

Careers education, skills, training and development for agricultural, horticultural and forestry workers: call for evidence

Who we are & our Role

The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) is the Royal Chartered body for tree professionals in the UK. Its membership covers the full range of tree professionals – more so than any other organisation – and this range of expertise is one of its greatest strengths. It has c.2,300 members who practise forestry, arboriculture and other related disciplines in the private and third sectors, central and local government, research institutions, universities and colleges, of which 10% are working in Wales.

The Institute regulates standards of entry to the profession. It provides support to members, guidance to professionals in other sectors, information to the general public, and educational advice and training to students and tree professionals seeking to develop their careers.

As the professional body we are ideally placed to comment on the skills crisis that forestry is currently facing. We work closely with our colleagues in organisations across the sector, with the UK governments and public bodies, and with the third sector. We also work extensively with committees and groups including the Forestry Skills Fora and government stakeholder groups, with skills organisations, with allied professions and with our fellow chartered bodies.

Key Points from our Response

- Trees have a huge role in mitigating the climate and nature crises and in helping us to adapt to a changed future climate. As the body representing tree professionals, we are proud to be playing our part in addressing the skills and training crisis. It is imperative that in the rush to deliver on Government targets we do not unintentionally marginalise expertise and professionalism, lest we end up with a temporary fix that requires a much more expensive investment in future to repair the damage.
- Urgent and systemic action is needed from individuals, organisations, public bodies, and governments, across departments and borders. It is our collective responsibility to ensure a future forestry workforce that can deliver for climate, nature, people and economic outcomes. We therefore welcome the opportunity to provide evidence and we urge you to contact the Institute to discuss further action and work with us to make our collectively shared goals for the environment a reality.
- We need more people from a more diverse range of backgrounds with the broad range of skills essential for modern forestry to thrive. Government and regulators need to recognise the skills of woodland managers and stakeholders who are key to the successful delivery of the Sustainable Land Management objectives. There is an important job to do in upskilling farmers, land managers and other stakeholders on the management of trees and woodland.

Barriers & Opportunities

Connections. Strong links have previously existed between forestry and farming in Wales for decades, with a high percentage of forestry contractors in all aspects of forestry (establishment, haulage, harvesting, civils, management) coming from Welsh farming backgrounds, often also coming from Welsh speaking families. As entry routes to the sector have evolved, we need to ensure that the benefits of broadening the sector are highlighted to the rural community and backed up with evidence and role models. The forestry sector provides opportunities for entrants from non-farming families to enter the rural economy, this provides opportunities to increase levels of diversity, whilst maintaining Welsh heritage.

Perceptions. We can improve the profile of forestry as a career, and this should start with better informing public perceptions. Arguably, public perceptions of forestry are changing, providing the opportunity to engage enthusiastic and motivated people who would never have considered a career in forestry in the past. We must continue to highlight all the benefits that forests and woodlands provide for society and explain and promote the vast opportunities available in the forestry sector for land-based students and graduates. This must start with careers advisers; at present the National Careers Service highlights only three roles in forestry and arboriculture: forestry worker, arboricultural officer, and tree surgeon and yet there are so many more roles and career opportunities available. Currently, the forest and arboriculture sector are looking at providing a career service through a variety of careers pages and support services to signpost individuals to information and support. This includes for example, the Green Jobs for Nature created by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) and the Arboriculture Association's Directory of Education Providers demonstrating a collaborative approach to the promotion of green careers.

We must continue to dismantle the old lumberjack stereotype and show the sector as the high-tech, forward-thinking industry that it is. School-level teaching is predominantly based on tropical rainforests, students often leave those lesson believing the felling of any tree is inherently a bad thing. There must be a targeted education campaign to highlight the wide range of benefits of woodlands ranging from biodiversity, climate mitigation, to all the important production of wood-based products, which in themselves help meet government climate change and other socially beneficial targets. Too often it is downplayed or not fully understood that home grown wood products, derived from sustainable forest management delivered by a skilled workforce, can replace any product made from fossil fuels such as crude oil.

Diversity. Whilst we have seen an improvement in the male to female ratio taking up roles in forestry, there is still a long way to go with ethnic and neurodiversity. To ensure that the sector can meet the societal needs, we need strong leadership by government and other stakeholders to ensure clear messaging. Government should lead by example, within its own departments related to the rural sectors. Crucially, we need to see visible examples on who can champion forestry, arboriculture and the environmental sector as a thriving and inclusive place to work. At the Institute, we have committed to diversity and inclusion as part of our five-year strategy, but we need government, organisations, companies, and other stakeholders to come on this journey with us.



Short Courses & Further Education

Provision. A common theme is the need for structured training programmes like graduate schemes and apprenticeships and the associated need for funding for these investment in the future programmes. However, a complex operating environment with perpetually changing standards and subsidy regimes is feeding uncertainty. Many higher and further education institutions in Wales, such as Coleg Cambria (Llysfasi), who provided forestry and arboriculture courses including Cert Arb, Diploma in Forestry, Higher National Certificate/Higher National Diploma (in partnership with Bangor University) and the various NPTC training and assessment in chainsaws, climbing and tree planting have experienced severe cutbacks and have been required to reduce costs at a time when we should be investing in the future workforce to manage this vital national resource. With the Welsh Assembly declaring a Climate Emergency and the industry requiring many people with the required skills to plant and care for trees, it seems a dire situation that many highly skilled and experienced professionals are nearing retirement, with very few students choosing to pursue (or even aware of the potential for) a career in the sector.

