

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

House of Commons, Westminster Hall Debate

“Seasonal agricultural workers scheme” (Alex Norris, Lab, Nottingham North)

Tuesday 12 February, 4.00-4.30pm



The Voice of the Countryside

Introduction:

- Access to labour is one of the three central issues facing farmers and producers as we leave the EU, along with trade and support payments. People from the EU play an important role in harvesting, production, and processing across the food supply chain, in both skilled and unskilled jobs.
- Seasonal agricultural workers are particularly important in filling temporary and labour-intensive roles. This type of employment is not only important for farming, but also for other sectors of the rural economy such as forestry and game farming.
- Approximately 80,000 seasonal agricultural workers are employed in the UK every year and according to the Office for National Statistics, 99 per cent of these people are from countries within the EU.
- We need an immigration policy to reflect the importance of workers from the EU to the food and farming industry and the broader rural economy. This must include distinct policy recommendations for seasonal workers, including the reintroduction of a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme or equivalent scheme.

Policy background:

- The Government commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to report on the impact of migration from countries within EU and to make recommendations for a future immigration policy outside the EU. The MAC [published a report](#) in September 2018 which showed that the vast majority of seasonal agricultural workers are from countries within the EU and acknowledged that “it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which this workforce can come from the resident labour market” (p.119).
- The MAC report recognises that if no new seasonal agricultural workers scheme is introduced “it is likely that there would be a contraction and even closure of many businesses in parts of agriculture in the short-run” (p.119). It also states that failure to allow for seasonal workers “may lead to modestly higher prices for consumers” (p.120).
- The Countryside Alliance welcomed the recognition in the MAC report of the importance of seasonal agricultural workers from the EU, although we were disappointed that the MAC did not use this opportunity to call for a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme to be introduced and instead, chose to focus on the conditions around any new provisions for seasonal agricultural workers.

- Shortly before the MAC report was published, the Government announced that Defra and the Home Office were planning to implement a [pilot seasonal agricultural workers scheme](#). The scheme is due to begin in April this year and will allow up to 2,500 seasonal agricultural workers from outside the EU to work on farms in the UK.
- The Countryside Alliance was pleased that the Government recognised the need for a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme but also expressed concern that what was being proposed would be too little too late for many sectors of the rural economy. We also expressed disappointment that the proposed new scheme will be limited to fruit and vegetable farmers, which will mean other sectors such as forestry and game farming will not be able to benefit from the provisions.
- By the time the pilot scheme is introduced in April 2019, the UK will have left the EU and there is still no certainty on our future relationship with Europe. The 2,500 people that will be allowed to enter the UK as part of this pilot scheme provides little in the way of reassurance when UK farmers and producers employ approximately 80,000 seasonal workers every year. The vast majority of agricultural seasonal workers are from countries within the EU and therefore outside the scope of this pilot scheme.
- The Government's [White Paper on immigration](#), published in December 2018, set out a skills based approach to a new policy in this area with the "possible exception of seasonal agricultural workers" (p.54). The White Paper makes it clear that the Government do not intend to open sectoral labour schemes, "except potentially" for seasonal agricultural work but it states that "the introduction of any seasonal scheme for agricultural workers will be temporary" (p.54). The Home Office has announced a 12-month programme of engagement on the proposals set out in the White Paper and the Countryside Alliance will be taking part in this process.
- The Countryside Alliance is deeply concerned about the lack of certainty in the White Paper regarding seasonal agricultural workers. References to a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme being the "possible exception" to Government policy in this area and that any new scheme would be "temporary" provide little reassurance to farmers and rural businesses or people from the EU looking to work in the UK. If the Government prioritises skilled workers or imposes unreasonable conditions on seasonal agricultural workers then there is a risk of labour shortages in the farming industry which would have a broader detrimental effect on the rural economy in many places.
- The approach to immigration outlined in the White Paper has been determined by the Government's goal of achieving "sustainable levels of net migration" which was stated in the Conservative Manifesto as reducing migration to the "tens of thousands." It is vitally important that seasonal agricultural workers are treated separately and not included in the net migration figures on account of the fact that these people are in the UK for a time limited period. The seasonality of many rural businesses means that access to the EU labour market is vital at important times of the year, and attempts to reduce this form of temporary migration would be damaging to the rural economy. A clear distinction needs to be made between permanent migration and temporary migration.
- The fact that we are due to leave the EU next month, with no clarity on future rules on migration, including seasonal agricultural workers, is a matter of grave concern. The Immigration and Social Security Coordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill does not deal with agricultural seasonal workers and the Government must set out what arrangements will be in place for this vital form of migration in the event of a 'no-deal' Brexit.

Countryside Alliance calls for:

- **An immigration policy to reflect the importance of workers from the EU to the food and farming industry and the broader rural economy.**
- **Distinct policy recommendations for seasonal agricultural workers, recognising that this a separate form of migration which should be excluded from net migration figures.**
- **Reintroduction of a permanent seasonal agricultural workers scheme, or equivalent scheme, which should include the requirements of other industries in the rural economy including game farming and forestry, and permit workers to enter from within the EU.**

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