

# SECURING THE FUTURE OF OUR FOOD:

Attracting young people to  
UK agriculture



School of **Sustainable  
Food and Farming**

powered by Harper Adams University



**Harper Adams  
University**





# CONTENTS

- 3. Foreword
- 4. Executive Summary
- 5. Project Overview
- 6. Context and Purpose
- 7. The Challenge
- 8. Project Aims
- 9. Methodology
- 10. Analytical Framework
- 11. Headline Findings
- 13. Young People's Perceptions
- 14. Recommendation #1
- 15. Recommendation #2
- 16. Recommendation #3
- 18. Sector Commitments
- 19. Conclusion
- 20. References
- 21. Acknowledgements
- 22. Collaborators





# FOREWORD

"Agriculture stands at a pivotal moment. As the sector adapts to technological advancement, environmental pressures and changing expectations from society, our workforce is central to meeting these challenges. Yet attracting and retaining skilled people remains one of the most pressing issues for the industry. At Harper Adams University, developing the next generation of agricultural professionals is the very heart of our mission. This report represents an important step towards understanding the barriers and opportunities that shape that mission.

Our collaboration with Arla has allowed us to combine academic insight with industry experience, producing evidence that is both practical and future focused. I am grateful to the survey participants, producers and staff who contributed their time and perspectives.

The findings remind us that investment in people is the most powerful investment we can make. I hope this report encourages meaningful action and supports a resilient, motivated and skilled agricultural workforce for years to come."



*Professor Michael Lee, DVC, Harper Adams University*



*Bas Padberg, Managing Director, Arla Foods UK*

"As a cooperative owned by the same farmers who supply our milk, we see first-hand the dedication, passion and commitment that goes into producing every litre of milk. Modern farming is adapting to meet the challenges of feeding a growing population with healthy, nutritious food, whilst finding new ways to bring down environmental impact. The agriculture sector plays an important role in providing naturally produced food that is accessible, and farmers work hard to produce it in a way that cares for the world around us. At the heart of all of this is the people.

Anyone working in the food and farming sector will recognise that recruiting and retaining people with the right skills and experience is a growing challenge. At Arla, we can see it in our dairies and our logistics depots, and our farmer owners have been sharing their concerns for a number of years.

As a nation we have to work harder to attract people into our industry and inspire the next generation. That means educating everyone involved in influencing career choices that food and farming these days is centred on data, technology and sustainability. Young people and their advisors need improved access to information and education to help them make informed choices about the roles on offer. That jobs in our sector are varied and incredibly rewarding. And that they are open to all, not just people from traditional farming and rural communities.

We have the opportunity to build a resilient food supply chain, with essential nutrition and fulfilling careers that support everyone in society. If we don't succeed in bringing in more people, there are obvious threats to the UK's food security. That's why I welcome this report from Harper Adams and look forward to working with government, industry colleagues, NGOs and campaigning groups, and others to turn its recommendations into reality."

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UK agriculture is a dynamic and evolving sector, offering meaningful, skilled and purpose-driven careers at the heart of some of the nation's most important challenges. From food security and environmental stewardship to innovation and rural prosperity, the sector has a powerful story to tell - and a growing opportunity to engage a new generation of talent. Nevertheless, the sector is at a crossroads. As the nation grapples with climate pressures, rising global instability, shifting environmental policy and a cost-of-living crisis, our domestic food system must remain resilient, innovative and productive. Agriculture underpins national security, public health, rural economies and our environmental recovery. Yet the sector's ability to deliver these outcomes depends fundamentally on its people, which is why growing challenges with recruitment across the supply chain, from farm to factory, are so concerning.

This report brings together insights from young people and industry experts to identify opportunities to encourage new entrants to consider joining the sector and to propose realistic, collaborative actions to build the future workforce. It highlights the strengths we can build on, the misconceptions we must challenge, and the structural changes needed to attract and retain the next generation of talent. This report connects evidence with practical solutions, emphasising that responsibility for this challenge lies across the industry, education sector, civil society organisations and government.

## Why this matters

Agriculture is one of the UK's most strategically important sectors. It contributes to food security, environmental management, employment and economic activity across the country. Yet many farms and agri-businesses struggle to recruit or retain the people they need. Experienced farmers and farm workers are retiring without successors, and the pool of new entrants is too shallow to sustain long term productivity. At the same time, young people report feeling disconnected from the sector, unsure of career options and unclear about progression.

