



**Staff-shortage solutions**

This is the first article in a series that will take a closer look at dairy labour. Many UK producers are facing the increasingly difficult challenge of finding staff to manage and run their herds and businesses. But why is there a labour shortage and what are the industry and individual producers doing about it?

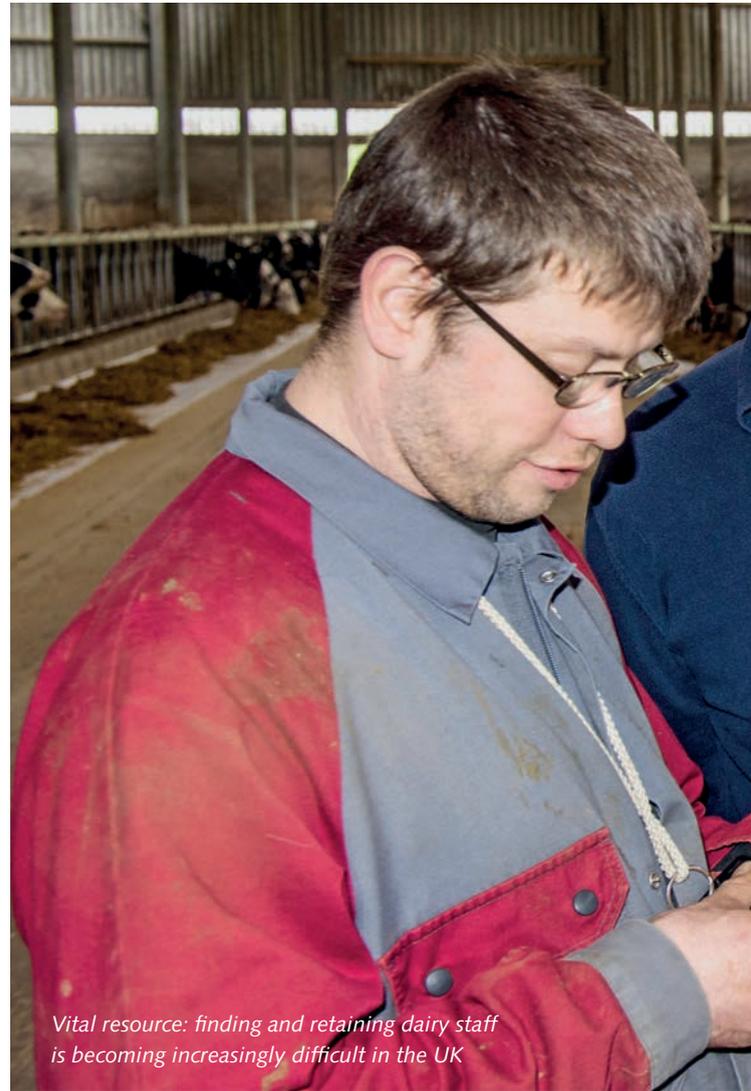
Part 1: **Dairy labour: why there is a shortage?**

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# Staff shortage is a real threat to 'Labour'



*Vital resource: finding and retaining dairy staff is becoming increasingly difficult in the UK*

Sourcing dairy staff is becoming increasingly difficult and some UK businesses are facing a labour crisis. We spoke to a consultant, a recruitment specialist, and a producer to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

A possible 'cliff edge' shortage of labour for UK dairy farms of all sizes is predicted, with a recent survey commissioned for RABDF's Dairy-Tech event suggesting that more than a third of the UK's milk is produced on farms that employ foreign staff, almost all of whom could move or return to EU countries post-Brexit.

This latest survey of more than 1,000 UK dairy farms, sponsored by Kite Consulting and carried out by Ian Potter Marketing Services in the final quarter of 2017, also indicated that more than half of dairy producers are having trouble at some level with recruiting staff – a quarter to a significant degree.

