



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

Labour shortages in the food and farming sector

Fourth Report of Session 2021–22

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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Summary

The food and farming sector has been suffering from acute labour shortages due principally to Brexit and the covid-19 pandemic. In August 2021, the number of vacancies was estimated to be 500,000 out of 4.1 million roles in the sector. We found clear evidence that labour shortages have badly affected the food and farming industry - threatening food security, the welfare of animals and the mental health of those working in the sector. Businesses have been badly hit, with the pig sector being particularly affected. The food sector is the UK's largest manufacturing sector but faces permanent shrinkage if a failure to address its acute labour shortages leads to wage rises, price increases, reduced competitiveness and, ultimately, food production being exported abroad and increased imports.

We found that labour shortages across the sector were causing crops to go unharvested and left to rot in fields, healthy pigs to be culled, and disruption to the food supply chain's just-in-time delivery model. Our key recommendations are:

- The Government must learn the lessons from the way it introduced the temporary short-term visa schemes of autumn 2021, as their late announcement limited the sector's ability to take advantage of the visas being made available.
- The Government needs to make a step change in how it engages with industry, taking seriously the concerns they raise and acting promptly on them—this should help prevent any future intervention being “too little, too late”.
- The Government must review aspects of the Skilled Worker Visa scheme that act as barriers, including the English language requirement and the complexity and costs involved in a visa application.
- The Government needs to build on its welcome expansion of the Seasonal Workers Pilot scheme to the ornamentals sector and: increase the number of visas available by 10,000 this year; make the scheme permanent; and commit to announcing visa numbers in future on a rolling five-year basis.
- The Government must work with industry both to tackle the immediate labour shortage facing the sector and to develop a long-term labour strategy that combines the development and deployment of new technology with attractive education and vocational training packages to entice British-based workers, so reducing the sector's dependence on overseas labour.

1 Introduction

1. The food and farming sector is a key part of the UK economy. It's the largest manufacturing sector, and contributed some £127 billion, which is 6.7% of national Gross Value Added (GVA).¹ During 2021, the sector faced a number of unprecedented challenges as it adapted to the circumstances created by the covid-19 pandemic, the imposition of checks and controls on exports from Great Britain to the European Union,² and challenging issues around cost and timeliness, for example in relation to energy, fertilisers, carbon dioxide availability, packaging and shipping.³ However, the single biggest factor affecting the sector has been labour shortages.

2. According to Grant Thornton UK LLP's report,⁴ as of August 2021, the food and drink sector had "potentially in excess of 500,000 job vacancies", equivalent to a 12.5% structural vacancy rate which it described as a "chronic" labour shortage.⁵ Scotland Food and Drink told us that business leaders were "united in their view that the shortage of labour is the single biggest challenge they face".⁶ The National Farmers' Union (NFU) said that labour availability was a "barrier to growth" and that the food supply chain "could break down at any moment".⁷

3. This is not the first time we have considered the sector's labour needs. Our 2020 report entitled "The UK's new immigration policy and the food supply chain" found that the sector had had limited time to prepare for the new immigration policy and that the absence of any transition period posed considerable challenges to businesses in the food supply chain.⁸ We concluded then (as we do again now) that much more needed to be done to attract domestic workers and increase investment in technology, but that neither reform could be expected to make up for the sudden decline in overseas labour in the short-term.⁹

4. When it became clear in September 2021 that significant labour shortages in the food and farming sector—meat processing workers and HGV drivers in particular—were

1 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Northern Ireland), Welsh Government, Knowledge and Analytical Services, and The Scottish Government, Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services, [Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2020](#) (July 2021), p11. The figure of £127 billion in 2019 is the total estimated Gross Value Added (GVA) figure. GVA is used by the Office for National Statistics as a proxy for the output measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (ONS, '[A guide to interpreting monthly gross domestic product](#)', 10 July 2018)

2 Trade controls, including the need for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks on animal and plant-related goods between the UK and the EU following Brexit, only apply to Great Britain. Under the Northern Ireland Protocol, Northern Ireland effectively remains with the Single European Market for goods and the EU Customs Union. Limited GB controls on EU imports were also introduced from 1 January 2021 mainly for high-risk SPS imports and live animals.

3 Food and Drink Federation ([LS0043](#)).

4 Grant Thornton UK LLP examined the labour shortages challenges and issues facing the UK Food and Drinks sector, having been commissioned by a number of organisations in the sector. The report, [Establishing the labour availability issues of the UK Food and Drink Sector](#), was published in August 2021.

5 Grant Thornton UK LLP, [Establishing the labour availability issues of the UK Food and Drink Sector](#) (August 2021), p6

6 Scotland Food & Drink ([LS0019](#))

7 National Farmers Union ([LS0045](#)); [Q54](#)

8 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Third Report of Session 2019–21, [The UK's new immigration policy and the food supply chain](#), HC 231, p3

9 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Third Report of Session 2019–21, [The UK's new immigration policy and the food supply chain](#), HC 231, p4

leading to stock shortages affecting the hospitality sector, we wrote to the Home Secretary, Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, asking how the Government planned to address these problems.¹⁰ At the same time, we launched this inquiry, inviting written evidence on:

- The extent and nature of labour shortages being experienced in the food supply chain, and what was driving these shortages.
- The outlook for the labour shortage situation in the short to medium term.
- The effectiveness of the steps the Government had taken to address these challenges, and what further steps it should take.¹¹

We held four public evidence sessions, and issued two further calls for written evidence.¹² We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this inquiry.

10 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Letter from the Chair to the Home Secretary](#), 14 September 2021

11 *"How are labour and trade issues affecting the food supply chain? MPs launch inquiry"*, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee [press notice](#), 16 September 2021

12 The evidence sessions took place on [26 October](#), [9 November](#), [16 November](#) and [14 December 2021](#).

2 The current labour shortages

Extent and impact

5. In August 2021, a report by the advisory firm Grant Thornton UK LLP on the food and drink sector found that there were “potentially in excess of 500,000 vacancies” from a workforce of 4.1 million.¹³ Ian Wright CBE, the then Chief Executive of the Food and Drink Federation (FDF), told us that the impact of labour shortages was being particularly strongly felt in key “pinch points”—roles such as pork butchers, meat processors and heavy goods vehicle (HGV) drivers.¹⁴ We heard many similar accounts of the impact that large scale labour shortages were having in different sub-sectors including:

- Crop picking/harvesting—The National Farmers’ Union (NFU) reported that 24% of the UK daffodil crop was left unpicked at the start of 2021 “due to a staggering 33% shortage in seasonal workers”,¹⁵ while Lea Valley Growers’ Association noted that “10% of cucumber growing members didn’t plant a third crop” in July 2021 due to a lack of workers.¹⁶ Riviera Produce Ltd reported that it “left over £500,000 of produce to rot in the fields” due to a lack of staff,¹⁷ and Boxford Suffolk Farms Ltd said it “had to waste approximately 44 tonnes of fruit this year” due to labour shortages.¹⁸
- Meat production and processing—Nick Allen, Chief Executive of the British Meat Processors Association (BMPA), said that its members were around 15% to 16% short on staff.¹⁹ The National Pig Association (NPA) reported approximately 10,000 vacancies across all processing sector roles, with vacancy rates in pork processing plants of 10–15% on average.²⁰ They reported a “desperate lack of skilled butchers” but said pig farmers were also “struggling” for labour.²¹
- Poultry—Graeme Dear, Chair of the British Poultry Council (BPC), said that of the 40,000-workforce needed, his members had vacancy rates of 16%, which equated to 6,000 empty positions.²² The BPC reported that due to labour shortages many members had been “forced to cut back weekly chicken production by 5–10%”, reducing the range of poultry products offered to UK customers.²³
- Food processing—Ian Wright, FDF, explained that labour shortages were having a “big impact” on food manufacturers’ capacity which was causing “something

13 Grant Thornton UK LLP, [Establishing the labour availability issues of the UK Food and Drink Sector](#) (August 2021), p6

14 [Q69](#)

15 National Farmers’ Union ([LS0045](#))

16 Lea Valley Growers’ Association ([LS0020](#))

17 Riviera Produce Ltd ([LS0012](#))

18 Boxford Suffolk Farms Ltd ([LS0024](#))

19 [Q66](#)

20 National Pig Association ([LS0054](#))

21 National Pig Association ([LS0054](#))

22 [Q66](#)

23 [“On-going labor crisis in the British poultry industry could lead to production shortages”](#), The Poultry Site, 17 August 2021

like one order in five not being fulfilled on time” for supermarkets and in hospitality.²⁴ Mr Wright said this threatened to undermine the food supply chain’s long-standing just-in-time model.²⁵

- Hospitality—Kate Nicholls OBE, Chief Executive of UKHospitality, said there had been a 10% vacancy rate within the hospitality sector since the end of lockdown in July 2021, which equated to around 200,000 workers.²⁶ Ms Nicholls said that labour shortages in the sector, and broader supply chain issues, were suppressing revenues by 15 to 20%.²⁷
- Logistics—Tom Southall, Policy Director at the Cold Chain Federation, said that there was a “staggering” shortage of between 70,000 and 100,000 HGV drivers compared to the 300,000 employed in total before the pandemic.²⁸ In addition, warehousing had shortage rates of 10 to 20%, which was causing considerable delays at distribution centres.²⁹

