

# Labour

## OUR ASK



**A minimum five-year rolling seasonal worker scheme, with suitable length visas, no wage differential from the National Living Wage or unrealistic cap on worker numbers, and implementation of the recommendations of the Independent Review into Labour Shortages in the Food Supply Chain.**

## Why it's needed

Accessing competent, motivated and skilled workers in the horticulture and agriculture sector has been increasingly challenging over the last ten years, due to a combination of the removal of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme in 2013, the ending of free movement following Brexit and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A joint industry report published in autumn 2021 estimated there were 500,000 vacancies across the food and farming industry. Labour availability is a significant barrier for many businesses across the sector and is restricting the opportunities for growth and often resulting in the contraction of food production. An immigration policy that is targeted at the skills required and is fit for the future of UK food production and processing is urgently required.

Seasonal labour shortages have been a significant factor in the fall in UK fruit and vegetable production, with some businesses cutting production by as much as 20-30% since 2020. It has also led to an increase in food waste – in 2022 an estimated £60 million of food was left to rot in fields due to a shortage of workers to pick and pack the crops.

These production losses not only have a detrimental impact on individual farming and growing businesses, they also have an impact on our food security and, consequently, on our national security.

In addition to the well-publicised difficulties in recruiting seasonal workers, businesses across all sectors continue to face difficulties recruiting permanent labour.

Agriculture and horticulture are specialised industries and many roles require specific skills and competencies that are difficult to find. In horticulture, the inability to offer experienced seasonal workers the chance to take permanent roles adds to this challenge.



This is the case across all business areas: administrative, financial, technical, and managerial. While businesses continue to seek to attract domestic workers, the

uptake has not been sufficient in supporting industry needs.

Automation is often cited as the answer, but technological

solutions for the most labour-intensive roles are still many years away and require significant investment.

## What it would deliver

Businesses need confidence to invest in future production. The stability provided by a minimum five-year rolling seasonal worker scheme would remove labour as a barrier to growth and help give businesses much-needed certainty for successful long-term planning. It would also give workers the assurance of being able to return in subsequent seasons.

Extending visas from six to nine months would support those businesses that have longer production cycles and give workers greater earning potential, an important incentive in seasonal workers choosing to come to the UK.

Reducing the 'cooling off' period from six to three months would give greater flexibility for all-important experienced returnees. Allowing employers of sufficient size, expertise, and experience with a track record of competent management to recruit directly would further increase business certainty and production output while ensuring job security throughout the supply chain.

The industry will continue to prioritise worker welfare through good standards of improved accommodation provision and protections for its seasonal workers.

Domestic recruitment campaigns require cooperation between

industry and government in order to change the public perception of the sector.

This would help businesses to better develop and support their employees and help increase job uptake from potential domestic workers. This further benefits worker welfare and increases the professional recognition of agriculture and horticulture businesses.

Abroad, the promotion of information on UK employment law and protections would assist in limiting the risk of exploitation and better inform potential workers of the strength of their rights within the UK.

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