

**Project acronym:** HTS

**Project title:** Harvesting Tomorrow's Skills, a Northern Ireland Food and Drink/Invest NI Collaborative Network

**Project code:** 1701/130141065

**Invest NI Collaborative Network** – 1 March 2017 – 30 June 2019

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## Section One: Executive Summary

*“Thank you for inviting us to the seminar today it was informative and a good insight into the needs and of our local employers as well as the labour market.” [Feedback on PR of HR from a public sector representative]*

*“A really useful afternoon spent engaging with careers teachers from across the country about career and development opportunities available at Dunbia. Events like this are a fantastic way of getting word out to key people about this fantastic business and industry, and showing them the range of roles involved in getting food from farm to fork!” [Feedback on Futures in Food from a private sector representative]*

### How the project came about in the first place (recognitions of the skills challenged faced by the sector)

This industry-led project was initiated in response to, and in recognition of, skills challenges being faced by the Northern Ireland Food and Drink sector in 2015. A well-trained workforce is a fundamental requirement for companies, in order to maximise efficiency and effectiveness and achieve sustained growth. A number of Food and Drink businesses came together to form a Skills and Sector Attractiveness Pilot Group, (which will hereafter be referred to as the “Pilot Group”), to address the issues on a collaborative basis. [A full list of Scoping Study Pilot Group Members is contained in **Appendix 6.**]

### Decision to carry out a Scoping Study

It was reported that issues surrounding employment were being experienced by several Food and Drink businesses across the region of Northern Ireland. In order to investigate issues around the skills profile and sector attractiveness of the Northern Ireland Food and Drink industry, the Pilot Group conducted a Scoping Study with the support of Invest NI. The six-month Scoping Study was initiated in July 2015 (and was completed in January 2016).

As part of the Scoping Study, the Pilot Group undertook to conduct two surveys:

- one for industry HR departments to investigate issues surrounding skills gaps, training and recruitment;

- the other was tailored to Northern Ireland students to examine the “attractiveness” of the Food and Drinks sector.

The student survey was designed for analysis of student perceptions of industries as prospective “employers of choice” and to identify tools that might improve the perceptions of students and those who may advise and influence them.

### Findings from the Scoping Study

The Scoping Study highlighted a number of skills and recruitment issues and challenges within the workforce. Examples of the findings include:

- the industry’s increase in demand for employees was not being met by the insufficient number of candidates applying for vacancies
- there were difficulties, reportedly, finding applicants with the requisite skills but training costs were also reported as prohibitive
- generally, the wider community in Northern Ireland seemed to have a poor perception and a lack of understanding about agriculture and food

### Phase 2 application

In order to identify solutions, in Autumn 2016 the Pilot Group applied for an Invest NI Collaborative network 2<sup>nd</sup> phase grant to enable them to take forward the findings of the scoping study. The on-going skills and recruitment challenges being faced by the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks industry were not being addressed as effectively as they could be.

It was proposed to initiate a project covering a 24-month period (from March 2017) that would establish a collaborative SME network across the Agri-Food sector to strategically address the skills issues within the sector.

This network of SMEs, it was proposed, would work in conjunction with a range of industry stakeholders within the area of Careers, Recruitment, Upskilling and Economic Development.

The application for an Invest NI Collaborative network 2<sup>nd</sup> phase grant was successful, and a Letter of Offer was received in February 2017. NIFDA would like to note its appreciation of Invest NI support.

### Steering Committee

The recruitment of the HTS Network members was drawn, in the first instance, from membership of the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA). A Steering Committee was set up on 24 April 2017 to provide oversight of the project. The Steering Committee was comprised of:

Brian Irwin, Chairman, Irwin’s Bakery

Declan Billington, CEO, Thompsons Feeds

Tony O’Neill, Group Deputy Chief Executive, Dunbia

Ursula Lavery, Technical and R&D Director Europe, Moy Park

Tracy Hamilton, Director, Mash Direct

Peter Henry, General Manager, Allied Bakeries Ireland

Michael Howard, Managing Director, SHS (NI)

Nick Wheelan, Group Chief Executive, Dale Farm

### **Launch of Harvesting Tomorrow's Skills (HTS) Collaborative Network**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2017 the Skills and Sector Attractiveness Pilot Group, the nucleus of companies who had been involved in the original Scoping Study and several new members attended a Kick-Off Meeting at Invest Northern Ireland in Belfast.

The Harvesting Tomorrow's Skills (HTS) Food and Drink Collaborative Network was formally launched on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2017. The new Network was officially initiated, and the objectives of the two-year programme were set out.

### **Objectives that were agreed for Phase 2 (in brief form)**

Project objectives, as agreed in the Letter of Offer, were grouped into five workstreams:

1. Governance and Communication (agreed activities outlined in **Appendix 1**)
2. Leadership and Upskilling (agreed activities outlined in **Appendix 2**)
3. Knowledge Transfer/Skills for Innovation (agreed activities outlined in **Appendix 3**)
4. Curriculum Alignment (agreed activities outlined in **Appendix 4**)
5. Career Attractiveness (agreed activities outlined in **Appendix 5**)

### **Timeline for the Harvesting Tomorrow's Skills (HTS) Collaborative Network Project**

The project was initiated on 1 March 2017 and was completed on 28 June 2019.

### **Participants that were engaged**

Over the 30 months of the Network project, membership expanded from an initial number of 10 to a total of 78 companies from across Northern Ireland.

There was collaboration across the six counties of Northern Ireland, ie Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone, and amongst a range of stakeholders including:

- HTS Food and Drink Collaborative Network
- Food manufacturers/employment providers from the Food and Drink industry
- Schools (including primary schools, high schools, comprehensive schools, academies), Further and Higher Education Bodies, including universities

- Training providers
- Careers teachers
- Recruitment companies
- Academics
- Regional local council authorities

Please see **Appendix 6** for a full list of HTS Network membership.

### Outcomes from Phase 2 project

Following the successful application for the Invest NI Collaborative network 2<sup>nd</sup> phase grant, the HTS Collaborative Network:

- Provided opportunities to attract talent into the food and drink sector, developed a people pipeline across all levels and abilities to ensure the sector's long-term viability
- Challenged the many misconceptions about the sector, such as low pay and poor conditions, and promoted instead the array of career options and career development opportunities and competitive salaries that exist within the industry
- Promoted sector attractiveness to prospective candidates with different skills and aptitudes, including those with business acumen and leadership potential
- Collaborated with the industry to champion investment in training for existing employees in the sector
- Engaged with appropriate educational providers and stakeholders across Northern Ireland

Listed below are headline outcomes for each workstream:

## **Governance and Communication (headline outcomes)**

### **Governance:**

- **Produced HTS Network Terms of Reference**, signed off by Steering Committee
- **Produced an HTS Network Charter**, signed up to by Network members
- **Collated quarterly reports**, recording activity

### **Created an HTS Collaborative Network “brand”/identity:**

- **Sector specific logo created**



- **Sector specific webpage created** for job seekers, employers and students, providing information, and shared with approximately 412 Network contacts
- **Twitter account created**, (89 followers)

### **Grew membership:**

- **Network Stakeholder/Member database created** and maintained. **78 members** and **approximately 412 Network contacts**.
- **Grew membership from 10 members, initially, to a total of 78 Network members**

### **Engaged with Stakeholders:**

Over the lifetime of the project, the Network **built working relationships with:**