These issues matter not only for agriculture but for national resilience. Global shocks such as war, natural disasters and disrupted supply chains highlight how vital it is for the UK to maintain a skilled and motivated agricultural workforce. A workforce that can harness new technologies, adopt climate friendly practices and build financially resilient farms.





# PROJECT OVERVIEW

**Who:** Arla Foods UK with industry partners from universities, further education, retail, policy and food producers

**Where:** UK wide focus, spanning urban, peri-urban and rural communities

**When:** Research undertaken 2025

**What we did:** A national YouGov survey and an industry roundtable involving dairy, arable, livestock, training and careers organisations

**What we found:** Young people value farming's purpose but are too often not considering it as an option for themselves, indicative of an awareness problem, careers attractiveness challenges, and unclear career routes into the sector.

**Recommendations** (summary, using our triple A Framework)

## Awareness | Attractiveness | Accessibility

1. Develop and deliver a national campaign to raise the profile of modern agricultural careers
2. Embed food, farming and rural living into the school curriculum to spark early interest and awareness amongst young people.
3. Create clear routes into careers by supporting employers to recruit, train and develop staff.

## Why it benefits government

A stronger agricultural workforce supports national security, environmental delivery and rural economic health. By strengthening pathways into the sector, government can reduce skills shortages, support its climate and nature goals, and improve rural productivity.

# CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Agriculture is a strategic national asset. It helps to stabilise the cost of living, supports half a million rural businesses, contributes significantly to GDP, and plays a vital role in meeting the UK's legal obligations on climate and biodiversity. Yet despite its importance, the sector faces a demographic cliff edge: 40 per cent of English farm holders are over 65, while only 5 per cent are under 35.

The workforce challenge is compounded by several factors. Public understanding of farming is uneven, and many young people have little direct exposure to rural or agricultural environments. Careers in agriculture are often stereotyped or misunderstood, with the sector struggling to compete with more visible professions in attracting young talent. At the same time, employers face increasing demands to improve workplace standards, invest in skills and operate in more regulated, environmentally-sensitive landscapes.

***“If we want the next generation to choose farming, we need to understand how they think and make sure the door is genuinely open to them.”***

*Sophie Gregory, Dorset/Devon Dairy Farmer*







**This report therefore highlights the shared responsibility for solving these challenges. Industry, education providers, civil society and government must work together to improve perceptions, pathways and employer capability.**

### **Agricultural Workforce at Risk**

- **37% of employers lack confidence in recruiting skilled staff**
- **Skills gaps are increasing in technical, digital and environmental roles**
- **83.7% of farmers who have had vacancies say that they have had very few or no applicants with the right skills to fill them**
- **40% of English farm holders are over 65**
- **Only 5% are under 35**





# PROJECT AIMS

The study set out to:

- Understand how young people perceive careers in farming and wider agri-food roles
- Explore how the agricultural sector can collaborate to improve awareness, attractiveness and accessibility of careers in agri-business
- Co-develop practical recommendations that the sector and government can take forward together



# METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach was used to ensure that the recommendations reflect the perspectives of young people and the realities facing the sector.

## YouGov Survey

A nationally representative survey of 1006 young people aged 18-24 (completed in summer 2025) explored:

- Perceptions of farming as a career
- Factors influencing career choices
- Barriers to entering the sector

## Industry Roundtable

In November 2025, a facilitated roundtable brought together farmers, educators, training providers and industry leaders. Participants reviewed survey findings and helped shape policy recommendations grounded in real world understanding.



# ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The Triple A model guided analysis:

## Aware

Do young people know about opportunities?

## Attracted

Do they see these careers as appealing?

## Access

Do they know how to enter and progress?





# HEADLINE FINDINGS

## What young people think

The research shows a sector that is respected and recognised for its purpose, but not yet fully understood by many young people. Crucially, it highlights a significant pool of untapped interest.

- While 58% say they would not currently consider a job in agriculture, 42% are either open to the idea or lack the information needed to make an informed decision.
- 38% of young people already view farming positively, with a further 45% feeling neutral or unsure – suggesting perceptions are not fixed and can be influenced.
- 4% are already employed in, or actively pursuing, agricultural careers.
- A further 38% could be open to working in agriculture, but:
  - do not know enough about the sector to consider it seriously, or
  - perceive other career options as more visible or accessible.



