ResULTS project: case study A interview 30

Face to face interview with upland farmer at the farm, conducted 8th November 2018

Two interviewers: I1 is the main interviewer, I2 present in supervisory capacity

One respondents: R1

I: Give me a bit of background about your businesses, the different activities you are involved in.

R: We have three different parcels of land, and we rent, this is a farm tenancy from the [S] Estate. And we’ve got primarily pigs here, but we’ve also got sheep, and we’ve taken on… We’re a start-up flock, so we’re new entrants to agriculture, first generation farmers in our own right, having spent quite a number of years working on other people’s farms or working in the veterinary industry. So farms I’ve worked on in the past, predominantly hill farms in this area, some on slightly lower ground and more on the larger scale. So there was a farm that just has a mass of landfall for six or seven years, and so I’ve seen their business change and evolve and they’re trying to model themselves more on the New Zealand system. They’re quite up to date with their reading, they do try and implement some changes, cull a bit heavier than some maybe do. And then I’ve worked for very traditional 600 sheep on a hill, hasn’t changed anything.

So doing relief stockwork and seasonal work for other farms, you get to see a whole range of different people’s problems, ideas, solutions, things that do work, things that don’t work. So I’ve mostly worked with sheep, but I have done cattle, spring calving at the same time. So I went and worked for a farm down in [place C], which were slightly different regional issues, but her dad was quite ill, so I went and lived in and lambed and calved for them.

And then I won a scholarship to go out to New Zealand from the Young Farmers Exchange programme to L, which is a research facility over in New Zealand, and I was there for a three months, and they just have a completely different scale. So comparing…not just what you read about New Zealand farming, but actually working alongside my equivalent in their country, people that come and work on those big stations, and hopefully… And I still find myself bringing things up of, you know, try this differently, things that do work, things that don’t work over here and getting people to think about changing their practices if things aren’t efficient or productive.

So that’s definitely…we’re seeing, by given a… Some farmers will just give you a list of introductions and once you’ve done them, you’ve done them, whereas others respect your experience and allow you to ask questions and change things a little bit. They’re at least a bit more switched on to let you go off and do a job on your own. With the goats, although they’re not sheep out on a hill, there are ways that you manage your goats as a similarity of the sheep.

So I’m currently working on a farm near [place N] which is better lower ground, but they have 300 dairy cows which they breed back to a Belgian Blue, so that’s the very start point of the beef industry, is those calves brought in. A lot of them come from the dairy herds. So the market this year has been just diabolical because of the lack of grass and you’re seeing first-hand the impacts of that lack of food and just lack of buyers at the Auction Mart. People do not want to take on any more stock than... People that would have bought store animals aren’t, so the sheep crisis has been terrible and the calves are costing more to get to the point to take them to market, so people are losing a lot of money at the moment. So that has quite a big impact socially as well as…

I: What type of impact socially?

R: Just people’s mental health. You take it all on, you can’t get away from those issues. So if you live and breathe the job, then you do take that home with you. It’s something that it would be…you’re starting to go backwards to a point where the animal costs more to rear than you’re going to get for it, and then is it actually a better business decision to put it down at birth? Which I don’t know if some people are facing or not, but certainly people are aware they’re losing money by being sentimental, so it’s hard and a horrible job to have to do.

I: We’ll have a chance to talk about a lot of the issues you’ve just mentioned. And we are really fortunate that we have the interview with you because it seems that it’s not only, you yourself, you are a farmer here in an upland area, but also you have all this knowledge of New Zealand and working with the vets, seeing other farmers and helping probably from hill farming to lowland farming. So you’ve pretty much… It’s really important that we have an interview with you. And so obviously I’m going to start with your farm, but please feel free any time you get any input from all the other things you are doing, it’s good to know because we didn’t know that you were doing so many things. Anyway, so I’m going to ask you now something which is on this particular upland. Are there any special features that should be maintained, in your view? So in 10/20 years, what do you still want to see here?

R: In the village, we’ve got red kites, we’ve got a lot of owls, we’ve got hares, a great hare population. I went to University [H] and I did a year there doing agriculture with animal sciences and access, the HE, because I’d worked from college age. So just to get my head back in it, I went down there and I was lucky enough to go and do a year fulltime down there. We did… What was it? Environmental impact farming? Is it environmental sciences? I think it was environmental sciences. And one of the tasks we got was to do a paper on your area at home. So I did a piece on… We went on the Natural England website and looked at not just what is your farm, what is in your area.

So there were things that I… I’ve grown up here and I didn’t know that there was a site of special scientific interest in the middle of the moors because it all just looks like moorland. We’ve got protected ancient woodland down in Masham. This area has got, like, hundreds and hundreds of years old heritage and sheep farming and that’s why Jervaulx Abbey and the Fountains abbey were big. The monks would buy the wool and it was a really big sheep area and Masham itself was the biggest sheep sale in the north of England and they still have an annual sheep fair every year. So sheep were a big deal, and certainly if you go up towards Halls, up there, there are still a lot of hill sheep. If you lost any of that… They’re meant to be on the hills, they’re not really… Breeds like Swaledale, they’re ideally suited to the climate that they’ve been selected for really. They’re as hard as nails and they rear a lamb, or two if you’re lucky, and they can manage on grazing that these commercial breeds that are coming in just couldn’t, and they efficiently convert feed that other breeds couldn’t. So the Swaledale is half of the picture of the North of England Mule, which is used on the lower land.

So if you lost any of that habitat, then… It taught me that the uplands affects the lowlands more than they realise and that the natural resource and the water, it doesn’t need huge amounts of fertiliser and things, it’s a very clean land compared to the lower ground that gets a lot of chemical applications.

I: Great. Sometimes I need to interrupt you. The only reason I’m doing that is because with what you are saying, pretty much it’s going to come later.

R: Oh, okay.

I: That’s the only reason I might need to do that. So if I ask you, what does resilience mean for you?

R: Futureproofing, I think, or thinking ahead to be able to be sustainable and viable. You need to be trying to predict what markets will be doing, or be aware of the bigger picture and how you fit into it. Certainly changes that have been made that might affect you in terms of legislation or projects. So at the moment there’s a lot of unease around the agriculture policy that’s going to be changed.

I: We’re not going to talk about that. I think I’m going to stop here, because this project, it uses a term which is called upward food system and we were thinking that probably that means probably different things to different people. That’s why we tried to draw all these kind of…

R: Yeah, I think I saw it on one of your leaflets. I think I got sent something similar. I didn’t have a massive amount of time with it being half-term and I had toddlers helping.

I: I understand, don’t worry, I will explain everything. So the blue arrows is pretty much the top line change. So you start from input providers and then upland/lowland farmer. Then you have abattoirs, and then you have secondary processor, wholesale, retailer. And then you have round them circles. The circles, which are all the organisations…

R: Linked to those.

I: Linked and trying to help and to add value, and together they are they the livestock value chain. So you have banks, you have colleges. By the way, because you are one of the first interviews I’m having in the area and unfortunately there you see examples from Scotland. So, for example, who are the colleges here? You mentioned one.

R: Ah yes, so A [is] the main one, and then there’s B and C, they’re probably the main three.

I: The main three, yeah, okay. And then the extension services, is there something that the farmers can go, like they have more little farms or any…?

R: A lot of the monitoring and testing and that needs to be done will be done through the vets.

I: Okay, so that is through the vets.

R: Yeah, I would say that the vets are having more of a part to play in preventative measures, so a lot of people are doing the sort of herd health schemes and flock management things. There are some other companies doing things and offering services like that, particularly to the dairy industry.

I: Does anybody have a demonstration farm or anything like that? A focus farm?