- **Regional/local councils** – HTS engaged directly with all economic departments within local councils by email/phone and face-to-face meetings, setting out the Network objectives and providing a contact to engage with for any local skills activities. The Network represented the Food and Drink sector on three Skills Forums run by local councils: Mid Ulster, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon and Derry and Strabane.
- **Education providers** – careers service, schools and colleges. Regional colleges gave presentations at four HTS workshops and 2 HR Forums. Twelve individual meetings were arranged with business support managers in regional colleges. Four presentations were given to regional career service offices. Network represented the Food and Drink sector at eight school careers fairs.
- **Human resources (HR) representatives (approximately 61) of Food and Drink manufacturing companies in Northern Ireland.** HR representatives attended all HTS workshops and HR Forums. Twenty-nine attended the Futures in Food event in Loughry; 28 HR representatives were involved in meetings with government departments; 58 participated in the PR of HR Forum; 12 at Inspire and Well-being Forum

### **Communicated core messages:**

- **HTS information booklet produced and shared with approximately 412 Network contacts**, providing information on training available within the local education system, upskilling and apprenticeship opportunities, Further and Higher Education courses etc, training contacts, info graphics, synopsis of options etc
- **Training opportunities and core messages** within the food and manufacturing industry and processing sector **promoted at 5 workshops, 3 HR Forums and several joint, collaborative initiatives/events**
- **Benefits of further education and upskilling promoted** across the sector **at 5 workshops, 3 HR Forums and several joint, collaborative initiatives/events**

- **12 stories featured in local/national press** across a range of different publications, equating to **39 individual press items** in total, **generating publicity for the activity of the Network**

**Press coverage stats:**

Number of press items: 39

Total circulation: 677,113

Total opportunities to see: 1,692,782.5

Examples of PR coverage can be found in **section 12 of the Appendices**.

- **Industry journalists and bloggers informed about career information/opportunities** in the form of press releases, **generating additional publicity**. They were also **invited to attend the 3 HR Forums**

## **Leadership and Upskilling (headline outcomes)**

### **Created platforms to promote upskilling and retraining**

- **Four workshops facilitated, June – October 2017:**

12 June 2017, Armagh

14 June 2017, Belfast

12 September 2017, Belfast

23 October 2017, Dungannon

- Good stakeholder attendance and representation at these events
- Participants received information and guidance on a wide range of topics
- Upskilling and retraining opportunities promoted and encouraged
- Regional Colleges and private training companies attended and provided information about courses of benefit to the Food and Drink industry
- Presentations provided and information disseminated
- Core messages communicated on behalf of the Food and Drink industry
- Employees suitable for up-skilling and retraining identified and potentially “signposted” to relevant courses

### **Enabled the right connections:**

- **Larger food manufacturing companies (Project Stakeholders) were successfully linked to SMEs** to facilitate knowledge transfer and for sharing of best practice
- HTS events were open to all membership of the Network, Project Stakeholders and Network members alike. **Workshops** were designed as **open forums to facilitate discussion, cross-pollination, knowledge transfer, information dissemination of core messages but also between participants** (including best practice)
- **Employees suitable for up-skilling identified** and potentially “signposted” to relevant courses

### **Engaged with appropriate Stakeholders:**

Over the lifetime of the project and in order to progress the Leadership and Upskilling workstream, the HTS Network engaged with:

- **61 HR representatives, facilitating 3 HR Forums**
- **Schools, Further and Higher Education Bodies, including universities**
- **Training providers**
- **Careers teachers**
- **Recruitment companies**
- **Academics**
- **Regional local council authorities**

### **Promoted, encouraged, assisted in delivery of:**

- **Placements for industry trainees:** presentations on placements, the process and obligations delivered by Southern Regional College (SRC) at the request of HTS; follow-ups conducted by SRC at a subsequent HR Forum (October 2018) and Future in Food event (May 2019).
- **Training in general:** eg Upskilling and retraining
- **Training, middle managers:**
  - Middle managers were encouraged to undertake export training at an Export Training Workshop organised for the members of the Network in Belfast (21 March 2018) and facilitated by FXL Executive Solutions.
  - Belfast Metropolitan College also delivered training to individual member companies in September 2018 in response to expressions of interest. Topics included sales and marketing, export marketing, sales etc
- **“Skills Support”:** raised awareness of government funding for Essential Skills
- **30 engineering apprenticeships piloted in the food and drink industry**

- **Apprenticeships:** the HTS Network worked with Southern Regional College (SRC) to promote **Food Apprenticeships** across the Network. Apprenticeships were **promoted at two of the HTS workshops and one of the HTS Forums**. The Network developed **info graphics** setting out **pathways to apprenticeships**.

### Provided training:

- To career staff on opportunities for career progression with the Food and Drink industry

### Conducted research into:

- **Possibility of organising an Owner-Manager training programme:** entered into discussions with Belfast Metropolitan College (proposal was not deemed viable due to an insufficient number of applicants expressing interest in enrolling at the time)
- **How to increase the uptake of apprenticeships across the Network:** seeking to encourage greater industry-led skills provision across the region and to meet the immediate needs of employers in the sector

## Knowledge Transfer/Skills for Innovation (headline outcomes)

### Created platforms to facilitate knowledge transfer/skills for innovation:

- Organised **three HR Forums** to facilitate greater knowledge transfer and address export development skills gap outlined in Scoping Study:
  - **PR of HR:** an HR Forum designed to explore new ways of engaging with potential employees through online media (78 attendees)

*“Thank you for inviting us to the seminar today it was informative and a good insight into the needs and of our local employers as well as the labour market.”* [Feedback on PR of HR from a public sector representative]

*“I wanted to extend my thanks to you for such a well run and important event.”* [Feedback on PR of HR from an education sector representative]

*“The event, speakers and content was fantastic; I came away totally energised and full of fresh ideas.”* [Feedback on PR of HR from a private sector representative]

- **Inspire Wellbeing:** an HR Forum exploring ways to retain staff and reduce turnover and absenteeism (16 attendees)

*Excellent workshop today, well done...lots to think about. As always if you need any further support do give me a shout, happy to help.* [Feedback on Inspire Wellbeing from a private sector representative]

*"Many thanks for the opportunity to attend a great event today."* [Feedback on Inspire Wellbeing from a private sector representative]

- **Futures in Food:** an HR Forum designed to provide direct links between employers and school career teachers and Government careers advisors (29 attendees)

*"Just a quick email to say well done on a great event yesterday. I genuinely believe that many of the teachers attending found it beneficial and I know we got a lot of positive feedback at the stand."* [Feedback on Futures in Food from a private sector representative]

*"A really useful afternoon spent engaging with careers teachers from across the country about career and development opportunities at Dunbia. Events like this are a fantastic way of getting word out to people about this fantastic business and industry, and showing them the range of roles involved in getting food from farm to fork!"* [Feedback on Futures in Food from a private sector representative]

- Organised **five Network workshops to facilitate greater knowledge transfer** and address export development skills gap outlined in Scoping Study. One workshop offered training on export development, for example.