The dairy farms surveyed produce more than 2.23 billion litres of milk – 15% of the UK's overall annual volume – and have between them nearly 270,000 cows. While a total of 11% of employees were non-UK nationals (521 from 4,635 total employees including family labour), almost 17% of dairy businesses have foreign workers within their workforce. More than half of these non-UK workers are in skilled positions of herdsmen or herd managers. "Any shortage of labour from overseas following Brexit would affect all sizes of farm," says Kite Consulting's John Allen. While larger farms would be most affected, the survey indicates that 40% of farms with five employees or fewer currently rely on at least one non-UK worker in their



*John Allen: "Labour is at the top of the list of challenges facing UK dairy businesses"*

team. And most of these experienced difficulties with recruitment.

He adds that labour issues have shot to the top of the list of challenges for many dairy producers after the Brexit referendum. "A significant proportion of our milk is dependent on foreign workers, and more than 25% producers say they have problems recruiting. It is already one of the key limiting factors to growth, and to the effective operation of dairy farms. A ready and steady supply of skilled, dedicated foreign workers is critical to the success of the sector, and to its long-term prosperity."

**Labour gap**

LKL's George Gordon says that the increasing difficulty in recruiting for UK producers is not only due to Brexit. "Sourcing dairy labour has become gradually trickier during the past 20 years – it hasn't happened overnight. Staff from Poland and Romania, for example, have been

# industry's long-term prosperity manifesto



plugging the labour gap on many units during the past 10 years or so.”

He says that some workers have since returned home as their countries' economies and job prospects have strengthened. “Brexit has compounded that. Some feel that they're no longer welcome or that there's no job security. Others have simply found better paid positions elsewhere.” One option for UK producers is to look outside the EU to source labour: “But dairy farming isn't on the recognised shortlist of occupations that people can easily travel to the UK to do. We'd like the UK Border Agency Immigration points system to be changed so that people from outside the EU can come and work on dairy units.”

He adds that it's vital that the industry lobbies the Government for a change in the list. “The UK is short of dairy staff, so it should be on the priority list. Raising the Government's awareness of the problem would be a good start to solving the issue in the short to medium term.”

RABDF's Matt Knight agrees that the survey highlights the urgent need for the Government and industry to work together urgently to remedy a labour shortage in the sector. “Government first needs to recognise the specific needs of the UK dairy farming sector for permanent year-round semi-skilled and skilled labour. And it also needs to accept that these roles are not going to be filled from the domestic workforce in the immediate future. A survey of the UK public conducted in 2017 revealed that just 4% were willing to consider the type of jobs found on a dairy farm.

“The dairy industry also needs to take collective and cohesive action to improve the image of dairying and the attractiveness of the sector as a career option to the domestic workforce.”

But there's no quick fix to solve the worsening labour crisis, according to Mr Gordon. “This problem has been on the cards for a while – we've just delayed it reaching this crisis point by having access to EU labour.”

The good news is that the number of students studying agriculture-related courses is

growing year on year. “So the interest in, and passion for, dairying is there. The trick is to make sure that the positions on offer when they leave school or college are attractive. And I'm not talking about pay – I'm talking about conditions and opportunities. Jobs in dairying – be they milking or managing – are well paid. But long and unsociable hours mean that other jobs outside agriculture can be a more attractive option. Lifestyle is important.

“We need to slow the rates of people leaving the industry and retain the skilled staff that we have. And we need to attract new blood too.”

## Trainee route

Evolution Farming's Tom Rawson says that, in his experience, the most notable shortage is in herd managers: “We take on trainees and hope that, after two years, they decide to stay on and progress up the dairying ladder.”

His company employs 24 staff across five dairy, beef and sheep units and positions are advertised – typically through Facebook and/or Twitter. He says that he attracts at least eight strong candidates to choose from. “I think this is because we have addressed some of the issues that were, traditionally, making dairying jobs unattractive. We offer good pay, holidays and working conditions, as well as training and opportunities to take on more responsibility.

“I do know units, however, that are struggling to recruit and retain staff. And I don't think it's just that there's a staff shortage or even an unwillingness among UK nationals to fill dairying roles. In some instances, the employers are simply not selling the opportunities that they have to offer employees.” |



George Gordon: “There's no quick fix to solve the worsening labour crisis faced by the industry”



Tom Rawson: “We train our own herd managers to fill the void”