R: Yeah, there will be. Because they do do meetings at certain… I’ve just done one. I’ll look on my emails…

I: No, don’t worry.

R: It’s on the tip of my tongue. Future Farmers, it’s a Yorkshire agricultural society and they have a number of different farmer focus groups and they’re doing a Brexit one soon. I think it’s 15th November, and they are going on on farm to look at some stuff. So I would say there’s definitely that. I’m sure there would be ones specifically for beef. But it used to be EBLEX. That’s it, AHDB. They have local groups, or some of them have regional groups and things going on, but you get everything on an app now. So yeah, we’ve got apps for pigs and for beef and sheep, but it used to be EBLEX Better Returns programme.

I: Okay, that’s brilliant. And then there might be developmental agencies, like the local council or… Well, in Scotland, it’s got this enterprise, but the equivalent…

R: Oh yeah, so there is. There was a big thing, the Local Leader funding, so there was some agricultural stuff available. There were grants for covering your muck heap, some environmental things. And then you’ve got like the higher environmental stewardship scheme.

I: But those are the schemes, there is some kind of agency behind that who promotes the schemes in this area?

R: Yeah, there is like…is it Science and Agricultural, and some of those will deliver certain things. Again, I’ve got an email on that and I’ll dig it out. It’s just not something that I’ve gone and done a lot of because I’ve been doing more pig stuff.

I: Don’t worry, if it comes to your mind, just write a quick email back to us and say these are the kind of organisations. Okay, probably you have standard certification bodies. I assume here it’s the Red Tractor?

R: Yes.

I: And what else?

R: The RSPCA Freedom Foods is one of them.

I: Freedom Foods you say?

R: RSPCA. They do a lot of free range things. I know some people are Soil Association Organic, but it’s mostly Little Red Tractor.

I: And then there might be inspecting agencies. So for here, it might be FSA but probably…

I2: The Environment Agency.

I: Yeah, Environmental Agency or something which is about…

R: Yeah, Defra.

I: Yeah, Defra, so it’s pretty much. Unfortunately the examples you’ve got here are from Scotland, so that’s why. Then you have insurance companies and research centres. What are the research centres related with livestock?

R: There is one in York… No, it’s gone. I’ll take this and I will scribble on it and then I will come back to you.

I: Don’t worry. You can have a copy of that. And then there are the consultancy services, including the vets, the land agents, the business control type of, or accounts or whatever. And then there are the industry associations, like NFU, NSA, any other…

R: Farmers Association, and some other breed societies. I know I went to some talks from Milking Goat Association. But there will be ones for dairy and beef and…

I: Yeah, okay, so pretty much that’s…

R: Is it North Sheep…? NSA, isn’t it?

I: NSA, yeah.

R: They’re about every year.

I: And then you have the green boxes, which is pretty much the stakeholders affected by what is happening in these arrows. But also, to some extent, affects from government or the funding board…

R: Funding has a lot to do with people’s decisions.

I: Pharmaceutical market, energy market, environmental, social/NGOs. Who are the NGOs that are quite active in this area? You mentioned RS…

I2: The RSPB?

I: Yeah, that’s the one.

R: Yeah, who else are the environmental…?

I: If you know anyone that is active in this area except that one.

R: I know the RSPB did the thing about rat poison and they’ve changed that, so you have to do a thing online now that costs £60 to buy rat poison for your farm, because the wild life were eating the rat poison. So they managed to change that. What else? Natural England might do stuff.

I: Yeah, Natural England, for example.

R: Environmental or social?

I2: I wouldn’t worry about it, just if something came to mind, but clearly not, not at the top of your mind, so don’t worry about it.

I: That’s fine. On the other hand, you have here the local upland community and the tourists that come in there and the general public and this is the kind of human side. But also would think part of the system, they are the animals, the plants, the microbial themselves. So what is your reaction to this diagram, does it make sense, there is something missing there which should be…?

R: I mean, tourism impacts the community negatively and positively. The tourism I think has almost become a little bit too much, certainly in our local community. We’ve had a lot of the smaller cottages, smaller properties have been bought by people wanting holiday homes or second homes, which has made it really difficult for younger people to get property, or people that don’t want a huge property, a lower cost home. But I think it’s pushed some people to move away from the communities that they grew up in, so then you have a sort of fragmented… Family used to stay fairly close to one another and the distance grows a bit. And I think for farming, if you’re not going to take on the farm, you’re not going to take on a farm immediately but you might do in the future, where do you go in between? So to then not be lost, just to a different path.

So my brother-in-law, he’s always known that he would take the farm on. He’s now 42 and he’s still waiting for the farm. So he’s been doing some work on the farm but it’s not enough to be his whole occupation. He’s done a lot of contracting but he is waiting for the farm. So to wait that long to get your chance at being able to get…

I: It’s also nice that you are giving us the perspective of young farmers, that they want to enter and what type of…

R: He definitely wants to farm, but his dad almost holds back at letting the reins over. So when his dad was ill, he had to have a heart operation, there were so many things that [brother-in-law] didn’t know about the farm was run, he was never allowed to drill…you know, order seed and plant. He was allowed to prepare the land but he wasn’t ever allowed to drill. So they have an arable… it was a big mixed farm, and it’s all owned as well, so it’s been passed down through the family. They got hit particularly bad with foot and mouth and it really affected them all and they couldn’t restock, they just couldn’t face restocking. So they have sheep.

Hill sheep come down for lowland grazing in the winter, but they just have to walk round and check them. His mum just wanders round and checks they’re fine. But to see all those buildings standing empty when they’re perfectly decent cattle sheds, but they just won’t let them do cows. I don’t know if that’s similar and there are areas on people’s farms that aren’t perhaps profitable for them because they were affected by foot and mouth. I know a lot of people have spoken of walking away with…not restocking and changing…

I: After the foot and mouth.

R: …after the foot and mouth. But I do think that it’s particularly difficult. In one argument, there are people saying the industry…the NFU, there are a lot of organisations saying that you need to support younger people into farming, but that support doesn’t appear to be given very freely. So every time there is a small property to let someone get started, it’s divided up into lots and the land all goes to tag onto a bigger farm. And you see it happening a lot, so it’s very difficult to get in on a scale that you can manage to begin with, before you…you know, get through the first couple of years and then grow from there. So unless you’re given it, it’s difficult. Whereas certainly in Wales and Scotland, there are different schemes available for new entrants, but in England it’s pretty poor.

I: So is it the issue of access to land, but also the access to schemes?

R: Yeah, business support and things available. A few years ago, there was just suddenly no funding for business support if you were farming, and a lot of the grants you can’t get if it’s direct to agriculture, it’s got to be training or equipment. You can’t get seed or livestock. It’s difficult to get lending for that as well. So to start small, unless you’ve got a chunk of money, actual cash to get yourself going, it is quite tricky.

I: Okay. So when I was looking at the literature, I came across this kind of definition, which is pretty much… It says, resilience is the capacity of the business or system as a whole, to either buffer/absorb against internal/external disturbances, or adapt through incremental changes. So improvements in incremental change might be increase or decrease the stocking rates, something like that. Or transform through radical change. Radical change might be convert to organic or, for example, adding pigs or some kind of activity, or renewables or agri-food, big changes. So does the definition make sense to you?

R: Yeah.

I: Any comment?

R: I think a lot of people are going to have to review their resilience in the next few years. And if you don’t and put your head in the sand, I think you might find yourself a bit stuck as subsidies decrease.

I: So what do you think from the three capacities, which one do you think is going to be more…?

R: I think the people that do number two and learn to adapt early enough are less likely to be putting themselves in a risky position on business terms. But I don’t think every business can make the changes that are big enough.

