



Sustainable Places
Research Institute
Sefydliad Ymchwil
Mannau Cynaliadwy

What will solve the problem with horticultural skills in the UK?

Key messages:

- The sector has attempted to address its skills challenges, but seems to have made inadequate progress.
- Immigration has been used to fill the gaps, but will be increasingly unable to do so.
- The sector's current collaborations and networks are fragmented with potential for duplication, and lack of retailer engagement.
- Few initiatives have reported on their impact or been evaluated, making it difficult to know what approaches are effective or worth replication.
- Successes and limitations of past and current strategies present lessons for future initiatives:
 - the need to monitor and evaluate impact
 - draw on evidence of what works
 - do more than provide information on careers
 - go beyond short-term action to develop long-term solutions
 - collaboration is essential and needs a committed lead with capacity to deliver
 - articulate specific government support horticulture requires
 - connect with parallel work on the future of food production, education, employment and rural communities.

1) Introduction

For more than a decade it's been said there is a significant problem with horticultural skills in the UK. Over the same period many campaigns, groups and initiatives have sought to highlight the problem and stimulate solutions. These are the issues and activity that the [Knowing to Grow](#) project focuses on, seeking to understand the problem and how it can be addressed. As a first step, we have interviewed stakeholders from within the sector for their perspective on the problem, attempted solutions and what else should be done. Analysis of these discussions is shared in two *Working Papers*, one focused on the nature of the challenge, and this one considering strategies for addressing it. A companion paper summarises available data on the UK's horticultural skills base. As with all research for this project the focus is production or edible horticulture – fruit and vegetable growing. Not all data or bodies fully distinguish this from the ornamental and landscape sector, whilst some of the issues are common to both, resulting in some overlap.

Horticulture is one of the land-based industries which have engaged in multiple efforts to address skills issues:

“there has been no shortage of activity. However, there is lack of progress, no overall strategy and no plan of action of what needs to be achieved. The onset of Brexit has brought a renewed emphasis and an urgent need for action” (Swadling 2018: 8).

But these initiatives have not made sufficient impact, and problems persist (Swadling 2018; RSA 2018). Of course the problem might now be even worse if no remedial action had been attempted, but strategies implemented seem not to have been wholly effective. This paper examines what stakeholders perceive to be appropriate solutions, and how successful activity has been.

2) The research

The remainder of this paper presents findings from a series of interviews with stakeholders undertaken 2018-19, plus insights from attendance at industry events (Appendix 1). Those interviewed included representatives of key sector bodies, educational institutions, companies and sector networks, selected for their knowledge of and regular contact with the industry. Interview recordings were reviewed to identify recurrent ideas, which were organised into themes presented here.

3) What are the prospects for horticultural skills?

“How do you get people to choose it as a career?” (I9¹).

As detailed in *Working Paper 3*, the problem with horticultural skills is complex and deep rooted, but fundamentally represents a shortage of people who want to work in the sector. Reasons for this are located both within and external to the sector; similarly solutions may not be within its influence. The causes are not always well understood, or supported by reliable data, which makes it difficult to devise evidence-based strategies to address them. Stakeholders expressed a strong view that public perceptions of the industry are key to the problem. Few were optimistic about signs of positive progress or effective activity to attract more people to the sector, with many pessimistic that prospects will worsen as the UK leaves the EU.

However, there were suggestions of positive trends which could ease the problem. Firstly, some interviewees noted recent growth in interest in home and community growing, or food more broadly which might attract people to related jobs:

“The appetite and the movement towards local grown food and provenance, and wanting to know where produce and food comes from, all the momentum is building. [...] It really feels like the right time, and there’s a lot of energy there.” (I5)

In particular, those focused on organic production, or market scale operations noted ongoing interest from potential entrepreneurs or growers. They suggested that this part of the sector is regarded more positively, associated with meaningful work or positive social values, hence the appeal of its careers. Those working within further education reported that numbers enrolling in agricultural courses have increased in recent years, suggesting a positive trend.²

Despite a largely gloomy outlook in relation to exiting the EU, some interviewee noted that moving out of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) could be an opportunity to better support horticulture in the UK. Post-EU it may become economically favourable to consume domestically produced fruit and vegetables thereby making UK growers more competitive. One interviewee reported that likely decreases in agricultural subsidies had prompted some Welsh livestock farmers to consider how they might move into horticultural production.

Growers already experience difficulties recruiting labour, particularly for seasonal work. It was suggested that as immigration declines they will be driven to focus more on staff development and

¹ Interviewees are identified by a reference number to preserve anonymity.