Morale and well-being

6. Witnesses also made clear the significant toll these shortages were having on those still working in the sector. Nick Allen, BMPA, said: “I have been in this job 23 years now ... I have never known morale in the industry so low”. He added: “I am seriously worried about some of the people in the plants, the mental health side, the stress they are under at the moment, and there has been no end to this”.³⁰ Derek Jarman, Chair Designate of the British Protected Ornamentals Association, similarly said: “We are all in great fear and we all don’t know what to do. I have never seen it like this in my entire life, never”.³¹ Mr Jarman observed that most businesses had responded to the labour shortfall by making the workers that were available “work harder, longer hours”, noting: “they are working 60, 70, 80 hours a week”.³²

Longer-term

7. Dr Ben Broadbent, the Deputy Governor of the Bank of England responsible for monetary policy, highlighted the inflationary pressure exerted by restrictions on the supply of labour causes upward pressure on wages and, in turn, higher prices and reduced demand.³³ Andrew Opie, Director at the British Retail Consortium (BRC), said that if labour shortages were not resolved soon, “we will start to see production being lost from the UK and being offshored, and then imported back into the UK”.³⁴ The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Rt Hon George Eustice MP, acknowledged

24 [Q69](#)

25 [Q69](#)

26 [Q105](#)

27 [Q106](#)

28 [Q107](#)

29 [Q107](#)

30 [Q70](#)

31 [Q2](#)

32 [Q2](#)

33 [Q156](#)

34 [Q118](#)

reports from the NFU and others that production had been reduced due to labour shortages, including that turkey production had been reduced by around 10%.³⁵ He also said he had heard anecdotal reports of reduced planting of some winter vegetables.³⁶

Causes of labour shortages

8. While we recognised difficulties in disentangling the precise effects of different reasons for the labour shortages, our evidence was clear that the two main causes were: the covid-19 pandemic and Brexit.

Faster than expected recovery from the pandemic

9. During our previous “Labour in the food supply chain” inquiry in 2020, we heard it was assumed that the recovery of the labour market from the pandemic would be slow, with the implication that there would be ample domestic workers to meet employers’ labour needs without looking overseas.³⁷ Kevin Foster MP, the then Minister for Future Borders and Immigration, told us that, given the “sad” unemployment figures, businesses’ “first priority should be to recruit in the domestic market”.³⁸ In the event, the UK economy recovered faster than expected. As a result, in February 2022, the Bank of England reported that the overall UK labour market had “tightened over the past year”, meaning that demand was close to outstripping readily available supply.³⁹ The difference in the forecast, and actual, unemployment rates during 2020 and 2021 is shown in Figure 1.

35 [Q173](#)

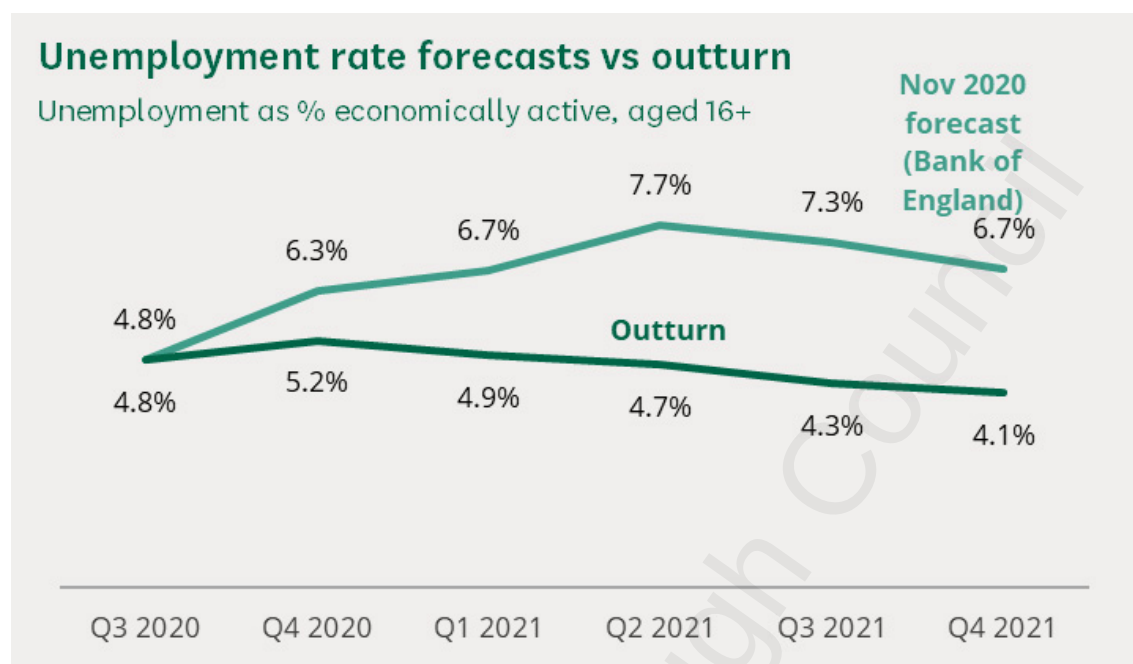
36 [Q247](#)

37 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Third Report of Session 2019–21, [The UK’s new immigration policy and the food supply chain](#), HC 231, para 37

38 Oral evidence taken on 17 November 2020, HC (2019–21) 231, [Q152](#)

39 Bank of England, [Monetary Policy Report](#) (February 2022), p38

Figure 1: Unemployment rate forecasts against outturns



Sources: Bank of England, [Monetary Policy Report chart slides and data - November 2020](#); ONS, [Unemployment rate \(aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted\)](#).

10. While welcome in itself, this quicker-than-anticipated recovery across the UK economy meant that the food and farming sector did not have access to the abundant supply of domestic labour that had been expected. The Provision Trade Federation and the UK Seafood Industry Alliance both said that the original covid-related shutdowns had, in some ways, been helpful to the food production industry as it had released people from other sectors to work in food supply chain jobs.⁴⁰ They added that, once the economy had begun to recover from the pandemic, “the underlying stresses and strains within the system have become both more visible and more acute”.⁴¹

Availability of overseas labour

11. The food production sector has historically been highly dependent on overseas workers, especially from the EU. The report by Grant Thornton UK LLP on labour in the sector highlighted the “importance of EU migrant workers” and cited the ONS’s July 2021 survey finding that, of the 2.3 million EU citizens then working in the UK on a permanent basis, around a fifth were thought to be in the food and drink supply chain.⁴² The pandemic had caused some foreign workers to return to their home countries, although Madeleine Sumption MBE, Director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, said that initial reports of a “very large exodus of people are now recognised to have been almost certainly wrong”.⁴³ Ms Sumption said that “the total number of EU-born people

40 Provision Trade Federation and UK Seafood Industry Alliance ([LS0033](#))

41 Provision Trade Federation and UK Seafood Industry Alliance ([LS0033](#))

42 Labour Force Survey (July 2021) Office for National Statistics, cited in Grant Thornton UK LLP, [Establishing the labour availability issues of the UK Food and Drink Sector](#) (August 2021), p6

43 [Q155](#)

in the most recent figures is not that far off the summer 2019 level”.⁴⁴ As such, hopes expressed by the Secretary of State that there would be an significant influx of returning EU citizens might be misplaced.⁴⁵

12. The evidence we have received leaves us in no doubt that labour shortages, caused by Brexit and accentuated by the pandemic, have badly affected businesses across the food and farming sector. If not resolved swiftly, they threaten to shrink the sector permanently with a chain reaction of wage rises and price increases reducing competitiveness, leading to food production being exported abroad and increased imports. We are also extremely concerned about the impact this is having on the well-being and mental health of people working in the sector.

Impact on the pig sector

13. Labour shortages are having a particularly devastating impact in the pig sector. Charlie Dewhurst, Senior Policy Adviser at the NPA, explained that the problem was not so much a shortage of labour on farms, but rather a lack of skilled butchers to work in meat processing, limiting capacity.⁴⁶ Other adverse factors included the loss of access to parts of the Chinese market.⁴⁷ As a result of these factors by late October 2021:

- 27,500 sows had gone out of production, which is around 7% of the UK female breeding herd;⁴⁸
- there was a backlog of “over 150,000 animals on farms”,⁴⁹ imposing additional costs on farmers of feeding and housing these animals after the age at which they should have gone to slaughter;
- pigs who were delayed going to slaughter continued to grow, gaining weight which reduced their market value (by not meeting contractual standards);⁵⁰
- overstocking also led to a “fall in pig welfare and an increase in aberrant aggressive behaviour”, such a tail biting;⁵¹ and
- “around 8,000” pigs had been culled by the time of our hearing on this issue on 26 October.⁵²

14. The NPA provided us with an update in January 2022 which showed that the situation had deteriorated further:

- 2,500 more sows had gone out of the English herd;⁵³
- the backlog of pigs on farms continued to stand at around 150,000;⁵⁴

44 [Q155](#)

45 [Q172](#)

46 [Q6](#)

47 [Q217](#)

48 [Q64](#)

49 [Q42](#); British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#)) para 51

50 British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#)) para 51

51 British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#)) para 53; [Q42](#)

52 [Q42](#)

53 National Pig Association ([LS0078](#))

54 National Pig Association ([LS0078](#))

- at least 27,000 more animals had been culled, although the NPA said it was “widely agreed that the actual number will be much higher”;⁵⁵ and
- average carcase weights had continued to rise, “topping 95kg, nearly 9kg heavier than two years ago”.⁵⁶

15. The impact on pig farmers has been both financial and emotional. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) explained that “animals that are culled won’t go into the food chain, they will either be rendered or sent for incineration”.⁵⁷ The NPA said culling was “an incredible waste of healthy pigs and good pork, [...] incredibly damaging for our supply chains” and “financially ruinous” for farmers; and the BVA pointed out that legally-compliant culling on the scale demanded may not even be feasible due to limited numbers of people licensed to conduct the process.⁵⁸ The NPA also stressed the “psychological trauma” for farmers of having to destroy healthy animals.⁵⁹ The following personal testimony sent to us by a pig farmer makes this clear:

