographics in our workforce because we had, and still have, an ageing workforce. We have a demographic profile much more biased towards older workers. That means we have a lot of workers who are heading for retirement quite soon. That issue has not gone away but has now been compounded by the prospect of turning off the tap of supply from the EU and replacing it with a system that looks like being both more costly and more bureaucratic for companies that up to now have only had to do quite simple right-to-work checks now having to potentially look at a series of new obligations and processes that they will have to go through if they want to access those kinds of workers.

Q55 **Chair:** When you say you have an older workforce, what sort of percentage of extra people do you think you will need in future?

Tim Rycroft: Turnover in our industry has been relatively low. We seem to have a good loyalty factor in our workforce and that is a great thing, of course. I cannot remember the exact figure—I can write to the Committee if you would like that figure—but I think something like 20% of our workforce is going to retire in the next 10 years[1].

[1] "Almost one third of the agricultural and manufacturing workforce [are] set to reach retirement age by 2033-35, from a 2018 baseline. Given that the proportion of those aged below 30 is approximately 21% in these parts of the sector, the industry is likely to face labour shortages over the next 15-17 years" [The Food and Drink Sector Council, "Preparing for a changing workforce: A food and drink supply chain approach to

Chair: If you would like to give us written evidence on that, that would be fine, please. It is an interesting point for us to put in a report.

Q56 **Robbie Moore:** My question is about skill sets. There is an assumption that EEA migrants predominantly work in low-skilled or unskilled jobs in food manufacturing and processes. Is that a correct assumption for your sectors?

Tim Rycroft: As I just said, we have a broad range of skills. One quarter of our EU workers are educated to degree level or above. The food manufacturing sector is very diverse. You will know from your own constituency that it is quite hard to generalise. There are certainly some areas—maybe Richard could say more about this—where probably there is a bias towards lower-skilled roles, but at the same time there are large sections of food and drink manufacturing that are highly automated and a lot of skilled roles are required in order to run those kinds of businesses. It is difficult to give you a generalist answer to that question.

Simon Doherty: We are in a situation in the veterinary profession where everybody is coming in with a degree that is registerable with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons to allow them to practise veterinary medicine under the Veterinary Surgeons Act in the UK. By and large, our workforce would be classed as skilled. Certainly, some European Union vets will come into meat hygiene inspector roles. They are technically non-veterinary roles to start off with, but quite often they will move into what is called an OV role—an official veterinarian role—within the abattoir setting. Some of those vets will then stay on and will continue to work, and maybe look for jobs in practice, if they become settled in the UK, and will look for alternative roles within the profession. They are coming in and they are skilled, and that will play right across the situation.

Generally, and taking the veterinary element out of it, where we have workers coming in who may be unskilled but are working with livestock in any shape or form, that affects the supply of workers coming in that could potentially have an effect on animal health and welfare. Clearly that is a concern of ours as well, beyond the veterinary role.

Q57 **Robbie Moore:** I have a quick further question, which Richard may want to pick up on too, on this statement: overall, EU employees are more likely to be overeducated for the job they are doing compared to UK nationals. Is this true of your sectors? What are the advantages and disadvantages for employers?

Richard Griffiths: That is not something that we have seen particularly but, as has already been said, quite a lot of EEA workers who come into our industry are in that sort of lower-skill area. We need to be cognisant of whether you agree with the immigration definition of skilled, because the other side of this coin is looking at the employers. We, as the poultry meat industry, do not want unskilled people, because the jobs they do need skills, but we are very happy to train people to achieve those skills.

For example, across our workforce there is a guarantee that everyone will achieve the level 2 qualification for the job they are doing. People coming into the country in the first instance may not be qualified for the job they ultimately do, but we ensure that they become skilled and qualified to do a good job.

Q58 **Robbie Moore:** Simon and Tim, do you have any more comments on the final statement I read?

Tim Rycroft: One of the things that has been a bit frustrating over the course of the debate over the new immigration policy has been that the way we have traditionally looked at the definition of skilled seems to be quite rigid, particularly in food and drink manufacturing. Not so much in Simon's world, but for Richard and me, some of the jobs that these people are doing are things that are difficult, that take time to learn, that have to be done with a degree of care and attention but that are not currently defined as skilled. The classic example in food and drink is fish filleting, which everyone who has tried it knows is incredibly hard to do well, but it is not currently designated as a skilled occupation. Part of our challenge will be to develop a more workable definition of skilled.

Q59 **Robbie Moore:** Okay. A good recommendation. Simon, do you have any further comments?

Simon Doherty: As things stand, one of the issues for us is around mutual recognition of professional qualifications. At the minute, we have a supply of vets coming in, and if their veterinary degree is recognised by the competent authority within the member state, it is essentially registrable with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Any vet, whether EU or UK qualified, would then go on and do an additional small piece of training that would allow them to become an official veterinarian to take on roles—there are OVs who work in meat plants and abattoirs, and there are other types of OVs who work out in general practice and will cover off things like certification that we can talk about later, and some aspects of things like pet passports and equine movements and so on. That is an additional piece of training.

If we leave without a deal and there is the potential that MRPQ disappears, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons put an amendment in place in 2019 that allows recognition of schools that are what we call EAEVE accredited. EAEVE is the European Association of the Establishments of Veterinary Education—a bit of a mouthful. EAEVE is an accrediting body and vets coming into the UK from an EAEVE-accredited school will be able to register with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons even if there is no MRPQ. That is where we stand on that.

I suppose I am quite different from the other two witnesses in that we are looking essentially at everybody coming in as skilled.

Robbie Moore: Thank you, all three. Much appreciated.

Q60 **Chair:** Tim, you were talking about 25% of your workforce being likely to need degrees, so 75% of the workforce would be outside of any skilled

immigration rules, would they? Am I interpreting what you said in the right way?

Tim Rycroft: I am saying that 25% of the current EEA workforce has a degree level or above qualification and only 10% have no skills at all. The new skilled visa will apply for level 3 and above, I think for A-level qualifications. You have quite a large chunk, if you are replacing all those roles, that would have to be accessed via the new visa.

Q61 **Chair:** Do you think they would be eligible for visas?

Tim Rycroft: If they meet the criteria of the lower salary threshold and they have a level 3 or above qualification, potentially yes they will, but that triggers all those processes and costs that I talked about earlier.

Q62 **Derek Thomas:** Tim, I will continue with you. Why do companies in the food supply chain, especially manufacturers and processors, currently rely so heavily on foreign labour? Is it just about wages, or is there more to it?

Tim Rycroft: I don't think it is just about the money. The figures show that food and drink manufacturing is not predominantly a minimum wage sector. There are a massive number of different roles at all skill levels within food and drink manufacturing.

As a result of freedom of movement, access to labour has been incredibly easy and recruitment has become much more international. It is also worth noting that food and drink in this country, as well as being of a very high standard, is also very affordable. In a world that is highly competitive, with quite low margins, finding workers that are good value for money is clearly something that competitive businesses will try to do. When you can draw on a huge well of talent across the EU, with virtually no bureaucratic obstacles, I guess it is no surprise that that is what food and drink manufacturers have done. It is interesting, though, that even in times when we have not had high employment in this country—and sadly it looks like we are heading into that again—there have still been large numbers of EU workers recruited into food and drink manufacturing, so it seems to be something a bit more systemic.

Q63 **Derek Thomas:** Richard, do you want to pick up on the last point, or on any point? Is there something about the willingness of UK citizens to take on these jobs? Pick up on whatever else you want to address.

Richard Griffiths: To your original question, no, it is not about the wages at all.