### **Engaged with appropriate Stakeholders:**

- Schools and regional colleges
- Careers advisors
- Government agencies
- Private recruitment companies
- Recruitment service providers
- HTS Network members/Stakeholders
- Training providers (private and public)

### **Encouraged greater industry-led skills provision across the region:**

- By applying the findings from the original Scoping Study and research carried out by HTS to identify ways of addressing export development skills gaps eg providing an HTS workshop on export development
- Provided training on a range of topics including export strategy, HR research, planning and implementation, upskilling support and apprenticeships

### **Explored opportunities to develop a Knowledge Transfer Network, working with Higher Education providers:**

- Invited all seven Regional colleges to attend and present at all HTS workshops and HR forums. A beneficial Knowledge Transfer Network was established between the Regional Colleges and the HTS Network as a result of these collaborations
- Worked with Southern Regional College, Northern Regional College and Belfast Metropolitan College on the sub-projects of Bridge to Employment and Academy models

### **Developed a skills pipeline process and network:**

- Future in Food event designed to begin a process of direct connection between industry and the local schools/colleges, providing direct links between employers, school career teachers and Government careers advisors
- Engaged with Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) and College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) to provide insight on diverse range of career paths with companies, opportunities for school-leavers

## **Curriculum Alignment (headline outcomes)**

### **Created awareness of skills requirements and opportunities within the Agri-Food sector to education and careers advisory:**

- **Skills requirements and opportunities within the sector promoted at HTS workshops and HR Forums**
- **Related core messages communicated in presentations to education and careers advisory**
- **Training on skills requirements and career opportunities in the sector provided to careers teachers**
- **Information on skills requirements and career opportunities in the sector provided to regional colleges**
- **Attended careers days, schools' skills fairs and made school visits**

### **Approached the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)**

- With a view to ensuring the education sector has in place appropriate course material to meet the future skills needs of industry
- Network capacity and time requirement to complete this activity was insufficient to permit a successful outcome, however.

## **Career Attractiveness (headline outcomes)**

### **Engaged with schools:**

- **Tasty Career presentations** provided in class rooms
- **144 school visits**
- **9 school skills fairs attended**, promotion of the sector to students and parents
- **15 careers days**
- **4114 school children received an in-class presentation**

### **Developed a pipeline:**

- **Future in Food event** - 200 career teachers brought together with 30 Agri-Food companies
- **20 company Career Ambassadors created** to provide career promotion to schools

### **Conducted research into:**

- **The appeal of other sectors.** Three skills fairs attended to bench mark against other sector recruitment activities
- **Commissioned research into Understanding the key drivers in the Career Decision process**, conducted by Food and Drink Sector Skills

### **Next steps**

HTS will:

- Continue to circulate information on recruitment events and activities occurring in Northern Ireland
- Maintain the webpage and twitter to promote the career attractiveness of the Agri-Food sector

- Continue to attend a limited number of school career fairs
- Continue to attend regional council skills task group meetings
- Provide representatives of the sector to any government department initiatives in relation to recruitment, skills and employee well-being
- Begin a process of research into automation and robotics, looking at how this may be introduced into the production of Agri-Food products. HTS and the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) are investigating Manufacturing 4.0 initiatives and have begun discussions with Invest NI.

## Section Two: Background to the Project

### The local Agri-Food sector and the challenges it faces

Agri-Food manufacturing in Northern Ireland is now the lead sector within our economy, employing 100,000 people and generating £2 billion in wages. According to [an article that appeared in the Northern Ireland BBC News on 25 July 2019](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49111827), [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49111827], the sales value of the food we produce will hit around £5 billion this year [refers to 2018] with at least £3.5 billion of that coming from export markets.

Whilst these figures and outputs sound encouraging, the Food and Drinks industry is facing on-going challenges in relation to the skills profile of its workforce. [Research and analysis conducted by the Department for the Economy](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/eu-exit-analysis), [https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/eu-exit-analysis], reveals persistent skills gaps and skills shortages within the labour force which do not appear to be being addressed by historic levels of up-skilling and recruitment, education or training.

The Food and Drink industry in Northern Ireland is a technically challenging and evolving sector but its needs are not being addressed as effectively as they could be due to a lack of comprehensive training provision and attractive profile.

According to Agri-Food Strategy Board's *Going for Growth, A Strategic Action Plan in Support of the Northern Ireland Agri-Food Industry* publication, published in April 2013, the recruitment and development of a highly skilled and motivated workforce were identified as crucial goals. The Strategic Action Plan incorporated specific targets reflecting the industry's ambition and aspiration to achieve an increased employment target of an additional 15,000 people or an uplift of 15%.

Recognising the persistence of the shortfall in 2016, a number of Food and Drink businesses came together to form a **Skills and Sector Attractiveness Pilot Group**/ the "Pilot Group" to work collectively with leading organisations associated with the sector to identify and address the gaps that exist between the skills requirements and skills provision; to support the targets identified in the Agri-Food Strategy Board's "Going for Growth" action plan.

The **Pilot Group** decided to conduct a Scoping Study. The six-month Scoping Study was initiated in **July 2015 and was completed in January 2016**.

### More details on the findings from the Scoping Study

- Prohibitive training costs and adverse effect on upskilling
- Industry's increase in demand for employees not being met by insufficient number of applicants
- Difficulty recruiting staff with the requisite skills
- Lack of uptake on apprenticeships

- Need for enhanced Management and leadership training
- Need for development of business skills at primary and processing levels (eg cost analysis, commercial viability and application of technical skills)
- Lack of understanding of agriculture and food production and, therefore, lack of awareness of the range of attractive career options within the industry
- Difficulty recruiting graduates into the sector, particularly graduates with scientific and technical skills
- Lack of recruitment marketing skills and failure to appreciate the need to meet or exceed prospective employee expectations throughout the recruitment cycle
- Need to better harness the fresh talent at Further Education Colleges, Universities and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), eg by creating and promoting apprenticeship opportunities on farm, in the factory and within skilled occupations such as the bakery sector

### **Successful application for additional Collaborative Growth funding**

The HTS Network Collaboration project led to a successful application for additional Collaborative Growth funding to support a Scoping Study into Automation and Robotics within the Agri-Food manufacturing process. Evidence gained while working on the HTS programme highlighted the need to explore how the ongoing issues of recruitment could be addressed by introducing automation within the production process. HTS and the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) are keen to begin a process of research into automation and robotics, looking at how this may be introduced into the production of Agri-Food products. HTS and NIFDA are investigating Manufacturing 4.0 initiatives and have begun discussions with Invest NI.

### **Role of NIFDA as Lead Company for both phases of the project**

The Lead Partner in both the Scoping Study and the main HTS project was the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA). NIFDA is an independent, non-party political organisation funded by its members from the Food and Drink industry. NIFDA represents 100 businesses across Northern Ireland (80% of the sector turnover) with the membership jointly supporting approximately one third of the Northern Ireland private sector workforce.

#### **NIFDA's Vision:**

NIFDA's vision is a strong and united membership working together towards a sustainable and growing internationally competitive food and drink industry in Northern Ireland.

**NIFDA's Mission:**

1. To be the “Voice” of our members that is respected and listened to by government and other key stakeholders
2. To collectively develop with our members pan-industry strategies that support our members' endeavours
3. To facilitate members business network development, including member to member support and development networks
4. To be a source of information that is valued by members

In acting as Lead Partner for this network, NIFDA sought to:

- Support the Agri-Food industry within a framework of strategic actions to increase the attractiveness of the sector
- Develop strategic plans to focus on reducing the skills gap and provide support for, and understanding of, employee up-skilling
- Develop a programme of measures to ensure higher levels of engagement in recruitment markets and provide a higher qualified and skilled workforce, the foundation for sales growth in local and international markets

## Section Three: Network Objectives

### Network Objectives

The Scoping Study report was analysed and discussed by **the Pilot Group** in July 2016. The findings provided confirmation of the key issues being experienced across the sector and the following core objectives were agreed upon:

- To establish a collaborative network across the Agri-Food sector
- To promote and facilitate increased collaboration across the industry to address common problems and set common goals
- To identify and engage with appropriate stakeholders including local councils, further/higher education providers, recruitment companies, careers advisory service, careers teachers etc
- To strategically address skills gaps and issues within the sector as evidenced by the findings of the Scoping Study
- To apply for an Invest NI Collaborative Network 2<sup>nd</sup> phase grant to take forward and enable further action

### How the Network Objectives were agreed upon

The Pilot Group set objectives which were discussed with Invest NI. An application for an Invest NI Collaborative Network 2<sup>nd</sup> phase grant was made.