² Data on numbers enrolled on undergraduate courses from 2013-2018 actually suggests a relatively consistent number of students <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/what-study>.

support. Reduced availability of migrant labour was also identified as a driver for automating the industry. This has been identified as a likely direction of travel, due to increasing labour costs, and jobs being “repetitive and arduous” so “ideally suited to robots” (ISHS 2014: 66). This was seen to have potentially positive impacts:

“You’d be talking about a modern industry, that’s effectively taking on board all this wonderful digital opportunities. Maybe that’s more attractive” (I9).

New jobs created by technological developments could present more appealing careers, for example in vertical farming: “That’s more sexy I suppose!” (I4). To be able to make the significant investments in innovation which will allow horticulture to continue producing (ISHS 2014) it may be that the industry consolidates further, with more ‘traditionalist’ companies going out of business (Promar 2006). One interviewee suggested that the sector will also become more integrated with large retailers, enhancing efficiency. But not all stakeholders were positive about such prospects, suggesting that rural communities benefit from small businesses and those producing higher value produce.

Trajectories most likely for the sector will have both positive and negative effects on the skills challenge. No stakeholder suggested that the sector can sit and wait for improvements, with most wanting more - or at least more effective - action.

4) What solutions have been attempted?

Interviewees were asked to identify activity or initiatives which have sought to address production horticulture’s skills challenges. They identified specific projects and programmes, as well as more general activity which can be categorised into five broad responses.

a) Groups and strategies

As Swadling (2018) found, the land based sector has formed numerous groupings focused on skills, with associated strategies or action plans. Interviewees identified several such groups directly related to or focused on production horticulture, including Horticulture Matters, Grow Careers, Bright Crop and the AgriSkills forum, and in Wales the Horticulture Action Plan Group. As noted in analysis of the skills problem (*Working Paper 3*), fragmentation and lack of coordinated activity is perceived as a contributing cause, so it is perhaps not surprising that collaboration has been a key response. But it is not clear how effective these groups have been in driving change. For example, a Wales-based interviewee suggested the Horticulture Action plan “raised it higher up the agenda” and had positive results for a short time, “before it got put back on the shelf” (I5). Few of the sector’s initiatives have been formally evaluated, and many do not report on outcomes or achievements against their goals. Although there was no data on its impact, the RHS stated that the Horticulture Matters campaign met its goals and seemed to have drawn attention to the issue, prompting action which is being taken forward through the Ornamental Horticulture Round Table.

Some stakeholders were optimistic that the most recent sector-led initiative has a better chance of success. The Senior Skills Leadership Group convened by AHDB, and associated with the Food & Drink Sector Council formed in 2018, building on Swadling’s review. Those familiar with it, suggested the membership is more influential and powerful, and with a more focused remit than that of previous groupings. Proposed solutions and actions are to be confirmed during 2019.

b) Promoting horticultural careers

A core focus of the groups just described, has been to collate and promote information about opportunities to work in horticulture. This has had two key features, firstly signposting by “getting people to come onto the website because they’re interested in horticulture, and then pingping them

off somewhere to one of the other bodies”, such as those offering work experience. Secondly, profiling the industry and particular jobs within it (I9). This responds to the perceived problem with lack of understanding of horticultural careers, particularly amongst young people, aiming to “try and promote a more accurate image of what the industry is about” and the range of jobs available (I4). Examples include Bright Crop and Grow careers websites, and the Roots to Work careers event. Stakeholders gave mixed assessments of the value of such initiatives. Positive views were that they helped by “opening the eyes up to the variety of choice” and opportunities to work in the sector (I9). Other suggested that Grow Careers had been useful, but was now effectively dormant due to lacking resources.

There was consensus that better promotion of horticultural careers is needed. Schools were identified as a key audience, enabling them to point pupils towards appropriate opportunities, encouraging them to recognise horticulture as a valuable career pathway:

“I do think that there’s a real role for school teachers. One of the problems is, nobody understands the potential within horticulture, for a whole range of different careers. You can be a robotics expert. You can be a plants man. You can be a tractor driver. There’s lots of different things that people go ‘oh, actually that sounds quite cool’. Whereas the image is I guess ‘[groan] oh I’m just gonna be weeding’” (I10).

Stakeholders suggested the sector should feature more positively in careers education so:

“people can see that it’s a fast moving industry, there is an opportunity to move up and down the value chain. [...] “The career opportunities have never been greater in the fresh produce industry than they are at the moment” (I6).

Portraying a more appealing image of work in the sector might be done through involving young horticulturalists to make it seem cooler. It was also suggested that businesses could link with schools more effectively, offering visits or enterprise projects to engage teenagers. Some organisations noted they had previously been involved in careers events or school visits to promote food growing, but such opportunities were now less available. They promoted inclusion of horticultural activity in schools, advocating greater attention to food and agriculture in the curriculum. School gardening programmes were seen as helpful in exposing children to growing, but it was noted that they are less prevalent at secondary schools, the point at which pupils are making decisions about careers.