We farm pigs to feed people and the prospect of having to kill healthy pigs on farm is totally disgusting. We are just about to undergo training to kill these pigs (we are trained to kill ill, diseased pigs but not allowed obviously to kill healthy pigs). This whole process makes me feel physically sick. [...] The whole situation is a disgrace”.⁶⁰

16. The impact does not appear to fall equally throughout the supply chain. As the NPA explained, most pigs are grown “under contract” with a processor: a farmer agrees a contract with a processor or marketing group to produce a certain number of pigs at an agreed price formula over a specific time period. However there are flexibilities within the contract, for example relating to market conditions, the condition of the pigs and changes in production levels.⁶¹ The NPA said that, in early January 2022, processors were not taking 30% of contracted pigs on average each week.⁶² Mr Bradshaw, NFU, said that “processors have let down the primary producers” (i.e. the farmers) upon whom “the whole burden has fallen”.⁶³ Mr Bradshaw added that the contracts between the processors and farmers “have not been worth the paper they were written on”.⁶⁴ The BMA said that there has been a “somewhat flexible approach to contractual arrangements” for a number of years in the pig sector, and noted that processors risked “heavy penalties” if they fail to

55 National Pig Association ([LS0078](#))

56 National Pig Association ([LS0078](#))

57 British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#)). The BVA explained that “farmers are only permitted to kill pigs under their care in an emergency, usually due to sickness or injury. Pig vets have been advised by Defra that they do not regard prevention of overstocking as an emergency. This means that if a farm needs to cull its excess pigs, then only a veterinary surgeon or someone with the correct licence under WATOK [Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing Regulations 2015] can do this. There are very limited numbers of people able to perform this task meaning this may not be feasible” (British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#)))

58 National Pig Association ([LS0054](#)) and British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#)) para 55

59 National Pig Association ([LS0078](#))

60 Anonymous A1 ([LS0062](#))

61 Email from the National Pig Association, dated 15 March 2022.

62 National Pig Association (NPA) ([LS0078](#))

63 [Q64](#)

64 [Q64](#)

deliver to their customers.⁶⁵ However they also acknowledged that 2021 had exposed the fact that “for years the industry has operated on somewhat very loose arrangements” and said “it would not be wrong for the industry collectively to find a better way forward”.⁶⁶

17. Given the backlog of pigs and that in her view “many contractual arrangements are simply unfair”, in February 2022 the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food, Victoria Prentis MP, announced that Defra had ordered an urgent review of fairness in the pig supply chain, saying that “we will begin engaging with industry on this straightaway with a consultation expected later this year”.⁶⁷

18. The Government has taken some steps to support the pig sector. In addition to making additional visas for pork butchers available (which we discuss in Chapter 3), they have also funded a private cold storage aid scheme to allow the processing of some pigs to be deferred, and introduced a “Slaughter Incentive Payment Scheme” which was an additional payment to processors to compensate them towards the costs of running overtime.⁶⁸ The Secretary of State told us that he thought using the Government’s powers under the Agriculture Act 2020 to intervene in this way was the right approach,⁶⁹ but in February 2022 he conceded that both schemes had “not been taken up as much as we would have liked”.⁷⁰

19. When we pressed the issue of compensation with the Secretary of State when he appeared before us in November, he said that the Government would not compensate pig farmers who had culled pigs as this was a “commercial risk” farmers faced. He added that “we live in a free-market economy and it is not the role of government to interfere in markets in all circumstances”.⁷¹

20. **While the whole food and farming sector has suffered from labour shortages, the situation for the pig sector has been particularly severe. Although the Government has taken measures to address the backlog of pigs on farms awaiting slaughter, the issue remains unresolved and the number of pigs being culled continues to rise. We were particularly disappointed by the Secretary of State’s attitude suggesting the current plight of pig farmers was simply the materialisation of a commercial risk for which businesses should be prepared. This ignores the covid-19 pandemic, for which nobody was prepared, but also the impact of the Government’s immigration policy. Since we took evidence, the sector has faced even greater pressure with feed prices rising as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.**

21. **We note the apparent lack of fairness in many contractual arrangements as highlighted by the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food. We therefore welcome the Government’s decision to review fairness within the pig supply chain. However, pig farmers continue to experience real and distinctive hardships and need immediate support. *Given the potential market failure represented by inherent inequity in sectoral contractual arrangements we call on the Secretary of State to use the powers under***

65 British Meat Processors Association (LS0095)

66 British Meat Processors Association (LS0095)

67 “Prentis promises review of ‘fairness in the pig supply chain’, as industry pushes for more immediate support”, Pig World, 10 February 2022

68 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [Blog: Package of measures announced to support pig sector](#), 15 October 2021

69 Q212

70 Oral evidence taken on 1 February 2022, HC (2021–22) 1027, Q116

71 Qq214–216

the Agriculture Act 2020 to intervene with measures aimed at providing support for pig farmers rather than pork processors. We also call for the Government's review of fairness in the pig supply chain to be taken forward as a matter of urgency and for the final report to be published before the end of July 2022.

Gravesham Borough Council

3 Responses to labour shortages

Action by the sector: higher wages

22. We gathered evidence of many examples of how businesses in the sector have responded to labour shortages by increasing wages to try to attract more workers—as well as indications of the results.⁷² For example:

- Sharrington Strawberries had increased wages by 50% for seasonal pickers—yet were only able to recruit “about two thirds of the 60 workers they needed to”.⁷³
- Wayland Farms Ltd said it was experiencing wage rate inflation of between 10 to 20%—with competition across the country from “both our competitors within the food industry, and in other sectors, as we all try to recruit from an ever-decreasing labour pool”.⁷⁴

23. In addition to offering higher basic wages, the British Meat Processors Association (BMPA) noted that meat processing businesses were offering other incentives both to attract and retain staff including “attendance bonuses, relocation packages, welcome bonuses, referral bonuses, flexible shift patterns, paying employee transport, [and online] benefit platforms”.⁷⁵

24. The Secretary of State acknowledged that “certainly, businesses in this sector [...] are working very hard to encourage those people to come back”, adding that “they are paying higher wages now and that will help”.⁷⁶ However, we heard that higher wages were not always enough. Nick Allen, BMPA, said that “we have been increasing the wages. We cannot find people and all we are doing is poaching one another’s staff”.⁷⁷ Kate Nicholls of UKHospitality agreed, saying there was “a displacement of workers within a sector but also across different parts of a sector”.⁷⁸ Andrew Opie, British Retail Consortium (BRC), described the labour market for HGV drivers as a “merry-go-round” as drivers moved from one company to another, sometimes staying long enough to be paid their retention bonus, before moving again.⁷⁹

25. The Food and Drink Federation (FDF) noted that “margins in the UK’s food and drink supply chain are extremely low” so higher operating costs—such as increased wages—

72 The Association of Independent Meat Suppliers ([LS0015](#)); Cornwall Council ([LS0018](#)); British Meat Processors Association ([LS0023](#)); Horticultural Trades Association ([LS0025](#)); Quality Meat Scotland ([LS0026](#)); National Farmers Union Scotland ([LS0028](#)); Centre for Rural Policy Research (CRPR), University of Exeter ([LS0029](#)); Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership ([LS0034](#)); New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and New Anglia Agri-food Industry Council (and Agri-food Sector Skills Group) ([LS0036](#)); Dairy UK ([LS0039](#)); Food and Drink Federation ([LS0043](#)); Lincolnshire County Council ([LS0051](#)); Association of Labour Providers ([LS0053](#)); National Pig Association ([LS0054](#)); Federation of Wholesale Distributors ([LS0055](#)); Northern Ireland Pork and Bacon Forum ([LS0065](#)); Cranswick Plc ([LS0071](#)); Dr Roxana Barbulescu, Professor Carlos Vargas-Silva and Dr Bethany Robertson ([LS0080](#)); Horticultural Trades Association ([LS0081](#))

73 New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and New Anglia Agri-food Industry Council (and Agri-food Sector Skills Group) ([LS0036](#))

74 Wayland Farms Ltd ([LS0007](#))

75 British Meat Processors Association ([LS0023](#))

76 [Q172](#)

77 [Q70](#)

78 [Q105](#)

79 [Q104](#)

”will have to be passed through the supply chain and onto consumers”.⁸⁰ The National Farmers’ Union (NFU) highlighted that this would result in “demand destruction for domestically produced product in favour of imported product, which has much better access to labour”.⁸¹

26. The food and drink sector has responded to the current labour shortage by increasing wages and introducing various incentives. However, this has not always been successful and, where it has worked, it has often resulted in labour movement and churn within the sector leading to higher labour costs which will have to be passed on to the consumer. This shows the need, at least in the short term, to increase the overall supply of labour through revised immigration measures to address the current crisis.

Government response: temporary short-term visas

27. In response to the acute labour shortage that the sector faced in the autumn of 2021, the Government announced three temporary short-term visa schemes for selected parts of the food supply chain.

Table 1: Temporary short-term visas for the food and farming sector

Sector	Deadline for applications	Number of visas	Expiry of visa
Poultry workers	15 November 2021	5,500	31 December 2021
HGV drivers	1 December 2021	4,700	28 February 2022
Pork butchers	31 December 2021	800	six months

Sources: GOV.UK, [Government set to bolster supply chains by extending cabotage rights](#), 14 October 2021; GOV.UK, [Temporary Work - Seasonal Worker visa](#), accessed 4 March 2022; GOV.UK, [Recruit a poultry worker, pork butcher or HGV food driver with a temporary visa](#), updated 1 January 2022

The additional visas were provided under the auspices of the Seasonal Workers Pilot (SWP). This meant that the immigration requirements that apply to the Skilled Worker Visa (the traditional route for recruiting overseas workers to these roles) did not apply.⁸² We return to the detail of the SWP and Skilled Worker Visa schemes below in Chapter 4.