The application for an Invest NI Collaborative Network 2<sup>nd</sup> phase grant was successful, and a letter of offer was received in February 2017, setting out a total of 30 smart objectives across the five workstreams. The smart objectives were based on discussions between the Pilot Group and Invest NI during the application phase.

HTS Network SMART objectives outlined in **Appendix 7**

### Network Project Plan

The letter of offer also set out the overall project plan.

The overall HTS Network project plan is outlined in **Appendix 8**.

## Section Four: Network Membership and Governance

### Workstream Leads

Initially recruitment of the HTS Network members was drawn from Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) membership. As previously discussed, a Steering Committee was established on 24 April 2017 and was comprised of members of the NIFDA Board.

The following Workstream Leads were appointed:

- Leadership and Up-skilling      Moy Park
- Communication                      Dale Farm
- Knowledge Transfer                Mash Direct
- Curriculum Alignment              Thompsons
- Career Attractiveness              Linden Foods

### SMEs and Stakeholders engagement

A drive to target and recruit SMEs was initiated via email promotion and contact by email or by phone call. Local SMEs were also strategically invited to attend a series of Network workshops that were organised across Northern Ireland.

During the initial phase of the Network project, the Network Facilitator was tasked with engaging with an agreed list of stakeholders. Stakeholders were contacted by email or by phone call in the following areas:

All local councils

- Further education providers
- Higher education providers
- Recruitment companies
- The careers advisory service
- Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) career teachers

### How Terms of Reference were agreed

The Letter of Offer included Terms of Reference (TOR) which defined the purpose and structures of the project, setting out the rules and obligations of the Network members, any committees, and covering aspects such as meeting structures and interactions with members who agreed to join the network.

At a subsequent meeting of the Pilot Group, Pilot Group members decided that the HTS Collaborative Network would oversee the running of the project and that a consultant should be appointed to act as a Facilitation Manager, to facilitate day-to-day operations and engagement with network members.

Terms of Reference outlined in **Appendix 9**.

### The HTS Network Charter

The HTS Network Charter is outlined in **Appendix 10**.

### How the Network worked in practice, ie meetings with the Steering Board, Councils and one-to-ones with individual companies

The Facilitation Manager was responsible for the progression and delivery of programme objectives on behalf of the HTS Collaborative Network.

The Facilitation Manager was supported by the HTS Steering Board. The Steering Board reviewed progress against goals and planned and prioritised future strategies, providing guidance on each activity.

Both the Network membership and the HTS Steering Board met every quarter to review and plan the next phase of activities. Engagement outside of these meetings was by direct email or phone call. The Facilitator co-ordinated directly with the Workstream Leader for the workstream relevant to the particular activity.

Reports stemming from the quarterly Steering Board meetings were circulated to Network members.

The Steering Board reported to the NIFDA Board and the Ministerial Future Skills Action Group.

The programme made quarterly reports to Invest NI, highlighting progress against objectives and identifying any major issues impinging on progress.

The plan was updated on a quarterly basis reflecting the dynamic and changing needs of the industry.

There was planned and regular engagement with local councils on activities of mutual benefit: eg skill task forces were being established across four local councils at the time: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Mid Ulster; Derry and Strabane and Mid and East Antrim. As a result of this collaborative engagement, the HTS Network was invited to represent the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Manufacturers on the council Skills Forums.

During the course of the project time-line, the HTS Collaborative Network had approximately 49 one-to-one meetings with many individual companies and Network contributors. Levels of engagement varied depending on the focus of the Network within any particular quarter.

### HTS Network Communication Plan

Communication was one of the key objectives of the Network project. A Communication Plan was created that would target three main areas:

- Communication across the Network
- Communication and promotion of opportunities across the sector
- Communication and engagement with Government and other stakeholders

A copy of the HTS Network Communication Plan can be found in **section 11 of the Appendices**.

### PR coverage achieved

During the timeline of the project, the HTS Network was successful in getting 12 stories published in the local and/or national press. Due to the fact that each story was typically printed in a few publications rather than a single one, this represents a total of 39 published news items. This served to publicise and highlight the activity of the Network project and raised the profile of the collaborative initiatives being undertaken to tackle the issues.

Examples of PR coverage can be found in **section 12 of the Appendices**.

#### Press coverage stats:

Number of press items: 39

Total circulation: 677,113

Total opportunities to see: 1,692,782.5

## Section Five: Workstreams:

### Five.1: Communication [Workstream Lead, Dale Farm]

#### Summary of objectives for this workstream

1. Hard copy TOR and management structures to be created and signed off by Steering Committee
2. Quarterly activities will be assessed and recorded into quarterly reports, circulated and accompanied with the claims
3. Create a Network Charter which will set out the objectives of the project – signed by all at the beginning
4. Strategy paper on self-sustaining programme investigated and presented to the Steering Committee by early 2018
5. Develop/maintain and implement a stakeholder database
6. Grow membership and maintain formal engagement with local councils and education providers
7. Develop, maintain and implement a Communications Strategy across Network partners
8. Develop an online portal for job seekers, employers and students to access information
9. Attend all FSAG (or revised version of) meetings to advise and take soundings from
10. Design and print a booklet/leaflet highlighting the project goals, objectives and activities
11. Identify, collate and disseminate information on current training available for the food manufacturing and processing sector

### Activities undertaken to address these objectives

The HTS Network created a stakeholder database and a Sector specific logo. Recognising the new way potential employees research and find jobs, it sought to improve employment opportunities within the sector by creating a web page and using the social network Twitter (creating a Twitter account). It developed an online and social media presence to enable access to the professional community and increase networking reach and opportunity.

Membership grew from an initial figure of 10 to a total of 78 companies by the end of the project. Growth was achieved by inviting new companies to become involved each time a separate workshop, HR Forum or Regional Council event took place. Companies would be informed of the upcoming event by email or directly by phone and invited to attend. This outreach would have been undertaken by the Project Facilitator or other Network members.

During the lifetime of the project the Network organised 5 workshops, 3 HR Forums and several joint initiatives. These collaborative events were used as platforms to disseminate information on available training programmes for the food and manufacturing sector; to provide training on export strategy, research, business planning and implementation; and to also offer up-skilling and apprenticeship support.

To inform and link the regional education bodies and industry, a booklet was created with information on training available within the local education system. It included information about up-skilling and apprenticeships and also covered Further and Higher Education, Undergraduate, Postgraduate and Open University courses. Please see **Appendix 13** to see a copy of the HTS Information Booklet.

The benefits of further education and upskilling and synopsis of Further Education options available were communicated and promoted across the Network via email.

Activities of the Network were advertised in the local and national press: 12 stories were released across a range of different publications, equating to approximately 40 individual press items in total.