We were in a position in the mid-2000s where the accession states to the EU allowed additional labour but created more, and allowed us to grow businesses in the UK beyond the labour available at that time. As the businesses grew and production and productivity increased, we found ourselves in a position where the geographical areas we were operating in exhausted the available UK workforce and so we started to have to rely on a European workforce. Historically, we have operated in areas where

there has been high employment. There was a combination of lack of availability of a domestic workforce and, to your final point, lack of willingness, I suppose, on the part of the domestic workforce to join the food sector, and our sector particularly. That is the reason that over the last 20 years the poultry industry has grown in the way it has. It has used the resource that is available to it. It is not about wages and it is not about pay; it is about getting the labour.

Q64 **Derek Thomas:** Picking up on that point, the expansion of the EU to include the A8 and the A2 countries probably came at the right time for you but has it steered production companies to employ labour—human workforce, if you like—rather than to invest in capital and other ways of doing the jobs that need to be done?

Richard Griffiths: That initial boost to production and productivity allowed for greater investment in technology through the farming sectors. We are not subsidised. We do not receive any support through government forums. We are market driven. Business plans have had to embrace technology, embrace innovation and move forward. Over the last 20 years, productivity levels have increased dramatically beyond the increase in labour levels. Through the use of technology and innovation, we are outpacing the manual side of the industry. Manual labour and the skills that come with being a farmer, for example, are still very important—that human aspect. Manual skills in butchery, for example, are absolutely crucial. But the combination of manual skills with technology has meant that the industry has grown successfully in the marketplace.

Q65 **Derek Thomas:** That is very interesting. Simon, is there anything you need to, or could, add to that?

Simon Doherty: As I hinted earlier on, roughly 50% of our workforce is coming from the EU but in the veterinary public health sector that figure climbs right up to 95%. I think at one point 100% of the official veterinarians working in abattoirs in Wales were EU nationals. That is something to do with the attractiveness of that particular part of the veterinary profession. The vast majority of us apply to go and study in veterinary school to come out and go into general practice and work as clinicians. It is a select part of the profession that would choose to get up at 4 o'clock or 5 o'clock in the morning and go and stand at the meat plant. It is a different type of work. With an overall shortage of UK-qualified vets, that particular part of the profession has been largely filled by vets coming in from the EU and, particularly in public health, Spain, Portugal, and Italy supply lot of those vets coming in. They are coming perhaps from member states that are slightly over-producing vets.

Q66 **Derek Thomas:** Thanks. Tim, last word to you, if you have anything to add.

Tim Rycroft: I don't think I do.

Derek Thomas: I didn't want you to miss out on the second bit about

the drift to capital.

Q67 **Dave Doogan:** I want to unpack what we mean by the unwillingness of the domestic workforce. Some people are tempted to think that when you hear "unwillingness", you can read that directly across to mean laziness or an unwillingness to take on difficult, hard and sometimes cold work. But is it not the case that for settled domestic workers an eight-month seasonal job is not going to get your car rolling, get you a mortgage or support you in the way that settled people would live their lives, unlike a migrant worker for whom that situation is far more appropriate and acceptable?

Chair: Can I add to Dave's supplementary question? I think perhaps one of the issues is that the large retailers in particular like to keep the prices down, so the process is at a very low margin for the processors and they cannot necessarily pay enough wages. Is there a problem there? Do we have to look not just at what you, the processors, pay but perhaps at what the retailers pay you? Otherwise, I don't think we are going to sort the situation out.

Dave Doogan: Chair, before we get on to that, can we just stick to the original core premise of my question, which was that it is possibly a fool's errand to think that we will fill all these jobs that are currently filled by migrant labour with a domestic workforce? To a very significant extent, the type of work, notwithstanding the denomination—the working patterns, the seasonal nature—is incompatible with people who live a settled lifestyle.

Tim Rycroft: There are a couple of points to make. The first is that our sector is quite different from other manufacturing sectors. It is geographically diverse. A lot of food and drink manufacturing takes place away from urban centres. It is close to primary production or close to sources of imported materials or ingredients, and also to export, and that has an impact on its attractiveness as a location in some cases. If you are coming here from another country primarily to get income to send home, that is probably much less of a barrier than if you are located here.

Also, it is fair to say that we, as an industry, have not yet done a good enough job on educating people about the reality of working in food and drink manufacturing in 2020. There are a lot of outdated perceptions about people in hairnets and wellies, and a sense of the 1970s. In my experience, having visited many food and drink facilities, that picture is now quite wrong but I do not think we have quite dispelled it. I will only know that we have succeeded when Ministers choose to come to food and drink factories rather than automotive ones.

Q68 **Chair:** Do Richard or Simon want to add anything?

Richard Griffiths: I can add to that. I support Tim's point. The food industry has much responsibility to try to raise awareness. There is more to be done on education. Separation has come between food production and food itself. With the rise of other opportunities, other industries in the country, food has not been visible. It is nothing to do with whether

people are lazy or unwilling. It is that we, as a food industry, have lost sight of the fact that we have a product that feeds people and we need to build back the connection about where it comes from. We have lost that connection to a certain extent.

Coupled with that is the education side. We need to support food education, whether that is through lessons, school meals, or some other form. We are missing a trick. I don't think it will ever fully replace European labour—I think that has to be clear—but I think we can do a much better job than we are doing to raise awareness and convince the UK public, and therefore the UK workforce, that food manufacturing is a good career opportunity. It is on both sides.

Q69 **Chair:** Thank you. Simon, I think you want to make a point.

Simon Doherty: We are in the situation now where we have a shortfall in the number of vets we are producing in the country anyway and we are not going to sort that one overnight by graduating twice as many vets from UK veterinary schools, unless Government are going to produce a lot of funding from some black hole somewhere. That is just not going to happen in a short period of time.

The BVA has been doing a lot of work on recruitment and retention within the profession. Where we can make the veterinary workplace a good place to work, we are obviously going to retain more UK-qualified vets in the system. If you want to think of it as a leaky bucket, we have some vets retiring, some vets leaving the profession, and we have two taps coming in, largely the UK graduates and the EU graduates. One of the areas we can work on is becoming perhaps a bit more self-sufficient in veterinary public health but ultimately, where we have a significant shortage of vets in the country anyway, there is no point in robbing Peter to pay Paul by moving vets around within the profession. If we somehow made veterinary public health and work in abattoirs and meat hygiene a lot more attractive, we would only be pinching clinicians from general practice or from government work and so on.

To come to your point, Chair, there is absolutely no doubt that particularly in the meat hygiene sector, salaries have largely been driven by the big retailers looking to reduce margins, and that part of the veterinary profession, veterinary public health, will tend to have lower salaries than vets would earn in general practice.

It is a combination. I don't think it is around laziness but there is no doubt that it is perhaps not as attractive a career as working in general practice.

Chair: Okay. Thank you all very much for those points.

Q70 **Ian Byrne:** Before I ask the question, and echoing what Tim said before, I think that it is very important that we redefine the term "skilled job". Certainly during the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen that a lot of jobs that were, to use that horrible term, "low skilled" have been at the

forefront of keeping this country going and people have been working in conditions that a lot of us would not work in. Hats off to them, but let's have a discussion about that term after we come out of this. I hate the term "low skilled". It frustrates and angers me. A lot of these people are doing outstanding jobs at the coalface.

My question is to Richard. The Recruitment and Employment Confederation has said that "it is far from just the wage rate that deters UK workers" from taking these roles within the industry, but that it is also a "perceived lack of progression" and "unattractive" conditions. What steps are poultry companies taking to attract UK workers?

Richard Griffiths: We are looking at it through apprenticeships and graduate recruitment. Those are the two main areas where we have had some success with UK recruitment. Within that structure, we can give a clear route to progression. Going back to redefining skills and skill levels, it makes it easier to put a career progression in place. We talk about careers quite a lot, but we talk very little about professions. You have people who are on a career ladder, with seniority increasing and improving in that way, but we have a lot of people, particularly if you are talking about manual skills, who are in a profession. They need to be able to know that their skills—their manual skills, in many cases—will be supported and improved over time as well. They are the routes that we, as an industry, should try to put in place so that people can look at us and say, "That is a good industry to work for, because there is career progression and professional improvement." It is by no means perfect, but I think your point is the right one; we need to do more to demonstrate that progression as part of an attractive industry.