28. Some groups were supportive of the Government’s efforts, for example Arla Foods wrote that the HGV driver visa scheme was “helpful”.⁸³ However, many stakeholders we heard from described these schemes as being “too little, too late”.⁸⁴ Their criticisms of the schemes focused on: the numbers of visas, the timing of their launches, the duration of the visas, and the choice of operators to run them:

- Number of visas—Scottish Land and Estates wrote that the schemes for the poultry sector and HGV drivers “would appear to be wholly inadequate and

80 Food and Drink Federation ([LS0043](#)) para 6

81 National Farmers’ Union ([LS0045](#))

82 [Q376](#); see Home Office, [Workers and Temporary Workers: guidance for sponsors—Sponsor a Seasonal Worker](#), Version 02/22 (February 2022) for the latest version of the rules for immigrant workers.

83 Arla Foods UK ([LS0031](#))

84 Scotland Food & Drink ([LS0019](#)); Provision Trade Federation and UK Seafood Industry Alliance ([LS0033](#)); [Q127](#) [Andrew Opie]; [Q127](#) [Tom Southall]

unlikely to have a material benefit”.⁸⁵ Nick Allen said that the 800 temporary short-term visas for pork butchers were “scratching the surface” given the BMPA’s estimates of a shortfall of between 10,000 to 12,000 butchers”.⁸⁶

- Timing—the BRC said that it was “disappointing” that the additional HGV driver visas did not become available until early November “as the supply chain begins preparing for increased Christmas volumes well before that”.⁸⁷
- Duration of the visas—Tom Bradshaw, NFU, said that the particularly curtailed duration of visas offered to poultry workers and HGV drivers meant potential applicants were effectively being told: “You can come while we need you for eight weeks, but then you have to disappear home”.⁸⁸
- Scheme operators—the National Pig Association (NPA) said that, because the visas were issued under the SWP, businesses were “constrained” by having to recruit via one of the existing four operators of the SWP who specialised in recruiting crop harvesters and therefore “none of whom were specialists in recruiting butchers”. They added that not all the applicants who had been offered to them through the scheme had the necessary skills to undertake the work.⁸⁹

Temporary scheme short-term visa uptake

29. In February 2022, the Government published the data for the uptake of the additional visas announced in September and October 2021.

Table 2: Uptake of temporary short-term visas

	Visas available	Applicants	Issued (% of visas available)
Poultry workers	5,500	1,845	1,770 (32%)
HGV drivers	4,700	135	130 (3%)
Pork butchers	800	170	115 (14%)

Source: Home Office, [National statistics: Why do people come to the UK? To work](#), 3 March 2022

Written evidence, submitted to us in January 2022, described the scheme’s mixed success, reflecting the official figures set out above. The British Poultry Council (BPC) described the initiative as a “success” for the poultry sector and had meant that, at Christmas 2021, there was “a turkey for everyone who wanted one”.⁹⁰ However, Graeme Dear, BPC, had previously noted that if the poultry sector had been told of the scheme three months earlier, they could have increased production.⁹¹ The Provision Trade Federation said that the schemes were “not viable in many cases” due in part to the “unnecessary additional costs for businesses”.⁹²

85 Scottish Land and Estates ([LS0010](#))

86 [Q73](#)

87 British Retail Consortium ([LS0016](#))

88 [Q20](#)

89 National Pig Association ([LS0078](#))

90 British Poultry Council ([LS0093](#))

91 [Q3](#)

92 Provision Trade Federation ([LS0084](#))

30. Currently, the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, Kevin Foster MP, conceded in mid-December that fewer “than 100 applications” had been made for the 800 pork butcher visas and told us that it was “safe to say we have not been rushed off our feet with applications”. He described the Government as “surprised” in the light of “people implying that there is this great crisis and saying, ‘There are all these butchers who want to come into the UK. If only the Home Office would allow them to’”.⁹³ The Provision Trade Federation and UK Seafood Industry Alliance wrote that the “general industry consensus” appeared to be that the schemes were “too little, too late”, and cautioned that poor take-up of the available visas in the available time “should not be taken as indicating any lack of need, simply the practical difficulties of putting such arrangements in place so close to Christmas”.⁹⁴

31. **The Government’s temporary short-term visa schemes for poultry workers, pork butchers and HGV drivers were seriously deficient. They were implemented too late, with many workers unable to arrive in time to help the sector prepare for Christmas and avoid poultry businesses reducing production. The schemes were not attractive due to the short notice and the very limited periods of time workers were allowed to work in the UK. We are therefore not surprised that the number of successful applicants was far below the number of visas available. The Government would be wrong to conclude the relatively low take-up meant that the sector’s concerns over labour shortages were exaggerated.**

32. We do, however, welcome the fact that the Government was willing to introduce temporary short-term visa schemes for the food and farming sector but it should learn the lessons from the operation and performance of these schemes and apply them to any similar schemes that are needed in the future. *We recommend that the Government must conduct a comprehensive lessons learned exercise on the operation and performance of the temporary visa schemes. This must be informed by meaningful engagement with the sector. The Government should publish the result of this study before the end of July 2022.*

When was the Government warned about labour shortages?

33. As noted above, one of the sector’s key concerns about the temporary visa initiative was how late it was established, which greatly limited its usefulness. Many businesses and bodies in the sector found this particularly disappointing as they said they had been raising concerns about labour shortages for several months before the temporary visa schemes were finally agreed.

34. The NFU said that the “warning signs” about labour shortages “were there from the start of the year”, citing the example of the wastage of nearly a quarter of the daffodil crop, one of the first to be harvested in each calendar year.⁹⁵ Charlie Dewhirst said the NPA had been having “crisis meetings” with Defra since February.⁹⁶ On 29 April 2021, the Government received warnings about the labour supply in the poultry sector from the

93 [Q314](#)

94 Provision Trade Federation and UK Seafood Industry Alliance ([LS0033](#))

95 National Farmers’ Union ([LS0045](#)). The ornamental sector, which included daffodil growers, was not included in Defra’s Seasonal Workers Pilot for 2021, meaning that the sector was reliant on UK workers including those with EU Settled Status or EU Pre-settled Status.

96 [Q17](#)

Association of Independent Meat Suppliers (AIMS), the NFU and the BPC.⁹⁷ Similarly, the BRC said that it had been “clear with the Government since Spring” about the shortage of qualified HGV drivers.⁹⁸ Scotland Food and Drink said that the Government had “spent months denying a problem existed despite numerous and sustained warnings from industry across the United Kingdom”.⁹⁹ Tom Bradshaw, NFU, told us he felt that “it is only once we have gone over the cliff edge that anything has been put in place”, adding “that is incredibly disheartening for anyone involved in the supply chain because it need not have happened”.¹⁰⁰ He contended that “it is not like people weren’t being warned” and said “we were told we were crying wolf”.¹⁰¹

35. David Kennedy, Director-General, Food, Farming and Bio-Security at Defra, responded that the Department had to “wait until the data says there is a problem”.¹⁰² He added that “the minute it [the data] did, we could make a case and address it”.¹⁰³ The Secretary of State said that while it was “very easy for people to say ‘too little, too late’”, he argued that the Department had “acted expeditiously to deal with problems as they arose”.¹⁰⁴ The looming increase in demand around Christmas was also a factor: the Secretary of State told us that “we acted first on poultry because it was foreseeable that we had a big need for seasonal labour for turkeys in the run-up to Christmas”,¹⁰⁵ while David Kennedy said that the visas for HGV drivers “were to protect food supply at Christmas”.¹⁰⁶

36. Defra jointly chairs a Food Resilience Industry Forum which has around 100 members from across the food supply chain, although recently it has only met quarterly with ad hoc meetings as required.¹⁰⁷ Mr Kennedy said that labour shortages had been a recurring theme since the Forum’s inception in March 2020, adding that “the need to do something about [...] the latest round of issues [of] labour shortages around butchers, poultry and HGV drivers” had “started to grow [...] in the summer”.¹⁰⁸ Defra stated that it has “a broad range of engagement mechanisms through which stakeholders can raise and address impacts affecting the food chain”.¹⁰⁹

37. We are concerned that, despite existing channels, the Government did not acknowledge the sector’s mounting concerns about labour shortages earlier in 2021. The Government should not have been “waiting for the data” before taking any action. It should have had contingency plans to mitigate the fairly obvious risks and developed specific measures far sooner in response to first-hand accounts being provided by the sector. The whole of Government needs a step change in how it engages with industry, taking seriously the concerns they raise and acting promptly on them. As a first step in achieving this, we recommend that the Food Industry Resilience Forum should meet at least monthly throughout 2022 and 2023, for a senior Home Office official to attend, and for the Government to publish minutes of its meetings within a fortnight.