Accessibility. We are aware that there is some speculation surrounding the short course and Further Education provision for forestry and affiliate sectors. There seems to be a disconnect between industry and education establishments when delivering what is perceived to be needed, over what is needed. Very little will change if these issues around communication are not addressed. Government needs to make training accessible for all with an interest in the sector, this should include a provision for contractors who provide the technical skills needed to maintain our forest resource. We recommend closer collaboration with industry, perhaps through combining organisations' internal training structures with further and higher education. This would allow recruits and employers a degree of flexibility in how training is undertaken and support for transferability between employers. Confor's forest skills training service is an area of potential support for the industry.

Apprenticeships. In partnership with the Forestry Commission (FC), the Institute is championing the Forest Craftsperson (Level 3) and the degree level Professional Forester (Level 6) apprenticeships. These work-based qualifications offer a blend of academic and employment led learning resulting in a flexible approach for new entrants to the sector of any age and the opportunity to upskill those already in employment. We would encourage Welsh Government to consider a similar approach. We need qualified, competent professionals with cross-sector skills if we are to address the diverse challenges we're experiencing.

For those who do enter the workforce, employers have mentioned the worrying gaps between education and employment which underpin this perceived lack of skills and experience, in part due to the crisis in training provision. This is partially evidenced through the degree-level apprenticeships launched in England in 2022. Despite their initial success, largely driven by FC and Forestry England (FE) recruitment to the programme, there are concerns with the financial support available for smaller companies to invest in the training and provision for apprentices throughout the process, which, given the nature of block release, means costs soon mount up when travel to the training provider and accommodation need to be covered. Therefore, we would like to see further financial resources to more equitably co-fund developments. Thus, ensuring more smaller operators are empowered to offer and invest in apprenticeships.



Skills & Development

Allied professions. In 2021, we produced a position paper “Can’t see the skills for the trees – critical shortages in forestry workforce skills put climate targets at risk”, where we highlighted the need for allied professionals, and acknowledged a need for further awareness of sustainable forestry principles and the importance of professional advice on trees and woodland. Professionals bring the skills and expertise needed to deliver government policy, meet the needs of industry, protect the environment and provide financial returns to owners. The small number of forestry professionals in a sector covering 13% of the UK land mass speaks to the size of that challenge. There is a significant gap between the numbers needed to meet targets and the numbers joining the sector. The estimated figures needed are between a 32% and 72% increase in Scotland from 2017 to 2027, and 63- 86% in England and Wales by 2030. This is not just a problem for rural planting and woodland management – for many years the sector has struggled with funding and recruitment for trained tree officers in urban local authorities. We believe that greater allied professions will help fill a widening skills gap.

Raising awareness. The Institute would welcome a national awareness campaign. This would not only provide an opportunity to explain industry issues and how they are being addressed but would also showcase the breadth and depth of job opportunities and the career progression available within the sector, along with the different entry points, which is important for both young people and career changers. With regards to setting minimum standard of skills set for workers within the land-based sector, we believe that there is benefit in cross discipline training, as we do not work in isolation; even if the perception of the sector unfairly, is that we do. Each career path is unique to the individual, and that for us means that only having, a minimum set of skills would not be progressive. We believe that collaboration, adaptability, and experimentation of process will be important, but ensuring that we can deliver whilst embracing technology will be key. There needs to be better integration within the forestry wood chain. We need to encourage and support forestry professionals in contacting, engaging with and collaborating with professional engineers, material scientists, technologists, and artificial intelligence specialists. We need their expertise and ideas to make innovative changes in forestry and its affiliate sectors.

Cross-sector learning. The extent of cross-sector skills challenge has been described as significant, with behaviour change identified as the least demonstrated skill set. The role of microbusinesses is key within both agriculture and forestry – particularly in relation to tree planting, establishment, and maintenance. We foresee a shortage of contractors to undertake this work as potentially one of the



biggest barriers to achieving tree planting targets as part of the Sustainable Farming Scheme. The Institute believes that allied professions, such as agriculture and forestry should be encouraged to work together and develop opportunities for cross-sector learning and collaboration. This is of relevance for a range of common practical skills including tractors/excavators, PA 1&6, brush cutters and chainsaws. Wider recognition is needed for technical skills, one of which the Institute is already addressing through our new membership category of Technical Member (TechICFor). Government can support this by providing a strategic read-across between initiatives involving trees and environment, which will need to be addressed both within, and across, government and national government organisations.

Closing Comments

Forestry may be devolved, but the skills market is UK wide and there are learnings from the Institute's working with Department for Food Environment and Rural Affairs and the Forestry Skills Forum that can be replicated. This includes the need for incentives for professional development and training and a commitment from government for a strategic agenda; we are encouraged to see that this is being addressed and developed by the Agriculture Advisory Panel for Wales. We would welcome the opportunity for further input and engagement as the strategy progresses. We all recognise that there is an important job to do in upskilling farmers, land managers and other stakeholders on the management of trees and woodland, and the responsibility does not stop with one sector. We need all affiliate sectors to want to engage and collaborate to deliver much needed further education and development opportunities.