*Dr. Laura Palczynski, Harper Adams University*

*“One of the most striking findings from this research is that 42% of young people either want know more about careers in agriculture or simply don’t know how to access them. That represents a significant opportunity, not a lack of interest - but a lack of clear pathways. It reinforces the importance of building better connections between education, employers, and the sector as a whole.”*





These findings suggest an awareness problem, an attractiveness challenge and an access barrier. Young people associate farming with a sense of purpose and connection to nature, but also with hard labour, long hours and low pay.

### Young People's Perceptions

- Farming seen as purposeful by some but unattractive to many
- Modern technology, sustainability roles and science in farming are not commonly referenced.
- A sense that farming is “not for me” in both urban and rural locations.



Alice Liddle, Agriculture Manager, Morrisons PLC

***“We meet so many young people across our supply chain with huge passion and potential. What this report shows is that we must do more to help them - and people who have never considered agriculture as a career - see a future in our industry. By working together across the industry, we can build the skills, confidence and opportunities needed to secure sustainable, long-term careers and a resilient UK food system.”***



# RECOMMENDATION #1

**The following three recommendations translate evidence into practical actions that the sector can deliver together.**

## **1. Support a national campaign to raise the profile of rural and agricultural careers**

A sector led and government supported campaign, Agriculture is for Everyone, would significantly build on existing initiatives by:

- Showcasing diverse roles across farming, science, technology, engineering, business and environmental management
- Highlighting new entrants, apprentices and career changers
- Providing transparent information on pay, training and progression
- Helping parents, teachers and advisers better understand the sector

### **How**

- Develop compelling media content that reflects the breadth and modernity of the sector
- Partner with TIAH, AHDB, Landex and other bodies to strengthen careers service information
- Collaborate with entertainment media to shift cultural perceptions
- Establish placement and experience opportunities through The King's Trust and Youth Environmental Service
- Platform stories celebrating diversity through AgRespect, Culture Roots Collective and others
- A DEFRA-funded national campaign showing the depth and diversity of agricultural careers

### **Why it matters**

**Young people and their influencers need accurate, engaging and consistent information. A coordinated campaign would ensure that farming becomes visible, relatable and seen as a credible career.**

### **Justification**

Agriculture faces labour shortages similar to other strategically important sectors. Evidence from campaigns like Generation Logistics shows that coordinated, well-funded promotion can shift perceptions and attract new talent. Make Your Mark (MYM) is a UK-wide careers campaign led by IGD to attract new and diverse talent into the food and drink sector. Building significantly on MYM has the potential to strengthen visibility of agribusiness, expand reach and ensure clear routes into the sector. A joined-up approach will challenge outdated perceptions by showcasing the industry's breadth — from farming and manufacturing to science, technology, logistics and sustainability. The MYM campaign provides a unified brand, inspiring stories and a downloadable toolkit for employers, educators and partners to promote opportunities. A collaborative approach will strengthen efforts to raise awareness, address skills shortages and encourage people from all backgrounds to consider meaningful, future-focused careers across the food system. Partnerships with organisations such as The King's Trust and Youth Environmental Service provide practical, meaningful exposure for young people who might not otherwise see agriculture as an option. Such initiatives are to be celebrated and supported — through strategic collaboration we have the opportunity to build on these successes.



# RECOMMENDATION #2

## 2. Embed food, farming and rural living into the curriculum to spark early interest

Early exposure shapes long term interest. Many young people finish school without understanding the role of agriculture in food systems, in sustaining the nation's health, and in supporting the natural environment. Improving agricultural education requires partnership between industry, schools and government.

### How

- Provide curriculum-aligned, ready to use resources for teachers
- Strengthen teacher training to embed agricultural and food systems concepts within wider curriculum/subjects
- Support school visits, virtual farm experiences and talks from industry volunteers
- Collaborate with outreach programmes such as Animal Aspirations
- Improve promotion of Young Farmers Clubs in schools to offer extra-curricular engagement with agriculture

### Why it matters

Sustained, high quality exposure helps young people make informed choices, develop curiosity and connect learning to real world challenges.

### Justification

The 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review stresses the need for learning experiences that help young people discover interests they may not encounter in daily life. Food, farming and nature are central to wellbeing, yet access and exposure vary widely. Teachers often lack confidence or tools to embed these topics. Providing ready to use resources, industry support and structured exposure helps build understanding and widens the pool of potential future entrants.



# RECOMMENDATION #3

## 3. Create clear routes for access into careers in farming and agri-business

Employers play a crucial role in shaping career pathways. To attract and retain talent, the sector must support employers to build modern, structured and supportive workplaces.