97 Association of Independent Meat Suppliers ([LS0015](#))

98 British Retail Consortium ([LS0016](#))

99 Scotland Food & Drink ([LS0019](#))

100 [Q17](#)

101 [Q17](#)

102 [Q180](#)

103 [Q180](#)

104 [Q169](#)

105 [Q220](#)

106 [Q197](#)

107 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([LS0063](#))

108 [Q192](#)

109 [PQ37484 \[10 September 2021\]](#)

38. *We also recommend that the Government reviews the timeliness of the data it relies on and, in any reply to this Report, sets out what datasets it uses to monitor the sector, how regularly these are updated, and the time lag between the period covered by the data and data being received and examined by the Department.*

4 Broader immigration policy

39. As well as commenting on the Government's immediate response to the acute labour shortages the sector faced during last year, several stakeholders raised with us issues around the Government's new immigration policy. The new policy was announced in February 2020 and key features for the food and farming sector were:

- The Skilled Worker Visa (SWV)—a list of occupations with eligibility criteria for applicants based on salary, English language skills and academic qualifications; and no cap on visa numbers.
- The Shortage Occupation List (SOL)—a subset of the occupations that are eligible for a Skilled Worker Visa. Entry onto the SOL allows the applicable minimum salary requirement for a SWV to be reduced by 20%.
- The Seasonal Workers Pilot (SWP)—offers 6-month visas for those working in certain agricultural harvesting roles; with a cap on the number of visas issued each year (e.g. the cap was 30,000 in 2021).
- No immigration route for workers who did not meet the criteria for Skilled Worker Visa (e.g. lower skilled, or lower paid roles) other than the SWP.¹¹⁰

40. The Government has stated that its wider strategy is to create a “high wage, high-skill, [and] high productivity economy”.¹¹¹ It has also stated the aim of its immigration policy is to “reduce overall migration numbers” and that it would “not implement a route for lower-skilled workers”.¹¹² The Government's policy paper stated that:

“We need to shift the focus of our economy away from a reliance on cheap labour from Europe and instead concentrate on investment in technology and automation. Employers will need to adjust”.¹¹³

41. Madeleine Sumption, Migration Observatory, told us that “the current immigration policy is not really designed to work for food and farming”.¹¹⁴ She noted that many jobs in the sector “are not eligible for visas at all because they do not meet the skill criteria or, in some cases, they do not meet the salary criteria”. Ms Sumption added that this approach was “not an oversight”, rather a “deliberate decision to have an immigration policy that was very much slanted towards high skilled [workers]”.¹¹⁵ The Country Land & Business Association said that the Government had “adopted a very restrictive immigration policy” which it said was “negatively impacting on sectors such as food supply, that, in the past,

110 HM Government, [The UK's Points-Based Immigration System Further Details](#) (July 2020), CP 258, pp17–23; UK Visas and Immigration, [Skilled Worker visa: shortage occupations](#), updated 15 February 2022; Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Home Office, [Seasonal Workers Pilot request for information](#), updated 7 October 2021

111 Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration, [Policy paper—The UK's points-based immigration system: policy statement](#) (February 2020), introduction

112 Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration, [Policy paper—The UK's points-based immigration system: policy statement](#) (February 2020), para 14

113 Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration, [Policy paper—The UK's points-based immigration system: policy statement](#) (February 2020), introduction

114 [Q164](#)

115 [Q164](#)

have tended to rely on a flexible flow of migrant labour”.¹¹⁶ It cautioned that “in the short-to medium term at least”, unless there was “a policy change towards more flexible immigration, there will remain labour shortages”.¹¹⁷

42. As we noted in paragraph 12, labour shortages could create cost pressures that undermine UK competitiveness and lead to the ‘export’ of some businesses in the sector. The British Retail Consortium similarly warned that the UK had “a choice” to “accept [that] a proportion of migrant workers is required to maintain production at its current level or allow an element of our food production to be outsourced to countries where labour is available and then import that into our supply chain”.¹¹⁸

Skilled workers

43. The Skilled Worker Visa route is open to applicants from anywhere in the world, the number of visas is uncapped and the Government maintains a list of the eligible occupations.¹¹⁹ This points-based system is based on (a) having a job offer from a business that is a Home Office-approved sponsor, (b) for the job to be at a skill level of RQF3 or above,¹²⁰ (c) meeting the necessary salary requirement, and (d) for the applicant to speak English at the required level of B1 on the Common European Framework Requirement (CEFR) or higher.¹²¹ The food and farming sector raised three main concerns with us about the operation of the skilled worker route: the English language requirement; the cost and bureaucracy of making an application; and the omission of key agricultural roles from the SOL.

English language requirements

44. The Minister for Safe and Legal Migration explained that, for the Skilled Worker Visa, there was an English language requirement so “those who arrive in the UK intending to settle can conduct basic day-to-day life like paying your council tax or finding somewhere to rent, and that they can have very basic conversations in English”.¹²² A recent academic survey of workers highlighted the importance of competence in English language to avoid misunderstandings at work, and so that workers understood their rights and responsibilities.¹²³

45. However, witnesses told us how the English language requirement was inhibiting applicants for roles in the sector. Nick Allen, British Meat Processors Association (BMPA), said that the requirement was a “tremendous barrier”, explaining that people like butchers are “more skilled with their hands and manual skills and things like that, and they are not necessarily that academic”.¹²⁴ The National Pig Association (NPA) noted that the language

116 Country Land & Business Association ([LS0032](#))

117 Country Land & Business Association ([LS0032](#))

118 British Retail Consortium ([LS0016](#))

119 UK Visas and Immigration, [Skilled Worker visa: eligible occupations and codes](#), updated 15 February 2022

120 RQF3 is the Regulated Qualifications Framework. RQF3 is equivalent to A-levels or Scottish Highers [GOV.UK, ‘[What qualification levels mean](#)’, accessed 11 March 2022]

121 HM Government, [The UK’s Points-Based Immigration System—Policy Statement](#) (February 2020), CP 220, p6

122 [Q383](#)

123 Dr Roxana Barbulescu, Professor Carlos Vargas-Silva and Dr Bethany Robertson ([LS0080](#)). The survey was of 73 people on the Seasonal Worker Visa—for which there is no English requirement as part of the eligibility criteria—and 53 farmers and farm managers.

124 [Q73](#)

requirement “is the same regardless of whether you are a doctor, vet or abattoir worker”,¹²⁵ and Mr Dewhirst, NPA, called for the English language requirement to be reconsidered so that it wasn’t a “blanket requirement”.¹²⁶ Cranswick plc (one of the country’s “big four” pork processors) said that while “the skilled vacancies for butchers meet the earnings threshold of £25,600”, the English language requirements “remain a hurdle for many potential applicants”.¹²⁷

46. The exact level of English required by applicants is level B1 on the CEFR scale.¹²⁸ The Government sets out several ways that competence at B1 level can be proved:

- Passing a Secure English Language Test (SELT) from an approved provider.
- Having a GCSE, A level, Scottish National Qualification level 4 or 5, Scottish Higher or Advanced Higher in English, gained through study at a UK school that began when the applicant was under 18.
- Having a degree-level academic qualification that was taught in English (with additional checks required to confirm an overseas qualification is UK graduate equivalent).¹²⁹

47. When we discussed the level of the English language requirement with the Migration Minister, Mr Foster, there appeared to be some confusion over what this standard equated to in practice. He initially contended that the B1 level at CEFR was equivalent to “a G at GCSE”—the lowest grade possible under the old grading scheme, equivalent to a “1” on the current scheme.¹³⁰ Mr Foster said: “we are not asking people to analyse the works of Shakespeare here. We are asking for basic conversational English”.¹³¹ The Minister heavily relied on this argument to support his position that the language rules should not be loosened for the food and farming sector saying: “we do not see that the case is made out to have a separate English language requirement, given that the level is a G at GCSE”.¹³²

48. However the CEFR’s own description of the different levels describes B1 as on the “Independent User” scale, with the lower levels of A1 and A2 being listed as “Basic User”.¹³³ For example, in regard to the Minister’s reference for the need for “basic conversational English”,¹³⁴ the A2 level requires “simple and direct [verbal] exchange of information on familiar topics and activities”.¹³⁵ After the session, Ecctis, which provides services in

125 National Pig Association ([LS0054](#))

126 [Q49](#)

127 Cranswick Plc ([LS0091](#))

128 The B1 level is defined as follows: “Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans” [Council of Europe, [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment](#), p24].

129 GOV.UK, ‘[Skilled Worker visa: Knowledge of English](#)’, accessed 4 March 2022

130 [Q379](#). The grading scheme was changed from letters to numbers in the summer of 2018 [Ofqual, [The Ofqual blog: GCSE 9 to 1 grades: a brief guide for parents](#), 2 March 2018]

131 [Qq377 and 386](#)

132 [Q386](#)

133 Council of Europe, [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment](#), p24

134 [Q386](#)

135 Council of Europe, [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment](#), p26

the recognition and evaluation of qualifications and skills, told us that the CEFR levels are language proficiency awards and “differ greatly in scope” to a GCSE in English Language.¹³⁶ When we challenged the Minister after the hearing that a 1 grade at GCSE was not necessarily equivalent to B1 on the CEFR scale,¹³⁷ he accepted that “equivalence with particular qualifications is difficult”.¹³⁸ Mr Foster did not reassert the equivalence of B1 on the CEFR scale to the lowest GCSE grade but he did insist that the required B1 level was “basic conversational English”.¹³⁹ In response, the Association of Independent Meat Suppliers said “we contend that this is simply not the case”.¹⁴⁰

49. We agree that migrant workers should have a reasonable understanding of English to allow them to communicate at work, integrate into their new communities, protect them from exploitation, and ensure health and safety at work. However, we do not believe this requires a blanket approach to the English language requirement, and that a more tailored approach could be taken to support the food and farming sector. The fact that the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration thought that the language level requirement was lower than it really is suggests to us that there should be some room for greater flexibility. Given the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration’s position that Skilled Worker Visa applicants only need “basic conversational English”, we recommend that the Home Office must immediately lower the English language requirement to a “basic user” level (either the A2 or A1 scale) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for those Skilled Worker Visa roles in the food and farming sector.