### Outcomes achieved

- 1. Hard copy TOR and management structures created and signed off by Steering Committee**
- 2. Quarterly activities assessed and recorded into quarterly reports**
- 3. Network Charter, setting out objectives of the project, created and signed by all**
- 4. Strategy paper on self-sustaining programme presented to Steering Committee in September 2017**
- 5. Developed/maintained/implemented stakeholder database**
- 6. Grew membership from 10 members to 78 members and maintained formal engagement with local councils and education providers**
- 7. Developed/maintained and implemented a Communications Strategy across Network partners**

8. **Created a Sector specific logo**
9. **Developed a Sector specific web page for job seekers, employers and students to access information**
10. **Created a Sector specific twitter account**
11. **Attended FSAG (or revised version of) meetings – provided advice and took soundings from**
12. **Designed and printed an HTS branded booklet, highlighting project goals, objectives and activities. Please refer to Appendix 13 to see a copy of the HTS Information Booklet [1000 copies were printed. Approximately 160 were posted; approximately 412 copies were shared with Network contacts as a pdf; approximately 150/200 copies were distributed at HR Forums and workshops]**
13. **Identified, collated and disseminated information on current training available for the food and manufacturing processing sector**
14. **12 stories featured in the local/national press across a range of different publications, equating to approximately 40 individual press items in total**

**Press coverage stats:**

Number of press items: 39

Total circulation: 677,113

Total opportunities to see: 1,692,782.5

For examples of press coverage, please refer to **Appendix 12**.

## Section Five: Workstreams:

### Five.2: Leadership and Upskilling [Workstream Lead, Moy Park]

#### Summary of objectives for this workstream

1. Facilitate four workshops designed in the identification of employees suitable for upskilling
2. Link larger companies with SMEs to enable knowledge transfer and dissemination of best practice
3. Engage with 25 sector HR Representatives (five per region) to develop a process
4. To assist in delivery of placements for industry trainees and training to career staff on Agri-Food
5. Encourage 20 middle managers to complete training in the following areas: lean manufacturing; sales and marketing; category management; professional selling; export marketing
6. Investigate and research the possibility of running an Owner-Manager training programme
7. Raise awareness of government funding for Essential Skills – this will be included in a “Skills Support”
8. Using the Apprenticeship in Engineering at Levels 2 and 3, develop a pilot for the food and drinks industry
9. Using the network, promote and encourage Pilot 30 engineering apprenticeships in food and drinks industry

#### Activities undertaken to address these objectives

##### Workshops on developing employee pipeline

Workshops were organised to provide an open forum where all the issues faced by the sector, such as attracting labour, labour issues, high levels of migrant employee dependency, employment difficulties etc, could be openly discussed by the companies. One of the key outcomes was developing an employee pipeline and engaging with potential employees. This action culminated in the HTS “Futures in Food” event in May 2019, which established closer working links within the sector between career teachers, career advisors and the industry. In addition to this, over the course of the project regular presentations were provided to the careers teachers’ NISCA bi-annual conference.

## Bridge to Employment programme

Three HTS member companies were involved in a Bridge to Employment programme. The main objective was to provide customised training to prepare unemployed, and the long-term unemployed people, with the skills necessary to for new employment within the food manufacturing sector.

Harvesting Tomorrow's Skills provided **training and mentoring for the network companies** to begin developing new routes to export markets in the international markets. FXL Ireland were chosen to provide the export training in a central Belfast hotel in March 2018.

As part of the Network workshop series, the participating companies received **one to one training with a specialist mentor**, who provided a wide range of training and business development support including marketing skills and logistic knowledge.

To **promote an awareness of government funding for Essential Skills**, a presentation was given to the network by Invest NI David McKeown Skills division at the HR forum in "Inspire and Retain" This was in addition to ongoing promotion across the network companies via email and workshops.

HTS **conducted** several **surveys** to inform the activities of the network providing leadership on the current issues impacting on employment within the sector.

### Include details of the outcomes that were achieved

#### 1. **Facilitated four workshops designed in the identification of employees suitable for up-skilling**

These workshops were held in the early stage of the project. A wide range of topics was discussed, including the identification of employees suitable for up-skilling. Representatives of both the Regional Colleges and private training providers took part in these discussions, which also included presentations from the training providers.

12 June 2017, Armagh

14 June 2017, Belfast

12 September 2017, Belfast

23 October 2017, Dungannon

#### 2. **Linked larger companies with SMEs to enable knowledge transfer and dissemination of best practice**

Attendance at all HTS events was open to all the membership of the project. This included large food manufacturing companies who had been registered as Project Stakeholders. The format of these workshops was based on open discussions between all the participants. Information and ideas were shared with attendees.

#### 3. **Engaged with 61 sector HR Representatives (five per region) to develop a process**

Over the lifetime of the project, HTS recruited 78 Network members. Recruitment began with the 100+ membership of NIFDA, progressing to target companies across each council region as the project activities were rolled out. The Network engaged with a total of 61 HR departments. There was productive, collaborative interaction with HR departments in preparation for, during and after HTS HR Forums, HTS Workshops, Bridge to Employment and Futures in Food events and generally

throughout the Network project. Engagement with HR departments within the sector was viewed as key to the success of the initiatives/events.

**4. Assisted in delivery of placements for industry trainees and training to career staff on Agri-Food**

At the initial workshop stage, presentations on placements, the process and obligations were delivered by Southern Regional College (SRC) at the request of HTS. This was followed up by SRC at the HR Forum in October 2018 and Future in Food event in May 2019. The workshops/presentations were attended by company HR personnel, Regional College business development managers (business training), career teacher representatives, Regional Government representatives (Economic Development), private recruitment companies, private business training companies and Invest NI representatives.

**5. Encouraged 20 managers to complete training in the following areas: lean manufacturing; sales and marketing; category management; professional selling; export marketing**

An Export Training Workshop was organised for the members of the Network in Belfast on 21 March 2018. The workshop was facilitated by FXL Executive Solutions.

In addition, Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) delivered presentations to individual members in September 2018. This took the form of BMC conducting one-to-one discussions with companies who had expressed interest in receiving this.

BMC proposed the idea of creating a Financial Academy to provide businesses with training on cash flow and invoice input in response to an enquiry about the potential for this from a Network member company. HTS evaluated the BMC proposal and felt it had merit. Unfortunately, this was not carried forward, however, as the proposal did not receive requisite backing to proceed from the department.

**6. Investigated and researched the possibility of running an Owner-Manager training programme**

In November 2018 discussions were held with Nuala Kilmartin of Belfast Metropolitan College to investigate the costs and timeframe required to organise Owner Manager training. HTS was advised that a budget was required to move forward and any course would have to be agreed and funded by the department. In order for this initiative to be agreed/funded, there would need to be a sufficient number of applicants interested in enrolling. Unfortunately, due to work commitments of Owner Managers, there was insufficient interest shown in this activity.

Flexibility on how the training was provided could have gone some way to addressing issues surrounding Owner Managers' work commitments and constraints. If the training could be provided on a one-to-one basis within the working environment, a higher level of uptake may be achievable.

**7. Raised awareness of government funding for Essential Skills – included in a “Skills Support”**

**8. Using the Apprenticeship in Engineering at Levels 2 and 3, developed a pilot for the food and drinks industry**

**9. Using the network, promoted and encouraged Pilot 30 engineering apprenticeships in food and drinks industry**

### **Apprenticeships**

Research was conducted by HTS, looking at increasing the uptake of apprenticeships across the Network and seeking to encourage greater industry-led skills provision across the region and meeting immediate needs of employers in this key sector.