The conditions are always going to be the conditions, to a certain extent. We are not in a position, for the most part, to work in air-conditioned offices. These are farms, slaughterhouses and processing plants. We can do a lot, but ultimately those are the sites that we operate. What we can do is look after the people, their skills and their career progression, which is what we try to do.

Q71 **Ian Byrne:** That is quite an interesting answer. Before I became an MP, when I had a proper job, I was a trade union organiser for Unite and I did quite a lot in the food industry. Certainly in the poultry industry, the conditions were really poor. Also, there was a complete lack of engagement with the trade unions. Trade unions are sometimes seen as monsters, but we talked before about education and enhancing these jobs in people's minds, so there could be career progression. What is the relationship like with trade unions? Could we use the trade unions to enhance the conditions and training, and also highlight that these jobs could be a career path?

As was outlined before, potentially we are going into another recession. There will be job vacancies within the industry, so how can we make them more amenable and more appetising for people in this country? It certainly is not laziness, but people do not think of the food industry as something they would want to go into. I know people—youngsters—in

Liverpool do not talk about career progression in food. Could we look at closer links with the trade unions? It was extremely hard getting the poultry factories to work closely with the trade unions. We can drive up terms and conditions. The model is broken, but we can work on that. That is something I am keen to explore with Richard, and I know Tim wants to come in on that as well.

Richard Griffiths: I think that one of the underlying principles of the trade unions is to provide community—a level of, let's say, unity—but in doing so, you extend the place of work beyond just the four walls of the factory. I think that is important, to provide a workplace or a source of employment for a community, and that is an element that we are missing. You get in a factory, behind the gates, behind the walls, and it is almost hidden away. I think there is a lot more to do in demonstrating to a local community—as well as more broadly to the nation, but certainly to local communities— that we are part of your community.

How do we engage actively? We can offer employment and everything that comes with that, but we have to also be responsible members of the community, not behind closed doors. We are here to help the community as well. A direct answer to your question is that where trade unions can excel in the food sector is by providing that link and bridging the gap that sometimes exists.

Tim Rycroft: We have not talked very much about Covid, but it still hangs over food and drink manufacturing. If you think back six months to the start of this, we campaigned successfully to get food and drink workers declared as key workers and then we had this high-wire act, almost, of both keeping food production going and keeping food and drink workers safe. I am pleased that quite early on in the process we put out a joint statement with Unite, GMB, USDAW, and BFAWU in which we set out our shared principles of how we were going to manage that tricky act. I think Covid has changed the way that employers think about their responsibilities towards their employees. That is a good thing and I think it will continue. Protecting workers, both in the pure sense of their health but also looking after them in the more general sense, has definitely gone up the agenda.

Ian Byrne: Thank you. I think Neil Hudson has the next question, so I will let you off the hook.

Chair: Thank you, Ian. I also echo your words thanking all those in the processing sector, processing food and working hard, especially through Covid, because they do not always get the praise they deserve. Neil Hudson, you have been champing at the bit. I think you have a question for Simon, and you might have a supplementary question from earlier. I would expect nothing less from you. Over to you.

Q72 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I also echo the thanks and pay tribute to people who work in the food processing sector. Thank you to all our witnesses today for being before us. This has been an excellent session.

First, I will declare an interest. As Simon knows, I am a veterinary

surgeon. Having worked in the veterinary higher education sector for many years, animal health and welfare and educating future veterinarians are political and professional interests of mine. I had better put that on record, Chair.

I have a follow-up question to Simon. It is good to get on record your comments about veterinary staffing levels moving forward for the United Kingdom, and whether we are producing enough vets, and so on. I take on board your comments that we have the new vet schools coming on line—Harper Adams and Keele this year and Aberystwyth and the Royal Veterinary College partnership starting next year—and also your comments about retaining people in the veterinary profession.

We have had an uncertain summer with the exam arrangements and how exam results have been awarded. There was a bit of flux in the veterinary and the higher education sectors, but Government have lifted the cap on some courses, such as medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry, so there may well be a knock-on effect. Do you have any comments on that? In a few years' time, we might get some good out of the uncertainty of this summer with the numbers of people being trained.

Simon Doherty: I can't help but think, though, that this year is probably going to be more of a blip. Certainly, the intake will be higher, and that has some knock-on effects. One important thing for the veterinary schools is maintaining their accreditation. I have already mentioned EAEVE accreditation at the European level. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons—the RCVS—accreditation will be carried out on all the UK schools as well. I also mentioned that some of the veterinary schools are accredited with the American Veterinary Medical Association, AVMA. Some of that accreditation is based on staff-student ratios. There will certainly be knock-on consequences for funding and potentially issues around accreditation, but five years from now, in theory, we will have a bumper year of new graduates coming out. That is certainly true, Neil.

Q73 **Dr Neil Hudson:** You make some very good comments about maintaining the staff-student ratio being important. The vet schools will need to be cognisant of that in order to maintain their accreditation. Equally, Government have announced that when international students who start courses this year graduate, they will be able to apply for work visas to stay on for a couple of years post graduation. That has happened in the past. That should have beneficial effects for the veterinary sector in a few years' time.

Simon Doherty: Yes. Within the last 18 months, we have been championing the return of vets to the shortage occupation list. Certainly on a points-based immigration system, that will have some benefit, and we welcome that piece around post-study work visas and the ability for non-UK but UK-graduated students—so some of the North Americans that I was referring to earlier—being able to apply to convert their study visas into work visas within two years of graduating. That certainly would have some effect.

Ultimately, a lot of those North American students are coming to the UK largely because they want to train here and some of them have not been able to secure places in the North American veterinary schools. They look at the UK as an option but very much with the intention of going back to the US. Certainly a few of them, once they have had some time in the UK, will feel some attraction and affinity after having spent four or five years here, and if the workplace is right they could return to jobs here. That would certainly help, but a lot of the North American students go back to the US.

Q74 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you. That is helpful. Forgive me. Chair, for getting that in, but I think it was important to get that on record, along with Simon's comments welcoming that the veterinary profession has been put back on the shortage occupation list, which was a welcome move.

Simon, you have answered some of this next question already. You have talked about the predomination of EU graduates in the meat inspection official veterinarian role in the UK—upwards of 95% coming in. You have talked about UK graduates not going into that area and we will come, in the second part of my question, to how we can improve that. First, do you have any more comments on why those sectors in the UK are so dominated by non-UK graduates now? Is it that they are training more in the other countries? Is it, as you said, the attractiveness for the UK vets? Do you have any other comments about that?

Simon Doherty: Yes, there are a number of different factors. Some of the other European schools will major much more on the veterinary public health role within their curricula. In the countries that I mentioned previously—Spain, Portugal, Italy, in particular—there will be a greater focus on veterinary public health. That is not to say that it is not taught well in the UK schools, but there is certainly a different emphasis on the teaching at some of the other European schools. There is always an expectation, if you qualify in a Spanish, Portuguese or Italian veterinary school, that you are possibly more likely to end up going into a career that is more public health oriented. There has always been the idea here—it is part of our heritage going right back to James Herriot and others—that we will come out and go into general practice.

We are now looking within the profession much more at diverse careers, looking at extensive roles right across the profession, and we are highlighting those to students as they go through. They have to at least spend some of their extramural study time in that setting, and some of them will become interested in that particular area. Certainly it is an area that we have looked at, at the BVA, and we have had some interactions with colleagues in New Zealand. The veterinary public health sector in New Zealand has been restructured over the last 20 years.