The cost of using the immigration system

50. Under the new immigration policy, all overseas workers face Home Office charges for applying for a Skilled Worker Visa which vary from £464 to £1,408.¹⁴¹ However, we heard that these administration charges can be dwarfed by the application costs, in both time and money, that employers have to bear:

- The Northern Ireland Pork and Bacon Forum (NIPB) said some members had taken 11 months to recruit 12 workers from the Philippines. The cost had been about £1,200 per worker “to get them onto the process in the first place”, plus the need for accommodation here to be rented before they arrived. The NIPB said the complexity of the administrative processes was “overwhelming”.¹⁴²
- The BMPA said the application process “involves significant outlay / large upfront investment” of “between £5K - £10K per candidate” which were “largely covered by the employer under [the] ‘employer pays’ principle”.¹⁴³

136 Email from Ecctis to the EFRA Committee, 16 December 2021

137 EFRA Committee, [Letter from the Chair to the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration](#), 17 December 2021

138 Home Office, [Letter from the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration to the Chair of the EFRA Committee](#), 29 December 2021

139 Home Office, [Letter from the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration to the Chair of the EFRA Committee](#), 29 December 2021

140 Association of Independent Meat Suppliers (LS0077)

141 UK Visas and Immigration, [Home Office immigration and nationality fees: 11 October 2021](#), updated 26 February 2022

142 Northern Ireland Pork and Bacon Forum (LS0065)

143 British Meat Processors Association (LS0069)

- The Association of Labour Providers (ALP) provided the data set out in Table 3 to illustrate the full costs over three years for a business recruiting 50 workers through the Skilled Worker Visa route.¹⁴⁴

Table 3: Cost of recruiting 50 workers for three years through the Skilled Worker Visa route

Cost	Unit cost	Total cost
Sponsor application - large company	£1,000	£1,000
Skilled worker visa	£610	£30,500
Certificate of Sponsorship	£199	£9,950
Recruitment - advertising, short-listing, interviewing, translation and interpretation	£2,000	£100,000
Travel from home country to place of work	Est £800	£40,000
Immigration Skills Charge	£1,000/year	£150,000
Immigration Health Surcharge	£624/year	£93,600
Total - equivalent to £2,834 per worker per annum, or £1.54 per hour, on top of cost of recruitment, employment, training, management etc.		£425,050

Source: Association of Labour Providers ([LS0088](#))

The Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, Mr Foster, said he did “not recognise” these additional costs when they were put to him, and instead referred to the cost of applying to be a Skilled Worker Visa sponsor licence holder.¹⁴⁵

51. We have previously recommended that Defra and the Home Office should consult food supply chain businesses on the impact of the points-based system and associated paperwork and fees to ensure such companies are being enabled to recruit sufficient staff from overseas in a cost-effective manner.¹⁴⁶ The Government did not accept this recommendation.¹⁴⁷

52. We are disappointed that the Home Office Minister for Safe and Legal Migration refused to recognise that businesses recruiting overseas labour face costs far in excess of the visa application charges. We were not satisfied with the Minister’s response when he refused to accept this fact. We reiterate our previous recommendation that the Government must urgently consult with the sector to establish what additional costs businesses face when applying for visas for vital overseas labour and to develop an action plan to minimise bureaucratic barriers and process costs. We call on the Government to publish a report and action plan within six months of the publication date of this Report.

Operation of the Shortage Occupation List

53. Some roles listed for the Skilled Worker Visa can be placed on the SOL, which can make it easier to recruit to those roles by reducing the general salary threshold of £25,600

¹⁴⁴ Association of Labour Providers ([LS0088](#))

¹⁴⁵ [Qq338–340, 342 and 370–375](#)

¹⁴⁶ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Third Report of Session 2019–21, [The UK’s new immigration policy and the food supply chain](#), HC 231, para 25

¹⁴⁷ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, First Special Report of Session 2021–22, [The UK’s new immigration policy and the food supply chain: Government Response to the Committee’s Third Report of Session 2019–21](#), paras 2.1–2.4

(or the occupation specific threshold if applicable) by 20%.¹⁴⁸ However, all the other eligibility criteria remain the same.¹⁴⁹ The Home Office determines which occupations are included in the SOL, taking into account the advice of its Migration Advisory Committee (MAC).

54. In March 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned the MAC to update the SOL.¹⁵⁰ In September 2020, the MAC proposed adding “around 70 entire occupations, or job titles within them” on to the SOL, including: veterinary nurses; meat hygiene inspectors; jobs in the fishing industry; and butchers.¹⁵¹ However, in her response in October 2020, the Home Secretary said that, while the Government was “absolutely not rejecting the advice of the MAC”, it had “decided not to immediately accept any of the recommendations”.¹⁵²

55. The MAC has described the Government decision to commission it to review the SOL in the first place, against its advice, as “unfortunate”. The MAC said that even with expectations of high levels of unemployment due to the covid-19 pandemic (which as discussed in paragraph 9 did not materialise), this was not reason enough to decline to add these roles to the SOL, given the training time required to upskill domestic workers.¹⁵³

56. The MAC’s recommendations still have not been accepted some 20 months later. The Minister for Safe and Legal Migration told us that the Home Office wanted to wait until the new immigration system had launched, and to look at application numbers and the general state of the labour market before making a decision.¹⁵⁴

57. The Provision Trade Federation said many of its members who contributed evidence to the MAC’s inquiry had felt “deeply frustrated by the policy decision to disregard the recommendation”.¹⁵⁵ The report by Grant Thornton UK LLP on the sector’s labour market went further, calling for the MAC to be commissioned by the Government to “undertake a detailed review of the sector—as it has done for the social care sector—and identify areas of shortage where short-term immigration solutions can be implemented and/or what roles should be added to Shortage Occupation List”.¹⁵⁶ We note the Government can commission the MAC to undertake work, but the MAC can also engage in work of its own choosing.¹⁵⁷

58. The Minister downplayed the importance of the SOL for the food and farming sector, highlighting that the only impact of a role being on the SOL was the lower salary threshold (compared to the previous situation where a SOL-listing also exempted a role

148 HM Government, [The UK’s Points-Based Immigration System—Policy Statement](#) (February 2020), CP 220, para 9

149 HM Government, [The UK’s Points-Based Immigration System—Policy Statement](#) (February 2020), CP 220, para 9

150 Home Office, [Correspondence—Letter from the Home Secretary to the MAC](#), 17 March 2020. The MAC was asked to consider those occupations in the “RQF3–5 bracket”, where RQF is the Regulated Qualifications Framework. A full list of which qualifications fall within this bracket can be found on the [GOV.UK website](#). The Skilled Worker Visa’s direct predecessor, the Tier 2 visa which was open for non-EEA citizens, required a qualification of at least RQF6 (degree level) or higher.

151 Migration Advisory Committee, [Review of the Shortage Occupation List: 2020](#) (September 2020)

152 Home Office, [Home Secretary letter to the MAC in response to the shortage occupation lists report](#), 23 October 2020

153 Migration Advisory Committee, [Annual Report](#) (December 2020), pp1–2

154 [Q312](#)

155 Provision Trade Federation ([LS0084](#))

156 Grant Thornton UK LLP, [Establishing the labour availability issues of the UK Food and Drink Sector](#) (August 2021), p7

157 Home Office, [Framework Document between Migration Advisory Committee and the Home Office](#) (September 2020), paras 2.2 and 2.3

from any cap on numbers).¹⁵⁸ Talking specifically about butchers, Mr Foster said that putting the role on the SOL would not help as the pay being offered by recruiting firms was above £25,600 in any case.¹⁵⁹ However, for other roles that MAC proposed adding to the SOL that the Minister did not raise, such as veterinary nurses, fishing trades and some deckhands, their lower average pay levels would mean that adding these roles to the SOL could have supported overseas recruitment.¹⁶⁰

59. Given the labour shortages facing the food and farming sector, we are surprised that the Government chose to ignore its own Migration Advisory Committee's (MAC) advice on which roles should be added to the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). While we note the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration's argument that adding roles to the SOL is not as impactful as it once was for better-paid roles such as pork butchers, it is likely to have been helpful for other lower paid roles. Furthermore, if the Government is correct that it would have made no difference then there was no downside in adding those roles to the SOL. Indeed, it would have been a powerful signal to food and farming businesses that the Government was doing everything possible to help the sector. We recommend that the Government immediately add the food and farming roles that were contained in its MAC's September 2020 recommendations to the SOL. We also recommend that the MAC use its power to initiate its own inquiries to review the labour needs of the food and farming sector.

Seasonal Workers Pilot

60. The SWP scheme¹⁶¹ was launched in 2019 and allows migrants from any country to work in seasonal roles in the edible horticulture sector.¹⁶² Successful applicants can come for a maximum period of 6 months' employment within any 12-month period and may work for more than one business during that time. The eligibility criteria are much less prescriptive within the SWP scheme than for a Skilled Worker Visa. For example, there is no English language requirement. However, SWP visa holders cannot bring family or other dependents with them to the UK.¹⁶³ There are four approved operators who administer the scheme and act as the licensed sponsors for any workers on it.¹⁶⁴ Businesses requiring seasonal workers must recruit them through one of these four operators.

61. In 2021, the cap on the number of Seasonal Workers Pilot visas increased markedly from 10,000 to 30,000, in part as a response to the end of freedom of movement. Notwithstanding this change, stakeholders raised several concerns about how the system operated in 2021:

158 [Q294](#)

159 [Qq310–311](#)

160 Migration Advisory Committee, [Review of the Shortage Occupation List: 2020](#) (September 2020), paras 5.88, 6C.54–6C.55, 6L.40–6L.42

161 The SWP is sometimes referred to by the name of its predecessor, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme (SAWS) which closed in 2014.