I: You mean radical change probably is not…

R: I think for some people to… I guess it’s going to depend on what schemes come out, what support there is to… If your business has to have a radical change to survive, the change that will come in reducing subsidies… I mean, we’re in a good position because we’ve never had subsidies, so we’ve never had a…

I: The need to rely on those, yeah.

R: We’ve been too small, we haven’t had the acreage, so we haven’t been able to access anything. Now that we’ve got the three sites, we are able to put in an application, we’ve got enough land now. But it wasn’t something that I considered in my business planning to do. As an income stream, I just didn’t consider it because it was maybe/maybe not, it might...

I: It’s unchartered.

R: Yeah. So if we did, then, brilliant, I could use that to support growth, but at the same time, if it wasn’t there, I’d go and find something else to…

I: You can rely on those.

R: Yeah, but if you have a real need for that subsidy payment to… Say, like this year, I bet there a lot of people that will need it to just be able to survive and get through to the next year, because the sheep prices are absolutely rock bottom and the forage prices are so high. So you’ve got to feed your animals through the winter, so if you reduce your stocking level dramatically, then you affect the following on year with… Because sheep, you get your money in, in the autumn, you’re expected to carry through the winter and through to when the grass is growing, to pay all your bills that have to be paid by the farm. And I just think perhaps they’ve had to already dip into their buffer too much in recent years.

Yeah, you’d hope that people had a bit of a buffer, but I don’t think… Certainly, I got invited to a women and farming group… Well, it was just a local… It was a project from York, somebody towards York, I can’t quite remember who, and they were investigating how… I think they were from the local… What do they call it? LEA? No…

I: I think I know what you are talking about.

R: No, not LEA, that’s education, isn’t it? The sort of Enterprise…

I2: Local Enterprise Partnership?

I: Yes, that’s the one.

R: Yeah, and there was somebody in the sort of media side of things, somebody from there, and they were doing like a pilot study to see if there was anything… They wanted to get a few farmers together, but particularly women, because I think it was to do with if there was funding for training, how it would be split between male and female. And somebody had come and said that it didn’t need to be 50/50 because there weren’t a lot of women farmers. So they were going to really restrict the… And so she really got the bit between her teeth and went, well, I’m going to prove that there are perfectly viable women farmers out there that do run their own businesses. But there was still this stigma of it being the farmer’s wife cooks and cleans and brings up the children and helps with the calves maybe, but they’re not actually business women in their own rights, which is complete… Yeah…

I: It’s not the reality, yeah.

R: Not accurate. And so they got a group of us together, fed us lasagne and we had a good chat, but it was interesting to hear those other women’s views. One, she lives a couple of miles down the road and she is a vet and she’d gone and worked as a vet and then come back to her dad’s farm to take it on. And her husband isn’t a farmer at all and she’s taken the farm on now and given… I think she still does a little bit of research or a little bit of lecturing and things, but she farms the sheep, commercial, the sheep earn the money now. And she had a lot of concerns that were quite interesting to listen to.

I: About that, yeah. So your farm busines, what do you think it’s doing in terms of resilience right now? Struggling and surviving, making a reasonable living, boom.

R: So we are in our second year, just, so we’ve focused on… In your arrows, we’ve gone a slightly different… We don’t want to just produce the same as everybody else, we want to produce something different. And we’re securing our own market and our own practice. So I sell, and I know it’s not beef and sheep, but I sell… We’re breeding a herd of Saddlebacks and Large Blacks that are all pedigree and they’re part of a pedigree pork scheme. We approached a local business, like a wholesale meat, and they have an online farm shop and they sell to… A lot of their trade customers are high-end restaurants, a lot of London customers, and then they also sell direct to consumers from home, so…

I: What is the name of that?

R: [Company 1].

I: [Company 1], okay. And they do anything on sheep and beef or pork?

R: Yes, they do…

I: And where are they located?

R: [City 1].

I: [City 1], okay. So probably we might talk to them, because as I said, we don’t do only interviews with farmers, we try to cover the whole supply chain.

R: Yeah, I could get you in touch with them.

I: Is there a name you have in your mind that you’re suggesting to us to talk to that person?

R: Yeah, I mean, the cofounders are [person 1] or [person2], they would both be happy to talk to you, but probably [person 1], he’s the sort of more PR/marketing type of person, he’s got a bit more time. But I’m sure both of them or their butchers. They’ve grown enormously and they’re now moving to new premises.

I: So they do only wholesaling or they have an abattoir as well?

R: The farmer takes the animals to the abattoir and then the abattoir delivers the meat back to their processing plant. So they have a team of butchers and chefs and marketing people.

I: So definitely we need to talk to them. Have you seen they get a lot of supply of upland?

R: Yeah, so they sell heritage breeds, so not necessarily rare, but they are showcasing the breeds as being different. So they’ll have Swaledale sheep on their menu and Galloway beef or… Yeah, they’ll still have Aberdeen Angus or…but it’s just trying to connect people better to the food they’re eating. There’s a good movement at the moment.

I: We’d very much like to talk to them.

R: Yeah, of course.

I: If you can give us some contact details, it will be nice, but obviously I will try to do it through the internet to find their contact details.

R: Yeah, I’ve probably got a stash of their leaflets. So they sponsored us this year. I approached them, saying, we’ve got pigs we think you might be interested in. And straightaway… We had quite a harsh first meeting with them and they said, well, will you be able to supply what we want? And they were wanting ten pigs a month. When we had pigs more as a hobby, we used to farrow twice a year for the spring and the autumn sales, so we weren’t left with lots of pigs to fatten and we would take the young ones to the sales. So we did spring and autumn and we group farrowed what we had at those two points of the year, partly to fit around the work and life and things, but partly for those sale dates.

And then we realised that actually butchers, if you were going to get the sales through the butchers, they wanted a regular supply, x amount per month. So you had to change the way you farrowed. So we farrow now every month… Well, a month to six weeks, we haven’t got quite got it down to a month, but we have not more than six weeks between batches, so that then there’s always like a trickle of… You know, we haven’t got gluts. Because when we used to fatten a lot, you would have… Instead of your costs steadily, you’ve always got roughly the same number of pigs. We would have it where we would have just the breeding herd and a few weaners, and then it would be 60-90 pigs. And your feed bills and your costs were all over the place, so it was harder to manage.

Whereas now, we’ve sold… Between August 2017 and August this year, we did 94 finished pigs as we were growing our herd. So that will go to more like 200 for next year. So we are kind of quite young growing but delivering what they want.

I: What exactly they want.

R: And with consistent sort of quality.

I: And this kind of… I like that you have [inaudible] market jungle and this type of relationship with your market. But obviously this is for the pig side. What about the beef and sheep?

R: We’ve just bought pedigree Wensleydales, so we wanted to do a similar thing with sheep, because we’ve probably got 17 acres, I think altogether, of grassland. Some of it up here is quite high and quite rough, it’s not particularly the good grass and we want to put it back to wild flower meadow. And then the grass at my mum’s, that’s more of a fairly hard standing, just rye grass mix really. And she keeps bees, so we’re quite keen to…

I: Go in that direction, okay.

R: Do a bit of more environmental.

I: Okay, but who are the markets?

R: I keep pedigree Texels and I’ve got some Texel Beltex continental type ewes, and then I’ve got Meyer Wensleydales that I’ve just bought that are pedigree. And I took them out to a countryside live showing a fortnight ago and we won the ewe lamb class. So I’ve started long wool sheep. But there’s a huge demand for their wool, which at first I thought all breed societies promote, oh, they’re great for meat and wool and this and that. But actually at the sheep fair, I met two or three people that their business was spinning it and making it into yarns and selling it to people. There’s been a resurgence of craft, people knitting and younger people starting to do things. Kind of old has become new and fashionable again.