For the organic sector, it was proposed that jobs with these producers be promoted as “value rich work” (I10) so they appeal more to younger generations and their career goals (Soil Association 2018). Some working outside this part of the sector, noted the success of organisations like Land Workers Alliance in attracting and supporting people into horticulture, and speculated whether the wider-industry might learn from their approaches.

Wales-based interviewees mentioned Pathways for Apprenticeships as a past initiative which encouraged young people to take up training opportunities, and move into jobs in the sector. The advantage for schools and colleges was that the scheme was centrally promoted, helping it attract higher calibre students. However, research suggests reason to be sceptical of policies promoting apprenticeships as a skills solution, due to lack of government control over quality and their inability to provide a vocational pathway equal to higher education (Sloman 2014). Sloman suggests that the current economic climate means employers lack capacity and motivation to deliver adequate quality apprenticeships (2014). Given the picture stakeholders presented of horticulture as a sector where businesses face very tight margins, it would seem constrained in its ability to support sufficient apprentices.

c) Better work conditions

As noted in the report on the problem with horticultural skills, there is some tension between the need for more accurate portrayal of jobs in the sector, and the reality that this work can be

demanding and not wholly enjoyable. A tendency to emphasise the *image* of horticultural careers might distract from the question of whether the *conditions* can be changed to be more appealing (Devlin 2016). Introduction of minimum then living wage has increased pay in the sector, although some organisations still campaign for re-instatement of an English Agricultural Wages Board to protect workers and employers (Sustain 2018b). Some employers are responding to labour shortages by improving their offer to potential employees. One grower described the package of rewards they offer including production bonuses, flexitime and delegating responsibilities so employees gain ownership over their outputs. There are cost implications but this was felt to be balanced by benefits in terms of recruitment, retention and staff skill levels. This company has unusually high retention rates, with seasonal employees averaging 7 years with the company, and above average numbers of recruits who are UK nationals. Another company which relies on large numbers of seasonal labour is working to make jobs more attractive through increased pay, better accommodation, and practices ensuring ethical, safe conditions.

Some stakeholders suggested careers in the sector could be made more appealing through employee-centred approaches to business:

“Is there some way that particularly those larger businesses could either restructure the work, or restructure the business to make themselves more attractive to people who want to come into horticulture” (I10).

The Soil Association found from discussion with ‘millennials’ that they seek more varied and rewarding roles, preferring jobs offering responsibility and independence (2018). The example of Riverford was mentioned as good practice, with the company’s recent move to employee ownership seen to offer better staff rewards and incentives. One interviewee suggested that the sector will need to consider innovative structures such as more flexible employment offers, or portfolio careers, allowing individuals to combine seasonal and physical horticultural roles with other work.

Some stakeholders perceive increased professionalization as a necessary step, for example by introducing chartered professions (Swadling 2018). There has been resistance to this in the past, with some perceiving it as undue regulation. Interviewees did not express a strong desire for Professionalization; one suggested it would be counter-productive to set up another chartered institute. Another described experience of providing training and mentoring for new entrants which showed their lack of appetite for accreditation, particularly as many were career changers who already had higher level qualifications from other fields. They were motivated by wanting to grow good food, rather than professional recognition.

d) *Providing training and skills development*

Stakeholders identified several training and professional development programmes addressing the skills challenge. Some saw their role as promoting the value of such activity to businesses, to help increase take-up and thereby enhance the sector’s skills profile. AHDB work to encourage growers to give greater priority to skills, promoting participation in professional and personal skills development as enhancing productivity. They have found good training take-up from horticultural businesses, particularly in comparison with other land-based sectors. Their current SmartHort programme of events, training, demonstration and support aims to stimulate companies to develop their workforce. It considers suitable use of technology as a strategy to address recruitment challenges.

In Wales, any commercial grower is currently able to access support from Tyfu Cymru, a three year project providing industry-led training and support. Having identified that growers were not seeking more standardised courses, it works to design bespoke provision. In addition to training events and business planning tools, the programme is developing new grower networks facilitating peer support:

“We are trying to get people working together, and it’s that soft skill exchange as well as the specific courses, that hopefully they’ll benefit from” (I5).

This programme is funded via Welsh Government Cooperation and Supply Chain Development scheme, which enables support to businesses at no cost. It is quite unusual for using public funds to support training, as government has tended to rely on individual employers investing in their sector’s skills base, resulting in under-investment in training (Keep and Mayhew 2010).