162 The SWP was expanded during 2021 for the temporary short-term visas for poultry workers, HGV drivers and pork butchers. For more information, see paragraph 27.

163 Home Office, [Temporary Work caseworker guidance](#) (December 2021), Version 24.0, pp26–27; Home Office, [Workers and Temporary Workers: guidance for sponsors—Sponsor a Seasonal Worker](#) (December 2020), Version 12/20, para SE3.3

164 Home Office, [Workers and Temporary Workers: guidance for sponsors—Sponsor a Seasonal Worker](#) (December 2020), Version 12/20, para SE3.4. The four operators are Concordia Ltd, Pro-Force Ltd and (since May 2021) AG Recruitment and Management Ltd, and Fruitful Jobs.

- The number of available visas—Tom Bradshaw, National Farmers’ Union (NFU), said the figure of 30,000 visas “has not been big enough” citing the NFU’s horticultural survey for the peak month of July which showed a “34% shortfall in available labour”.¹⁶⁵
- The exclusion of the ornamental horticulture sector—in 2021, Seasonal Worker Visa holders could only work on farms in the edible horticulture sector and not the ornamental sector despite its size with Cornish daffodil growers alone producing around £100 million a year of crops.¹⁶⁶ Derek Jarman, British Protected Ornamental Association, told us that the ornamental sector “desperately need inclusion” in the SWP.¹⁶⁷
- Late addition of new scheme operators—during 2021, the number of licenced operators increased from two to four.¹⁶⁸ However the new two operators were only granted their licences by the Home Office in April and did not start operating until May, despite some harvesting activity starting in January and February.¹⁶⁹ G’s Fresh (a fresh produce company) said this meant that “their first candidates were not available to work until July 2021” which was “far too late”.¹⁷⁰
- Late announcement that the scheme would continue in 2021—as the scheme is still a pilot, it does not automatically continue the following year. The decision to extend the SWP scheme into 2021 was not announced until 22 December 2020,¹⁷¹ which the Association of Labour Providers (ALP) described as “too late”.¹⁷² As Tom Bradshaw said: “we cannot have this uncertainty going towards Christmas every year when we still don’t know whether we have a scheme in place or not”. He called for the SWP to be made permanent.¹⁷³

Seasonal Workers Pilot for 2022

62. When we raised these issues with the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration and asked that they be addressed in future years, we did receive the encouraging news that the ornamental sector would be included in the SWP scheme from 2022 onwards.¹⁷⁴ He also set out the number of Seasonal Worker Visas that would be available each year until 2024 (see Table 4) thereby committing to the scheme’s future deployment for the next three years.¹⁷⁵ The Government has since said that the number of Seasonal Worker Visas might increase by a further 10,000 during 2022 “if necessary”, but has not set out the criteria it would use to make this decision.¹⁷⁶

165 [Qq2 and 29](#)

166 Cornwall Council ([LS0018](#))

167 [Q31](#)

168 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [Seasonal Workers Pilot request for information](#), updated 7 October 2021; Association of Labour Providers ([LS0053](#))

169 AHDB Horticulture, [Harvested in Britain](#) (2015), p4

170 G’s Fresh Ltd ([LS0050](#))

171 GOV.UK, [Seasonal workers pilot: request for information](#), 22 December 2020 [accessed via Wayback Machine]

172 Association of Labour Providers ([LS0053](#))

173 [Q30](#)

174 [Q359](#)

175 [Q355](#)

176 GOV.UK, [Industry given certainty around seasonal workers but told to focus on domestic workforce](#), 24 December 2021

Table 4: Number of Seasonal Worker Visas available

	2022	2023	2024
Seasonal Worker Visas	30,000	30,000	28,000

Source: [Q355](#)

63. However, it was not until 24 December 2021 that the Government officially confirmed the pilot would operate in 2022 and how many Seasonal Worker Visas would be available. This repeated the unhelpful practice of late announcements in previous years. In addition, the official announcement did not confirm the 2023 and 2024 figures. On the contrary, it just said that “the number of visas will begin to taper down from 2023”, thereby creating uncertainty.¹⁷⁷

64. The Horticultural Trades Association, which represents the ornamental sector, said that it welcomed the Government’s decision to include ornamental horticulture but called for the scheme to be “extended by a further 10,000 visas now if ornamentals are to benefit at all this year”.¹⁷⁸ The Lea Valley Growers’ Association argued that the failure to increase the guaranteed number of visas despite the ornamental sector’s addition was concerning, saying: “if you wanted to devise a plan to force British edible growers out of business [...] this would be one way of achieving your aim”.¹⁷⁹ British Summer Fruits reported that the four licensed companies that provide labour to farms under the SWP “are already informing growers that they are over-subscribed” for 2022.¹⁸⁰ A range of figures were given to us by the sector for how many visas were needed, ranging from 50,000 to 80,000.¹⁸¹

65. G’s Fresh said that the decision to taper down the number of visas was “counterintuitive to the needs of the industry”,¹⁸² while the ALP said the idea demonstrated a “complete disconnect” from the farming industry.¹⁸³ The sector also called for the length of the visa to be extended as “as workers can be required throughout the year”.¹⁸⁴ The sector called for greater incentives to be given to seasonal workers to come to the UK rather than other countries: G’s Fresh noted that Germany had increased incentives for seasonal workers by extending their tax free days entitlement from 70 to 115.¹⁸⁵

66. While not an impact yet heading anyone’s agenda, or at the forefront of anyone’s mind, there are potential effects of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the ensuing war and associated sanctions, on the Seasonal Worker Visa scheme given that in 2021 two-thirds of such visas were issued to Ukrainian nationals and 8% to Russian nationals.¹⁸⁶ It is also possible that the UK immigration system will be under additional pressure due to this conflict.

177 GOV.UK, [Industry given certainty around seasonal workers but told to focus on domestic workforce](#), 24 December 2021

178 Horticultural Trades Association ([LS0081](#))

179 Lea Valley Growers’ Association ([LS0073](#))

180 British Summer Fruits ([LS0076](#))

181 Boxford Suffolk Farms Ltd ([LS0024](#)); G’s Fresh Ltd ([LS0050](#)); [Q30](#)

182 G’s Fresh Ltd ([LS0086](#))

183 Association of Labour Providers ([LS0088](#))

184 Cucumber Growers Association ([LS0006](#))

185 G’s Fresh Ltd ([LS0050](#))

186 Home Office, [National statistics: Why do people come to the UK? To work](#), 3 March 2022

67. We've previously called for the Government, employers and representative bodies to work together to develop a common methodology for the number of seasonal workers needed.¹⁸⁷ In its response to our most recent recommendation on this matter, the Government simply said that "producing a single aggregate number for seasonal labourers in the UK" would be "challenging".¹⁸⁸

68. We welcome some of the reforms that Government has made to the Seasonal Workers Pilot (SWP), including accepting our recommendation that the scheme is extended to the ornamental sector and the provisional announcement of the number of Seasonal Worker Visas for 2022 through to 2024. *Given the expansion of the SWP scheme to include ornamentals, we recommend that the Government should immediately make available the additional 10,000 visas. The Government should publish monthly updates on the seasonal labour market to create an evidence base for whether further visas should be issued. The Home Office must also engage closely with the sector to ensure a smooth flow of seasonal workers and to make sure that UK Visas and Immigration is resourced to swiftly process Seasonal Worker Visas.*

69. *We also call on the Government to make the Seasonal Workers Pilot a permanent scheme and for it to commit to announcing the number of visas that will be available under the scheme on a rolling five-year basis.*

187 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Third Report of Session 2019–21, [The UK's new immigration policy and the food supply chain](#), para 48

188 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, First Special Report of Session 2021–22, [The UK's new immigration policy and the food supply chain: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2019–21](#), para 6.1

5 Longer-term solutions

70. While this Report has largely focused on how immigration policy can help the food and farming sector meet its labour needs in the short to medium term, our witnesses agreed that, in the longer term, overseas labour was only part of the solution alongside investment in technology and attracting more UK workers into the industry.¹⁸⁹

71. At present, many British workers are not strongly attracted to roles in the food supply chain, particularly seasonal work. Derek Jarman, British Protected Ornamentals Association, said that if his business advertised a role in the company's office "I would probably get in the region of 50 or 60 applicants", whereas for a job for a nursery seasonal position with the same pay he said: "if I am lucky I would probably get seven or eight applicants".¹⁹⁰ Given the tight profit margins in the food and farming sector, there is limited scope for businesses to attract British workers by increasing wages without causing price rises.¹⁹¹

72. Ian Wright, Food and Drink Federation (FDF), said that when people did join the sector "they tend to stay. They like it" but added "we have to make the careers more attractive" and in particular "we have to provide much better training".¹⁹² The Association of Independent Meat Suppliers highlighted that there was an "educational void" between GCSEs and degree level,¹⁹³ and the recent report of the independent National Food Strategy said that "without an A-level to go on to, the number of children taking the food GCSE has also declined".¹⁹⁴ Mr Wright said that the sector's "own schemes and careers in business" also had a role to play,¹⁹⁵ such as apprenticeships and vocational training.¹⁹⁶ The Secretary of State said that "getting the right kind of apprenticeships and skills in place to support a new generation is going to be really important" in order to address long-standing negative perceptions of working in the sector.¹⁹⁷

73. The sector has already invested in technology and automation, with the food processor Cranswick plc telling us that it had invested over £100 million in the past 10 years, so "reducing the labour need and the skills required for some of our cutting operations".¹⁹⁸ Tom Bradshaw, National Farmers' Union (NFU), said that "exciting" new technology would "supplement labour rather than replace labour" and Graeme Dear, British Poultry Council, said that investment in automation would mean "we have new skills to train people in" to operate the machinery.¹⁹⁹ However, Mr Bradshaw also cautioned that, at a farm level, "we are probably seven to 10 years away before [technology] is really transformational".²⁰⁰

189 For example, National Farmers Union Scotland ([LS0028](#)); British Poultry Council ([LS0040](#)); British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#)); British Poultry Council ([LS0066](#)); Provision Trade Federation ([LS0084](#)).

