



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Chris Rose

Age: 55

Location: Asplins Producer Organization, Faversham

Size: n.a.

Type: Fruit

Interviewed by: Louise Rasmussen

Date: 11 July 2015

Louise: So Alan said you managed different farms in the past, you've been working on different farms?

Chris: My background, I'm 55 now, and I started working on a farm in West Kent when I was 18. And after a year of that then went to Agricultural College at Hadlow, and came out of there, worked on several farms, culminating in 1984 in moving to Edward Vinson Limited, which happens to be across the road from where we are this moment, which was a top fruit and soft fruit farm. And that was the farm that I particularly managed, and I managed that from, I came in as a under manager, supervisor sort of level, and moved up to manager and senior manager until 1999, I left there. But I've done quite a lot of consultancy work and work around other farms, so I've, although I haven't managed those other farms I've seen a lot of the industry, more than just the farm I managed.

Louise: And now this is a cooperative, as far as I've understood, with 12 different members or farms?

Chris: Yes, Asplins has got 12 members, geographically very spread from the New Forest, which is right down in the South of England up to Scotland, we got 2 members in Scotland, several in the Midlands and Kent.

Louise: And do you still work on a farm then, at the same time, or this is your main work now?

Chris: This is the work I'm doing most of, but I'm also doing, I am still self-employed though, I'm here currently 4 days a week, which is most of my time obviously, but I also have other projects. I'm doing a health and safety video for HDC, are you familiar with HDC?



Louise: No.

Chris: The Horticultural Development Company that farmers have to pay a levy money to bodies for research, and so there's, they, the HDC have the horticultural research budget, and this is a ...and communication is sort of, health and safety is a communication... So yes, and other consultancy projects I do from time to time.

Louise: And how come you decided to go into doing this rather than managing farms or working on farms?

Chris: I was made redundant from Vinson's. What happened is they had a, it's a company with several farms and I managed two of them, and they had a big problem with the plant breeding side of the business, or plant propagation side, which wasn't my area, but that meant that they lost a lot of money, so they downsized and reduced from 3 managers to 1. And at that point I could have very easily gone to another farm and managed, but I was interested in training, interested in doing some other things, and took it as an opportunity to branch out.

Louise: Can you explain, do you know a bit about how Asplins came into being?

Chris: Yes, I can because Vinson's, Edward Vinson Ltd., which is the farm I managed is a member of Asplins PO and I was still there at the time that Asplins started. So although I've only been involved with Asplins here since 2010, 2011, I do know about the start. What happened, before the fruit and veg scheme--the EU fruit and veg scheme--was developed, which came into being in 1997, the money from Europe available was largely, if not totally, a market intervention tool. So, if there was too much production, if there was a glut of apples, say, across Europe or the EU, and prices were thus going to be very, very low, so much so that people, growers were losing money, you could apply for intervention and you, your fruit would be checked that it was sound, and then basically destroyed. And you would get paid for growing the fruit even though it's been destroyed. It wasn't a fortune, it wasn't big money, but it was better than you might get on a very, very depressed market. And it was, it's a tool to enable the prices to be sufficient for growers to stay in business. But it got widely abused, it wasn't just in fruit farming, it was across the whole of farming. So back in the 1980s, 1990s, we used to talk about the wine lake and the beef mountain, and basically there were surpluses of production, but growers and farmers would produce surpluses, knowing they could always get money for it, so they weren't being market led. And it was clear, it was very, very politically unpopular that farmers were always being subsidized for growing food that nobody wanted, and then in Africa people are starving and...it was just not working. So the fruit and veg scheme was developed to replace that. And that was much more... money could be had by producer organisations, what was cooperatives, and the



money was really meant to grow businesses to be able to ... send produce to newer markets. Typically in Southern Europe for instance, you might have a thousand or two thousand small growers with a hectare each, who couldn't sell to Tesco's in the UK because they're just too small peasant farmers. But all grouped into one producer organisation that has central pack house, central facilities, they could then have an export programme, and all of the EU money would be into setting up that infrastructure, and managing that infrastructure. What happens in the UK is we have larger growers, larger farmers, and they have a much greater level of independence, but still wanted to access the money. And so producer organisations have been set up. Some of them are true cooperatives, some of them are less than that. So we're a cooperative, but we're not marketing the food directly to the customer, largely because the supermarkets in the UK, Tesco's, Sainsbury's and so forth, have their preferred route to market. So they, if I was a grower, and I said to Tesco's I'd like to sell my food to you they would say that's fine, you need to go to that marketing desk or this marketing desk and talk to them. So we, at Asplins, outsource the marketing to particular marketing desks. That is changing and we are now marketing more directly as well, or marketing *somewhat* directly, and that's increasing.

