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**FUNDING COULD BE FREED FOR LAND SKILLS**

Defra minister Michael Gove has called for a funding shake-up to help land-based industries fill a skills shortage and close the productivity gap.

Gove – Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – believes funding paid as apprenticeship levies by large companies in the sector should be diverted to help smaller operators.

He tabled the idea at a skills summit organised by the National Land Based College, which develops qualifications and training for land based industries and champions the sector as a career choice.

The meeting, attended by 70 leaders in the sector, heard that the UK was falling behind international rivals in productivity while skills provision was “fragmented” and can only be improved with greater collaboration across the whole land based sector.

Gove, who has only been in the job for five months, said: “Some of those paying the levy don’t always have the capacity to train the numbers they are paying for.

“Finding a way to get some of that levy cash further down the supply chain would be helpful. The money is there for training and should be spent on that.

“It will be better and easier for farmers in the future if we help and incentivise them, and also support a greater degree of collaboration both in terms delivering the environmental goods but also in terms of capital expense.”

Gove said that more news on the post-Brexit support model would be made in the New Year – and promised a new relationship with the sector.

“We will be saying more in the New Year and what I would like to do is guarantee individual farmers the amount of cash they currently receive is not going to change dramatically in the next two years.

“There has to a balance between giving the sector time to prepare but making it clear that change is going to come.

“What we want to do is to move to a different method of support – and it may well be the case that there are business models that will need to change.

“Sometimes in the past I know that the relationship between Defra and its predecessor departments and farmers has been, if not antagonistic, then sometimes unnecessarily framed in bureaucratic terms.

“The men and women from the ministry dictate, interfere and regulate rather than working with, facilitating and supporting. I want to make sure we do everything we can in the weeks, months and years ahead as we face a specific set of challenges and opportunities to work together.”

Lord Curry of Kirkharle, who chairs the National Land Based College which is based at Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire, said improving skills was key to closing a productivity gap, and that work must start immediately to align with developments in Technical Education.

“We need Government to take a lead and despite the many good examples and good work going on across the board, we have a very fragmented landscape. As the minster said, the industry is preparing rather than prepared, for the changes ahead.

“It is so important that we are able to develop the skills to allow us to compete in terms of productivity, whereas we have been falling behind in recent years.

“Certainly, the time is right for that to happen. Every strand of the industry agrees that is the case and the National Land Based College is perfectly placed to lead that initiative. That was heard loud and clear today.

“Sometimes the sector has been side-lined but that has been partially our own fault because we have not maybe raised our profile strongly enough. We have to find a way forward which allows us to grow our productivity and also appeal to young people as fulfilling and worthwhile industry in which to make a career.”

The National Land Based College covers the full range of land based industries including equine, horticulture, forestry, landscaping, agri-food and fishing, and offer those industries the opportunity to collaborate on skills development for the sector.

[www.nlbc.uk/industry](http://www.nlbc.uk/industry)

CAPTION: Lord Curry with Michael Gove