### How

- Provide business and people management training for employers
- Redirect unspent Apprenticeships Levy funds to support apprenticeships and employer capability
- Establish a good employer grant to improve workplace facilities and professional development
- Professionalise CPD frameworks across agriculture
- Use platforms such as IGD to broaden training access

### Why it matters

Farmers report being concerned investing in staff will lead to qualified people who take their skills to other businesses, encouraging reticence to provide development for fear of losing a good workforce. Yet employers who invest in people retain staff, improve productivity and strengthen local economies. Clear routes into and through the sector make agriculture more competitive with other industries.

### Justification

Nearly 65 per cent of agricultural employers do not participate in formal leadership or management training, contributing to recruitment and retention challenges. Redirecting unspent Apprenticeships Levy funds to farmers would support practical, on farm training and enhance employer capacity to recruit. Structured CPD, improved workplace standards and support for professional development would make the sector more attractive and competitive for new entrants.







*David Christensen, Oxfordshire Farmer*

***“This report shines a light on one of the most important issues facing UK agriculture: securing the people who will shape its future. The findings make clear that attracting young talent is not a challenge for farmers to solve alone. It demands collective action across industry, education and government. If we want a resilient, competitive and sustainable agri-food sector, we must invest now in the people who will deliver it.”***



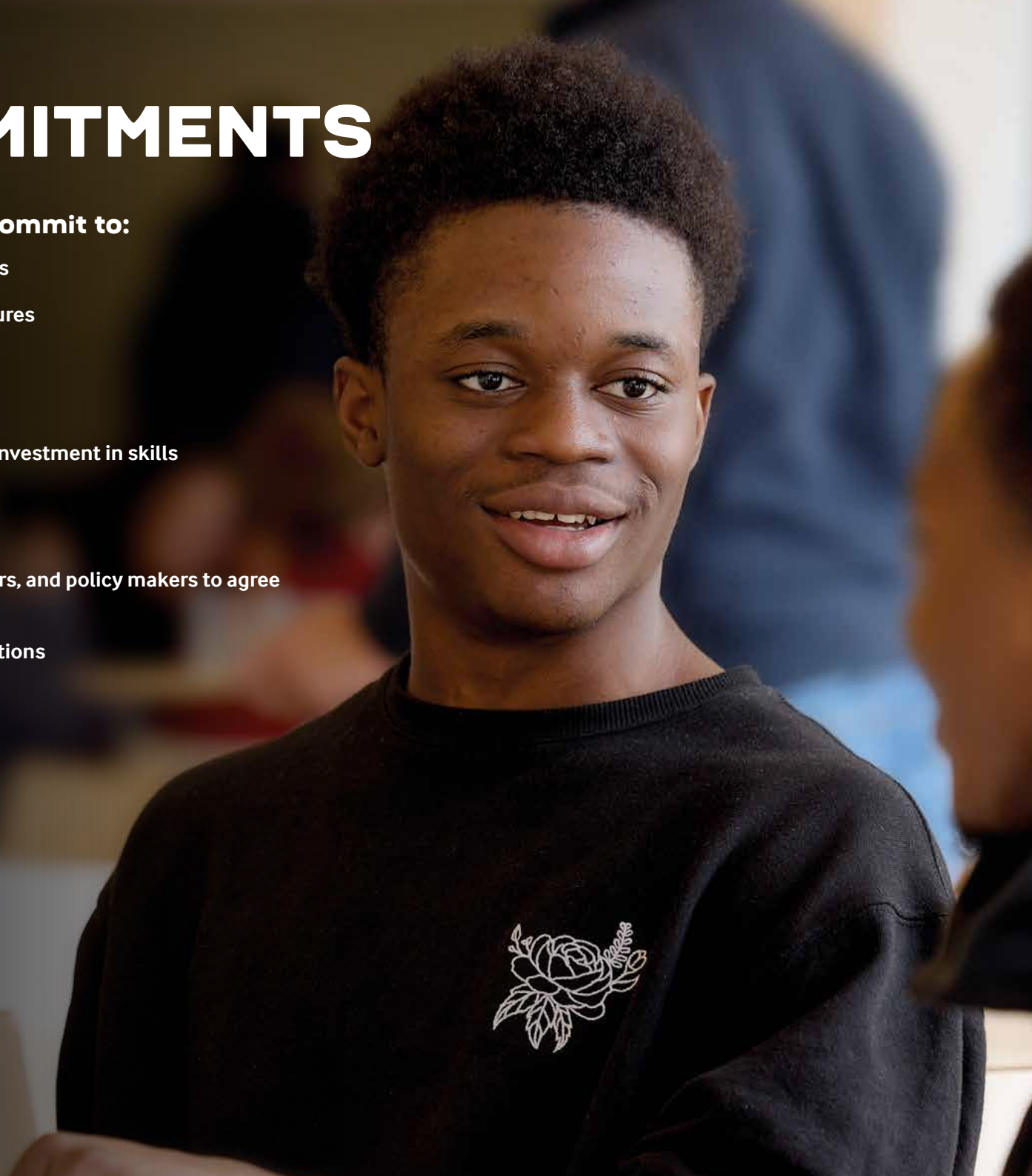
# SECTOR COMMITMENTS

## **Agricultural industry partners should commit to:**

- Championing new entrants and showcasing role models
- Strengthening employer standards and workplace cultures
- Supporting placements and exposure opportunities
- Co-developing curriculum resources
- Working with government to align public and industry investment in skills

## **What Next?**

- Convene a senior group of employers, education providers, and policy makers to agree priority actions
- Secure clear commitments from participating organisations
- Focus on a small number of high-impact actions
- Translate in to practical delivery pathways





# CONCLUSION

This report highlights a **clear** and **urgent** message: **the future of UK agriculture depends on its ability to attract, develop and retain the next generation of talent.**

Young people recognise the **value** and **purpose** of farming, yet too few see it as a realistic or appealing career path. Awareness is limited, stereotypes persist and routes into the sector are often unclear or inaccessible. At the same time, employers face mounting pressures to adapt to new technologies, meet evolving environmental expectations and maintain resilient food production.