Louise: How come that's starting to change?

Chris: Because there's a lot of downward pressure on prices, as I'm sure you're aware, there's a supermarket war going on, and the discounters—Aldi, Lidl, particular, Iceland and others—are coming in with lean models so that they're able to have lower prices, either because they're more efficient and/or because they're operating at a loss in the UK to get market share or no profit, whatever they're able to undercut. And so that the big four as they call them; Sainsbury's, Tesco's and Morrison's and ASDA, not necessarily in that order, are all finding that their market share is being attacked, and is going down, and that they're having to combat that with lower prices. And when we look at the supply chain, there's the grower, or producer, there's the multiple retailer, but in the middle there's a marketing desk that charges a commission, and often they're not really doing much for that commission. It's a route to market but they're not, they say they're negotiating better prices but the prices don't feel better. And so, and the supermarkets sometimes are saying the same, they're saying well, we want to be able to pay less, but we realise the growers can't afford to have any less, in fact, they need a bit more, but if we took that middle man out, then there's more money to be shared both ways.

Louise: What are the major changes that you've seen in farming or in the farming sector over the past years?

Chris: When I started farming, I ... I came in at a time where there were still a few of the old farm workers who'd never driven a tractor, and had left school at 14, went



on a farm, expected to stay on a farm for their whole working life, and ... there were, any picking was done by local, mostly women, often or usually women with young children who could have the children on the fields when they were picking and the little kids before school age would run around somewhat free. And farms were family farms producing, a fruit farm would typically produce a range of fruit crops, so there might be apples and pears and plums, and cherries and some strawberries and some raspberries and some blackberries, so quite a range of crops, and all of them relatively small volumes. There were beginning to be some bigger farms, the specialists, but what certainly happened is that the, in the last 20 years, is that the production has gone up and up and up, quite dramatically, and the producer organisations have helped that, because there's been money available for capital projects. So for instance with strawberries, and I come onto the change particularly in strawberries in a moment because that's a good case in point, we have poly tunnels that you may have seen. Well, they cost a lot of money. But the POs can subsidize that, doesn't pay for it totally but it's less expensive, well for the PO. Let's talk about strawberries because that's a good case in point. I first got involved with strawberries when I came to Vinson's in 1984. And strawberries used to be grown all in the soil, they would be planted in the autumn, in October, we had no irrigation, good soils but no irrigation, and we'd get a small crop the following May, June, but was small... And sometimes not even worth picking. And then the following three years, we would have a crop that, a reasonable crop. But when I say a reasonable crop it... in 1985,6 I'm not sure which year, I remember Vinson's, as a cooper farms, saying: when we can achieve picking 3 tonnes of strawberries per acre, and 60% of it going to supermarket, we will be successful. Today, those figures would need to be at least 12 tonnes to the acre, at least, with 90% going to supermarkets, and you'd be staying in business, and maybe a little bit more to invest. So, dramatic, dramatic changes. The price of strawberries, the price that growers are getting for strawberries have not changed in the last 15 years, and look like they may go down. So growers stay in business by becoming more efficient; better varieties, better growing techniques. We went from growing without any irrigation to growing with irrigation and with 'fertigation', so the fertilizers applied through the irrigation lines, to growing in peat, in ...

Louise: Sorry, what is peat?

