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Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Harper Adams University visit note

Date: Tuesday 17 March - Wednesday 18 March 2026
Location: Harper Adams University, Newport, Shropshire

Attendees

- Mr Alistair Carmichael MP (Chair)
- Sarah Bool MP
- Charlie Dewhirst MP
- Jayne Kirkham MP
- Josh Newbury MP
- Terry Jermy MP
- Sarah Dyke MP
- Henry Tufnell MP
- Jenny Riddell-Carpenter MP

Purpose of the visit

The Committee visited Harper Adams University as part of its inquiries into Animal and plant health and the Future of farming. The purpose of the visit was to explore the training opportunities available within land-based sectors and to examine how skills are developed to ensure individuals are ready for employment in these areas. The visit focused on identifying current and emerging skills gaps, as well as the role of universities in attracting students from diverse backgrounds, increasing interest in the sector, and equipping graduates with the skills needed for future employment. Harper Adams University, in partnership with Keele University, also hosts a veterinary school.

The Committee also held an evidence session at the University with veterinary professionals and leaders of veterinary schools to examine workforce challenges in the sector, proposed Competition and Markets Authority reforms to the provision of pet veterinary services, and the case for reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

Harper Adams University Facilities

During the site visit, Members toured a number of teaching and research facilities. This included a visit to the University's new teaching vineyard, which supports farm diversification and reflects growing demand for English wine. Members heard how the viticulture course draws on growing and pruning techniques from countries including China and Greece, both to attract international students and to equip domestic students with transferable skills that can be used globally. The vineyard

demonstrates how wine grape production can be a viable diversification choice for UK farms, including on a relatively small scale where production is supported by off-site winery facilities.

Members also visited the engineering department, where they saw facilities designed to reflect real-world agricultural requirements. This included demonstrations of precision spraying technologies, AI-enabled drones, humanoid robots with potential future agricultural applications, and student projects involving coding and car racing. The visit concluded at the Harper Adams Future Farm, a 500-hectare commercial mixed farm used for teaching, research and industry collaboration. Members saw how the farm provides hands-on experience across dairy, beef, sheep and other land-based systems, including the use of FarmMetrics data platforms, rotary milking parlours, lambing facilities and biosecurity measures to support student learning and sustainable farm management.

Roundtable discussion

Members of the Committee attended a roundtable discussion with students and academic and non-academic staff from Harper Adams University to discuss land-based skills and education, including routes into the sector and preparation for employment.

Students and staff from Harper Adams University described land-based education as particularly attractive because it offers practical learning, clear career outcomes and strong links to real jobs. Student representatives spoke about choosing this route because they wanted to do something different from a traditional university experience and valued courses that lead directly to employment, especially those with a placement year. Degree apprenticeships were seen as an important route for students who might not otherwise attend university full time, although staff noted uncertainty caused by frequent changes to apprenticeship policy and relatively small numbers of students at higher apprenticeship levels despite strong employer demand. Participants highlighted that awareness of land-based careers remains limited, particularly among young people without rural or farming backgrounds, and that food and agriculture are often absent from school curricula beyond primary level. It was noted that many students that attend Harper Adams have relatives that also attended. Harper Adams described ongoing outreach work with schools and colleges, including a desire to engage earlier with primary schools and to better support teachers and careers advisers, whose advice was felt to be outdated and under-resourced. Local context was also important, with low higher education participation in the surrounding area and more students living at home and commuting due to cost-of-living pressures.

Strong employment outcomes were a consistent theme throughout discussions. Staff reported that Harper Adams graduates have very high rates of employment or

further study and that in many land-based sectors there are more jobs available than qualified applicants. The placement year was repeatedly described by students and staff as central to this success, offering confidence, practical experience and often leading directly to job offers. Employers were said to value placements as a reliable way to assess potential recruits, and industry involvement extends beyond placements to shaping curricula, setting assessments, and offering scholarships and prizes. However, participants also raised significant concerns about the financial and practical barriers associated with placements. Placements in animal and veterinary settings are often unpaid, placing heavy strain on students who may need to work long hours or take on multiple jobs alongside placement commitments. Reduced student finance during placement years and limited transparency about costs were highlighted as creating inequity, especially for students without independent financial support. Some placements, such as on farms also require prior practical experience for safety reasons, which can disadvantage students from non-farming backgrounds and influence them to choose agribusiness roles over practical farming.

Participants also discussed how land-based education is adapting to a sector undergoing significant change. Courses are being updated to reflect new environmental schemes, regulatory requirements, business pressures and changing approaches to animal health and welfare. There was a strong emphasis on preparing students for future skills, including data analysis, technology and business management, with examples such as agri-engineering, veterinary technician apprenticeships and innovation partnerships with industry. Harper Adams was described as the only provider of some high demand courses, including agri-engineering, despite declining student numbers nationally. Participants highlighted tensions between industry expectations and professional accreditation requirements in areas such as veterinary education, and called for clearer national policy on food security, skills development and education. Overall, the discussion emphasised the importance of a joined-up pipeline from schools to higher education and into work, supported by stable policy, strong industry collaboration and better early exposure to land-based careers.

Next Steps

The Committee will use the evidence gathered during these visits to progress its inquiries into both animal and plant health and the future of farming.