



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

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Secretary of State

The provision of land-based education

On 23 March, the EFRA Committee held an evidence session looking at the provision of land-based education in England. As part of this work, we also heard and received evidence specifically on the proposed closure of Newton Rigg College in Cumbria.

With the introduction of the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme, the Government is currently undertaking the most significant change to farming support and land management in 50 years. The introduction of ELM alongside specific new targets for tree-planting, restoring habitats and biodiversity clearly call for a highly skilled land-based workforce, an imperative which will only grow as the UK moves towards its ambitious net zero target. Land-based education is therefore more vital now than ever.

However, there is a clear dissonance between the growing importance of this education and the framework within which it is provided. We were told that the number of independent specialist land-based institutions has fallen as many colleges have merged or closed. In 1980, there were 50 independent land-based colleges; now, there are 11 specialist independent colleges and four universities. The provision of land-based education is now concentrated amongst a small number of providers, spread across the country, which has clear implications for local access. Students are being asked to travel over 70 miles to study land-based courses, making the offer unattractive in comparison to other courses which can be locally accessed. In particular, our witnesses raised the importance of ensuring that 16 to 18 year olds have access to land-based apprenticeships provided locally.

The delivery of land-based education is by its nature expensive; it requires land and continual investment. In recognition of this cost, its providers receive more money per student for land-based courses. However, providers are struggling to balance their books. Many of the land-based educational specialists who have closed since the 1980s did so because of financial pressures and their inability to ensure a “critical mass” of students. Specialist land-based education requires access to the modern facilities to deliver practical learning such as farms,

equestrian centres, wildlife habitats etc. This creates twin pressures for providers. These assets are very expensive to maintain, while their high value also makes them an attractive option for liquidation. If these assets are sold and education on the site ceases, value to the local community and agricultural economy is permanently lost. This risk accentuates the need for an approach to funding that reflects the full value of land-based education to the environment, local communities, and the rural economy.

The Committee's work on this matter has highlighted the complicated tangle of roles and responsibilities in local skills provision. Ultimately, the Department for Education is accountable for national policy and securing value for money from the public funding provided to colleges. However, the colleges themselves are independent charities and need to make their own financial decisions in the face of multiple pressures and the heightened costs associated with delivering this specialised education. This has contributed to the pattern of mergers and, in extreme cases, closures exemplified by Newton Rigg College. The closure of a provider has clear implications for the local community.

In recent years there have been several attempts to improve the co-ordination of local skills delivery. These have tended to focus on facilitating engagement with employers to identify local priorities. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) are a key part of the Government's approach to local economic development, and they host Skills Advisory Panels bringing together local providers and employers. However, it has been noted, for example by the House of Lords Rural Economy Committee in 2019, that despite examples of good practice, LEPs are not working for many rural areas, with evidence that their priorities tend to be oriented towards large-scale capital investment and therefore biased toward larger population centres. In a similar vein, the Government's recent *Skills for Jobs* White Paper proposes the development of Local Skills Improvement Plans, with Chambers of Commerce and other business representatives playing a leading role. Nevertheless, similar concerns remain about this local-led approach to skills provision, with Landex Chief Executive Alex Payne telling us that "the industries that are likely to be funded from a capital perspective are those that are most prominent in the area", meaning that a national framework is needed to ensure delivery of land-based education at the local level. The land-based industries also clearly deliver wider benefits – for the environment, food security and human wellbeing – that may not be recognised by a strict focus on their local economic contribution.

The planned closure of Newton Rigg College in Cumbria demonstrates that, even in an area where the LEP has identified the rural economy as a key sector, the pressures faced by land-based providers can appear to be insurmountable. Newton Rigg is a land-based educational college situated just outside of Penrith in Cumbria. It has been announced that it will close in July. Newton Rigg has an extensive campus with two farms. Since 2011 it has been part of Askham Bryan College. Askham Bryan College owns several other land-based educational institutions. There is an ongoing discussion with Penrith's Ullswater Community College in partnership with Myerscough College, to take on a limited number of students and deliver training out of Penrith. However, the closure of Newton Rigg will leave Cumbria, a county whose economy has a strong rural focus, without any specialist land-based educational provider for the first time in over 100 years.