Chris: Peat is a substrate, so it's not soil. You have bags that the, with peat in them, and then the strawberries or raspberries or whatever are planted in those. And now, the case of strawberries still have that although we use coyer, and coyer is ... it's basically a product that comes from the coconut industry, in the Southern hemisphere, and where coconuts are grown, and a lot are, there's a big, big, husk outside the coconut and that material is very good as a substrate for growing plants in. It's quite inert, that means it doesn't have much goodness in itself, but it's a medium that you can put the plant in, put water and fertilizer in, it holds water



pretty well, and allows the plants to grow very, very well. So most UK strawberries, over 50% of them are grown, not in the soil now, and quite a lot of farms are 100% not in the soil, and they also now grow them on what we call table tops, which are support systems that are waist height and are much easier for picking. So those are dramatic changes. The other change in strawberry harvesting particularly, well all labour involves seasonal labour in producing food, is that there's almost no English people, or local people involved at all. The labour is all from various Eastern European countries, used to be just students, often now it's married couples and older people as well. But people who can earn more over here than they can in their own country come for six months, earn some money and go...So we're totally reliant on that labour force. Yeah.

Louise: Why do you think that has changed, those things that you are mentioning now?

Chris: I think the labour change is something that you see the world over, in California, all of the labour or the vast majority of it is from Mexico, so the Californians don't want to do jobs like picking strawberries, they can find better jobs to do. Sometimes they don't pay any more but they're just more pleasant or they feel they are more pleasant. Harvesting is hard work, and so they don't want to do it. What happened in the UK was that the laws changed and women were no longer able to bring their children onto the farm. And at the time we all thought this was great because it was so dangerous having children on the farm, it's not a place for children. You would have tractors driving backwards and forwards and having to watch out for children running out between trees and things like that so it was a good change. But what happened was that those women then weren't able to work and found jobs elsewhere, and we for a while had younger people who just left school, some unemployed people, but didn't have a very good work ethic. And at that time we were starting to get the first of the Eastern Europeans that, there were systems set up to bring them in, and it changed pretty rapidly. I can remember sending a bus every day to nearby villages and towns, particularly towns at Whitstable and Herne Bay. And we used to fill the bus up with pickers, and we didn't know who was coming each day, that was the other thing, they were what's called daily casuals. So you came to pick fruit and you got paid in full at the end of the day, and off you went. And if you chose to, you came back the next day, and if you didn't, you didn't. And we had no control over that, which was an absolute nightmare: it's very, very difficult to plan any business on that sort of thing. But it was tax free, legally, so it seemed a less expensive way to go. The Eastern Europeans mostly are living on farms in caravans, so one has to provide the caravans and the kitchens and the toilets, and showers and... a whole camp for... in some cases several hundred people, it's quite a big undertaking where these farms have grown and grown and grown. So that took a while to adapt to...I can remember having one person one year, one Polish lad turned up and he was great, fantastic, and I thought we need more of that, and I think next year we had four, and then we found a company that



had the license as it were from the government to bring in people, cause you didn't have freedom of movement in the 1990s from places like Poland. So these were students who were brought in under a scheme called SAWS; the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, and so we were then legally employing these Eastern Europeans. And we went from 40 to 80 to 120, and the farms have got bigger and bigger, more and more people. So we are completely reliant on that non-local labour force. Yeah.

Louise: Do you think there is any particular reason for locals working less on farms nowadays, apart from the changes in law that you mentioned earlier?

Chris: I think one relevant point is that, when the women – and it was all women – almost all women... They would typically work from 9 till 3, they'd drop their older kids at school, work from 9 till 3, and then back to pick the kids up. And the young kids grew up on the farm each summer, they knew what farming was, in a very sort of way... they certainly knew what picking was, and what a hard day's work was. And so when they came to leave school at 16, then getting a job on a farm was an actual thing to do because they'd grown up with it. But once we stop that, within a very few years, there were 16 year olds who had no idea what farming was, what a day's hard work was. I can remember 16 year olds turning up in white trousers and gleaming white shoes, and not wanting to get dirty and just no work ethic at all. It was a nightmare. So that had a lot to do with it. I think the economy picked up at that time as well: there were jobs in supermarkets, at checkouts and stacking shelves and other part-time jobs came along. So for instance, Tesco's they'll have a lot of people who can work in Tesco's around school kids, and they have crèches, everyone puts their children in crèches. And now it's just, it's then, it fairly quickly then became 'oh it's beneath us to go and do that work'. And we could say, there are Polish, Bulgarian, Romanian, whatever countries, people out there working really hard for it, really hard for it, but earning £500 a week. And English people say oh, I'd love to have that sort of money, but oh no, I wouldn't go and pick strawberries. It's seen as something that English people don't do.