Other good practice highlighted by interviewees pointed to schemes supporting training of people seeking to work in horticulture. For graduates, Management Development Services³ facilitate training placements within the fresh produce industry. A collaboration between horticultural businesses, retailers and processors, the programme is intended to develop future employees with skills suited to industry needs. For other parts of the industry and other entry points, stakeholders highlighted the inadequacy of available provision. A shortage of dedicated training for organic growing was noted, with the Future Growers scheme previously operated by the Soil Association not open as the cost limited participation and numbers of placements. Some stakeholders pointed to small, locally focused projects supporting people to become growers and establish small businesses. Examples include Pathways to Farming, a Welsh Government supported project in Machynlleth, and Organic Lea’s training provision.⁴

e) Policy advocacy

The final area of activity the sector has engaged in to address skills challenges, centres on advocacy pressing for government support or particular policy decisions. Recent examples include campaigning by NFU to re-introduce, then extend the seasonal workers scheme. Several stakeholders are involved in advocacy around post-CAP agricultural, seeking support for horticultural production, and a future approach founded on public health. Those involved in the Fruit and Veg Alliance agree the need for food system reform making produce more accessible and affordable, proposing a public health approach to support this (Fruit and Veg Alliance 2018). The Alliance recommends a clear national vision for horticulture, and proposes Brexit be harnessed to increase domestic productivity. Sustain have suggested specific mechanisms for England’s new Land Management Support Scheme to support horticulture and new entrants, including ring-fenced support for small businesses in target sectors. They advocate for government investment in advice, training and demonstration farms, and a strong research base to support agriculture, including agro-ecological approaches (Sustain 2018).

The sector has established its own networks and fora to liaise with decision makers, and promote the industry to politicians. The recently established Edible Horticulture Roundtable was identified as a useful mechanism for liaising with UK Government. Those involved in the parallel, older grouping for Ornamental Horticulture cited its value, noted as a positive outcome of the Horticulture Matters campaign. The All Party Parliamentary Gardening and Horticulture Group was also seen as valuable for promoting the sector to decision makers, although less focused on edibles.

Despite several stakeholders identifying the importance of government action and support, few specified policy changes, or pointed to particular decisions which would make a difference to the sector’s skills challenges. This may be symptomatic of a sense that the sector has been neglected relative to other parts of agriculture and the food industry, hence a general will for greater attention. Equally, these silences may reflect lack of detailed insight into what action will make a difference, and the sector’s lack of capacity to focus on policy work.

³ <https://www.mds-ltd.co.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.machmaethlon.org/pathways-to-farming/> <https://www.organiclea.org.uk/we-help-you-grow-your-own/>

5) What has limited progress with solutions?

As already highlighted, there is a view that the sector has been attending to skills issues for some time, delivering numerous initiatives. Insufficient evaluation of these efforts makes it difficult to confirm why this is the case, however analysis of the material available and stakeholder reflections indicates some potential factors. As interviewees noted, the challenge is a complex one taking time to address: “We’re getting there, I think. It’s just a relatively slow process” (18). As stakeholders expect access to labour to worsen post-EU there is reason to be pessimistic.

The first logical question is whether attempted solutions match the likely causes. As noted in *Working Paper 3*, the roots of horticulture’s skills challenges is subject to speculation more than evidence. However, considering what stakeholders perceive as the causes, they seem fairly well matched by attempted solutions. Table 1 matches suggested causes against corresponding solutions.

Assumed causes	Relevant remedial action
Negative public perceptions of horticultural work	Various promotional campaigns and informational materials e.g. Grow Careers
Nature of horticultural jobs	Cases of companies implementing good working conditions and employee rewards
Educational system does not favour horticultural training	Campaigns for inclusion of gardening in the curriculum and school life Provision of training and professional development for companies
Lack of coordination and cooperation in the sector	Various networks, fora and partnerships, with accompanying strategies
Lack of government support	Government liaison and policy advocacy groups promoting the sector’s needs e.g. Edible Horticulture Roundtable
Reliance on migration	

Table 1

Solutions implemented by the sector seem fairly well matched against likely causes. The exception is reliance on migration: the industry has continued to use migrant labour and advocate for its availability (Scott 2013). It is not unique in this regard, with some suggesting the whole UK economy has become structured around low-wage immigration (Coulter 2018). It has been in the industry’s interests to draw on mobile labour, the spatial fix (Scott 2013), resulting in less priority to other remedial action. However, it is unlikely to be an ongoing option, creating pressure to implement other solutions.

If, as this table suggests, the sector has addressed action towards appropriate factors, then failure to progress seems to have three likely explanations:

- False assessment of problem’s causes.
- False identification of solutions appropriate to the causes.
- Inadequate implementation of the selected solutions.