I: So in the sheep side, it seems there is a future about the wool as a product, about the make.

R: Yeah, that has literally only been in the last 18 months I’ve seen that change. Because I go to the sheep fair every year because it’s just down the road, but this year, there were loads of people and younger people doing thing with wool. So there’s a woman in Bedale, just down the road, and she’s got a flock just of Wensleydales. She doesn’t breed them, she just has them for the wool club, and I’ve not heard of that ever before, someone keeping sheep for the wool. But her business is based on Wensleydale wool and purely Wensleydale wool and nothing else. So to make sure that he’s got as much as her little business needs, she keeps 75 sheep.

But for the relationship with farmers and that we’ve already built with the pigs, I can sell my Wensleydale meat to just them. So I don’t have to go to the commercial market, which, unfortunately, is not a place that does the farmer much favours at the moment with sheep. I’ve found that certainly there are markets I’d avoid and there are markets that are better, but they’re still…

I: Just to discuss about those markets. So from your experience from those markets, any good names of markets?

R: Yeah, [3], we’ve got good relationships with [3] Auction Mart. I’ve bought some really good stock from [3]. So the farmers are still going, still big sales happen there, but from week to week, it seems to differ a lot. We used to go to [place 4] a lot. It’s changed for the set up. They sell sheep… We used to put them into the pens, then they’d go in on to the weigh bridge as a group, and then they’d all go into the ring and we’d sell as a group, and then go out. So you’d sort whatever you wanted to sort into a pen. And now, they’ll put sheep through individually. So that then penalises more sheep because you don’t get an average weight. You just can’t do it.

You can’t produce a uniform animal enough, they’re not machines. So it penalises all the ones that are light, or you get penalised for all the ones that are heavy, and you get a slight group in the middle that are perfectly what they want. But it also gives the buyers – we’ve noticed it quite a lot – they won’t bid. They almost have all the buyers have chatted to each other and said, this is what I’m looking for today, this is what I’m looking for today, you have that pen, I’ll have that pen, and they’re not bidding against each other, so it keeps the prices low. And it seems to be very… Certainly [place 4] Auction Mart, I won’t go back to, like I’m going to give it a few years, because we’ve had really good sheep that have gone and come away with hardly anything. And for all the work that you put in, to then…

I: Yes, but the other market, you don’t have this type of…?

R: No, they still go through the ring as a group and that’s fine. I actually brought around 30 pet lambs, commercial Texel cross mule pet lambs, and I’d brought all of them on and I had more grass than sheep, because I bought early pet lambs, I got them away early and they did okay.

I: And in the future, do you see that there is going to be…for yourself, you prefer… Which route do you think you will prefer there, livestock at the Auction Mart or the other route?

R: Definitely the other way.

I: The other way, do you sell live weight or dead weight?

R: Dead weight. I get paid on dead weight pricing and that’s negotiable. So when I first got to know them, I think they got the better deal because I wanted to kind of do…a bit like you do a loss leader type thing to attract… You just have to be clever and you have to have some business sense and you have to haggle and you have to stand your ground. I started on…the pigs finished…the pork pigs I started on at £2.30 a kilo, knowing that that was cheaper than I really wanted to be. I wanted about £180 to £200 a pig back, whereas that was with the dead weight price and that would bring me back more like £140/£150, so it was quite a chunk down per animal. But I had negotiated that I could have access to their marketing department and…

I: What type? What did you get from the marketing department that was useful for your business?

R: So I got a professional photographer came and took close pictures. I got put in touch with journalist from the Yorkshire Post, and we got [name of spread], a double page spread in the Yorkshire Post the week before the Yorkshire show.

I: Which must have helped you, the breeding.

R: Yeah, and then people could come and meet us at the Yorkshire show and I sold a breeding pig off the back of that, which I got quite good money for because she was in pig and she’d come second in her class as well, so that was a bonus. We had a video, a drone came and flew over, and I’d just released the video clip. And I got £500 sponsorship for the show team. I think you just have to… As long as you deliver on things that you’re going to say and deliver on time and quality, then just keep asking for just a little bit here and there. And for a big company like them, they don’t miss it. And then I give them my time for nothing. So they brought some buyers up to the farm to have a look at what we did, and that to them is invaluable, to be able to show people…

I: The farm, yeah.

R: We’re quite happy to open the gate and have a look at the animals. And they brought some of their staff to come and learn what it is that they’re selling. Yeah, we’ve given them an opportunity that other farmers perhaps wouldn’t have done, or wouldn’t have had the time or the…

I: So I wanted to ask you, obviously in order to build that kind of relationship around the pig supply, you mentioned before you changed pretty much how you farm…

R: Yeah, flipped it…

I: …to fit their schedule, their demands. I wonder, is it easy to do something similar for the sheep side?

R: The way that you manage sheep is a little bit more tied to the calendar because they don’t breed all year round. So I think, yes, you could change a little bit, but I think with every change you make, cost has to be… You know, with pigs, your input to them is pretty similar all year round, whereas it can peak and trough a lot more with sheep. But potentially, there are some differences that could be made to make it more cost effective.

I: Make differences in what?

R: I’m just thinking. You could… I don’t know, people tend not to bring their lambs in and feed them any hard feed, but it might be that they could put them on… One of the farmers, he used to have like a creep feeder out to finish his lambs off when the grass was still growing, instead of waiting for the grass to run out or the hay to run out and be trying to get them through the spring either side. He was trying to push them before the temperature dropped. So he had them on…I think it was on barley but they had to lick it to get it out and then they… I’m sure it meant that they had to keep going to the water. I can’t remember quite what else he had in it.

I: So there are some ways you can pretty much manoeuvre and get to…

R: Yeah, or whether people can grow overwintering crops, or farmers that maybe leave their land… I asked about this. If people that put in spring barley, rather than putting it in as winter barley and putting it in in the autumn, why not use those stubble fields for overwintering? Or grow like kale or fodder beet or something else that the sheep can come down onto. And it’s something in the payment scheme that they have to leave it empty. I don’t know why but it was very much, yeah, in theory, we could do that, but we can’t then claim something in the scheme that they’re on. So whether actually there’s a bit of movement in… If then that isn’t the case, will people think ahead, oh, well, I could use my land slightly differently because I don’t need to tick that box anymore on that form.

I: Yeah, I understand. So it gives some flexibility.

R: Yeah, I think a lot of people are quite governed by what they are allowed to do based on the schemes and subsidies.

I: It makes money. I have a card which pretty much summarises the functions and also the goals, whatever you would like to call them. There you can see the ones in the top, they are pretty much owners’ private interests related to those. That means a return on investment, pretty much. And this one is about the multiplier effect, so all the money recycled to the local community, buying new goods or services or whatever. And this is related pretty much with public goods. I’m a bit concerned about the time.

I2: Yes, I’m a bit concerned about the time. You’re giving us so much really interesting information.

R: Have you got somewhere to go on to?

I2: We’ve got about an hour.

I: It’s good to know how much.

R: You can always come back if you’ve got the chance.

I: Okay, thank you for offering that, but obviously it’s going to be quite tough today to come back. So the thing is that I would like you to read the whole list. The first question is: is there any function/role for your farm business which is quite important and you don’t see that here, anything missing? And then the next question, when you answer that one, is about, can you rank please the five most important critical functions for your own business? So which are the five most critical for yourself? The other thing is that some of those there might be related, so feel free to group them in any possible way.

R: Ah, yes, so I’m afraid we’ve got the caravan there.

I2: Don’t worry, that’s fine.

