

West Sussex Growers' Association (WSGA)

Executive Meeting – 18th February 2019

Report to Members – John Hall (Consultant)

1) Horticulture Conference 4.0 – 26th October 2018

The *Horticulture Conference 4.0: Innovation, Automation & Robotics* was held on Friday 26th October 2018 at the University of Chichester – Bognor Regis Campus – New Engineering & Digital Technology Park.

Edited versions of the presentations will shortly be available at: www.wsga.co.uk

2) Defra – AHDB Consultation

Below is a quote from Minette Batters – NFU President:

"The NFU believes the time is right to move to an AHDB model that is less bureaucratic and more dynamic, responsive and determined to work in partnership with its levy-payers to ensure that they are prepared for a post-Brexit world."

"Any new model must deliver far greater value for levy-payers' investment. We believe that approach is clear - an organisation that provides business development tools that are truly relevant for the industry, injecting vigour to farmers and growers position in the market, and the profitability and sustainability of their businesses."

3) Defra – Government – Immigration White Paper

Please see below the response from the NFU to the Government's White Paper on Immigration Policy:

"As a major contributor to our economy the British food and farming industry must have access to a workforce that has the right skills to fit the broad spectrum of roles our industry requires. Currently this includes many overseas workers, and that requirement is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future."

"We are concerned that the government's immigration proposals, particularly the emphasis on so called 'high-skilled' workers, will exacerbate a situation with farm businesses already struggling to recruit and retain staff."

"Rather than focusing on the level of skill, government should consider the specific skills sets that are needed for each industry to thrive. In the case of farming, this means continuing to produce safe, secure and affordable British food for the public."

"The proposed 12 months visa system for 'low skilled' workers would also be highly disruptive to many businesses. As currently proposed, it would cause massive problems for businesses which employ non-UK workers on a permanent basis and we urge government to recognise the need for continued access to this workforce."

“Any changes to the immigration system will have a big impact on businesses that rely on workers from overseas, so it is vital that a sufficient transition period is put in place to enable food producing businesses around Britain to adapt to these changes. We await clarification as to the length of this transition period.

“We welcome the fact that the government intends to engage with the farming sector over the next 12 months and we hope to make vital improvements to these proposals.

“The new immigration policy must reflect the economic importance of the food and farming industry to Britain, and a system must be developed that serves sectors of the economy based on need rather than misleading measures such as skill levels.”

The food and farming industry is the bedrock of the UK’s largest manufacturing sector, food and drink, which is worth £113 billion to the economy and provides jobs for nearly 4 million people.

4) Defra Meeting – 28th November 2018

I attended the latest Rural & Farming Network (RFN) Chairs meeting on 28th November at the offices of Defra, Smiths Square, London. For the second meeting running we attracted two Defra Ministers: Lord Gardiner and George Eustice MP. The main topics that were raised and discussed were:

- Access to the EU labour market remains the number one issue for many agricultural, horticultural and rural businesses. If the free movement of EU workers is no longer possible into the UK, then other robust schemes will have to be put in place to satisfy demand; including, Industry specific work permits. It is important to understand that many businesses need all-year-round workers, not just seasonal workers.
- The UK Horticultural Industry supports maintaining EU legislation ref: Biosecurity Strategy and a Plant Health Assurance Scheme.
- The development of Degree Apprenticeships for technical skills and all initiatives to upskill the workforce are welcomed.
- Government support for further research is essential; especially in the areas of automation, innovation & robotics.
- All initiatives around affordable rural housing and hostel accommodation for rural workers should be prioritised.
- There are concerns as to competition and fairness in the supply chain as the retail sector continues to shrink towards fewer buying desks e.g. the proposed amalgamation of Sainsbury’s and Asda.
- *“The best way of improving resilience in the agriculture & horticulture sectors is to support increases in farm productivity.”*

5) Defra Meeting – Brexit – 6th December 2018

I attended this hastily convened Defra meeting at Westminster to further discuss Brexit issues with Food Industry representatives. Minette Batters (NFU President), David Kennedy (Defra Director General), Gayle Soutar (NFU Brexit Policy), Ali Capper (NFU Horticulture) and leaders of supermarkets and the supply chain were present. The main issues of concern were:

- Continued access to labour – Skilled & unskilled
- Possible tariffs
- Delays at ports
- Animal & Plant Health/Phytosanitary issues
- Further effect of a weakening pound

6) WSGA Autumn Dinner – Vicars' Hall – Chichester.

The Autumn Dinner was held at The Vicars' Hall, Chichester on 30th November 2018. Our Chairman: Graham Bryant, spoke on behalf of the Association and Hayley Campbell-Gibbons (Chair - AHDB Board for Horticulture) was the Guest Speaker. Special guests included: Tony Dignum (Leader - Chichester District Council), Gillian Brown (Leader - Arun District Council), Louise Goldsmith (Leader - West Sussex County Council), Andrew Gaunt (Animal & Plant Health Agency), Jane Longmore (Vice Chancellor - University of Chichester) and Katie Nurcombe (Coast to Capital).

We would like to thank Fargro for sponsoring the wine at the Dinner and our grateful thanks also go to our loyal Members, the National Farmers' Union and the NFU Mutual; without who's support, there would be no West Sussex Growers' Association.

7) Meeting with Nick Gibb MP – Newey Roundstone.

A round table meeting was held with Nick Gibb MP on 14th December 2018 at Newey Roundstone, Roundstone Nursery. The main topics discussed were:

- Access to the EU labour market post Brexit
- Upskilling of the work force
- Planning issues
- Plant Health issues now and post Brexit
- Water abstraction & reservoirs
- Innovation, Automation & Robotics

Another meeting has been arranged with Nick Gibb for 26th April at Binsted Nurseries.

8) Police

We have been in contact with Sussex Police concerning a number of issues over the last few months. Criminals have been caught on camera stealing pallets and fly tipping with very clear images of vehicles, registration numbers and people. In addition; members have

reported other events and sightings, which have all been passed up the line to the local police.

At the Executive Meeting on Monday 18th February, members will have the opportunity to meet Sargent Tom Carter from Chichester Police to discuss these and other issues.

9) Upcoming Events & Meetings in 2019

- 6th February – Meeting with University of Sussex – Falmer, Brighton.
- 7th February – Portsmouth Water – CCG Conference Call
- 18th February – WSGA Executive Meeting – Vitacress.
- 6th/7th March – AHDB Smart Horticulture Conference – Stratford Upon Avon.
- 8th March – Environment Agency – Catchment Area – Worthing.
- 8th April – WSGA – AGM + Executive Meeting – Aldingbourne.
- 26th April – Meeting with Nick Gibb MP – Binsted Nurseries
- 3rd June – WSGA Executive Meeting – Vitacress.
- 9th September – WSGA Executive Meeting – Fargro.
- 28th October – WSGA Executive Meeting – Aldingbourne.
- 29th November – WSGA – Autumn Dinner – Vicars' Hall – Chichester.
- 2nd December – WSGA Executive Meeting – Fargro.

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www.wsga.co.uk

john.hall@wsga.co.uk

07788 107915

01243 587385