Stakeholders’ reflections on the initiatives suggests a combination of these three. Some factors suggested by interviewees mirror those identified by Swadling: reliance on voluntary approaches, action plans not fully implemented or monitored, lack of sufficient impetus and follow-through with initiatives, and delivery fragmented across numerous bodies (2018). The crux of these failures is inadequate commitment across the industry to the need for change and action driving it. Discussion with stakeholders found they agree with the factors Swadling identified, and identify additional limitations hampering the sector’s efforts.

a) Inadequate insight to the problem

This project's analysis found a lack of data on the nature of the challenge, or evidence of what contributes. There is a similar lack of knowledge and data on the impact of action to address it. Knowledge gaps highlighted by interviewees included an inadequate sense of the skills supply chain:

"I genuinely think we need to understand how the whole education value chain works from FE, university, right the way through. [...] What does the system look like for producing that technical expertise in the first instance? And how effectively do they go round selling the system?" (16).

They also noted lack of analysis of the types of vacancies going unfilled, training and education uptake or cases of unsuccessful recruitment. The precise nature of the skills problem has not been detailed, there is no data on trends or the impact of activity to address it.

b) Reliance on informational campaigns

Few of the many strategies and action plans delivered for and by the sector included adequate monitoring or evaluation of outcomes and impact. As a result successive initiatives have repeated similar actions which are not necessarily best designed to tackle the problem. For example, the aim of attracting more young people to careers in the sector has largely been addressed through information provision:

"It's one of those things that people do a lot when they're trying to entice people into an industry, in that we make a website. However, the website comes at the bottom of the 'getting people into horticulture pathway' at which the top is 'people aren't interested'. And along the way you have to somehow pick up lots of different pieces of engagement. We also need to do things like careers initiatives, going to careers days, ambassadors and things like that, so we can present it as an option to people earlier" (18).

Evidence of what works to change people's behaviour suggests a need to go beyond providing information, and to target different people's preferences (Barr 2003; MacKenzie Mohr 1999). Evaluation of Bright Crop Careers suggests one reason the programme's careers promotion struggled was inadequate assessment of target audience needs and influences (Bright Crop 2017). Knowing how to communicate effectively with young people and what will attract them to a career pathway is a specialist expertise, not necessarily available within the sector.

c) Lack of momentum

Initiatives which stakeholders described have been relatively short-lived, or time-bound projects. Examples included websites created then left un-maintained or updated, and dormant social media accounts. One interviewee referred to an example of activity funded for four years:

"And you think, realistically, what can be achieved within that time in terms of upskilling?" (15).

Another highlighted the problem of key people driving initiatives for short periods:

People set things up, they set it going, and it might be three or four great people, and they've all got this vision, and they get together in a room and they all bang the table and they go "I'll put 10k in" "yeh, I'll put 10K in" and they all put 10K in [...] Then these core people disappear because change is going on. You don't get continuity, then the priorities perhaps don't quite mesh with the new leadership or the new individuals. And they fail." (19)

This stop-start approach is symptomatic of the lack of strategic commitment identified by Swadling (2018). Stakeholders associated it with the sector's lack of an organisation committed to leading

action, or with capacity to do so as a long-term priority. Stakeholders noted that within the sector “people are so stretched” that they lack capacity to engage in addressing the problem.

d) Fragmentation in the industry

Previous reviews noted the proliferation of careers and skills initiatives in the land-based sector, and that this results in a fragmented approach confusing for target audiences, duplicating efforts (Bright Crop 2017, Swadling 2018). In 2017 Bright Crop identified 31 careers initiatives for the land-based sector and 200+ websites providing career information. Stakeholders identified insufficient cross-sector collaboration focused on skills:

“Everybody’s sort of trying but it is disconnected” (17).

This was seen to result in confused communication, lack of co-operation on common interests, inefficiency or reduced impact:

“There’s quite a lot happening, even today. I think the big issue is coordinating it and bringing it all together” (16).

Table 2 details current or recent groupings convened to address the skills issue in horticulture or the broader land-based industries. It demonstrates the number of bodies involved, potential for duplication, and difficulty involving all relevant stakeholders within a single network.

In part this arises from lack of sector-wide coordination around a skills strategy, but also from lines of division within horticulture: ornamental-edibles, small-large and conventional-organic growers. One interviewee noted that whilst there are differences between parts of the sector “there are synergies” (110). Another urged greater focus on commonalities:

“Let’s start talking about horticulture. Let’s stop talking about ornamental. Let’s stop talking about production or agri-food. Let’s just talk about horticulture. Let’s talk about plants, the common denominator. Let’s keep a really simple message, and start selling a simple message to them. And everybody start putting their money where their mouth is” (19).