Coming back to some of the things that Tim was talking about earlier about career progression and being able to show a structure in career development, veterinary public health is an area that New Zealand has possibly exemplified. They have a very good structure in place. It

highlights the role of vets in public health, and that in turn has helped to drive up salaries. New Zealand has been able to show that by creating high value links to their export trade, and the role of vets and certification and so on has taken off. They have been able to create a career structure and additional value around that part of the veterinary sector.

Q75 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you. Chair, Simon has almost answered the second part of my question about what we can be doing in the UK to encourage more UK veterinary graduates to go into that important public health sector. Simon, you have said that with accreditation with EAEVE, the American Veterinary Medicine Association and the Royal College, it is part of the curriculum in all the UK vet schools. It is a key competency as well, so perhaps we can draw some good out of this dreadful coronavirus crisis. One of the key things that we found on this Committee is that people are now starting to realise the value of where their food is coming from and how it is produced, and all the workers along that food production sector—farmers, vets, supermarket workers—need to be valued as key workers. Perhaps that is something that we can bring into the UK veterinary side of things to make these careers appealing for UK graduates.

Simon Doherty: Yes. I think that is right, but we have to be careful that we balance that appropriately. One of the things that we found in the early stages of the Covid pandemic in the UK was the need try to maintain, for example, things like TB testing in cattle. The focus was very much on "Can we maintain the food supply chain?" That was absolutely right, but we needed to balance that and not take six months away from TB testing cattle, otherwise we would completely lose control of it. Vets had to adapt very quickly, for instance being creative in how they would go about doing a caesarean operation on a cow but maintaining social distance from the farmer. Undertaking TB testing was another one where handling, particularly of young calves, became quite difficult. The profession has been able to adapt.

If we could also touch on one other area that we have not talked about yet, the whole piece around trade certification—

Dr Neil Hudson: Sorry to interrupt you, Simon. We will come back to differing veterinary roles after Brexit, so maybe, Chair, we might leave some of the animal certification until later on.

Chair: Okay, yes. Thank you.

Dr Neil Hudson: We will come back to that, Simon.

Q76 **Chair:** Simon, just before we leave this, could we have some written evidence from you on the New Zealand situation? Also, an issue that I know you and I and many others are interested in is that New Zealanders are doing much more stunning for Halal slaughter. While it is not exactly part of this inquiry, I would be very interested to see what links you could give us in writing about what the New Zealanders are doing about that situation, because I think it would help us in the future. All the members

of the Committee are very keen to see that animals are stunned at slaughter, so I think there is something we could learn there as we come out of the EU.

Simon Doherty: Yes, certainly. We can provide that information. The BVA has recently reviewed its position on welfare at slaughter. Although that position is now very broad in its reach, we have specifically taken it beyond the traditional food producing—cows, sheep, pigs, poultry—and have broadened it. That welfare at slaughter position now includes things like finfish. We also comment on cephalopods and so on. We can share that position with the Committee and certainly we can provide some additional written evidence.

Chair: Thank you very much for that, Simon.

Q77 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** I will turn to the lessons learned from Covid-19 and ask all of you: were there shortages of staff because the pandemic restricted labour from the EU and elsewhere from coming here? Perhaps I could turn to you, first, Tim, and then follow on with Richard, because I know we have already heard a response with regard to veterinary matters from Simon.

Tim Rycroft: I think it is a very important question. The shortages that we saw quite early on, when there was the very big spike in retail demand, were not systemic failures. I think there were just some local mismatches of goods in warehouses to supermarket shelves. I don't think it was ever anything more serious than that.

Quite a few of our members reported staff shortages in the early stages as a result of illness or people being cautious because they had some symptoms and they were staying at home. As FDF, we were able to act as a bit of a hub to help redirect people who had been displaced from hospitality, which of course had effectively ceased trading when we shut down, into those bits of food and drink manufacturing that sell through retail, which obviously saw a big spike in sales. There was a certain amount of redeployment of people, using various online and other platforms.

I don't think the shut-off of access to labour from the continent or beyond had a material effect on availability over that period, because it was over a relatively short period. I think that there are some important lessons as we head towards the end of the transition period for the fragilities of supply chains, and the challenges for manufacturers and retailers in having enough goods in the right places. Those are things that we are talking to DEFRA about almost daily.

To echo the Chair's words, overall food and drink manufacturing coped magnificently and, genuinely, those people who work in that sector are the hidden heroes.

Q78 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Do you have anything to add to that, Richard?

Richard Griffiths: With the Covid situation, the challenge with labour was around illness and the actions that needed to be taken in relation to Covid self-isolation and such like.

We have seen over the last three or four years a higher flow outwards. More people were leaving than were coming in. That long-term effect, combined with the effect of Covid in the short term, led to a number of companies being on a knife-edge with regard to labour. A little bit more lost would have been disastrous in a number of cases. What being on that knife-edge also illustrated was the importance of particular roles within that supply chain. If we had lost a certain part of the workforce that would be the whole chain grinding to a halt. That plays into Tim's point about the importance of the different parts of the chain and acknowledging that activity during Covid times.

Q79 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Simon, I did not mean to completely shut you down when I said we had already addressed the veterinary side. Do you have anything to add to that question?

Simon Doherty: In the early stages of Covid, everything within the veterinary sector shut down. What we found was that because clinics were closing their doors and doing emergency work only, there was a pool of locum vets who all of a sudden had no work to do. Some of them were able to be redeployed within the meat hygiene sector and in OV roles at that time. That was to balance off, because the abattoirs and meat plants were looking at having smaller teams working and if there were staff off or having to isolate, another vet could be slotted in there to try to maintain throughput. That was in the early stages.

Then we went through the stage where we were trying to head back towards normal and getting more work going, but overall when you are in that situation and you have a shortage of official veterinarians across the sector, it was challenging in some areas. You were just that bit concerned that if there was a positive case or even a trace and people were being forced to isolate for a period of time, it could leave a plant without an abattoir vet. Fortunately, I think we have managed to ride that out reasonably well. Obviously the effect of some of the local lockdowns is having a knock-on effect as well, but by and large I think we have been able to continue and maintain veterinary cover. I do not think that has been a limiting factor; let's put it that way.

Q80 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Thank you very much. How successful were employers in filling any shortages due to the pandemic with UK staff?

Richard Griffiths: Moderately. I think there was certainly an increase in interest, but again these would be people coming in at entry level, new to the industry and therefore untrained and unqualified, so that would be a process. The question is whether those people will stay in the industry. We will not know that until we are a little bit further through.

Q81 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Do you have anything to add, Tim?

Tim Rycroft: I think for food and drink manufacturing more generally, Richard is right: there was a spike in absenteeism with people being ill or isolating, but it started to go down quite quickly across the sector. We were monitoring that daily with DEFRA. I think we managed to redeploy quite successfully in some of the less specialist sectors of food and drink manufacturing.

Q82 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Finally, given the impact of the pandemic on the food supply chain, do you think workers should now be classified as key workers for immigration purposes?

Richard Griffiths: Yes. I think we have seen the evidence—and I think from the Prime Minister as well—of food production's critical national infrastructure. That needs to be recognised in the people that are needed in that field as well.

Tim Rycroft: It would be quite optimistic of me to expect that the Government might list all 430,000 workers in food and drink manufacturers as key workers for immigration purposes, but we continue to hope for flexibility around shortage occupations and that that should be a dynamic process that is kept under review. As I said earlier, a more flexible approach to defining skills would also be very helpful in ensuring that we do not have any sort of cliff edge.

Q83 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** I know you have already touched on this, Simon, but do you want to expand on that?

