

Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State
Home Office
Direct Communications Unit
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

20 February 2019

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Countryside Alliance response to the White Paper on immigration (The UK's future skills-based immigration system)

I am writing to respond to the White Paper, published in December last year, on the Government's proposals for a future immigration policy.

As you know, 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.

The Countryside Alliance welcomes the publication of the White Paper and the opportunity to establish an immigration system based on the needs and interests of our country. Our future immigration policy will have an impact on every part of the country, including the rural economy. It is vital that the needs of rural areas are properly considered and included in the Government's approach to immigration to ensure that a living and working countryside can be sustained outside the EU. I set out our views below and would welcome an opportunity to discuss these with you, or the Immigration Minister, as part of the 12-month engagement period on the White Paper to ensure these proposals are rural proofed.

Workers

The focus of the White Paper is almost entirely on arrangements for skilled workers, and the Government clearly wants to encourage this form of migration, which we entirely understand. There is a commitment that no cap will be imposed on the number of skilled workers and an undertaking to make the system as "straightforward and light touch as possible, and low cost to employers." However, no such commitments are given in regard to other workers and the White Paper makes it clear that the Government does not intend to establish a route specifically for low skilled workers.

While it is right that the UK seeks to attract the brightest and best to work in this country, the Government's approach must also reflect the needs of the whole economy. In many cases, particularly in rural areas, it is low skilled workers that are in most demand and which employers find hardest to recruit. People from the EU play an important role in harvesting, production, and processing across the food supply chain, in both skilled and unskilled jobs.

The White Paper sets out a route for temporary short-term workers, which we understand will apply to both skilled and low skilled workers, but this route provides little in the way of certainty to employers. The White Paper states that this route will be subject to "tightly defined conditions" and the Government will set "restrictions on nationalities, duration and possibly numbers." This route is also only intended to be a transitional measure to enable employers to "change their ways of working", but for many rural businesses, reliance upon low skilled workers cannot be avoided, at least in the short to medium term future.

The need for low skilled workers in the rural economy is particularly important in filling temporary and labour-intensive roles at important times of the year. 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. Seasonal work is not just important to farming but also to other sectors in the rural economy such as shooting, where 60 per cent of game farms depend on workers from countries within the EU. UK game farming depends on the continued availability of low 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.

We share the objective of the White Paper that employers should not be using migrant labour to put downward pressure on wages where there is a ready supply of labour, and we fully support efforts to enforce the minimum wage. However, in the vast majority of cases, businesses who employ workers from the EU do so because the local labour market cannot provide enough workers, in part thanks to record low unemployment figures across the country.

We have been encouraging the Government to reintroduce the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), or equivalent scheme, in light of the decision to leave the EU. 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 Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). However, when this advice was provided, the MAC reflected concerns from employers that labour shortages could arise in future and called for the decision to be kept under review. That was before the vote to leave the EU in June 2016 and before any consequence changes in immigration arrangements with the EU which makes the reintroduction of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme even more pressing.

The most recent MAC report of September 2018, commissioned by the Government, 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". The report also recognised 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". It also states that failure to allow for seasonal workers "may lead to modestly higher prices for consumers".

We 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. We understand 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.

We were 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 pilot scheme will be limited to fruit and vegetable farmers, which will mean other sectors such as game farming will not be able to benefit from the provisions of the pilot scheme.

By the time the pilot scheme is introduced in April 2019, the UK will have left the EU and there is still no certainty as to our future relationship with the EU. 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 White Paper makes it clear that the Government does 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”. The Countryside Alliance is concerned about the lack of clarity 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 this situation continues, there is a very real risk of labour shortages in the farming industry. I know these concerns have been expressed to you by colleagues from the farming unions, but I wanted to stress the problems that any such labour shortages would cause in the rural economy more broadly as farming remains the cornerstone for life and work in many rural areas and integral to the land-based economy.

I appreciate that the approach 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.” However, 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. A clear distinction needs to be made between permanent migration and temporary migration.

I hope the Government will recognise the importance of workers from the EU to the food and farming industry, and the broader rural economy, and consider the reintroduction of a permanent seasonal agricultural workers scheme, or equivalent scheme.

Visitors

The White Paper makes it clear that the Government does not want to see tourist visitors to the UK affected by any change to immigration arrangements, which we welcome. We are particularly pleased by the commitment in the White Paper that the Government will not require people from countries within the EU to obtain a visitor visa, and that such visitors will continue to be entitled to spend up to six months in the UK.

Country sports tourism is an important economic contributor in many rural communities, particularly in the winter months when income from other forms of tourism is often reduced. Visitors from countries within the EU are an important part of this market and therefore it is essential that country sports in the UK remain easily accessible to people from countries within the EU.

The White Paper does not mention arrangements for visitors from countries within the EU who wish to travel to the UK with legally held firearms. At present, all visitors who bring a shotgun or rifle into the UK, whether from a country within the EU or not, require a Visitor Permit for their firearm. However, the process is made easier for people travelling from countries within the EU on account of the Government recognising the EU Firearms Pass (EFP). The status of the EFP outside the EU has yet to be confirmed by the Government although government guidance published in December last year confirmed that in the event of a ‘no deal’ departure from the EU, UK residents would no longer be able to use the EFP when travelling to countries within the EU.

I hope the Government will give further consideration to this form of tourism, particularly to people who wish to travel with legally held firearms, and ensure that no extra bureaucracy or cost is imposed on those involved.

Implementation

Given the scale of the changes proposed in the White Paper, it will be necessary to have a period of transition. We welcome the commitment in the White Paper to introduce an Implementation Period, planned to run until 31 December 2020, during which current rules will continue to apply.

We understand the Government intends to introduce this Implementation Period whether or not a Withdrawal Agreement has been reached and ratified by 29 March 2019 and whatever the terms of our departure from the EU. More information on how this Implementation Period would work in the event of a 'no deal' departure from the EU would be useful for rural businesses, particularly whether the Government intends to maintain freedom of movement arrangements in this situation. It is vital that the Government maintains good communications with rural employers to help reduce uncertainty.

I look forward to hearing from you on these points.



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