The findings illustrate that no single organisation can address these challenges alone. While we recognise our recommendations are not the only challenges to be addressed, success requires a **unified effort** across industry, education providers, civil society and government.

## The three recommendations set out a practical and collaborative path forward:

Raising the national profile of modern  
agricultural careers

Embedding food and farming meaningfully  
into the curriculum

Strengthening employer capability to  
create structured, supportive career routes

By acting **together**, the sector can build a workforce equipped to **deliver the UK's ambitions for food security, climate recovery and rural economic vitality**. The insights from young people offer both a warning and an opportunity: with the right support, agriculture can become a **dynamic, inclusive and future-ready career destination**.





# REFERENCES

1. DEFRA. 2025. Agricultural workforce in England at 1 June 2025
2. Nye, C., Wilkinson, T., Lobley, M. 2022. Labour and skills in the horticulture and agriculture sectors in England, 2022
3. Generation Logistics
4. IGD. 2025. Mmmake Your Mark campaign toolkit
5. GOV.UK Curriculum and Assessment Review, 2025
6. Arla Foods on-farm workforce survey results, Spring-Summer, 2025.
7. Adwan, S., Goncharenko, G., Liu, S. 2024. The impact of employee satisfaction on company's labour investment efficiency. International Review of Financial Analysis





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of David Christensen (Arla dairy farmer and member of the Board of Representatives), Rob Davies (Arla dairy farmer and NFU West Midlands Dairy Board Chair), Gavin Devine (Park Street Partners), Paul Flanagan (AHDB), Sophie Gregory (Dorset/Devon Dairy Farmer), Michael Halliwell (Holstein UK), Tess Howe (TIAH), Liz Lawrenson (Landex), Alice Liddle (Morrisons), Chris Manley (Traction Ltd), Elizabeth Newton (Arla), Kate Robinson (Harper Adams University), David Christian Rose (Harper Adams University), Mel Shipley (Oxbury Bank), and Lharanya Somasundaram (Animal Inspirations/RVC).

Thank you to Catherine Frayne (DEFRA), Olivia Giggle (DEFRA) and all of the above for joining the roundtable event at Harper Adams University in November 2025.



# THIS REPORT IS PREPARED IN COLLABORATION WITH;

Alex Hardie, School of Sustainable Food & Farming @ Harper Adams University

Dr. Fiona Williams, Harper Adams University Business School

Dr. Laura Palczynski, Harper Adams University, Agriculture & Environment

Elizabeth Newton, Arla Foods UK

Gavin Devine, Park Street Partners











**Harper Adams  
University**



**School of Sustainable  
Food and Farming**

powered by Harper Adams University