Simon Doherty: Not really. The fact that we have that restored shortage occupation list goes some way there. In the early stages of Covid we had to seek some clarification around whether it was all vets who were key workers or just vets who were working in meat hygiene, and whether it included farm animal vets and small local vets who were maintaining animal health and welfare, albeit emergency only. Once we sought that clarification for the veterinary profession we were okay on that front.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Q84 **Barry Gardiner:** Welcome, gentlemen, and thank you for your evidence this afternoon. I want to focus on the Government's immigration proposals and the way they have impacted on your industries. Before that, Richard, could I just pick up where you left off with my colleague, Ian Byrne? You painted an incredibly rosy picture of the view of the industry towards trade unions and their community role and enabling them to reach out into communities, but I have certainly heard reports of a very different set of relationships, where when people have wanted to unionise their workforce, they have encountered violence. Can you perhaps flesh it out? If you regard unions as able to work in this co-operative community spirit with the industry in that way, why is there not more unionisation of workplaces?

Richard Griffiths: I think there have always been those difficulties and conflicts, but for the previous question I was highlighting what I thought

was the potential for the future. I cannot answer why there has not been more unionisation, but—

Q85 **Barry Gardiner:** Do you think that management in the industry needs to adopt more of your perspective, and that the potential here is for a co-operative relationship that benefits everyone?

Richard Griffiths: There is some excellent potential for that across the food sector, but in our industry the management takes unions seriously and it engages proactively. We need to expand the role of that relationship and that is where I think the community side comes into it, because it is a point of common ground upon which future relations—

Q86 **Barry Gardiner:** I do not want to over-pursue this, but thank you for that. Gentlemen, quick-fire answers here. We all appreciate the way in which the industry has had to get to grips with the new policies and regulations that Government have come out with. We had the White Paper in December 2018; we had the policy statement in February of this year; we had the further detailed document in July; and we have the final details of the points-based system due to come, we are told, by the end of the year. There has been a lot of regulation thrown at you guys.

What has been, in your view, the level of Government engagement with you? For each of those four—the White Paper, the policy statement, the details document and for the upcoming points-based system final details—let's ask you to give a mark out of 10, with one being, "Could not have been less engagement if they had tried" and 10 being, "Could not have been more engagement if I had wanted it". Rate us on each of those four. Tim, do you want to start?

Tim Rycroft: Thanks for that hospital pass, Barry. It would start probably quite low. It was quite hard to get engagement and traction with the Home Office while it was developing its thinking. As its thinking crystallised, it has become more amenable to talking about it. Certainly we have seen, particularly under the chairmanship of Professor Bell, that the MAC has definitely become more open and welcoming in the last few months. It is a sliding scale, starting quite low and ending up maybe at seven.

Q87 **Barry Gardiner:** Is this a three, four, five, seven? Give me numbers. I love numbers.

Tim Rycroft: Let's go for a steady progression. Yes, three, four, five, seven sounds about right to me.

Q88 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you very much. Simon, how about you?

Simon Doherty: We probably had more engagement in the time that we were campaigning with the Migration Advisory Committee and the whole piece around vets being restored to the shortage occupation list. That is probably when we had the most engagement with the Home Office. Recently we probably have not had an awful lot of direct engagement, if I am being honest. If you are looking for numbers, we would almost have gone from six, seven, eight when we were looking at the return to

shortage occupation list, but we are possibly below five for engagement over the last six to nine months. We have not had a huge amount of engagement in that respect. A return to the shortage occupation list will maybe provide a few extra points.

It is the whole piece around the bureaucracy, the sponsorship and visas and things like that, with most of the veterinary profession being small private businesses as opposed to the NHS or huge corporations. We have a lot more corporatisation and large employers within the profession now, but for small general practices to be thinking about starting to sponsor applicants is a huge burden of time and cost.

Q89 **Barry Gardiner:** To get your numbers, it is six, seven, eight and then—

Simon Doherty: Yes, six, seven, eight, but I would say probably four or five now. It has definitely dipped down more recently.

Q90 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you. Richard, you are in the hot seat now.

Richard Griffiths: I would agree with Tim's overall of around seven, but this is the important part throughout: we and many other food sectors have been lobbying for level 2, not the skill levels that have been talked about. At the level of what is being talked about—level 3 and above and the salary caps—it is good engagement, but they are definitely not engaging on the needs of the industry, so on that front I would put it down around two.

Q91 **Barry Gardiner:** That is very interesting. Thank you for that clarification. Moving away from the engagement that you have had, how confidently are you able to plan your workforce over the next year in 2021, after we have left? Again, give us a confidence rating out of 10—if you are going for a 10, you know exactly what you are doing and your planning is all online—or, at the "one" end of the scale, things are still pretty chaotic. Give me a figure.

Simon Doherty: I would quite happily go with a two or a three on that. It is not just so much about the immigration rules and that side of things. We will come on to it—I have been assured that I am going to have my chance to talk about certification—but the complete lack of clarity about how many vets we will need to do export health certification is making me not very confident at all that we can adequately plan our workforce for the next 12 months.

Q92 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you, Simon. Richard or Tim?

Richard Griffiths: I think that without a clear route for level 2 jobs, it still down around two.

Tim Rycroft: There is an analogy here, Barry, with trade—an issue that you are probably more familiar with than any of us—which is that we can debate what the trading rules will be from 1 January, but the big obstacle is that a huge number of businesses that have never had to engage with any rules are suddenly going to have to engage with some rules. The

situation here is exactly the same. You have a whole load of businesses who have only ever had to do a right-to-work check to engage people and are now going to have to apply to become a visa sponsor. That will carry some obligations with it. There will be costs involved in sponsoring visas. From that point of view—although I think that, sadly, the spike in unemployment that we are seeing with today's figures may to some extent ameliorate some of the immediate consequences of this—there is a deep sense of foreboding in our industry about the impact of these changes. I guess I am probably on about three.

Barry Gardiner: On balance, quite a bit of room for improvement.

Q93 **Julian Sturdy:** Moving on now to the consumers and farmers in this, what do you think the implications for consumers and farmers will be if food manufacturers and processors are unable to maintain capacity due to the lack of workers? Obviously food prices is one issue, but would you like to touch on anything else that you feel is of wider concern?

Richard Griffiths: I will give that one a go. I think one of the dangers, and particularly in my own sector, is that once you start to lose capacity, it is very difficult for it come back. It is difficult to get new farms and new slaughterhouses. It would be incredibly difficult. This broadens out the discussion, but as a result you then become vulnerable to aggressive trade and you get into the discussion around food standards. Do you import food of potentially lower standards because you need it, because you cannot produce it yourself, and then ultimately do you end up with a two-tier food system? That is a lot to lay on the availability of labour, but it is all connected.

I think it is important to look at this bigger picture and say if we cannot get the labour and maintain our production and productivity—and we have acknowledged that the UK is very good at producing food—it is going to be a very tough time in the next year for a lot of food producers.

Tim Rycroft: I echo what Richard says. There are clearly some big structural changes coming in access to labour. It is quite hard to predict from here, particularly with what else is going on, how that will affect the industry. You would have to say that it does not look like it will be a good thing at least for some time, until we can hopefully arrive at a situation where the system is working well. But of course the elephant in the room is all the other things that are going on. We are still hoping that we are not going to have a significant second wave of Covid.

Interestingly, this is not one of the top three issues for our members—not because it is not important to them, but simply because the other things are even more pressing. The consequences of the trading arrangements after we leave the transition period and the implications of a potential second spike in Covid are things that are even more important to them and they will be dealing with those things just as this new system comes into place. You have to say that it does not look very good. As I say, it is a source of considerable concern to my members.

Q94 **Julian Sturdy:** Following up on that point, as you rightly say, there are wider issues out there at the moment that are probably distracting all of these businesses away from the issues over immigration and access to labour. But do you feel that companies will look at restructuring their businesses over the medium term in response to the immigration policy, or do you think at the moment it is probably so far off their radar that they are not even considering it?