Louise: Do you think people are lazy, is it as simple as that, or is there more to it?

Chris: I think there is an element of that, yes, I think that the Eastern Europeans are very highly motivated. It's less than it was, but certainly 20 years ago, you could, we had a Romanian student, who worked for us for two summers and bought a flat outright, in cash, with the money she'd earned. So a flat in Romania from 2 season's summer work. That's fantastic. Well, an English person who's got a house over here and bills over here and children growing up over here, that same amount of money isn't anywhere near so much here... But when you are able to earn a flat in two years, then why wouldn't you really, really work hard? Their work ethic is something else, because they see it as an opportunity that they don't ... particularly



then, they didn't know if they could come back the following year, they had to have the license to do so. So just make the most of every moment I'm here, and it was difficult for English people to compete with that. Yeah. The difference isn't so great now, but still, a Bulgarian and Romanian can earn 4 or 5 times what they could...if they had a job over there.

Louise: How do you see these labour issues develop in the future? Now with the new government as well...

Chris: I see an issue. We've had several years of recession, global recession, downturn, and there has been less work in those Eastern European countries. That's gradually turning around, and I can remember back in 2007, we were having a lot of people from Poland on the farms, and they were starting to say it's not worth coming now, although the money is better it's not *that* much better, and Poland's doing really well and I want my future to be in my own country, which I personally think they should do of course, it's great. I think it's sad, although we need people, it's sad that some of the best talents leaves a country and comes to another country. But, the last few years that hasn't been an issue: there's been sufficient labour but I think that's beginning to change now, and I think that in the next year or two or three, we'll see it more difficult to get people. It just, it's dependent on the economies in those other countries, which is something completely out of our control. But the problem with the current government and the political climate is that we get completely mixed up in immigration: bringing people over seasonally to pick labour, who then go home again is *not* immigration. Not anything remotely like it. But it gets wrapped up in that whole immigration story. So we have lost the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme source because the government said there are 330 million people in the EU and we should be supplying work to all those before we supply work outside of the EU. Which I can understand, that's a fair argument, and up till now we can. Our fear is that we will, as that gets more difficult over the next year, two years, three years, we will have to suffer quite a lot before the government listen and possibly let a new scheme start. So for instance, if a new scheme started or if the existing scheme had continued, we might be bringing people in from Ukraine, which has got a big population, very low earning levels, and very hungry for good work. And I would have preferred to see, just even if it was very small numbers coming over to keep the scheme in existence ticking it over and ramp it up as the need comes. I don't think any government or certainly the current government is gonna be in a hurry to do that. So I think that somewhere in the next 2, 3 years, there'll be a significant issue. And the farms that look after their labour better, will find enough labour, and the ones that don't will struggle.

Louise: How do you think farmers have reacted to these changes especially now with the labour force coming in from Eastern Europe?



