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# Time to change the record: Northern Farming Conference calls for a more confident future for British farming

***Industry leaders and working farmers gather in Hexham to discuss food security, profitability, succession and the opportunities shaping the future of British agriculture.***

British farming must look beyond the challenges it faces and recognise the opportunities for a more confident, profitable and resilient future. That was the message emerging from the Northern Farming Conference 2026, held at Hexham Auction Mart on Wednesday 4 November.

Under the theme ***Turning a Corner: Building the Future of Farming***, the conference brought together farmers, industry leaders and agricultural professionals to examine the political, economic and practical issues shaping the sector, while challenging delegates to consider what they can do to influence their own future.

Opening the conference, **Chair Samantha Charlton** acknowledged the uncertainty facing farming businesses but encouraged delegates to focus on the opportunities within their control.

"Alongside the challenges, there are undoubtedly some really exciting opportunities," she said, highlighting the importance of profitability, understanding global markets and investing in the people and skills needed for the future.

The opening panel, chaired by **Adam Bedford of GSC Grays, brought together Tom Bradshaw, President of the National Farmers' Union (NFU), Gavin Lane, President of the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), and George Dunn, Chief Executive of the Tenant Farmers Association (TFA).**

The discussion examined the need for greater policy certainty, investment, food security and opportunities for the next generation.

Looking ahead to what British farming could achieve over the next decade, Gavin Lane outlined a vision of profitable, adaptable businesses combining food production with environmental management, technology and new income streams.

He told delegates: "Time and time again, thriving businesses are the ones that seek to adapt to change rather than having change put upon them."

However, he emphasised that achieving this vision would require stable government support, a framework that encouraged long-term investment and confidence within the industry itself. Tom Bradshaw reinforced the importance of domestic food production and fair trading conditions, arguing that British farmers must be able to compete without being undermined by imports produced to different standards.

He also highlighted the importance of attracting and rewarding younger people entering agriculture, whether through traditional tenancies, share farming or other business arrangements.

"If we're not attracting the brightest and the best into our industry, how are we going to move forward for the long term?" he asked.

George Dunn focused on the barriers facing tenant farmers, particularly the lack of long-term security needed to invest and develop their businesses.
"For me, the one thing would be security of tenure," he said, arguing that farmers need sufficient certainty to make the changes necessary for the industry's future.

Attention then turned to the international markets influencing British agriculture. **Jonathan Eckley, Director of International Trade Development at AHDB**, highlighted opportunities for British food exports, while **Freddie Humfrey, Head of Grain Trading at ADM Agriculture**, examined the impact of global supply, geopolitical uncertainty and commodity price volatility on farm profitability.

Both presentations reinforced the importance of commercial knowledge and understanding the wider forces affecting individual farming businesses.

In the afternoon, the focus moved from national and international issues to the practical experiences of working farmers.

**Chaired by Northumberland farmer Jen Oglesby**, the panel featured **Jamie Leslie of Scholland Farm in Shetland, David Cross from West Norfolk and Joe Nelless of Thistleyhaugh Farm near Morpeth.**

The farmers discussed how they were adapting their businesses through cost control, financial planning, changes to farming systems and reducing their reliance on agricultural support payments.

Succession emerged as a particularly important issue, with Joe Nelless offering a thoughtful perspective on the challenges of transferring responsibility between generations within family farming businesses.

Speaking from his own experience of working in a multigenerational family partnership, Joe acknowledged that younger farmers needed to understand the emotional and practical investment made by those who had built businesses over many years.

"From my generation, it's important that we realise that there's going to be resistance when the older generation have put two, three, four decades of blood, sweat and tears into something that they're very passionate about," he said.

Joe encouraged younger farmers to approach succession discussions with respect, supported by sound financial information and clear business plans. He also suggested that beginning conversations earlier could allow for a more gradual transition, giving different generations time to build trust and work towards shared goals.

The panel also explored how farming could attract new entrants, including those without agricultural backgrounds, and demonstrate that agriculture can provide both a rewarding career and a fulfilling life outside work.

The pressures facing farming families were recognised by **Georgina Lamb of the Farming Community Network**, who highlighted the importance of supporting farmers experiencing financial difficulties, mental health concerns and challenges within family businesses.

Bringing the conference to a close, **rural affairs journalist, author and Just Farmers founder Anna Jones** challenged delegates to consider the stories British agriculture tells about itself.

In a keynote address asking whether it was *time to change the record*, Anna questioned whether the industry's understandable focus on hardship and uncertainty could sometimes overshadow its achievements and discourage the next generation.

She argued that while stories of struggle were important, farmers should also be confident in communicating the successes, opportunities and positive experiences that exist within agriculture.

"What we put out to the world shapes how people view us," she told delegates.

Encouraging farmers to share their experiences beyond the farm gate, Anna highlighted the power of personal storytelling to strengthen public understanding, challenge misconceptions and inspire others to become involved in the industry.

Her message reflected a recurring theme throughout the conference: although many challenges facing British agriculture are beyond the control of individual farmers, there remains considerable scope for businesses and the wider industry to adapt, collaborate and shape their own future.

From government policy and global markets to farm profitability, succession and public perception, the discussions demonstrated that building a stronger future for British farming will require both structural change and confidence within the industry itself.

The Northern Farming Conference continues to provide a forum for farmers, industry representatives and agricultural businesses to share knowledge, challenge established thinking and explore the opportunities ahead.

The conference is a joint venture between Armstrong Watson, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), Hexham and Northern Marts, HSBC, Womble Bond Dickinson, youngsRPS and the Soil Association.

The Conference’s Chartable Partner this year was the Farming Community Network.

For more information please visit: www.northernfarmingconference.org.uk