More effective progress was also seen to require the sector reaching out to other key actors:

“Probably what’s needed is greater collaboration between industry, training organisations or the education sector and government on how to make this thing work. [...] There are quite a lot of people involved in the process of recruiting, training, attracting people to the industry. And just by sheer availability of resources, it’s not always possible to do as much as you want in terms of talking to other people in the employment talent pipeline” (16).

However, this was identified to be problematic:

“For an industry that’s relatively disparate, doesn’t have large amounts of money, or large numbers of people that are focused on education and training that’s quite challenging” (16).

Few horticultural organisations have capacity to engage in or lead such activity; those with an interest in tackling the issue such as the Chartered Institute were noted to lack staff resource. Interviewees were asked to suggest who should lead or coordinate action on horticultural skills; there was no consensus on which body has the responsibility or ability to do so.

Network / Forum	Membership																							
	AHDB	BALI	British Growers	CIH	FE / HE Inst.	Garden Organic	Government	HDC	HIP	HTA	Land Workers Alliance	Lantra	Landex	NLBC	NFU	RHS	Soil Association	Sustain	YFC	Grower Companies	Grower Associations	Retailers	Others	
UK Wide																								
AgriTech Council	+						*														+		+	
Edible Horticulture Roundtable	+		+				+				+				+		+	+			+	+		+
Food and Drink Sector Council	+						*								+						+		+	+
Fruit & Vegetable Alliance	+		+								+	+			+		+	+			+	+		+
Grow Careers				*												+								+
Ornamental Horticulture Round Table	+	+		+			+	+	+	+		+	+		+	*								+
Senior Skills Leadership Group	*				+		+								+						+			+
Wales Only																								
Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales							*								+									+
Food & Drink Industry Board							*														+			+
Past Groups																								
AgriSkills Forum	+											+	+	*	+				+					+
Bright Crop	+														+							+		+
Horticulture Matters		+	+	+	+	+		+		+		+	+		+	*								+

Table 2

*Denotes lead member / coordinating body

e) A big problem but a minority interest

Some comments from stakeholders suggested that the sector is presented with a very challenging problem, one not easily resolved no matter what strategy is attempted. It was noted that work in the sector is by its nature difficult to attract people to:

“I think it’s actually finding that labour, in any form, that is willing to do the tasks that are required in horticulture that are quite manual, quite back breaking, quite uncomfortable positions that people are in day in day out” (I4).

Deep-rooted societal preference for intellectual work over manual education and careers was also highlighted as problematic. Such factors lie beyond the influence of horticultural organisations. However, some commentators suggest the industry could do more to consider the employment conditions it offers, engaging with wider debates about work quality (Devlin 2016; RSA 2018). This challenge applies to low-wage work more broadly. Some commentators note that for these sectors a focus on skills can tend to imply action without addressing the fundamental problems: “rather than hope that skills can help shift people up and out of bad jobs, it might make sense to reduce the number of bad jobs and make doing them less unpleasant” (Keep and Mayhew 2010: 572).

The sense that this challenge is too big and fundamental for a sector like horticulture to tackle, is confounded by what is perceived as its position as a relatively minority interest. Stakeholders suggested that government and policy makers tend to neglect horticulture. It relies on vocational training in the further education sector which is also felt to receive less priority and investment than higher and academic education. Some noted that agricultural policy has not prioritised domestic fruit and vegetable production, with most support directed to arable and livestock producers.

Some interviewees noted that horticulture is a relatively small sector in the UK in terms of number of producers. As such its interests tend to be combined with others such as other forms of agriculture, or other land-based careers. Examples of this resulting in horticulture being neglected or a lower priority included the introduction of T-levels, and lack of support through agri-tech funding. It was noted that government looks to bodies such as AHDB and NFU as key stakeholders for food production and land management, but as both combine responsibility for horticulture with agriculture the former’s priorities receive less attention. Horticulture has therefore been labelled as a Cinderella sector, with the attention and support it receives not matching its importance to public health and sustainability (Schoen and Lang 2016).

6) Who should lead action?

In addition to understanding what action is required, the sector needs to know who should lead delivery. Given the problems noted above of fragmentation, the need for coordination and leadership was emphasised:

“It will be a sustained effort to keep it going, and I think someone has to lead it. There’s not mechanism whereby it just happens, it doesn’t happen unless someone’s pushing” (I8).

This resulted in formation of the Senior Skills Leadership Group which aims to address failings identified by Swadling (2018), providing coordination, leadership, and senior level commitment. It is perhaps disappointing that few interviewees mentioned this new grouping, or identified it as likely to result in a step-change. This may be because it is not allied with horticulture alone, or due to insufficient awareness of its existence; interviews took place less than 6 months after its formation and prior to promotion of any outputs.