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We were told that Newton Rigg is closing because it is not financially viable for Askham Bryan to continue provision at the site. This was also the view of the Further Education Commissioner's Strategic Review. In closing Newton Rigg, Askham Bryan is therefore acting to secure its financial position and properly seeking to observe its obligations to its other FE students. However, Newton Rigg remains an important community asset, and its closure means that its value will be lost to both the land-based educational sector and the local community.

Prior to 2011, when the site was owned by the University of Cumbria such a disposal would have been prevented by an asset deed. However, as Gillian Keegan's letter of 16 April set out the Government deemed this unnecessary when Newton Rigg was transferred to Askham Bryan as the new owner was a further education provider. In retrospect this policy decision appears to have been a mistake.

Questions were subsequently raised in the local community about the circumstances of that transfer. These have also been put to the committee, and it would be helpful to have your specific assurances in order to clarify the probity and processes which the department and its agencies followed. In particular whether all the relevant Cabinet Office Guidelines on the disposal of public assets were followed; whether the particular provisions of the Deed of Release were approved by the department and its legal advisors; and why the SFA allowed the terms of the 2010 Prospectus to be changed to require ongoing payments in the sum of £3.4million for shared use of the Newton Rigg Campus by the vendor who was receiving a cash settlement of less than one fifth of that sum (£636,575) in consideration for the entire sale of the asset.

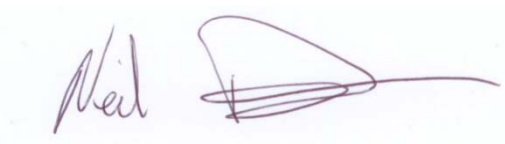
We trust that your responses will be able to definitively settle the persistent questions about whether Askham Bryan is legally within its rights to proceed with the sale of the Newton Rigg land and assets. In any event, the Committee is clear that, as Askham Bryan acknowledged in their evidence: notwithstanding the lack of an asset deed, they are under no legal obligation under charities law to achieve market value for the site if it were to be transferred to another provider who would further Askham Bryan's charitable purposes. Furthermore, in their evidence to our inquiry, Askham Bryan acknowledged that they had a moral obligation to the learners of Cumbria to facilitate a smooth transition to a new provider. The Committee was disappointed with some of Askham Bryan's responses to our inquiry, both oral and written, in many cases deflecting responsibility away from themselves. We hope that clarity about the reasonable transfer of Newton Rigg's assets can be found, and that DfE will do its utmost to facilitate it. We further trust that DfE will strongly urge Askham Bryan to be reasonable in any negotiations with stakeholders aiming to secure the assets of Newton Rigg for future educational provision for Cumbria. The risk of the loss of such an historic and valuable provider suggests that the Government needs to tighten the safeguards on the sale of remaining land-based educational assets and ensure that providers do not need to sell the family silver to stay solvent.

Fundamentally, this case demonstrates the clear need for a proactive approach from central Government toward the provision of land-based education. The example of Newton Rigg shows that an approach prioritising local engagement and decision-making, even in area where rural industries are a priority, will not succeed in ensuring adequate local provision of land-based education, if it is not backed up by clear leadership and sufficient resource from central Government. The Committee therefore calls for a national strategy for land-based skills and education, with clear responsibilities identified at a national level for assessing need, and ensuring local provision, backed up by adequate funding. The strategy should be forward looking, reflecting the future need for skills created by the Government's environmental goals, and not just legacy demand. This will require a joined-up approach across Government. Defra's laudable ambition for an innovative, productive and competitive agricultural sector, which will support the achievement of net zero and the goals within the 25 Year Environment Plan, must not be undermined by a failure to adequately fund land-based education providers.

A national strategy should focus on ensuring that land-based education is an attractive and accessible option. There is considerable energy and enthusiasm to address environmental challenges among young people, and this should be harnessed to ensure that there is the critical mass of students needed for local land-based provision to continue. This means facilitating creative and innovative learning and management among providers, and an approach to funding that recognises the broad benefits of local specialist provision. If the land-based industries are to thrive at the heart of rural communities and the green recovery, then the Government needs to make a clear commitment to land-based education.

We understand that you have asked Robbie Moore MP to undertake a review of this area for you to report in June. We would therefore be grateful for your response by the end of June at the latest on the broader issues and sooner if possible on the specific Newton Rigg issues.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink, consisting of the name 'Neil' followed by a stylized, elongated flourish.

Neil Parish MP
Chair of the Committee