I: We are coming back to this area this evening, late this afternoon, so if we could come back, but it depends on when it suits you.

R: Yeah.

I: Yes, that’s true. Let’s see how much we can cover, because I allowed the conversation to go a bit longer because you were giving us different insights we didn’t expect.

R: Reasonable workload.

I: So the question is, which of those, if you were asked to pick five that are the most important ones, which ones might you pick?

R: I would definitely say food security.

I: Food security for…

R: For the animals. Being able to source it and access it. If arable farms change what they do, that’s going to affect livestock farmers. I think that’s one of my…as the future, as things do change, it’s a knock-on, you don’t know. Every decision that one farm makes will affect the surrounding farms. They’re linked because if… It’s the same as if you get one year where the sheep price, breeding sheep are cheaper, more people buy them, so then there will be a glut of lambs the following year. So you can kind of start to see patterns based on prices and I think that’s why people focus on the prices quite so much. Like this year, where a lot of people are taking their sheep home because they’re not making enough money to sell profitably, how many people have had to keep back that they’ll then have bred from that they maybe wouldn’t have bred from?

I: So there will be a lot more lambs.

R: Lambs, but then there are store lambs that didn’t sell that people have kept, so there’s going to be even more of a glut. So when it’s struggled already this year and, financially, people haven’t made the return that they wanted or needed to, next year, I can’t see it improving. So that’s why I’m breaking free of that market and going in a different direction.

I: And where do people get their fodder from in this area or for their feed?

R: Well, we’re quite okay in this area because we’ve actually got two feed mills in [name of area], which is uncommon, to have two big feed mills. One of them serves northern England and one of them is international and mills for a lot of other place and they actually micronize their feed as well. So to have such specialist knowledge on your doorstep, we can collect feed and benefit from the lower price. So we’re kind of the centre where people bring their grain to, and all their various crops, but it’s really grass that we’re finding is harder to get hold of, because you’re getting these super dairies that are not grazing the land, they’re just cutting it for silage and cutting it for silage. So there’s less hay around than there used to be and it’s nearly all wraps. The bales are bigger and bigger. So I’ve managed to buy some from a young lad who bales… I bought it off the field, but it’s gone. A hundred bales are gone because we had to feed it early.

So to have animals that can use their feed or utilise different qualities of feed, I think is going to be important. Because if you have these commercial carcass animals but are high-input, then you rely on having that input and you’re committed to finding it and paying for it as your business model. Whereas what we’re looking more at is animals that can use… Historically, animals that manage in areas that are poorer, or at times when people didn’t have… We’ve gone for bigger and bigger and bigger since the 50s really, post-war, and there’s a limit on it really. I think it wouldn’t harm to go back towards… Well, I would say that, being a heritage breed supporter, but there are some real good qualities. You’re never going to have a Texel next door to the Hebridean sheep, for example, but that Hebridean sheep doesn’t need the input that that Texel has. And the livestock that have adapted to really sort of do…

We have got some great animals in this country but I don’t think people are aware of the cost difference in the input of what you put into the animal and the resources that are going to be needed to rear the commercial ones. They can go, oh, we got the best price, but you want to say, how much profit did you make? And I think some farmers don’t necessarily think about being profitable, it’s not the first… Because I suppose they’re family-run, maybe the farmer, or the younger farmer or farm worker, doesn’t need to scrimp on the feed because they’re not buying it in, maybe a different…

I: Producing their own, yeah.

R: Yeah, exactly. If they grow it, it doesn’t have the same value, they maybe don’t know what the current value would be if they were buying it. And I think maybe just being aware of what you’re wasting or…

I: So we were talking about resilience goals and the top one was food security in the context of food security for the animals.

I: Yes, but the thing is, from what I heard, it seems to me like traditional breeds, they give you a kind of resilience advantage, pretty much.

R: For us, yeah. Animals that are adapted to the area, like with the Swaledale, it’s not a struggling breed, but it is a breed that’s linked to upland farming. The Welsh Mountain, the ones that can cope in those harsh climates and still produce a lamb that’s worth eating, you can cross… Over winter, in lamb, somewhere up in the middle of nowhere and it doesn’t need a lot of input, it doesn’t need you to go and pour concentrates or…

I: I think that’s related with a function particularly… Where is it? Seventeen: maintain the genetic diversity.

R: Yeah, profit margins, I’ve covered that a little bit. Because if you’re not profitable, then you don’t have a business, do you?

I: So it’s like a pre-condition for anything else.

R: Well, yeah, I think it should be. I think more farmers need to be thinking about their farm as a busines, not just… I think a lot do. I don’t think that all of them, but certainly perhaps older farmers.

I: So what do you think are the barriers for the farmers not to think in business terms? You mentioned age.

R: Education. I think partly age. Yeah, I do think the older farmers that I’ve worked with are less accepting of change. If it works, don’t change it. Whereas instead of thinking about how they fit into the farming community or into that supply chain, they’re just thinking about what they’re doing rather than what their market perhaps is demanding.

I: So it’s less market-oriented.

R: Yeah, perhaps just seeing themselves as one business rather than a business that’s linked to lots of other businesses. So there are plenty that are taking on board and investing in technology on the farms, but perhaps not things that could improve efficiency or money-saving, particularly energy… Yeah, reduce bills and increase output.

I: And from your experience, have you seen there are specific technologies that can make a difference?

R: Yeah.

I: Which one do you have in your mind?

R: Just a decent set of scales, not wasting drenches and drugs, dosing to weight saves you quite a bit. The solar panels on pig buildings. The automatic drafting shedding thing so you can weigh them and shed them and feed them accordingly. Being able to even just change the groups you haven’t got… Getting the ones away quicker that are doing better and identifying them as the one that are the better ones.

I: So assuming the tags and the IDs of the animals?

R: Yeah, the Tru-Test system they use in New Zealand a lot and they had 1,500 dairy beef bulls that they took to weight and that was brilliant. It would shed them to one side or the other side…

I2: I’ve seen one used for sheep and it’s impressive.

R: Really good, yeah.

I: But from your experience from New Zealand, I would like to know if you will have seen any systems where any technologies or any advances there that you think can easily be transferred in an upland farm?

R: Up in the North Island, where we were, it was very hilly. They were right by the coast, so they had quite harsh weather coming from that side. They had 15,000 ewes, so they were a relatively big set-up and they were so much more efficient in handling those animals. I was really impressed in just the handling, the way that they were designed. They weren’t all-singing, all-dancing and fancy, but the farmers knew how to move and handle the animals quickly and with least stress to the animal. I mean, we could drench 3,000 sheep in a morning, and then have lunch and do something else in the afternoon. Whereas here, I think it can take all day to do 300 sometimes; we’re just quite slow in comparison.

And I think largely because they know how to work a dog, they make use of sheepdogs. I’ve seen so many farmers chasing their sheep around the fields on quadbikes, shouting and waving their arms at them and the sheep aren’t going where they should. Not even just younger people, more sheep farmers working dogs and they have the Huntaways who would jump on the backs in the races and bark and they could [inaudible] moving through. And the design of them, they would keep them…the main, the really big yard that they had where they would gather everything in was circular and it all kind of fed from one bit to another, like to another segment. And then in the centre, they had a covered area that had an automated shedding weighing system, but it also turned on its side for doing clipping them out behind or doing feet.

You could then access them shoulder and legs if you were giving them an injection of anything and there was no… I think it would reduce injuries massively because you weren’t having to manually turn sheep. So for manhandling, it was brilliant because you didn’t have to wrestle with the sheep. And over here, some people have rollover crates, but I think because of the scale of it over there, to invest in that sort of technology is a more viable business decision. Whereas over here, our flock size is smaller and I think people are less willing to share equipment because of legislation. You could disinfect a piece of equipment and let another farmer use it, but I think farmers are a bit scared of what disease risk there might be of another farm. I’ve often thought why don’t communities have shared equipment?