Chris: I think, ... I'll go off the tangent for a moment: one of the changes over the last 20, 30 years is that the number of farms for instance in fruit production has declined dramatically, but the size of those farms in terms of output has increased dramatically. A lot of that is through higher levels of production over the same given area, some of it is through acquisition, so we have some very big growers who bought that farm and bought that farm and rented that farm, so they've increased their area dramatically. But either way, the smaller growers have in many cases given up, and they may farm or they may rent their farm out to these larger growers. They may have just said ok, I'm not gonna make a living out of this 50 acre farm now, I'll let that arable grower rent it, and I'll go get a job. I know of cases like that. But the ones that have survived and thrived, and have grown considerably, are the ones that are more adaptable to change, and have grown with a lot of change, and so every new challenge is, 'well that's more change and we're used to that, and we have a culture embracing change'. And so, I would say most growers would say it's definitely better with the labour force we have now than the labour force we had, the local labour force. Not because they're better people, but because, largely because they're on site 24/7. So, for instance, if you have a situation with... one of the things with strawberry growing in, and raspberries in these poly tunnels is they need a certain amount of management. If it's very hot, they all need venting, they need pushing up so that air can get in. But if we have a cold night, those vents need dropping. And sometimes you can't tell until the last moment what decision you're gonna make. If you have a labour force that's only there from 9 till 3 or even from 7 till 5, anything that happens outside of those hours, you're stuck. Whereas with the current workforce, you can decide at 7 o'clock in the evening, that's getting cold, we need to drop the vents, or shut the doors up on the tunnels. And 20 people will be available like that to do that work. So there's much more flexibility and modern fruit growing requires that level of flexibility. So...in the main, I would say growers are happy with that change. Some of them do a better job than others in how they manage those people, but a lot of fruit growing has always been about people management, particularly soft fruit growing where you have, and that's another change, which I didn't mention earlier, strawberry season used to be 5 weeks, now it's 25 weeks. So, with different varieties, different techniques, the tunnels can make strawberries earlier, and you put fleece inside the tunnel and doors on them so you'll wind them up. But then other varieties aren't planted until later and then cropped later, so we can be picking...we got one farm, the farm in the New forest, picks its first strawberries middle of March and picks its last strawberries end of November. And that includes glass houses as well, to make the full length of the season. So that's a very long season, yeah.

Louise: Any other changes you can think of maybe?

Chris: Whilst the price of fruit, particularly of soft fruit, hasn't gone up in the last 15 years as I mentioned, the cost of everything else has. And the cost of labour has gone



up massively. Partly just because with minimum wage... that rises each year. And originally, people were paid on piecework, before minimum wage you were just paid so much per box, so much per tray. And if you were lazy and didn't work hard, you didn't earn anything. But it was accepted as fair, because it was there to be earned and looked: he or she'd done next row whereas you earning lots. So you...hm...okay. With minimum wage, if you were lazy and did nothing, you still by law had to have the minimum wage, which...is ...growers struggle with it...It's wrong to be employing people and paying them very, very little money, on the other hand it's also wrong for people to be employed and do very, very little work. So, they have to make up money to the slower workers, but will typically say I'll make you money up for the first few days, but then I expect you to be up to speed, and if you consistently don't, then sorry but there's no further work. But we're also paying holiday pay, obviously cost of accommodation, although they're paying something that they rent but there's less costs involved. So the overall cost of employing somebody might be in the region of £9 an hour now, where 2 years ago it was £2 an hour. There's massive increase in the cost. But that has meant growers have had to find all sorts of ways of being more efficient, and much, much higher yields being achieved. Say, if we take raspberries for instance, the modern varieties of raspberry might be twice the size of the smaller variety so you can pick more raspberries in a given period of time if you're growing them better, and ... presenting the crop in a way that it can be picked more quickly, so that's an example. So those are changes that are going on all the time.

Louise: What is the role or what has been the role of the EU in driving these changes?

Chris: If I take it since the start of the producer organisations, what I've seen is that the growers...I particularly talk about growers, and producer organisations is just growers, that doesn't apply to agriculture, wheat farming, cattle farming... I can't really speak on those areas so much...But in terms of growers, the availability of money for increasing production has helped them increase production enormously. The PO scheme wasn't necessarily designed purely to increase production, or even largely to increase production, but that's how it's been used in the UK. Because what happens in the UK is we don't have the central, the cooperative with the big central pack houses and central facilities. Each farm has its own pack house, they already had pack houses when they joined the PO and they've kept those pack houses. And in the case of our PO, we're very geographically spread, so it wouldn't make sense to bring everything from Scotland and the South of England to one pack house in the middle of England. It's far better packed on site. The... what has happened is that money is not spent in the same way on this central organisation with big pack houses, big storage facilities, but it's spent on the farms. Some of that money they chose to spend on pack houses, storages and these things, but a lot of that money they chose to spend on increasing production. And if they got land to spare, either rented land or they have more land anyway, they'll put another field of fruit in, and



