

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE WRITTEN EVIDENCE

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD, AND RURAL AFFAIRS SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO LABOUR CONSTRAINTS

26 February 2018

Executive Summary

- People from the EU play an important role in harvesting, production, and processing across the food supply chain, in both skilled and unskilled jobs. UK farmers and producers employ approximately 80,000 seasonal workers every year, the vast majority of these people come from countries within the EU. There are indications that it is now becoming difficult to recruit people from countries within the EU following the referendum result.
- The Government must reintroduce the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) or an equivalent scheme. The reintroduction of the SAWS or an equivalent scheme could be one way to help UK farmers and producers when freedom of movement comes to an end and, given domestic policy changes in EU countries, any new scheme should apply to people from beyond 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. Coupled with distinct policy recommendations for seasonal workers, recognising that this a separate form of migration which should be excluded from net migration figures.

Introduction

1. The Countryside Alliance is a membership-based organisation that works for everyone who loves the countryside and the rural way of life. We reflect the views and interests of 100,000 members and supporters who come from all walks of life and every part the United Kingdom.
2. We welcome the decision by the Committee to re-launch and re-open an inquiry into the labour constraints faced by agriculture and related sectors, and the opportunity to submit written evidence as part of this inquiry.
3. The decision to leave the EU will have an impact on the countryside and the people who live and work there. Decisions that are made in relation to trade, travel, agricultural, and environmental policies, will shape the future of our countryside for a generation and beyond. At the heart of these decisions are defining questions about the kind of landscapes we want to create, the food we want to eat, and the communities we want to support.
4. 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. Access to labour is also important for related sectors in the rural economy such as shooting and the game market, and it is

vital that the interests and concerns of these industries are also considered when assessing labour requirements and migration policy.

Migration trends

5. As part of the EU Single Market, our food and farming industry benefits from the free movement of people which has provided access to labour from across Europe. People from the EU play an important role in harvesting, production, and processing across the food supply chain, in both skilled and unskilled jobs.
6. Migration from the EU is particularly important during harvest times when there is a significant increase in the demand for labour. UK farmers and producers employ approximately 80,000 seasonal workers every year, the vast majority of these people come from countries within the EU, and this could increase to 95,000 by 2021 according to the NFU. This work is often low paid and low skilled and, given the current low rates of UK unemployment, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find labour from the domestic market to carry out this work.
7. There are indications that it is now becoming difficult to recruit people from countries within the EU following the referendum result. In June last year a NFU survey found that 17 per cent fewer workers had come to work on British farms, leaving some businesses critically short of people to harvest fruit and vegetables. This view was supported by the report from your Committee in the last Parliament which stated: *“The weight of evidence from a range of agricultural and horticultural businesses indicates that their sectors are facing considerable difficulties in recruiting and retaining labour”*. This has been confirmed more recently in a NFU survey at the end of last year which revealed that there was a 29 per cent shortfall in seasonal workers for horticulture businesses in September, raising the average shortfall for the year to 11 per cent.
8. Changes in domestic policy in Poland and Bulgaria are likely to have contributed to the difficulties experienced in recruitment this year. However, it can also be attributed to the decrease in the value of the pound combined with uncertainty about the UK’s future relationship with the EU which has reduced the appeal of working in the UK for some people from Europe. In order to ensure that UK farmers and producers are able to attract the labour they require it is vital that the Government provides clarity on work and travel arrangements with the EU as soon as possible.

Needs of the Rural Economy

9. We have been encouraging the Government to reintroduce the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) or an equivalent scheme. The Government removed the SAWS in 2013 following the lifting of freedom of movement restrictions on people from Romania and Bulgaria, and upon advice received from the MAC. However, when this advice was provided, the MAC stated that by 2017 labour shortages could arise and it should therefore be reviewed. That was before the vote to leave the EU in June 2016 and any foreseen changes in migration arrangements with the EU which makes the reintroduction of a seasonal workers scheme even more pressing.
10. The reintroduction of the SAWS or an equivalent scheme could be one way to help UK farmers and producers when freedom of movement comes to an end and, given domestic policy changes in EU countries, any new scheme should apply to people from beyond the EU.

11. Any new scheme for agricultural workers should also include the requirements of the broader rural economy such as game farming and forestry. The Game Farmers Association (GFA) estimates that game rearing in the UK is 60 per cent dependent on migrant labour from the EU, similar to the poultry sector. UK game farming depends on the continued availability of unskilled and semi-skilled workers from overseas, and the shooting industry more broadly is dependent on this as over 80 per cent of shoots rely to some extent on reared game birds. Confor has stated that access to a seasonal labour force is essential in many parts of the forestry sector such as nurseries, planting squads and sawmills, and has called for a post Brexit immigration policy that recognises the need for seasonal labour and the temporary employment of EU nationals in the forestry and timber sector.
12. Our new immigration policy with the EU must recognise the importance of ensuring labour is provided to the entire rural supply chain, not just food and farming. One example of this problem is the current definitions of 'agriculture' and 'livestock' used in the Agriculture Act 1947 which do not include the rearing of game birds. These definitions are the basis of most farming legislation passed since the Second World War and might well be suggested as the basis for an agricultural exemption covering migrant labour. Were that to happen, game farming would be excluded from the exemption, with disastrous consequences.
13. We welcome the assessment being carried out by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). However, they are not due to report until September 2018 during which time there will be increased uncertainty for many parts of the rural economy. We have encouraged the MAC to prioritise seasonal workers and produce an interim report on this to allow the Government time to implement any new scheme.
14. The Home Office has stated that they could create a new scheme within five to six months, with a Statutory Instrument. However, this does not allow much time for a scheme to be tried and tested before March 2019 when we understand that freedom of movement, as we know it, will come to an end. It is vital that any new provisions for seasonal labour are in place well in advance of this date.
15. Whilst we appreciate that the Migration Advisory Committee has been commissioned to provide independent advice, it will be aware of the Government's goal of achieving "sustainable levels of net migration" which was stated in the Manifesto as reducing migration to the "tens of thousands". It is vitally important that seasonal 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.
16. It is vital that whatever happens by way of tightening immigration controls, the flow of seasonal workers which keeps crucial rural businesses afloat is not restricted.

Countryside Alliance Recommendations

17. An immigration policy to reflect the importance of workers from the EU to the food and farming industry and the broader rural economy.
18. Distinct policy recommendations for seasonal workers, recognising that this a separate form of migration which should be excluded from net migration figures.

19. Reintroduction of the 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 be open to people from beyond the EU.
20. We urge the Migration Advisory Committee on seasonal workers to encourage the Government to introduce a seasonal workers scheme before March 2019.