When we first moved here, people would come and help us plough the field. People tend to keep their equipment to themselves a lot more than they used to because you don’t want to get something that the neighbour’s got, regardless of the fact that all the wildlife and the birds are all going to move things around anyway if there was a disease problem. And then they’ll go to the sales and mix. I do think that [inaudible] and vets and things. Biosecurity, a bit of a fear of getting something that someone else might have maybe is preventing people investing as a community. Whether there could be shared equipment that would get you past that that you could all benefit from it. But maybe that’s just a nice idea that wouldn’t happen in reality.

I: Is there technology we need related to the scale and the fear about biosecurity or weight? But also, from what I understood from New Zealand, is that the human skill of the people…

R: Yes, so I do think that a lot of farmers… Every sheep farmer now has the ID tags in their ears, but that isn’t used in a lot of flocks to help… There are a lot of ways that you can use that to keep better records, but that’s just another job, another bit of paperwork. And I think some farmer are keeping good records that then allow them to select better performing animals. They could actually know by that animal’s number, match that to a record of how it’s performed at lambing time, what weight its lambs were at birth, what weight they finished at. Does that ewe produce a good carcass lamb that finishes quickly, or does she always stamp on them when they’re born, or always have to get the vet out? And there are so many farmers out there that simply don’t have records on their animals’ performance, whether that’s on the progeny or the animal itself. So how can you then know how…?

You’re guessing at what you’re going to achieve each year and hoping or… You might persevere with a lay miss in an animal that really delivers and has genetics that you want to keep, or you might even consider a really good cow, if it’s getting older, embryo transfer younger… If you’ve got a heifer that’s… You’ve had a cow that’s given you six or seven wonderful cows that are also producing well, then do you flush them with those heifers and do an embryo transfer into some surrogates and then build this better performing base?

I: From your experience, most of the farmers don’t do that?

R: No.

I: Although it’s possible, they don’t.

R: I think cost is a limitation, definitely.

I: Cost in terms of what?

R: Investing in that technology initially, whether that’s breeding technologies or whether that’s actual physical machinery implements or some equipment.

I: And when you were in New Zealand, did they have a better way to record all these data?

R: Yeah, almost every farmer would have farm management software, but certainly in the hill farmers, you don’t see them having an office with a system recording all that information as commonplace. There’s certainly only one farm I can think that they would read up on what was going on. But they also have 2,000 pigs, so they’re used to keeping a lot of sow performance records and they’re just transferred across for the sheep that they’ve got. Three or four farms, but I think they had about 2,000 sheep, so they were quite big on the sheep as well.

I2: We’ve got about half an hour.

I: Okay, so that’s fine. What you have discussed, can you give me a bit of numbers of the five of them?

R: Definitely number one, the profit margins.

I: And number 17 because you mentioned about keeping the traditional ring.

R: So is it five from both of these?

I: Yeah, for the whole list.

R: Okay. The food security, number seven.

I: Number seven, okay. But for in the terms you discussed.

I: It’s livestock feed.

R: I would say number 20.

I: Landscape management.

R: Yeah. And soil structure. I worked at the farm that have the…the good farm down near [place 1] that I did a lot on the ergonomics farm and they’ve found that… They’ve now put cattle back into the farm and reintroduced beef cattle. They buy the calves, so they started off with 40 at a time and they were up to…I think they’re up to just over 200 now, because they needed the manure to improve the soil structure and the drainage and the land. So they recognised that they needed more organic matter in their soil because it was being ploughed too deep. So they got the cows with that in mind, to improve the soil quality, and the yield on some of their arable crops. So the cows… They planted some grass and they would do paddock grazing. It’s always nice going down there because they’re actually forward-thinking. So cattle have been brought in to support…

I: So is it a lowland farm, that one?

R: They’re just down the road, but they’re not up on the hill. They’re down by the river.

I: That’s fine. What are the grazing systems? Have you seen anything in New Zealand that can be transferred here?

R: Yes, paddock grazing. So they’ve moved them on…

I: So it’s a kind of rotation.

R: They move them on… It’s moving the animals on, partly for…so the parasite burden doesn’t get so high because they’ve already moved them on to fresh grass. And things aren’t grazed as short either, so they would move cattle on, and then the sheep would follow the cattle, and then they’d move them on. But their paddocks aren’t like ours, they’re a 100 acre paddock, each one, so they would be on there for a fortnight, and then they’d move them on to another one for a fortnight. You’re constantly moving your animals around, but the benefits were worth it.

I: But you haven’t seen anything here in the UK, you don’t get any information about those systems in the UK?

R: There were some Better Returns programme leaflets for…

I: Produced by?

R: EBLEX, AHDB.

I: So this is the only source about that?

R: Yeah, I remember quoting some of them in something I’d written, looking very much on, go back to the grassland, making sure the quality of that grass is good. But that’s for pushing these commercial animals rather than thinking… That’s great if you can plough up and start again and reseed/overseed. Some of those species will not grow at the altitude. The growing season is shorter, the temperature, the soil quality of what you’re planting, you have to make do with… It’s more having, I think, animals that can cope with the conservation grazing, that sort of can utilise what is there, rather than trying to change the uplands to suit lowland animals.

I: Okay, so pretty much it needs that kind of adaptation of those kind of systems to feed to the upland?

R: Yeah, for beef and sheep in the uplands, I think you need upland breeds that are adapted to suit those conditions, lower stocking density. You know, account for the fact that there’s going to be a lower stocking density. Try and improve the value of what they can get back for that animal, rather than comparing it all the time to the commercial counterpart in the market, try and… Yeah, I don’t know how we’d do it but try and see if things like the [inaudible] whether they can put it on and then you…

The Herdwicks did a brilliant job of making Herdwick meat. It was on Country File, where they did a whole piece about Herdwicks… They protected the name of it, it’s a regional food to Cumbria, because they’re a hill sheep, the Herdwicks. Yeah, they’ve even got like a range of gifts, a giftware range with a herd trademark on, and it’s like the tourists are supporting that as well because they’re buying into the Herdwicks as being part of that area. Well, if every sheep breed could…well, not even every sheep breed, but if you did that with Swalesdales, they’re known for Yorkshire and it’s on the Yorkshire Dales National Park logo.

I: So it’s a kind of missing opportunity there?

R: Yeah, if somebody clever in marketing could get on to it and make a difference that way, because then it will filter back into the local community.

I: Before we look at that one, I would just like to ask you very briefly, what would be the impact if upland sheep and beef cattle farming is dramatically reduced or ceased altogether in this area?

R: There would be an awful lot of… You have to have them to manage those environments. The knock-on would be you have a lot of plants that would be choked by weeds and grasses. It’s like the whole ecosystem, it…

I: So is it in terms of ecosystem, we are going to lose some of the habitats, there is going to be degradation if we don’t have grazing livestock?

R: Yeah.

I: But what about, if there are any, effects for the supply chain, the lowland farmers?

R: If you reduced the number of…certainly of hill sheep, then I couldn’t imagine how you would… And a lot of people have brought beef cattle inside, they’ve fattened them, and that’s changed already, I think. I think it’s become easier to the farmer to just drive along with the tractor and feed cattle inside and cut the grass rather than manging cows outside. The dairy cows moving inside I think has then meant people will have sheds with finishing cattle inside. And I’ve seen finishing cattle inside in summer, which just seems a bit… I mean, the farmer here, he keeps his out and just brings them in for the winter, but I think there are people that are calf rearing and then they’re kind of going in sheds rather than going out into the field for the summer. Because that grass has been used to make silage or something, it’s not turnout.