more poly tunnels and more table tops. And I can think of farms that 15 years ago, were producing 200 tonnes of strawberries, which may sound like a lot, but they're now producing 2-3000 tonnes of strawberries a year. So it's a tenfold increase in their cases. So the EU has driven that, and up to a point that was great, but from a grower perspective, it's becoming counter-productive because we're now growing arguably more strawberries, for instance, than there's demand for, which brings prices down. On the plus side, and this probably is ultimately the best thing, that's better for the consumer. And given that it's the consumer who's the tax payer who's paying the money that's going...it's just money that's going around in a circle. So whilst growers would prefer strawberry prices to be higher, they can't have both. If there was no EU support, prices might be higher, but they would have to be paying more for their costs of production. So it's... I think the problem with the scheme is that when you're in a producer organisation, you have to pay money in to a pot, a central pot of money, that is then match funded from the EU. But you can't...without the scheme, if you had a bad year, you would say, 'OK, no more capital expenditure for next year, this winter we're going to just tighten our belts and weather the storm as it were. So we haven't got any money to spend'. But when you're in a PO, you have to spend money, even when you'd rather not. You have to put your money into the pot and it is match funded, so you end up increasing production just at a time when you wouldn't have done. And so I think that's what's become counter productive. I think that it's legitimate in my mind that the fruit and veg scheme increases efficiency. So for example, going from growing strawberries in the ground to growing them on table tops that allows higher yields and much cheaper picking costs, is a good thing. Just putting another field in and another field and another field, there's a point where that's not a good thing. So I think, if I had to sum up, the scheme has been good, but I'm not sure going forward, certainly in soft fruit that it's gonna continue to be so useful.

Louise: Do you think POs have become more popular over the years, or more numerous?

Chris: No... I think the figure currently is that only about 40% of horticultural production is through POs, and clearly a 100% would be full success for the scheme. And one of the things that stopped the growth of POs or the growth of ...either more POs starting or POs expanding, is that there has been over the years, particularly since about 2007, a lot of problems. When the POs were first set up, it was very easy to manage, very straight forward, and you really just had to put together what we called an operation plan, what we're gonna do for the next three years, or the next five years, so you had some vision, and put in a budget each year and changes, you can never expect to go exactly where you planned. But you justify those changes in writing, and it was very straight forward. As with the intervention that I mentioned before, that it got abused, so has been the case with POs, and so there were groups in different countries, groups of farmers, growers who found ways of abusing it and



they were getting the money but not actually doing the job, so trees were supposedly planted, but when they came to be audited, the trees weren't there. But the money had been received. And so the EU understandably tightened up its auditing procedures and the UK agency, the Rural Payments Agency, that oversees on behalf of the government the running of this scheme, they tightened up their auditing. But there were lots of issues, there were a lot of...I think incompetence on the part of the RPA, and so that they would get worried at times that...when I first got involved in 2010, there was an occasion where every PO in the country was suspended. And they said you're all suspended until we've checked you all out and then we'll let you back in again. And there was a lot of uncertainty. So you're spending all this money but you don't know if you're gonna get the money from the EU. So that worried a lot of people. It's been better in the last 3 years, but I think it's still...some growers are independent by nature, and don't want to be tied into something.

Louise: Do you tend to have smaller growers in the scheme?

Chris: In many ways a PO is more useful for very small growers. In our 12 growers, we've got 5 large growers and 7 small growers. And I can tell you this authoritatively cause I checked the figures this morning as it happens, the 7 small growers equal 75% of the turnover of the fifth grower, so all those 5, each of them is bigger than the 7 combined. So there's quite a difference in size. And the smaller growers...some of them did have good roots to market, but certainly some of them are seeing that the PO provides them with a root to market that they might struggle to have otherwise. We've got a grower who only grows about a 100 tonnes of strawberries, well our largest growers grows 3000 tonnes, a 100, though it sounds like a lot by itself, it's not a lot. And he's at the mercy of the market to some extent; the marketing desk will say, we don't want a tiny grower like you, no thank you. But the PO can say well, we'll make sure we market your fruit. And in the case of this particular grower we're marketing his fruit direct to Lidl and if there's an issue with the volumes, we're finding other ways to sell it, and so he's been helped massively.

Louise: Do people have different reasons for entering a PO?

Chris: Yes, I would say so. I think that most of our members...there is money to be had from the EU, so therefore they want it, their share of it. Because it's a very, very competitive environment, and if your neighbour is getting money from the EU and his cost of production is a bit lower as a result and you haven't got it, then you're not competing on a level playing field. And several of our growers have said they wouldn't mind if POs ceased to exist. Because everybody would still be on a level playing field. But all the time they do exist, I want to be part of that.