Tim Rycroft: I suspect that the impact will fall differentially on different parts of the industry. The big multinationals are well resourced; they are already recruiting from across the world. I suspect they will be able to absorb this reasonably well. There are some good concessions in costs and things for microbusinesses. We are slightly worried about the squeezed middle, if I am honest—the businesses that are too big to be small and too small to be big—and the impact on them. They may have to completely rethink some of their employment practices. As Richard says, that is bound to have consequences somewhere up or down the supply chain and probably it will be felt by consumers.

Q95 **Julian Sturdy:** Automation is talked about a lot, but that is a big investment and takes time, doesn't it? Some businesses cannot; it is just impossible to do that as well.

Tim Rycroft: Clearly, automation is something that the industry is very focused on. We were due to have a massive conference on this earlier this year, which obviously we had to cancel. It is worth making the point that when you are dealing with something that is organic that has to be produced in a highly clean and hygienic atmosphere, it creates different challenges for automation than it does if you are dealing with automotive parts, all of which are the same size and you do not have the issues of hygiene. But some of our food and drink factories are highly automated; it is just not a one size fits all. While we would all, I am sure, want to see an acceleration in the growth of automation and AI as one of the answers to this, it is not going to happen overnight.

Julian Sturdy: No, that is fair enough. Thank you.

Simon Doherty: In relation to the piece around veterinary capacity in particular, it is that whole sort of stretch in the system—if we do not have that supply of vets coming in from the EU, where exactly do we leave ourselves exposed? If I was sitting here and I was chief veterinary officer, my primary concern would be something like a foot and mouth disease outbreak. We are seeing African swine fever is coming close—there has been a case just within the last week in Germany—which is an absolutely devastating viral disease with pigs that has seen over half the world's pig population wiped out in the last 18 to 24 months. Do we have the capacity within the UK to deal with another 2001? Contingency planning for episodic diseases is an area that is of huge concern.

In 2001 we had a huge influx of European vets who were able to come into the country, register with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons overnight and get out into the field, literally, and help us with the foot

and mouth disease outbreak. Are we going to be in a situation where we can do that if we have a points-based immigration system without that free flow of movement? I would imagine that emergency powers can be put in place.

Maybe I am saying it for the shock factor, but where we sit in balancing animal health, animal welfare, if we are going to do certification, do we have enough vets to do TB testing? If we are going to put more vets into meat plants to ensure that we have the food supply chain, are we taking vets away from clinical practice? We are a relatively small profession and with a 10% to 15% shortage of vets in the country, we do not have an awful lot of manoeuvrability if we suddenly stop the supply of vets coming into the country based on a points-based immigration system, so I just flag that.

Chair: Very good point.

Q96 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Can I turn to unskilled labour? Again, I think this is to Tim and then the others to answer if they have anything to add. What are the implications for food manufacturers and processors in the absence of an immigration route for low and unskilled workers? I know you described very early on in this session about the fish filleters, for instance. Do you have anything on top of what you have already said about this, please?

Tim Rycroft: It is likely that the spike in unemployment that we are seeing will create a pool of labour that has not been available in this country for some time. Certainly some of our members are already reporting to us that they are getting more applications for vacancies now. Clearly the pool of labour will not exactly match the geographical and skills requirements, but it will get easier to recruit people in this country for some time; let's hope, in a sense, not for too long, and that we can quickly return to fuller employment.

The immediate impact of the change will help in a curious way—unintended consequences. Some of the work around apprenticeships and vocational qualifications, and the Kickstart scheme, which FDF is engaging with to see if we can act as a kind of hub to make the minimum 30 applications on behalf of some of our members, will help. T-levels are some way down the track, but that will help. There is a lot of work going on. We are working with the National Skills Academy for Food & Drink, the National Centre of Excellence for Food Engineering in Sheffield, the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre in Wales. All of these things are designed to try to help our food and drink manufacturers to become more efficient and less dependent on labour, but these things do not happen overnight, as I say.

If I am honest, it is very hard to predict how big a shock this will be from 1 January. It may be that an increased pool of labour in the UK will act as a buffer. We will not know for some time what the impact of the new immigration system and restricting access to these entry level roles is. I continue to hope that we will see flexibility around the definition of skills

and the shortage occupation list. I think as long as we can be reassured that the MAC will continue to keep close to the evidence and act on it, that would give us some reassurance that there will not be an immediate and serious cliff edge.

Q97 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** I will go on to the second part of the question before I ask Simon and Richard to answer both parts, because you have already touched on it. Does this also present longer-term challenges for businesses in being able to develop initially lower-skilled staff to take on more skilled jobs? You have touched on that. You have mentioned planning with T-levels and that sort of thing, but do you have anything else to add before I move to Richard and Simon?

Tim Rycroft: I do not think there is anything to add to what I have already said, if I am honest. I think those are the routes that we are all pursuing to try to mitigate the impact of this.

Q98 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Thank you very much. Simon, do you have anything further to add to what Tim said?

Simon Doherty: I mentioned that there would be a number of vets who would come initially into meat hygiene inspector roles before possibly becoming an official veterinarian, and then from an OV role possibly into a role in clinical practice. One of the concerns that we have is how easy it would be for them to change jobs—change roles. I think a meat hygiene inspector under the new system would be classed as a skilled worker, but how easy would be the progression of a qualified vet coming into the country to move from a meat hygiene inspector role to an OV role with the same visa sponsor? I think if the wheels could be oiled in that respect to allow qualified vets who are coming in in various roles to change their role, that would certainly be very helpful for our overall veterinary capacity within the country.

Q99 **Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Finally, Richard, do you have anything to add?

Richard Griffiths: Yes. Just to borrow Simon's leaky bucket from earlier, if we do not have the route through for the lower-skilled roles, the taps will be turned off and we will gradually lose more and more people. Businesses will be left in a position of hoping—it is a hope at this point, given the massive amounts of uncertainty around Brexit—that their investments in technology, innovation and automation will tide them over. That speaks also to your point about the progression of people over the years, so maybe fewer people but higher skilled to go along with the improvements in automation and technology.

Conversely, if there is a route for those lower skill levels, what is the cost going to be? We have seen the cost around the current immigration proposal, and I am sure there would be a cost around those as well if there were a route. Either way, we are looking at increases in production costs and that has to be allowed for somewhere in the supply chain.

Q100 **Dave Doogan:** Thanks, gentlemen. Tim and Richard, are you confident that your members will be able to access the skilled labour they need

under the UK's new points-based system? Within that specifically, are you concerned that there is a bias towards formal qualifications in abstract rather than the actual high value vocational skills that your members need?

Tim Rycroft: I am not terribly confident that we will be able to access the skilled people we need under the new system because of the cost of the new processes—not just the absolute cost, but the cost compared to some of our competitor nations, who will also be searching for that talent. I am concerned about that. I think that this issue is about how we understand skills, how we define skills, and the current RQF framework, which I think most people accept has been developed probably with too strong a bias towards academic skills rather than vocational skills. I think this has to be part of a general kind of reassessment of skills in a world in which we accept that vocational and academic are routes of equal merit. We should be entirely supporting both of them, and young people who want to take their own route should feel that whichever route works best for them and they can contribute in is equally valued and rewarded.

Richard Griffiths: At the higher skilled levels, I have very little concern. Our businesses employ specialist poultry vets, for example, and research specialists as well. At that level I do not have a concern about how the proposals will work. I have a concern about the cost of them, but I am not overly concerned about the availability, being able to get someone at that level. I am very concerned about the access to the people at the lower skill levels, and that is not covered by the proposals.