HTS worked with Southern Regional College to promote Food Apprenticeship across the Network. The college provided information and promoted apprenticeships at two of the HTS workshops and one of the Forums. They also supplied info graphics setting out pathways to apprenticeships. A revised version of this was included in the HTS contact booklet.

## Section Five: Workstreams:

### Five. 3: Knowledge Transfer [Workstream Lead, Mash Direct]

#### Summary of objectives for this workstream

1. To address specific export development skills gaps highlighted in the original Scoping Study
2. To explore opportunities to develop a Knowledge Transfer Network, working with Higher Education providers
3. Develop a skills pipeline process and network. Using the network for referral, engagement and assessment

#### Activities undertaken to address these objectives

##### Apprenticeships

Seeking to encourage greater industry-led skills provision across the region and to meet the immediate needs of employers in this key sector, research was carried out by HTS to look at increasing the uptake of apprenticeships across the Network.

HTS worked with Southern Regional College to promote Food Apprenticeships across the network. The College provided information and promoted apprenticeships at two of the HTS workshops and one of the Forums. They also supplied info graphics setting out the pathways to apprenticeships. A revised version of this was included in the HTS contact booklet.

##### HR Forums

A series of HR Forums were organised to facilitate **greater knowledge transfer** and a more structured collaboration to better achieve the common goals. The topics and subject matter of the forums were designed to increase knowledge and inform the Network of potential solutions.

1. PR of HR - Learning of the new ways to engage with potential employees through online media

Engagement with potential employees has evolved over recent years. With the emergence of smart phones, how we communicate has changed beyond recognition. Gone are the days when a company can place an advertisement and sit back and expect the best of the available recruits to apply. The PR of HR Forum (October 2019) set out to educate the employers on how to communicate with potential employees in the modern marketplace, advocating a process of promotion of the workplace, engagement with the public, creating interest and then advertising a career opportunity.

2. Inspire wellbeing - Exploring ways to retain staff and reduce turnover and absenteeism

It's a lot more cost-effective to retain your employees than to recruit new ones.

To address the problem, HTS offered the industry's HR directors and senior business leaders the opportunity to participate in a seminar which challenged their perceptions and highlight ways to inspire, retain and unlock the talent within their organisations. HTS teamed up with Talent Sensus and Talent WB Group to host an HR Forum on Thursday 9 May 2019.

The event was open to all local food and drink businesses and was aimed at HR and senior management.

3. Futures in Food – providing direct links between employers and school career teachers and Government careers advisors

This event was held on Wednesday 29 May 2019 at the College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), Loughry Campus, Cookstown. The collaborative event was in response to the high demand to attract more school-leavers into food-related careers and close the existing, ever-widening “skills gap”. Over 30 Agri-Food and Drink companies from a range of food sectors across Northern Ireland attended the Forum.

Working in partnership with Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) and CAFRE, HTS provided insight into a diverse range of career paths with companies offering opportunities for school-leavers. Information on Agri-Food related courses, apprenticeships and syllabus support available to schools was also provided throughout the afternoon.

### Outcomes that were achieved

**1. Addressed specific export development skills gaps highlighted in the original Scoping Study**

The gap in specific export development skills was highlighted in the original Scoping Study. The HTS Network arranged for specific export development skills training to be provided by FXL. This took the form of a one-day specific workshop which was open for all Network members to attend.

**2. Explored opportunities to develop a Knowledge Transfer Network, working with Higher Education providers**

During the project, regional colleges were invited to attend and present at all the workshops and HR forums. In addition, individual one-to-one meetings were arranged across all 7 regional colleges. Southern Regional College, Northern Regional College and Belfast Metropolitan College continued to work with the Network on sub-projects, Bridge to Employment and Academy models.

**3. Developed a skills pipeline process and network. Used the network for referral, engagement and assessment**

The primary aim of the Future in Food event was to begin a process of direct connection (“pipeline”) between industry and the local college or school in their area. This outreach was encouraged and sharing contacts for future follow-up cross-pollination was promoted. The Future in Food event happened as a result of HTS attending and presenting at the NISCA conference on four previous occasions.

## Section Five: Workstreams:

### Five.4: Curriculum Alignment [Workstream Lead, Thompsons]

#### Summary of objectives for this workstream

1. To create awareness and understanding, across the education and careers advisory sector, of the skills requirements and opportunities within the Agri-Food sector
2. Working with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to ensure the education sector has in place appropriate course material to meet the future skills needs of industry

#### Activities undertaken to address these objectives/objectives achieved

1. The **HTS Network provided presentations to career teachers at NISCA conferences in November 2017, May 2018, November 2018** and promoted the Agri-Food sector as a career choice, highlighting the skills gap within the sector
2. In **May 2019 200 career teachers attended the HTS Futures in Food event**. Thirty companies provided presentations to **increase the career advisory sector's awareness and understanding about the opportunities in the Food and Drink industry, skills requirement etc**
3. **HTS also attended school interview days and career fairs to promote the sector to sixth form students**
4. The second objective, of working with the CCEA to ensure the education sector has in place appropriate course material to meet the future skills needs of industry, proved to be a challenging one. The time required, and the range of people involved in this area made it difficult to move things forward. Due to the time requirement and the level of expertise required to compile suitable material for inclusion into the curriculum, it was agreed that these actions were unobtainable within the network timescale. Resources were then redirected to facilitate employer surveys and direct engagement with the Department for Economy (Bridge to Employment) and the Skills Pavilion at Balmoral
5. **Other possible approaches toward the achievement of objective 2** would be for companies to adopt greater outreach towards the schools in their locality, fostering closer links between industry and schools; companies could also be encouraged to organise factory open days as part of a process of "opening the industry up" and encouraging younger pupils to think about the Agri-Food sector as a possible career option from an earlier age; regular (annual) transfer of knowledge on jobs and career options between industry and career teachers would also be beneficial.

#### Include details of the outcomes that were achieved

1. **Created awareness and understanding, across the education and careers advisory sector, of the skills requirements and opportunities within the Agri-Food sector**
2. Worked with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to ensure the education sector has in place appropriate course material to meet the future skills needs of industry (objective not completed)

## Section Five: Workstreams:

### Five.5: Career Attractiveness [Workstream Lead, Linden Foods]

#### Summary of objectives for this workstream

1. Target 20 School Career visits per year – provide feedback and submissions to DAERA education review
2. Research and understand the key drivers in the career decision process
3. Disseminate online information to recruitment companies and adult training providers and career-changers
4. Methodology: investigate/attend international recruitment fairs. Conduct research with recruitment firms
5. Identify the appeal of employment in other sectors
6. Attend recruitment fairs to evaluate the strength or weakness of the Northern Ireland Agri-Food Market place
7. Investigate how the principles and processes embodied in other models such as “Bring It On” (ICT Sector) could be applied to post primary engagement within the Food and Drink Sector
8. 15 Ambassadors to be identified and recruited during the lifetime of the project
9. All Ambassadors to receive training on Presentation Skills provided by NIFDA

#### Activities undertaken to address these objectives

School visits (144)

Research - Researching and understanding the key drivers in the career decision process

A key activity of the project was to facilitate school visits and to promote the career attractiveness of the sector across the education system. This required providing presentations to pupils in class. The content of these presentations was based on the “Tasty Career” website (<https://tastycareers.org.uk>). These school visits were carried out on behalf of HTS by Geoff Lamb of Food and Drink Sector Skills. In addition to this the HTS Facilitator attended 9 school career events during the course of the project. The main objective was to dispel the myths around a career in the food and drink industry and to promote the benefits of the sector as a career choice.

