

Why UK farms are recruiting fruit pickers from 7,000 miles away

Last year, Ukrainians helped plug post-Brexit labour shortages. With the focus now on Asia, it's unclear who should police issues such as illegal broker fees



Plums from Clock House farm. After Brexit and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, UK farms are recruiting seasonal workers from further afield. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

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As a Guardian investigation reports that Indonesian workers picking fruit for leading UK supermarkets have ended up with **debts of up to £5,000** for a single season, we look at what is driving a crisis in British agricultural labour and how exploitation can be avoided.

Why are farms recruiting fruit pickers from 7,000 miles away?

A shortage of farm workers created by Brexit led to 8,000 tonnes of berries going unpicked last year. Russia's invasion of Ukraine only made the shortage more critical - Ukrainians made up two-thirds of all workers arriving on seasonal worker visas in 2021, with almost 20,000 working on British farms. When war broke out weeks before the picking season was due to start, recruiters had to look beyond Ukraine, with a rise reported in farm workers arriving from **Indonesia**, Nepal, Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

How much do farms rely on seasonal workers from overseas?

A great deal. In 2019 about 2,500 workers came to Britain on a pilot of the **seasonal worker visa**. This year the number is expected to be 40,000, with many coming from distant countries and little funding or infrastructure to investigate the circumstances of their recruitment.

Why are pickers on UK farms arriving thousands of pounds in debt to brokers in Bali?

AG Recruitment, one of only four licensed agencies allowed to recruit under the UK seasonal worker scheme, was tasked with filling a shortfall in farm workers quickly this year, including in Indonesia.

With no previous experience in Indonesia, AG sought help from the Jakarta-based Al Zubara Manpower, which appears to have gone to brokers on other islands who charged exorbitant fees to the workers they introduced.

The managing director of AG, Douglas Amesz, said he personally recruited candidates in Jakarta for Clock House farm in **Kent**, that applications and visas were only processed by AG, and he was unaware of brokers levying charges. He said he was "extremely concerned to learn of the allegations that have been raised".

Do labourers have enough work to pay their debts?

Some pickers at Clock House were worried when they started work that they could end up trapped in debt, as multiple labourers were initially on zero-hours contracts, despite this being against the rules for those on seasonal worker visas since April 2022.

With at least one worker making less than £300 a week once accommodation costs were charged, some were anxious about work running out as the picking season finishes before the end of their six-month visa.

Clock House changed the contracts to guarantee a minimum of 20 hours after the Guardian approached it for a response. The farm said it conducted an audit of its payroll and found workers picked for an average of over 48 hours a week, meaning an income of more than £2,000 a month.

What about workers who were not charged illegal fees?

It is commonplace and within the rules for pickers to bear the costs of their flights and visas, despite experts saying that best practice is an "employer pays" approach. This means many workers arrive with significant debts

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when they are flying from the other side of the world, even without extra charges.

Will workers charged fees get their money back?

Unlikely. Dora-Olivia Vicol, the chief executive of the [Work Rights Centre](#), said: "The real tragedy is that compensating these workers will be extremely difficult. This is because enforcement agencies in the UK are not yet equipped to pursue and prosecute rogue recruiters registered abroad.

"To go after them we would need sustained collaboration between enforcement agencies in the UK, and those in the countries that supply British farms with agricultural labour. Unfortunately, this can take years to build, which is why workers from Indonesia, Nepal and [parts of] central Asia, countries that were all but invisible to enforcement agencies until recently, are at particular risk today."

Does the fruit they pick end up on my table?

Quite possibly. Clock House, where several workers say they have debts between £4,400 and £5,000 to brokers in Bali, supplies supermarkets with strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, plums and apples.

Its clients include Marks & Spencer, Waitrose, Tesco and Sainsbury's, and the supermarkets have launched urgent investigations into the allegations. Clock House said it was "deeply concerned" and was working with the authorities to investigate.

Who is supposed to stop it happening, or act when it does?

This is where the buck-passing starts. The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, which operates in England and Wales, has a remit to protect vulnerable and exploited workers, but the Home Office was quick to point out that the GLAA cannot investigate labour abuse and exploitation in other countries.

The Home Office says it is incumbent on foreign governments to investigate, but cash-strapped nations exporting workers do not necessarily have the resources or inclination. The GLAA itself has a budget of just £7m - less than what the Home Office spends on publications, stationery and printing.

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