Q101 **Dave Doogan:** Tim, the horticultural industry is heavily reliant on seasonal workers from the EU. What operational challenges will your members face from the Government's seasonal workers pilot and specifically the arbitrary cap of 10,000?

Tim Rycroft: We supported the pilot scheme very strongly, and we have supported the NFU and NFU Scotland in its call for that to become a permanent scheme. It is worth noting that when the original scheme was shut down because it was made obsolete by freedom of movement in 2013, the Migration Advisory Committee at that time made some observations about the fact that it had found no evidence that it disadvantaged anybody in the UK. It also noted that most other countries had some kind of scheme to support seasonal industries—subsectors where it clearly was not sustainable to employ people all year round for a product that needs picking at a certain time of year.

I think there is a need for a permanent seasonal workers' scheme. As we design it, we should be flexible in thinking about which sectors and subsectors should be included. This Committee has talked many times about food security and food self-sufficiency. It seems to me that these are things that the UK does very well, growing these particular crops and fruit and vegetables, and we should be finding ways to encourage more of it to be done here rather than making it more difficult.

Q102 **Dave Doogan:** But specifically do you foresee problems coming from the

10,000 cap?

Tim Rycroft: In its original submission I know that the NFU said that there would need to be 70,000, so there is a pretty big gap between those two numbers. I would trust our friends at the NFU to have a very good sense of what they think the scale of this needs to be.

Q103 **Dave Doogan:** Which is the bigger risk to the supply chain for your members: the unattractive or increased bureaucracy to enter the UK for work, or the higher incomes available closer to countries of origin? Or is it a perfect storm of both?

Simon Doherty: I would say it is probably both. There is no doubt that the bureaucracy of having somebody apply for a job and then having to go through a whole visa application process, and the costs and time associated with that, will be a real headache. The movement of vets within Europe could change substantially and I think that perfect storm you are talking about could definitely affect us: it just becomes no longer worth their while to jump through all of the hoops when they can get the same type of employment somewhere else in Europe an awful lot more easily. I think it is a combination of both.

Q104 **Dr Neil Hudson:** I will come on to the issues that Tim and Richard talked about to do with labour and leaving the European Union, and how they affect your sector. But first, I will come back to my veterinary colleague Simon. I know Simon is champing at the bit—he is saddled up and ready to ride into the racecourse—to talk about veterinary certification. The BVA's submission talked about the challenges moving forward, and the increased demand for veterinary certification and supervision as we leave the European Union.

Simon, as we are now approaching the end of the transition period, can you articulate to the Committee what demands you foresee being placed on the veterinary profession for food supply vets with this increased need for certification? What impact do you foresee from DEFRA's announcement that they will be introducing more non-veterinary qualified certification support officers to help official veterinarians with that process? What are your thoughts on that, moving forward?

Simon Doherty: I will try to keep this as brief as I possibly can, but you are right, I am champing at the bit because it is an important piece for our members. There are a number of different aspects. What we are talking about here is export health certification for animals or products of animal origin. That is one of the first stumbling blocks. The products of animal origin have quite broad reach. It is not just meat and dairy products; it is a whole range of different things, including isinglass, which is used for clarification within the wine industry and is made from fish scales. The products of animal origin piece would have been moving around Europe on commercial documentation and they will require an export health certificate signed by a veterinary surgeon.

There is an aspect of that that is related to the country listing, which is something that is exercising everybody at the minute. If we got a good

country listing from Europe, certainly the export health certificates should in theory be an awful lot simpler to complete. There are an awful lot more assumptions made about the health status of the UK generally and, therefore, the actual certificates themselves can be an awful lot simpler, possibly less testing required or certainly less bureaucracy in the length of the paperwork itself.

Another added layer on to that is the whole piece around Northern Ireland and whether in fact we will require export health certification. Under the Northern Ireland Protocol, Northern Ireland is going to remain part of the single market. Is produce coming from GB to Northern Ireland going to require an export health certificate? There was all sorts of talk initially about unfettered access, but in fact we are probably going to have some level of export health certification required and associated infrastructure at ports in Cairnryan or Liverpool coming into Belfast or Larne in respect to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

That whole piece will require another chunk of the veterinary workforce that is already, as I have described in this session, being pulled in a number of different directions. The vets who sign export health certificates are also described as OVs, confusingly—official veterinarians. They are different OVs to the OVs that work in abattoirs and meat plants, but they are all the same OVs and require additional training on top of their veterinary degree. Where we are now is just a complete lack of clarity as to what will be required GB to Northern Ireland, what will be required in respect of a country listing, what will be required in respect of the actual export health certificates themselves.

You touched on the certification support officers. Within European legislation there is a role for a layperson to become a certification support officer. DEFRA and APHA have put a bit of work into that area in recruiting CSOs. The idea is that a CSO, as part of an auditable process—let's say we are exporting milk powder—would be able to go out and look at the serial numbers on the bags of the milk powder, and check from that sort of perspective, or if any testing is being done to show freedom from certain diseases. All of that information would be pulled together by certification support officers, who would be laypeople, and then presented in an auditable form to the veterinary surgeon, who would then ultimately have the information that they required to put their veterinary signature on that certificate. Again, until we understand what will be required for export health certification, we cannot plan ahead as to how many CSOs we will have per official veterinarian. That has really delayed that a bit.

The other thing that we need to look at here is that there are very few vets who do export health certification as a full-time job. Most OVs are practitioners as well. If the cheese factory down the road that has largely been moving cheese around Europe on a commercial certificate suddenly needs to have lots of export health certificates, I know that Tim's members will be looking at what certificate they will require and what sort of capacity they will need and what sort of time will be needed for a vet to do that certification, but ultimately at this point it has been quite

difficult. That vet needs to be able to fit that in among their TB testing and their clinical work and whatever else. We have very few full-time equivalent OVs. A lot of OVs will be doing this work before they open their clinic in the morning or they may be doing export paperwork in the evening for a shipment the following day or things like that. There is a lack of clarification of the volume of certification that will be required.

It gets compounded with compound products. For example, a frozen pizza will need an export health certificate for the pepperoni, the mozzarella and the cheddar. Each product of animal origin will require a level of certification, so for a frozen pizza you could be looking at half a dozen export health certificates to be signed off by a vet. This is not something we have had to do before.

Looking specifically at the aquaculture industry in Scotland, traditionally the work of export health certification has not been carried out by veterinary surgeons. It has been carried out by environmental health officers. We also have a shortage of environmental health officers in the UK now, so it is not that we can suddenly look at bending some rules and getting a lot of EHOs to sign what is essentially a veterinary certificate. That is fine for the aquaculture sector as things stand at the minute, but there is no quick answer for that piece of capacity either.

In summary, lots of unknowns and a lot of questions still remain. We are sitting here heading towards the end of September and we need that clarification urgently, whether that is by putting infrastructure in place at some of the border inspection posts, or even ferry ports in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, and around the Northern Ireland situation.

The other piece to bear in mind—this may be of less interest to this Committee, but it needs to sit somewhere within the Government—is the movement of equines and the movement of pets. I keep using the example, "Can I take my dog to Donegal from Belfast for the weekend?" We do not have clarity about the movement of companion animals, even within the island of Ireland let alone throughout Europe, for what would have previously been done under a pet passport. We also do not have clarification for the equine industry, which is obviously worth millions. I do not need to tell this Committee the value of that. The tripartite agreement that was in place between France, the Republic of Ireland and the UK allowed relatively seamless movement of equids between those three countries. That potentially, in a no-deal scenario, would also disappear, and you then need, again, more veterinary capacity to complete equine or companion animal export health certificates as well.

Q105 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you, Simon. That was a very full and thorough answer. Thank you very much. Chair, I guess Simon has touched on issues about animal movements that we, as a Committee, are very interested in and will be looking at in subsequent sessions. Thank you for raising that. I think, Chair, that gives us a nice platform for future inquiries that we are going to launch.