I don’t think that’s necessarily the best thing for those cows, but that’s lowlands really, isn’t it? As far as uplands go, there need to be cows out. The cows that can manage out all year round. There are plenty of breeds that can. How to answer it…?

I: Don’t worry, we might have time to talk a bit about the effects on the lowland later on. But I would like you to check this list, disturbances and long-term pressures, so drivers of change, whatever you want to call it, pretty much we are talking about the same thing. So the whole list, if you will read that list, it sounds like threats, and I wonder if you see any there with an opportunity for a business like yours. And also, if there is any driver which is quite important and it’s missing from that list.

R: Okay. Weather patterns…

I: Read the whole list and then we’re going to have a discussion.

R: This covers such a massive topic, doesn’t it? You could talk for hours on any of these.

I: Any that particularly resonate with you?

R: Global trade, I think we’re going to see…

I: Which number is that?

R: Thirteen. I think we’re going to see, particularly soya, a big import of the feed really and I think it is in a lot of the rations that finishing cattle will have. And I think that’s going to become prohibitively expensive if the trade agreement…if there are tariffs, or if there are increased costs to importing it. We import quite a lot of pork, and I know that’s not beef and sheep, but I think we import a lot of New Zealand lamb, which seems crazy. I think we should be eating a lot more of our own lamb, but they need to get behind it and change the consumer drive now, not wait for it to be an issue to farmers.

There needs to be a push to really support and get behind what we can produce in this country and try and secure our own market on the things we’re good at, and then seek alternatives for things that we can’t. So here, we’re doing a trial on not feeding the soya and replacing it with milk. So our breeding sows are getting… we’ve just farrowed some in September and we’ve been giving them goats milk on barley, looking at alternative protein sources.

I: So this is for pigs?

R: Yeah, but…

I: But for the sheep side?

R: Not so much sheep, but I’m thinking of beef production, whether you can turn to different proteins…rethink their diet instead of just buying what the mill has, premixed in a bag. People used to feed a much wider range of things as straights and then formulate rations that suited what they didn’t have access to, I suppose. Make it easier to buy direct from other farmers. If there was an initiative that you could buy…like you can buy grass or hay off the field, can you buy corn off the field? Can you buy…? Being able to store. Because if you knew you were going to need to buy a lot of feed in for your beef cattle but you didn’t grow it yourself, so you were buying it from a secondary business, a feed mill, then if you could save money by storing a lot of barley, say, then if you could buy that barley direct off another farmer at harvest time and it would be just brought straight to your… Have it local. Because every time it has to travel, it pushes the prices up.

I: But how is it blocked now?

I2: What’s blocking that happening there? What’s stopping that happening?

R: If your farm didn’t have the storage, you’d have to invest in silos. So maybe infrastructure on your farm. Or the price being offered by… I don’t know, maybe the prices being offered and just the easiness of taking it to the mill, traditionally, that’s what’s been done. There isn’t someone approaching you, saying, can I buy it? I’m not sure really. I’m just sort of…

I: You’re brainstorming.

R: Yeah, I am, because I’m not an arable farmer. Yeah, whether there could be an initiative to… It’s like they’ve done with the covered muck heaps, whether they could do silos and storage for fodder, a funding pot for being able to put in a new haybarn or something, I don’t know. To be able to stockpile what you need when the price is good definitely is a good thing for grass fed animals.

I: So right now, you don’t do it because of the infrastructure barriers but you think it might be…

R: A lot of upland, or the majority of upland farms, won’t be growing what they’re feeding through the winter. They’ll have to buy it in or they’ll have to move the animals down to lowland and have them. Because it can’t be grown… Not all of them, but there are some mixed farms that are altitude. If you start looking to really moorland and things, they can’t grow even the hay and silage that they would need to take the cattle through. So they’ll have to buy some supplement feeding from somewhere.

I: So they needed to rely on external…they had to…

R: Yeah, they have to rely on other farms or they’ll have to buy it from either places, so they’re not going to be growing their own barley, they’ll have to buy it in. So if those upland farms can have some sort of support scheme to be able to benefit from the price being good, whether they could… Because if they haven’t sold their sheep before… If they’re selling their sheep in autumn but the good price is there in, say, July or May, but they haven’t got the money available at that time to go and buy the full winter’s worth of hay, even if they can store it, cashflow, they can’t actually buy it. So that might be something to consider.

I: So some kind of loan or something?

R: Yeah, some sort of forage scheme.

I: Great, because at the same time, you are giving suggestions about how we are going to fix these issues, solutions, which is great. From that list, you mentioned at the beginning about weather or… What type of issues do you have here with the weather and how have you tried to tackle that issue?

R: In this area, we’re at the bottom of lower [area name], so we get a lot of the water. When you’ve had a drought, the water was… So my other half is a fireman, so he gets called out to sort out the floods. So a couple of years ago, we had quite extreme flooding over Christmas, not last year, the year before, and if we’ve had particularly dry weather…or if we’ve had lots and lots of rain, then there’s nowhere for the water to go and it floods. Or if it’s been very dry, it just goes over the top, it doesn’t go into the ground.

So maybe some compaction and overstock, maybe some more attention needs to be given to soil structure or the planting of trees. Again, it’s an area that I’m not… I know the estate do have forestry things going on, some are maybe not particularly well managed, whether there needs to be more. There are some areas that flood regularly. We’ve got a field that’s right on the river bank and I was told that it has flooded every year, but a different month every year. So you can’t know when it’s going to flood, but so far, we’ve had it for 18 months and it hasn’t breached its banks. We’re kind of expecting it to this year.

I: What impact does it have on your farm when that happens?

R: If that happens, like it did with a lot of people when it did flood quite badly – was it last year? – and if the water sits on the land, then it can affect the grass growth or kill it off completely. It damaged the fencing, so we need to refence that field because the fencing has been hit by water and not been replaced. To be refence that field, it’s going to cost, but you should get 15 years out of that fencing, but because it’s on the river… We rely on other people maintaining their bits of riverbank and the angling club and... We’re quite lucky that they do manage it quite well because they can fish quite well. But if you were in a stretch of river that wasn’t particularly managed well, then it would affect your… Having riverbank land is so much more complicated than having just a field, boundaries by other fields, because you have that risk of that water opening on to your field, or the creatures that come with that water coming on to your field.

We are opposite a wetlands, the old quarry was made into [name of area] Wetlands, and you get lots of migrating birds, which then all come and eat your grass. So we have an enormous amount of geese…

I: So that’s pretty much number two, I think.

R: Yeah, and I wouldn’t have thought geese being an issue, but my god, they were. They ate a lot. And rabbits in the sand, sandbanks, there are more rabbits than I’ve ever seen on a field. I think round here, pollution isn’t really a problem for us, it’s quite clean land and there are a lot of people in the higher level environmental schemes and I think people are quite switched on to the environment.

I2: So it’s pretty much more the number six you’re talking about, the extreme weather.

I: The extreme weather.

I: Yeah, but if there are any gradual slow changes in the weather, like more humidity or more rainfall or more wind or gradual increase of the temperature that you see the effects of it?

R: Yeah, so when I was younger, we used to get proper winters and we’ve had wetter, milder winters, which then don’t get kill disease off. And I think there’s certainly more… There are issues with…they seem to put quite a lot of drugs into commercial sheep flocks just to keep them healthy. Like if you don’t, you’re going to lose a lot of your lambs or you’re going to have the growth of those lambs…

I: Do the vets use any diagnostics?