Various organisations were suggested as the most suitable lead for action on horticultural skills, with several bodies seen to have appropriate strengths. Several stakeholders noted the need for an

independent lead organisation to prevent different businesses or groups working in their individual interests, or being perceived to do so. Some thought this pointed to government:

“I think it’s got to be government led really. Because if you don’t, then it’ll just be everyone sort of fighting their own little corner again” (I10).

Others felt government will never take such a role, viewing it as an industry responsibility. Recent UK governments have adopted employer-led approaches to skills policy (Sloman 2014). For those who felt an independent horticultural organisation should lead, AHDB, CIH and RHS were suggested. However, there were doubts over whether they have sufficient capacity to devote to the issue. It was noted that Lantra had previously delivered useful work including labour market intelligence, which is no longer possible due to changes to their government funding.

Some expressed a view that it is less significant who leads, than ensuring that coordinated action involves the whole sector:

“I think it’s a collective [responsibility]. I think you get the energy from the collective. And you get the energy from the businesses being involved, as well. And I think it is important to involve them” (I5).

It was noted that networks like the Ornamental Horticulture and Edible Horticulture Roundtables could provide effective leadership as they bring together key actors and have a route to government. However, Wales-based stakeholders were not sure that such groupings effectively include Welsh perspectives, particular as key actors like the RHS have a relatively weak presence in the country. Others commented that supermarkets should be involved given their significant influence on the sector and their large teams of horticulturalists. At present retailers are not represented on the horticulture roundtables or Senior Skills Leadership Group.

7) Reflections and conclusions

As a sector horticulture has devised and delivered initiatives to address its skills challenges, and contributed to allied activity working across food and land-based industries. Reasons for persistence of the sector’s problems are not clear, and are likely to be multi-faceted. As a sector highly reliant on low-wage jobs typically categorised as low-skilled, horticulture suffers the effects of UK and EU policy which prioritises higher over vocational education, and promotes labour mobility. The availability of migrant workers has dis-incentivised investment in training and labour conditions, whilst politicians neglect the interests of those employed in low-wage work (Coulter 2018). As a result the UK has under-invested in non-higher education skills and training, and failed to attend to companies needs regarding “workplace organisation, job design and employment relations” (Coulter 2018: 219).

There is a fundamental question regarding the nature of the skills challenge: whether skills are the real issue or merely an expression of deeper problems within the food system under neoliberal economies (Devlin 2016). A focus on skills may be convenient way for government to be seen to act, without intervening in company structures or employment relations (Keep and Mayhew 2010). Skills and training are less controversial arenas for intervention than structural economic factors such as company ownership structures or corporate governance (Keep et al 2006). But as some interviewees suggested, it may be necessary to introduce alternative business structures and employee relations in order to make horticultural jobs ones people want to do. Interventions focused on education and training cannot address constraints rooted in labour market structures; it is also necessary to consider “pay, quality of work and employee relations” (Keep and Mayhew 2010: 573).

It is perhaps inevitable that a relatively small business sector will struggle to impact broad, complex and deep-rooted social processes. But there is reason to hope the sector can make a difference. Some stakeholders were optimistic that recent initiatives such as the Food & Drink Sector Council and new

Senior Skills Leadership Group have learnt from past failings to make appropriate responses, and have the right membership to make a difference. It is too early to judge whether this is the case, but these initiatives and others can learn from reflection on previous strategies and perceived limitations. The following are suggested areas for attention:

- To stand a good chance of having an impact on its problems, the horticultural sector needs to **address gaps in understanding** their nature, causes, and likely solutions. Obvious knowledge gaps include future skills and labour profiles, and what works to attract people to work in the sector. For a 'squeezed sector' to resource these investigations they might partner with others facing similar issues, or work with allied sectors to advocate for this to be government-led.
- There is a clear need to **evaluate all skills-focused projects and initiatives**, and assess the difference they have made. This will require more robust data on the sector's skills profile, and monitoring changes. Learning what works and how will enable more precise targeting of future activity, and a focus on strategies with a good chance of success.
- The sector can also **draw on evidence of what works** to promote a sector and its careers from other fields and specialist knowledge. For example, other industries such as construction have addressed similar issues and may offer useful insight. There is also dedicated expertise available on generic activities such as careers support.⁵
- Future action will need to do **more than provide information** about horticultural opportunities. This is because firstly, information provision is a relatively weak intervention to change behaviour. Secondly, increasing awareness of opportunities will not attract people if what is on offer remains unappealing to a majority. The sector also needs to consider how to make its jobs more attractive and rewarding.
- Preparing a plan or strategy has value in raising the profile of the issue, helping coordinate activity, and mobilise commitment. However, there is a risk that associated delivery is not sustained and loses momentum, particularly if no organisation is placed to push for continued focus. **Long-term problems demand long-term solutions** tackled through on-going commitment.
- Some actors have begun to accept that **migration cannot be relied on** to fix the labour supply, requiring a shift in how the sector responds. Whilst seasonal migration may be the only viable way to deliver immediate labour needs, companies need to plan for this to be unavailable relatively soon.
- In the absence of a single organisation clearly positioned to represent the whole sector, **networks and partnerships** are a key mechanism for action. However, they require a committed lead with capacity to facilitate co-ordination. This role requires understanding of what makes it difficult for horticultural organisations and companies to participate in collective action. Collaboration also requires clear protocols for working through actors' contrasting - potentially competing - visions for the sector's future.
- There is no reason to expect government will take the initiative in addressing horticulture's skills needs. But government decisions will continue to affect the sector, and might help address future challenges. The sector needs to **articulate the government support it requires**,

⁵ See for example https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/sites/default/files/download-files/what_works_in_careers_and_enterprise.pdf

and advocate for realistic mechanisms for policy implementation. Advocacy should target UK and devolved governments.

- Strategies need to address drivers beyond the sector if they are to have sufficient impact; not all necessary action is located within horticulture per se. Any horticultural skills strategy needs to **connect with parallel work** on the future of food production, education, employment and rural communities. This should reflect on the true nature of the problem: are skills really the issue, or does a focus on skills mask a need to restructure horticultural businesses and employment to establish more rewarding jobs.

Read all the working papers from this project:

<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/sustainable-places/research/projects/knowning-to-grow>



This research is supported by the Sêr Cymru II programme which is part-funded by Cardiff University and the European Regional Development Fund through the Welsh Government.

References

Barr, S. (2003), Strategies for sustainability: citizens and responsible environmental behaviour. *Area*, 35: 227-240. doi:[10.1111/1475-4762.00172](https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4762.00172)

Bright Crop Careers 2017 *End of Project Report and Recommendations*
<https://projectblue.blob.core.windows.net/media/Default/What%20we%20do/Skills%20and%20training/Appendix%20F%20Bright%20Crop%20End%20of%20Project%20Report.pdf>

Coulter, S., 2018, Skill Formation, Immigration and European Integration: The Politics of the UK Growth Model, *New Political Economy* 23(2):208-222.

Devlin, S., 2016, Agricultural labour in the UK, *London: Food Research Collaboration*
<https://foodresearch.org.uk/download/11852>

Keep, E., Mayhew, K., 2010, Moving beyond skills as a social and economic panacea, *Work, Employment and Society* 24(3):565-577.

McKenzie-Mohr, D. 1999 *Fostering sustainable behavior : an introduction to community-based social marketing* (New Society Publishers)

RSA Commission 2018 *Good Work for a thriving economy* <https://medium.com/the-rsa-food-farming-countryside-commission/good-work-for-a-thriving-economy-64218899466e>

Scott, S. (2013), Labour, Migration and the Spatial Fix: Evidence from the UK Food Industry. *Antipode*, 45: 1090-1109.

Sloman, M., 2014, A long journey to a cul-de-sac: a reflection on UK skills policy, *Human Resource Development International* **17**(2):222-230.

Soil Association 2018 *Digging into Horticulture: Encouraging the Next Generation of Producers*
<https://www.soilassociation.org/media/15861/digging-into-horticulture.pdf>

Sustain 2018 *Sustain submission to the Agriculture Bill Committee Part 2*
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmpublic/Agriculture/memo/AB41A.pdf>

Sustain 2018b *Why would anyone want to pick our crops? Securing decent pay and conditions for agriculture workers in England*
https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Why_would_anyone_want_to_pick_our_crops.pdf

Swadling, J. 2018 *Agri-Food Industry Workforce Skills and Development Strategy*
<https://projectblue.blob.core.windows.net/media/Default/What%20we%20do/Skills%20and%20training/Skills%20Strategy%20Full.pdf>

Appendix 1: Research participants

Participating stakeholders were given the option of remaining anonymous, or having their organisation acknowledged. Those which preferred to be identified represented the following organisations, with some having more than one interviewee:

- Bridgend College
- British Growers Association
- Chartered Institute of Horticulture
- Eric Wall Ltd.
- Lantra
- Myerscough College
- RHS
- The Soil Association

Meetings which have informed this research were held with:

- AHDB
- Garden Organic
- NFU
- RDP Collaboration Group
- Sustain