Louise: Do you think the dynamics between the farms and the scheme have changed over the years?

Chris: It certainly got a lot more difficult to manage when Asplins PO started. Edward Vinson Ltd, their company secretary as well as being full-time company secretary, also within that job managed the whole of the PO. And so it was simple. It's got much, much more demanding and much more complex and so there's a frustration with that within the members at times although we as the executive are there to handle all that complication and try to make it as easy for them as possible. I'm not sure that's fully answering your question though...I think in the...This may also not be answering you quite, but I think there is a move away from increasing production now, so the way that the POs use the money is moving away from that to more efficiency, and I'm keen to see more of that, I think that's more valid now...Our current programme runs to the end of next year, and I would think that the growers will want to stay in and have another programme, but I know one or two, who would say well, not sure. One of the problems with POs, is getting out. Because what happens with POs is that those poly tunnels that you see around farms, if they're part of a PO, and have been bought through the PO, they are never owned by the grower. They are a PO asset. The PO itself is owned by the growers collectively, and to all intents and purposes the grower has use of it, it's just the same as owning it, until you come to leave the PO and then, if you want to leave a PO that's still functioning, you have to have your assets, the PO assets that are on your holding, on your farm, valued, and that's your cost of exit. And that could be prohibitive, or difficult anyway. So we had one member leave, and the reason they left was because they were struggling, they didn't, well the bank was saying don't spend any more money. And they were saying well, we have to cause we're in a PO. Well, maybe it's time for you to get out then. So they took the decision to leave, had to find the money to buy their way out, but that was because they just didn't want to continue.

Louise: Some of the farmers have mentioned paperwork as well, as one of the major changes, due to the EU regulations and things like that. Is that something you feel here as well?

Chris: Yes, fair comment. It's got much more onerous, there is much more paperwork. The programme has to be balanced; it has to have a mixture of production, improving quality, environmental, there's several different categories, and you can't put all of your expenditure into one or the other, there has to be a balance. So a grower might want to *just* spend all of their allocation of the available spend on, for example, putting up new poly tunnels. Or poly tunnels and tabletop structures all come under production, it's all the same loop. And we'd have to say well you can't do that, you can only have x amount and then you have to balance that with something. I don't wanna do that! Well, you have to find something. And there are some things that...some expenditures that is acceptable within the scheme, but



there's another thing that, things that at one point were acceptable, and now are not acceptable for various reasons. And so that makes it more difficult. But I think growers are right...in that respect it can be more onerous for them, on the other hand they've had an enormous amount of money out of the scheme over the years. It isn't, as I say, it's not the possession...the asset isn't their asset ultimately. But the asset is a wealth creation tool. If you are now growing 3000 tonnes where you were only growing 200 tonnes, 15, 20 years ago, there's a much bigger turnover and even if your margins are squeezed, there's more you can draw out of the business that... With that said, I think some growers would say, well, I'm not sure I am that much better off. I'm working harder, life's got much more complicated. But ... So it's, yeah, it's a difficult one.

...

Chris: Going back to how farming has changed: when I first worked at Vinson's, and first started managing Vinson's over the road, all of our strawberries were just outdoors. If at 7, 8 o'clock in the morning it was raining, nobody came in to work. If it was raining like today, no picking. If 11 o'clock, it dried up and the sun came out, and there's lots and lots of fruit needing picking, still no work, still nobody there. So we lost a whole day, and whereas with the work force living on the farm, you just say, well, first of all you could say, and we used to, it's raining now so stand by, and then 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock, OK, we'll start working. But we will work later today because late start, yeah, no problem. Now, cause it's all in poly tunnels, the rain doesn't stop play at all. Much more...it's much nearer factory farming, it's...for better or worse. We used to have orchards that didn't crop very well that were far too vigorous, there were all sorts of problems with them. We were learning, although we'd been farming fruit, apples and pears in the UK for years, and years, and years, there's still changes that hadn't been quite right. The varieties weren't easy to grow, they weren't very good croppers, and, it was quite difficult to predict from one season to the next how much yield you might have. Whereas now, our growers put in a forecast in November for the whole of the following season, week by week, what they expect to produce. And though the timing gets out, because the seasons do vary, this season is normal, or slightly late, last season was really early, season before was really late, so there's that variation. But by the end of the season, collectively between the 12 growers, we are within 5% total volume of what they said they would produce. So there's much, much more planning, organisation, structure, knowledge, and we're not at the mercy of the elements anywhere near so much as we were. But growers need that, the old farming, the adage is, you have a 3 good years and a bad year or something like that, and a bad year might be no crop at all, but you've got money aside, that's just not, there's not the money there to say 'oh we could manage with a really bad year'.