Food and Drink Sector Skills (FDSS) was recruited to lead this aspect of the project by adopting the “Tasty Careers” process and using it as the basis of the school engagement activity.

### **Target 20 School Career Visits per year**

Within the time of the HTS project, September 2017 to June 2019, FDSS gave 144 presentations to 4114 school children. These were post primary children, year 10 – year 14.

### **Researching and understanding the key drivers in the career decision process**

This involved a major piece of research into careers decision making which culminated in the publication of a report into the issue. The research covered local and international activities and a review of the most relevant career decision making models and their recommendations.

FDSS also conducted research on the formation of structured links between schools and employers in the local Agri-Food sector.

Copies of both research papers can be found in **Appendices 14 and 15**:

**Appendix 14** Researching and understanding the key drivers in the career decision process

**Appendix 15** Understanding the key drivers in the career decision process

### **15 Ambassadors to be identified and recruited during the lifetime of the project**

This work involved meeting with employers to explain programme details and the need for suitable ambassadors from the industry who are best placed to deliver a positive message about careers in the sector.

Over the period of the programme we overachieved on target numbers of ambassadors, with a total of 20. All ambassadors received training on presentational skills provided through FDSS. The training took place onsite and was based in either small groups or on a one-to-one basis.

### **HTS Balmoral Skill Pavilion**

During Autumn 2017 it was agreed by the Network to explore the possibility of running a Skills Pavilion at the Balmoral show to look at the issue of sector attractiveness and career promotion. The idea was proposed by HTS in response to a survey which had been carried out in October 2017: as part of its process of assessment, HTS conducted a survey of network members to evaluate the pressure on recruitment within the sector in October 2017. The survey highlighted that attracting general applicants was a difficulty for 56% of respondents. In response, the Network moved to increase efforts in the area of career attractiveness and outreach.

Examples of issues highlighted in the survey:

- Acute issue of general employment
- Dependency on migrant labour

- The need to engage with the local population
- Sector attractiveness

The Network agreed that holding a Skills Pavilion at the Balmoral Show might be a beneficial and timely outreach opportunity.

The Balmoral Show was to take place on 16 – 19 May 2018. It was anticipated that the reported annual attendance of over 100,000 people during the four days would provide a great opportunity to promote the sector as a career choice but also engage directly with the general public in a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

### **Futures in Food – Pipeline development**

On 29 May 2019 the HTS team ran the first ever 'Futures in Food' Forum which was held at the College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), Loughry Campus, Cookstown.

This collaborative event was organised in response to the Agri-Food and Drink industry's urgent need to attract more school-leavers into food-related careers and close the existing ever-widening 'skills gap'. Twenty-nine Agri-Food and Drink companies from range of food sectors across Northern Ireland attended the forum with the sole aim of building a pipeline of employees from the local higher education schools. Promoting the fact that Agri-Food is ranked in the top three STEM industries for future careers and opportunities in Northern Ireland, the purpose of the afternoon was to give Careers Education, Information and Guidance (CEIAG) teachers and key-influencers a valuable insight into Northern Ireland's Agri-Food and Drink sector.

HTS, working in partnership with NISCA, both CAFRE and NIFDA, created an opportunity for careers teachers and career advisors to connect directly with the sector. The event was in two stages: stage one, the employers provided presentations to groups of attendees on career pathways within their respective companies; stage two, employers engaged on a one-to-one basis in a traditional skills fair format.

The key purpose was to facilitate 'face-to-face' conversations between teachers and Agri-Food industry representatives, and to give teachers an insight into sector specific career progression opportunities along with academic and apprenticeship options available for school-leavers.

### **Outcomes achieved**

- 1. Targeted 20 School Career visits per year – provide feedback and submissions to DAERA education review**
- 2. A written submission was completed and regional group meetings were attended to discuss the topic**
- 3. Research paper on “Understanding the Key Drivers in the Career Decision Process” provided**
- 4. Researched and understand the key drivers in the career decision process**  
This information was issued via email and was also included in HTS Contact booklet.

- 5. Disseminated online information to recruitment companies and adult training providers and career-changers**
- 6. Methodology: investigated/attended international recruitment fairs. Conduct research with recruitment firms**

HTS attended Skills London at the Excel Centre London on 24 November 2017. This two-day event provided visitors with the opportunity to discover careers through interactive, inspirational activities and demonstrations, helping young people visually bridge the gap between what they enjoy doing and what they could potentially do as a career. For a report of the Skills London event, please refer to **Appendix 16**.
- 7. Identified the appeal of employment in other sectors**

This action was completed via desk research and by attendance at recruitment fairs. In addition to this, one-to-one meetings were organised with recruitment agencies, servicing large companies. This research and feedback were shared with Network members during the HR Forums, both by the Facilitator and directly by representatives of the recruitment agencies and other business leaders who had been invited to take part.
- 8. Attended recruitment fairs to evaluate the strength or weakness of the Northern Ireland Agri-Food Market place**

Attended the Skills London event in November 2017 and also the Skills NI events held in Titanic, Belfast, in November 2017 and November 2018.
- 9. Investigated how the principles and processes embodied in other models such as “Bring It On” (ICT Sector) could be applied to post primary engagement within the Food and Drink Sector**

This research was conducted by Food and Drink Sector Skills (FDSS) and fed back to the Network. The evidence was used to inform and guide the activities of the Network in the final year of the project, primarily in the increased focus on engagement with the regional colleges.
- 10. 20 Ambassadors identified and recruited during the lifetime of the project**
- 11. All Ambassadors received training on Presentation Skills provided by FDSS on behalf of NIFDA**

## Section Six: Lessons Learnt/Unexpected Outcomes

### Reflections on overall experience of the project, lessons learnt, unexpected outcomes

**The industry recognises that co-ordination is key to success.** Promoting the sector and providing outreach works significantly better if businesses work together. Individual companies acting on their own do not have the impact or the capacity to progress into so many different areas. Pooling resources and co-ordinating efforts via a Network like HTS bring enormous benefits to the sector as a whole.

**Access to support needs to be improved.** Whilst there is support on offer from Government, it was recognised that there has been a low up-take on the part of the companies, largely due to lack of awareness and also because of time constraints. Making applications easier to complete could go some way to increasing the up-take; making it available on mobile devices and/or linking similar applications so that information completed on one application would automatically transfer to another application could also be of benefit to the user going forward.

**More effective, clearer communication of support options available is needed.** It would be helpful to companies if information about the support available to them could be communicated in a clearer and more user-friendly and accessible way.

**Only the larger companies have the capacity to engage effectively.** SMEs do not have the personnel to conduct school outreach or hold career days and parent evenings. Skills Forums and schemes to engage with the long-term unemployed can be time-consuming and require ongoing engagement. This can be difficult for smaller companies.

**Failure to effectively recruit is reducing output.** Companies were reporting that insufficient numbers of employees at the production line level was having a direct impact on their ability to achieve the required production output. Deliveries would be sent out incomplete or behind schedule.

### What would you have done differently?

HTS should have allocated more time to certain actions eg Balmoral Show and Curriculum Alignment objective.

Both of these actions would have required more time to roll out successfully and proved too ambitious for a project of this size within a two-year life span.