To go back to Barry's question, what you are asking for is more clarity

and more engagement as the clock is winding down to know where we are at. It is a rapidly evolving situation. You have veterinary expertise, but also geographical expertise, as to where you are physically located with the Northern Irish situation. Already there are checks between GB and Northern Ireland on the animal side of things, disease surveillance and biosecurity, but what you need is clarity as to what the level will need to be increased to beyond what is already in place. Is that right?

Simon Doherty: Yes, absolutely

Q106 **Dr Neil Hudson:** Thank you very much. I will move away from that veterinary rift and to Tim and Richard. As we get to the end of the transition period, what issues will it create for your members? You have touched on this in some of your previous answers about the demand for labour, in both the short and longer term. As the clock is running down, what issues and challenges face your membership and your sectors?

Tim Rycroft: Do you mean on trade, access to labour, or both?

Dr Neil Hudson: Demand for labour.

Tim Rycroft: The challenge we face is the new system coming in on 1 January. I think because ending freedom of movement was part of Brexit, there is a bit of a misunderstanding in some of the businesses I talk to that they think that the immigration consequences are that there will be a passing phase where there will be a bit of disruption and then everything will be fine. There are still some businesses that do not understand we are moving to a completely different immigration system, irrespective of what happens with a deal or no deal from 1 January. As I said earlier, part of the problem is that we are dealing with a large number of businesses that have never had to engage with any kind of processes or systems around recruitment suddenly facing the fact that they will have to apply for licences, pay fees, appoint new roles in their businesses to supervise visas and all that kind of thing. We are expecting that that will be a bit of a shock.

As we have referenced earlier, at the same time there are a number of other big challenges going on, and you just heard about one particular aspect of the end of the transition period. It is a bit of an aside, but it was interesting that one of our members was saying that they have decided they will not know what the trading arrangements will be for the first few months of next year with Northern Ireland, so their plan is to get their customers to buy ahead between now and the end of the year. They will just say that they will not be shipping stuff to Northern Ireland for the first few months until they can see how things eventually settle down. I suspect there will be others who will take that view too.

Richard Griffiths: We have been through quite a number of the concerns about labour specifically, but it is really about where the next availability of labour will come from. Given the list that Simon has just been through about lack of clarity, businesses are looking on that with horror, and that is just the veterinary side of things. We have areas

where we do not know what labels to put on products yet, and all of that just adds and adds to the uncertainty.

On top of that, if you do not know where your workforce is going to come from, that does not give confidence to businesses over the next couple of years. What we need over the next couple of years is some consistency—even if it is an interim measure—to allow for what we are talking about, the flow of labour. I think that is really important.

Dr Neil Hudson: Thank you. Chair, you asked Simon before whether the BVA could give any more thought in writing about the New Zealand situation. I guess we are launching an inquiry in the future, but would it be worthwhile, with some of the additional points that Simon raised about animal movements, if that could come in sooner to help us with the development of that? I will leave that with you, Chair, as to what you think, or whether we just keep our powder dry on that one.

Q107 **Chair:** I think Simon has plenty of homework to do. I am very happy to have as much information on movement as we can, but I am particularly interested, like I said, in this inquiry looking at the veterinary situation in New Zealand and whether we can look at veterinary-trained animal health officers in slaughter houses. I am also interested in the situation regarding halal slaughter and the stunning and export that New Zealand does for stunned meat to the Middle East and others that has been accepted by the halal slaughter as feasible. We could get some improvements to our animal welfare on stunning slaughter through that system. That is what I am particularly interested in. Simon, I know you and I have talked about that, so I will park it there, Neil. Thank you very much.

A final question from me, and this is one to stir you all up. The Government have said that employers will need to adjust to the new immigration policy and call for a shift in focus away from cheap labour from Europe to investment in technology and automation. Is that feasible in your sectors in the short and medium term? We have been talking about it a lot this afternoon. Are there other things that you want to add?

Tim Rycroft: There is no reason why a points-based immigration system need disadvantage the UK against its competitors. The problem with the system that we have is that because of the additional costs relative to our competitors and the additional bureaucracy, it does disadvantage us. We are willing to adapt, we are happy to adapt and we understand there will be a new system in place. We are taking all those opportunities that you talked about for automation, apprenticeships and upskilling, but we need a bit more help with the system, because I do not think the way it is designed at the moment will help us.

Richard Griffiths: I do not think the description of "cheap labour" is right at all, and I do not think it is an either/or situation. The two have to go hand in hand, the embracing of technology and the embracing of automation combined with a properly defined skilled workforce. That is

essential. We cannot be playing one off against the other. The two have to work together.

Simon Doherty: Unfortunately, there probably are not a lot of veterinary roles that can necessarily be replaced by technology, but certainly technology can play a part in smoothing some of the processes that we undertake as veterinary surgeons. I would agree with what Tim and Richard have said about it not being really an either/or situation. We will continue to rely on a number of EU vets coming into the country, and really all the new, proposed system will do is create an extra layer of bureaucracy for small businesses that are stretched otherwise anyway. While we can continue to work on fixing the taps and the leaky bucket, certainly the taps need to remain running.

Q108 **Chair:** This is my very final question, and I think I have an idea of what your answer might be to this. We are questioning the Secretary of State, George Eustice, next week about whether DEFRA will be ready for the end of the Brexit transitional period, whether there is a deal or not. What would you like us to ask of George next week?

Simon Doherty: I think the immediate ask is for clarity on what we will need for certification. The other one is that the Secretary of State will need to invest heavily in veterinary education to maintain the standards that we have come to expect of our veterinary education in the UK and to make sure we have a suitably trained veterinary workforce in the future. Coming back to the shock factor, you can be pretty sure that George Eustice will want a cadre of vets ready if we have African swine fever or foot and mouth disease in the country.

Richard Griffiths: I think if a national aim is that nobody in this country goes hungry, one of the essential elements to that is getting the right workforce and supporting the food and farming production industries. My top ask for the Secretary of State, while it does not fall under his remit specifically, is to lobby for a route for workers to come into the country at that level 2 position.

Tim Rycroft: We have had 10-out-of-10 engagement with George Eustice and his team at DEFRA throughout this process, and he is well aware of the many asks that we still have for this process. If I was to highlight just one, Chair, as top of mine today, it would be to ask him to push even harder to try to get an answer for UK organic exporters, who currently have no certainty or expectation that they will be able to continue to export their organic products into the EU from 1 January. We really must get that resolved.

Chair: Thank you for that final point. I understand that the EU has not replied a lot to us on the organic situation and I think we need to put more pressure back on them. I thank all three of you for a very good evidence session. What is abundantly clear is, whether we get a deal or a no deal with the European Union, we need to make sure the rules are clarified and we know what we are going to do in the future. It is a situation at the moment where it is unclear for industry across the piece.

We cannot wave a magic wand, but we must work hard to make sure in the future we have a good food supply, a great veterinary service and that we can feed our people like we have in the past.

I look forward to a challenge ahead of us but one that we must sort, because we are going to, and we have, left the European Union. It is the way that we will do this trade deal, or not, in the future. The one thing we wanted to do as we left was to reduce bureaucracy, not increase it. That will be the huge challenge for us now, to make sure we actually reduce bureaucracy. I think we can do that in the long run, but I rather fear in the short run it may be a little bit of a bumpy ride before we get there.

Thank you all very much for a very good session of evidence. Thank you, members. We have lots of questions to put to the Secretary of State next week and it is a very good start to our inquiry. We will also put a lot of these cases to the Home Office Ministers, hopefully, when we get them before us, so we look forward to using your evidence then. If you have any last evidence that you may want to supply, or if there is something that you may have forgotten, please let us have it in writing. Thank you very much, and I will now close the meeting. Thank you again.