R: Yeah, so when I worked at the vet’s, the health schemes that the flocks could be on, it did cost to be on those health schemes, but they were head counting as part of that. What else did they do? Well, [name of vet] will be able to tell you.

I: And who runs here the health schemes? It’s [name of vet] and who else is doing any work on that?

R: So the vets themselves, [name of larger veterinary practice], they had schemes that they offered as a service to monitor lameness, fertility. When they’re counting, they would discuss each farm with the farmer. It wasn’t a set thing, it was flexibly tailored to each farm, trying to sort of get through any of the problems that they’d had in the past, I suppose, and build the plan to be more preventative.

I2: We need to go in about ten minutes. I’m sorry, we have another…

R: That’s okay.

I: So about this list, what about eight and nine?

R: Like I said, supermarkets or the market, if they drive it down to the farmer, there’s nothing the farmer can do about it, if that’s all that people… If something is only worth as much as someone’s willing to pay, if they refuse to pay what it costs, you can’t say, sorry, no, I’ll sell it to someone else, if they are the market. I don’t know that enough is done to fight for the farmer.

I: I wonder, have you ever…? Some of the supermarkets have farm goods and they create some meetings with the farms or whatever. So they have some…

R: Representatives.

I: Yes. Have you been involved in any of those? Have you met anyone from the supermarkets?

I2: Any of the buyers or…?

I: Yeah, any of the buyers.

R: The only buyers we’ve had come here were actually… [organisation 1] people had pitched for a heritage meats tender for [shop 1] in London, so we had six buyers that came up from [shop 1]. That was for beef, lamb, pork and poultry. So they came here to look at the pork…

I: But I was thinking about some of the farms that you’ve worked on.

R: Worked on. Yeah, so the goat milk that goes to [organisation 2], so that’s contracted. The beef up the road, [supermarket 1]…

I: I’m asking because I wonder, what is the experience for the farmers working with a supermarket?

R: It’s a very hard bargain really. Even if they don’t like it, they have to accept that that is a more secure market for their business than an open market, trying to do it. I think you need to have a contract really. It’s the security of a contract. Yeah, I don’t know… I do know a lot of people that don’t, they do just sell them at market, but…

I: You mean auction market?

R: Auction Mart, but…

I: Yes, I wonder, who has organised the thing with the [shop 1] buyers?

R: The [shop 1] buyers, that was [organisation 1].

I: Ah, okay, so it’s the same.

R: Yes, so they went from 20 down to six, then they got… No, 20, and then they went down to London, and then they got to the final six shortlists and they went round to those six businesses. And then they came here, then they went to a beef farmer in [place M]. And then they took them for lunch somewhere fancy, and just last week, they announced that, yes, we’ve got [shop 1].

I2: Wow.

I: Great, congratulations.

I2: We’re going to need to wrap up.

I: Yes, okay. So from the list, you mentioned a lot of those, but is there anything else you feel is quite a key driver of change?

R: Labour, I think there are less people, it’s a less attractive option for people to go into sheep farming and livestock farming, I think.

I: Also losing the skills, I assume.

R: I think certainly having gone through agricultural college, and then I went and did my degree at [University B], I feel like a lot of the people that are going agricultural courses want to drive tractors or fix tractors or work with technology, or sell things. They don’t want to hands-on get their hands dirty and farm livestock. They want to do different things, agronomy or crop science stuff that is linked, but it’s not actually farming beef and sheep. Unless they’ve got a farm to take on, they weren’t maybe wanting to…

I: And my last question is pretty much… So we’ve discussed a lot of different things and we’ve highlighted a lot of problems and you’ve already suggested the few solutions for those problems. I wonder if anything else comes to your mind, how we can improve things in order to make farms in upland areas more resilient? Anything else you haven’t mentioned and you haven’t had the chance so far?

R: I think if there was some sort of scheme where a new entrant or a younger farmer, or somebody that just felt they didn’t have a skill on a certain area, could pair up with another farmer. So you almost had farmers mentoring other farmers. Because if you’ve got an older generation, they’ve got a huge wealth of experience and perhaps have lived through times that they had to do more than themselves rather than getting a company in to do things for you. Because we’re quite a consumer-driven…you know, we can get someone to fix… We tend to replace stuff rather than repair it and do less ourselves, and you get someone to fix your car. People do less, people are less hands-on, I think, generally, in this generation, or younger generations. But if perhaps you paired them up with a farmer that could show them, they could take skills back to their own farms by almost having work days on other farms.

I2: That’s a great idea.

I: I wonder if any one of those can improve the way it works? I’m talking about the orange titles now, the organisations or the businesses that are around to help the farmer, any improvements in any of those that could make a difference?

R: If there was funding for renewable energy, then that’s got to be a bonus to whoever puts it in really. But some of them are quite big, like you have to put it upfront yourself, so you’re only actually supporting the big farms that are already quite secure, they’ve got that buffer money. But you’re not helping the ones that don’t. Like there were grants available, but it was only a percentage of that grant that…you’d only get it at the end of the completion stage, so you had to have paid for a new building and then you got some of it back. Whereas that isn’t going to help your uplands farmer, so…

I2: So it’s more a scale and they needed to pay in advance?

I: Have the money upfront, yeah, help you invest the money.

R: Yeah, you don’t have to give it as cash. You could say it has to go to the…it’s paid to the person that’s going to fit the wind turbine on the windy hill where they’ve got the option to make the most out of that bad weather. Then they can put in all sorts of things.

I: Okay. So you have seen what we are talking about. If you come with any other ideas, feel free to send an email to me.

R: It’s all interesting stuff.

I: We’re likely to be running some groups at some stage, quite a long time ahead, possibly next summer. Would it be okay to contact you again?

R: Yeah, that would be good.

I: And I wonder also, you mentioned before when I was asking who were the players, so I’m going to send that one page back to you and so if you can come up with some future suggestions, especially the orange things. But also with buyers, who are the main buyers in the area, even if you don’t use them, just to have an understanding of the map, who is who and who is doing…

R: Yeah, I mean, for us, we don’t want to be just a farmer, we’ll sell to other people in this. So we’ll sell to the wholesaler or the consumer. We’ll sell to restaurants or…

I: There’s a restaurant up the road here.

R: Yeah so we’re trying to add value to the product we’ve got and we’re going to start curing and smoking…

I: Oh wow.

R: …in the building behind there. We’re also going to be starting to do some horses and experience days. So we’re entering other areas and diversifying that way.

I: Yeah, in that way. We didn’t discuss the solutions, but already you have mentioned a way, and that is the diversification. Anyway, I’m really sorry we have to stop it here. Thank you very much for your help.

I2: And I’m sorry we haven’t got time to go and say hello to the pigs.

R: Oh no, that’s alright.

I: We saw them across there, so it’s almost like meeting a pig.

R: We’ve got all piglets, they’re the cute ones. I’ll give you one of our cards.

I: Yes please. And especially with the farm job, if we can have the details of the people. As I said, I will try to find it myself over the internet.

R: I could certainly speak to a few other people and just see if anybody is able to get in touch. Because like I say, there’s [person 2] up the road, she’s a vet and she was saying at that group that she particularly felt that the targets that were coming… The things suggested to improve farming are not for uplands farms. So she would be a good one.

I: That’s one. And also the other lady you mentioned about the wool. Because we don’t have many examples of…

I: Someone who’s in wool. It would be very interesting to go and talk to her.

R: I’ll try and find her details, because I’ve just really met her, but there was a thing… Yeah, I’ll take that away and I will think about it.

I: Think about it, yeah, thank you very much. [Voices overlap].

I: It certainly works fast, as you said. Thank you so much for your time.

**End of transcript**