### What worked well?

- An effective mechanism for collaboration was created
- A new employee pipeline between industry HR departments and career teachers was created, facilitating meetings/presentations by industry ambassadors
- Sector engagement with local councils, schools and career bodies
- Visibility of the sector increased outside parameters of normal recruitment channels
- Bridge developed for the economically inactive to return to work in a phased process

- Issue of wellbeing of staff promoted with employers as a result of series of workshops, sharing examples of good practice etc

### Feedback from participants/stakeholders etc

Please refer to **Appendix 17** for examples of feedback received from participants/stakeholders in response to and following HTS Network workshops, forums and initiatives.

Feedback to HTS events was extremely positive (more than 95% positive). Here are some examples of feedback received:

*“Thank you for inviting us to the seminar today it was informative and a good insight into the needs and of our local employers as well as the labour market.”* [Feedback on PR of HR from a public sector representative]

*“Excellent workshop today, well done...lots to think about. As always if you need any further support do give me a shout, happy to help.”* [Feedback on Inspire Wellbeing Forum from a private sector representative]

*“The event, speakers and content was fantastic; I came away totally energised and full of fresh ideas.”* [Feedback on PR of HR from a private sector representative]

*“A really useful afternoon spent engaging with careers teachers from across the country about career and development opportunities available at Dunbia. Events like this are a fantastic way of getting word out to key people about this fantastic business and industry, and showing them the range of roles involved in getting food from farm to fork!”* [Feedback on Futures in Food from a public sector representative]

## Section Seven: Summary and Final Recommendations

### Current position of the sector

At the time of writing of this report, recruitment issues continue to restrict growth. In some sections of the industry, successful contracts are being won by companies who can guarantee delivery and not by those offering the best price.

The reasons for the recruitment challenges are outside the remit of this report, but the net result is a deficit of skilled employees due to a lack of availability of appropriate courses and insufficient numbers of applicants to fill the available vacancies. Compounding the problem is the shortage of available workers to fill the vacancies at the operative level in Northern Ireland.

All this at a time when the industry is failing to attract sufficient numbers of school leavers: 40% of university funding is derived from student fees. This puts pressure on universities to maximise enrolment. The feedback from HTS members is that progression to university may not be the best option for all pupils. An alternative pathway should be provided within the education system. Third level education is not a pre-requisite of a successful career in the Agri-Food sector. There are plenty of career opportunities for pupils with A levels or equivalent qualifications. Pupils should be encouraged to explore options.

Uncertainties surrounding Brexit continue to pose difficulties for the sector. At the time of writing key decisions and the eventual impact of Brexit are unknown but Brexit will continue to have a profound impact on how the Agri-Food and Drink manufacturing sector progresses. The sector is interlinked and interdependent on relationships spanning across many regional and political borders. As the uncertainty and the impacts of political decisions emerge, it will be vital that the Agri-Food industry continues to develop and maintain working relationships with the Education sector and with local and regional government.

### Current challenges being faced by the sector

- Increased competition for employees within the Northern Ireland market
- Insufficient number of prospective employees available
- Uncertainty regarding future availability of EU workers and the law as it will relate to settled status (“Brexit effect”)
- Recruitment departments under pressure to grow or maintain employee numbers due to historically low levels of unemployment (2.9% currently) and lack of engagement by the local population
- Increased pressure on general recruitment
- Competition with Southern Ireland

### **Network's recommendations for the sector when recruiting employees**

The findings of the Network over the last 30 months have highlighted areas in which the sector can become more efficient and effective when recruiting employees by:

- Providing on-going updates to the local schools and Department for Communities on the level of recruitment forecast for the next 12 months
- Holding open days or information events
- Engaging via social media and promoting the company as an employer of choice
- Creating a profile for the company as an enterprise people want to work for before advertising job opportunities
- Understanding what prospective employees want and how this aligns with what the company can offer

### **Network's recommendations on any next stage process**

Maintain collaboration to mitigate against skills and recruitment challenges that may result for any new political arrangements. A co-ordinated approach will be key to success here in view of the many components that are involved.

Maintain sector engagement with local councils, schools and career bodies.

Maintain pipeline that has been developed between schools, careers and the Government Department for Communities via contemporary emails and direct contact.

Continue and greater interaction with the education sector particularly Further Education colleges who provide employee pipelines, further training and up-skilling.

Promote support available from Government and Further Education bodies more effectively. Communicate more effectively about the assistance that is available, providing information on how to access the support.

Engage more directly with particularly smaller companies (only larger companies having the capacity to engage effectively with the Network), supporting them to promote Agri-Food sector as a career option.

Continue to:

Produce/provide ambassadors for school visits

Conduct online promotional campaigns

Organise school career days

Create funded training opportunities

Build on the Future in Food event by continuing to develop a pipeline between Education and industry, supplying information on current employment opportunities. Consider creating

an annual event with follow up and regular contacts to update both career stakeholders and “the supply chain” (ie industry).

Challenge the thinking of the sector and update it on potential new approaches to recruitment and staff retention

Increase visibility of the sector outside normal recruitment channels

Encourage employers to engage with regional councils and feed into council local initiatives to support industry career promotion, in addition to conducting direct recruitment campaigns.

Explore strategic engagement with the economically inactive, eg developing support for return to work or a Bridge to full employment programme for inactive or part-time workers.

Promote latest thinking on “increased wellbeing and “strategies to retain” staff, ie retaining staff as a cost-effective means of maintaining staffing levels, reducing recruitment costs and employee down-time. Providing education and training.

Encourage companies in the sector to become an “Employer of choice” with better people management, career development, offering transport and/or flexible hours, creating an employee-friendly environment and experience.

Promote apprenticeships, academies and encouraging companies to invest in their workforce.

Encourage companies to use sector marketing and social media to engage with prospective employees, creating awareness of the company/sector being a significant local employer offering opportunities for career progression.

Encourage companies to explore costs and benefits of automation within their production process. Huge advances have been made in this area and the costs have come down considerably. The investment required for a small robotic is affordable and comparable to an average annual salary. In the absence of available employees at operative level, automation may well be an option worth investigating.

### **What steps will be taken to ensure that collaboration continues as a means of addressing the common pains experienced by the sector?**

HTS will:

Continue to circulate information on recruitment events and activities occurring in Northern Ireland

Maintain the webpage and twitter to promote the career attractiveness of the Agri-Food sector

Continue to attend a limited number of school career fairs

Continue to attend regional council skills group meetings

Provide representatives of the sector to any government department working within the area of recruitment, skills and employee well-being

Begin a process of research into automation and robotics, looking at how this may be introduced into the production of Agri-Food products. HTS and NIFDA are investigating Manufacturing 4.0 initiatives and have begun discussions with Invest NI.

## Section Eight: Bibliography, References and Appendices

### Bibliography:

- 1 Going for Growth, A Strategic Action Plan in support of the Northern Ireland Agri-Food industry, produced by the Agri-Food Strategy Board:  
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/going-growth-strategic-action-plan>
- 2 Tasty Careers: <https://tastycareers.org.uk/>
- 3 Collaborative Growth Programme: <https://www.investni.com/collaborative-growth-programme.html>
- 4 An article that appeared in the Northern Ireland BBC News on 25 July 2019:  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49111827>. Entitled: *NI's agri-food sector turnover "is close to £5bn"*
- 5 Research and analysis conducted by the Department for the Economy:  
<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/eu-exit-analysis>
- 6 NIFDA website: <http://nifda.co.uk/>

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