Louise: You mentioned before 'for better or for worse' – do you think there are any negative sides to the things that have changed? You have mentioned a few things, but maybe...?

Chris: When I started at 18 there was a little bit of a sort of romantic idea of being outside in the open on the farm, and there was ... it was a way of life, and it still is a way of life but it's...it's much more, they are businesses, they are businesses with 8, 10 million pound turnover, and lots of complexity, lots of paperwork, yeah, and many growers probably preferred the way it was 20, 30 years ago. A lot of, well, some of our members don't like computers, they don't like the paperwork, they wanna be out there with their crops, they're growers. And some of the most successful businesses in farming, certainly in horticulture those are the biggest ones, the management team, the senior management team doesn't include the grower. Or he or she might be involved in decisions, but in terms of the drive and the direction and the running of the company, there are professional managers who do those things, and interface with the marketing desk and the supermarkets, and the growing is always on the side.

Louise: At the same I've heard a lot of farmers mention – but then that's a positive thing I guess – that they are very relieved with all the technology and the way that technology has changed, and allowed them to work in a more easy way.

Chris: Yes, that's for sure. Yes, I would agree. I think, when I just mentioned that we were within 5%, we are with each year, we seem to be within 5%. And two of our growers, one of them who's close to 3000 tonnes of strawberries, our biggest strawberry grower, in 2013, he was less than 1% out from what he forecast in total volumes, and he did it again in 2014! Which...and we had 2 growers achieve that, which I find remarkable. And so they would undoubtedly feel that that certainty about production is a great comfort that you're not just putting crops in the ground and crossing your fingers and hoping it'll be all right, because nobody likes that level of uncertainty. One of the problems with a PO, that I mentioned, is that uncertainty. And it's better at the moment, but we were suspended for 12 months, and were taking the RPA to court, lawyers, fees, and it got *that* close, your tape recorder won't pick out that, but very, very close, literally, we had a phone call planned on the Monday, where we were saying to the lawyer: this is it, take action. And the lawyer had communication from the RPA to say we've dropped it altogether, you're back in, which we couldn't believe at that point, but we were that close to it. Well, that sort of situation is very stressful, because the growers had all paid money in on the basis they knew they would be getting money back. The assets had been bought, but they were relying, maybe borrowing from the bank, on having that money come back in. So when you get that uncertainty, so nobody likes uncertainty, and why we were growing everything under poly tunnels is that we...we're sitting here being leaned on sort of...now, and we still have that problem, for instance some of the cherry



orchards are increasingly under tunnels, but because they were bigger trees and they used to be very big trees, some of those still exist, 20, 30 foot high, the cherries will split in this weather. And there's nothing you can do about it. So you've grown that whole crop, and then you just watch the weather destroy it. So increasingly growers are saying, I'm just not gonna do that. If I'm gonna grow cherries, one of our growers has put in very, very expensive cherry covers that are 3.7 meters high. So he can grow the trees fairly high, not as high as the big old trees were, but these modern trees that's plenty. And he's got waterproof but rain can still get in, it won't fall on the trees but it will fall in the alley way, so there's still water getting down for the roots. He's got insect netting all the way down round the outside that stops, there's a particular pest called spotted wing drosophila, that's a real problem of late, and so he's preventing that getting in. And not everybody's doing that but his view is, well, my profit margin will be lower than others if we both have the same crop, but I'm much more sure of getting my crop. And at times they may not get a crop at all. And I'd rather have the lower margin, but know I'm sustainable.