190 [Q15](#)

191 Food and Drink Federation ([LS0043](#)) para 6

192 [Q93](#)

193 The Association of Independent Meat Suppliers ([LS0015](#))

194 National Food Strategy, [The Plan](#), (July 2021), p207

195 [Q93](#)

196 [Q40](#)

197 [Q265](#)

198 Cranswick Plc ([LS0091](#))

199 [Qq40 and 61](#)

200 [Q61](#)

74. In order to consider how technology and automation, education and training, and new skills could together affect future labour needs, there was strong support for the Government to produce a long-term labour strategy. Kate Nicholls, UKHospitality, said that such a strategy was needed to understand “what we are looking for in terms of skills, training, development, jobs, the economy, how we get from here to there and what short, medium and long-term interventions we need to help support that”.²⁰¹ The Minister for Safe and Legal Migration agreed with the need for a labour market strategy, saying “we would like to see across Government [...] a proper plan for the UK labour market, with immigration as one part of it”.²⁰²

75. **In the longer term, we agree with the Government that the sector needs to shift its focus away from immigration and toward domestic workers and technological innovation and development. While not able to deliver results overnight, a greater focus on the development and deployment of technology combined with attractive educational and vocational training packages to attract British-based workers could reduce the sector’s dependence on overseas labour. It is vital that the Government works with the sector to develop a sustainable labour plan to make the most of these opportunities and potential. *The Government must produce a long-term strategy setting out how technology and labour will together meet the evolving needs of the food and farming sector. This work must be cross-departmental in nature and closely engage those within the sector who will be vital to achieving its successful implementation.***

201 [Q132](#)

202 [Q401](#)

6 Conclusion

76. During this inquiry, we have been struck by the Government's failure to grasp the labour issues faced by the food and farming sector, and the actual experience of businesses on the ground. There has also been an unwelcome tendency for the Government to blame the sector for not doing more to tackle the problem or fully utilising the immigration system—sometimes on the basis of incorrect information.

77. The most serious example of this was when the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, Kevin Foster MP, suggested that labour shortages in pigmeat production did not seem to be a real problem as only one large pork processor had sought a licence to sponsor Skilled Worker Visa applicants.²⁰³ When we pointed out to the Minister that all four big processors in fact held licences, he corrected the record but contended that “the key point remains” that only one large processor had “sponsored any butchers to date”.²⁰⁴ As we have highlighted in paragraph 50, businesses have found the Skilled Worker Visa route unattractive for several reasons which can deter them from seeking workers through it (and exercising a licence they hold).

78. In addition, Mr Foster was unaware of the nature of the English language requirement for the Skilled Worker Visa, and used his flawed understanding (that only “basic conversational English” was required) as the basis to blame the sector for not making full use of the Skilled Worker Visa scheme.²⁰⁵

79. A further example was the Secretary of State describing the serious issues facing pig farmers due to labour shortages elsewhere in the pig supply chain as simply a “commercial risk” for business to tackle without Government intervention,²⁰⁶ with which we have disagreed.²⁰⁷ His comments also demonstrated a lack of understanding of the issues facing pig farmers, many of whom are having to cull animals and thereby suffering damage to their businesses but also to their mental health and well-being.²⁰⁸

80. The Government has sought to reassure us that they are working closely with the industry.²⁰⁹ On the question of whether the Government needed to do more to support the food supply chain, Defra said that its “long-standing view” was that an industry-led response was the most effective approach, aided by “appropriate support and enablement from Government”.²¹⁰ Defra told us that it was “working closely across Government and with key stakeholders to assess how we can best facilitate food supply sectors to operate normally through this period”.²¹¹

81. The evidence we have taken leaves us in no doubt about the seriousness of the issues facing the food and farming sector caused by labour shortages. These include food security, animal welfare and the mental health of those working in the sector. In contrast, the Government has not demonstrated a strong understanding of these

203 [Qq285, 296 and 392](#)

204 Home Office, [Correspondence from the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration to the Chair of the EFRA Committee](#), 29 December 2021

205 [Qq386 and 392](#)

206 [Q214](#)

207 See paragraph 20.

208 See paragraphs 13 to 16.

209 [Q180](#)

210 Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs ([LS0058](#))

211 Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs ([LS0058](#))

issues, and even on occasion sought to pass the blame onto the sector on the basis of incorrect information about its own immigration system. The Government must radically shift its attitude and work together with the sector to devise solutions that speedily help address the problems it faces, in the short, medium and long-term to help the UK's food industry and enable it to thrive. Failure to do so risks shrinking the sector and leading to higher food inflation at the price of the UK's competitiveness, thereby making the country more reliant on food imports as we export our food production capacity—as well as the jobs it supports—abroad.

Conclusions and recommendations

The current labour shortages

1. The evidence we have received leaves us in no doubt that labour shortages, caused by Brexit and accentuated by the pandemic, have badly affected businesses across the food and farming sector. If not resolved swiftly, they threaten to shrink the sector permanently with a chain reaction of wage rises and price increases reducing competitiveness, leading to food production being exported abroad and increased imports. We are also extremely concerned about the impact this is having on the well-being and mental health of people working in the sector. (Paragraph 12)
2. While the whole food and farming sector has suffered from labour shortages, the situation for the pig sector has been particularly severe. Although the Government has taken measures to address the backlog of pigs on farms awaiting slaughter, the issue remains unresolved and the number of pigs being culled continues to rise. We were particularly disappointed by the Secretary of State's attitude suggesting the current plight of pig farmers was simply the materialisation of a commercial risk for which businesses should be prepared. This ignores the covid-19 pandemic, for which nobody was prepared, but also the impact of the Government's immigration policy. Since we took evidence, the sector has faced even greater pressure with feed prices rising as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. (Paragraph 20)
3. We note the apparent lack of fairness in many contractual arrangements as highlighted by the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food. We therefore welcome the Government's decision to review fairness within the pig supply chain. However, pig farmers continue to experience real and distinctive hardships and need immediate support. *Given the potential market failure represented by inherent inequity in sectoral contractual arrangements we call on the Secretary of State to use the powers under the Agriculture Act 2020 to intervene with measures aimed at providing support for pig farmers rather than pork processors. We also call for the Government's review of fairness in the pig supply chain to be taken forward as a matter of urgency and for the final report to be published before the end of July 2022.* (Paragraph 21)

Responses to labour shortages

4. The food and drink sector has responded to the current labour shortage by increasing wages and introducing various incentives. However, this has not always been successful and, where it has worked, it has often resulted in labour movement and churn within the sector leading to higher labour costs which will have to be passed on to the consumer. This shows the need, at least in the short term, to increase the overall supply of labour through revised immigration measures to address the current crisis. (Paragraph 26)
5. The Government's temporary short-term visa schemes for poultry workers, pork butchers and HGV drivers were seriously deficient. They were implemented too late, with many workers unable to arrive in time to help the sector prepare for Christmas and avoid poultry businesses reducing production. The schemes were not attractive

due to the short notice and the very limited periods of time workers were allowed to work in the UK. We are therefore not surprised that the number of successful applicants was far below the number of visas available. The Government would be wrong to conclude the relatively low take-up meant that the sector's concerns over labour shortages were exaggerated. (Paragraph 31)

6. We do, however, welcome the fact that the Government was willing to introduce temporary short-term visa schemes for the food and farming sector but it should learn the lessons from the operation and performance of these schemes and apply them to any similar schemes that are needed in the future. *We recommend that the Government must conduct a comprehensive lessons learned exercise on the operation and performance of the temporary visa schemes. This must be informed by meaningful engagement with the sector. The Government should publish the result of this study before the end of July 2022.* (Paragraph 32)
7. We are concerned that, despite existing channels, the Government did not acknowledge the sector's mounting concerns about labour shortages earlier in 2021. The Government should not have been "waiting for the data" before taking any action. It should have had contingency plans to mitigate the fairly obvious risks and developed specific measures far sooner in response to first-hand accounts being provided by the sector. The whole of Government needs a step change in how it engages with industry, taking seriously the concerns they raise and acting promptly on them. *As a first step in achieving this, we recommend that the Food Industry Resilience Forum should meet at least monthly throughout 2022 and 2023, for a senior Home Office official to attend, and for the Government to publish minutes of its meetings within a fortnight.* (Paragraph 37)
8. *We also recommend that the Government reviews the timeliness of the data it relies on and, in any reply to this Report, sets out what datasets it uses to monitor the sector, how regularly these are updated, and the time lag between the period covered by the data and data being received and examined by the Department.* (Paragraph 38)

Broader immigration policy

9. We agree that migrant workers should have a reasonable understanding of English to allow them to communicate at work, integrate into their new communities, protect them from exploitation, and ensure health and safety at work. However, we do not believe this requires a blanket approach to the English language requirement, and that a more tailored approach could be taken to support the food and farming sector. The fact that the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration thought that the language level requirement was lower than it really is suggests to us that there should be some room for greater flexibility. *Given the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration's position that Skilled Worker Visa applicants only need "basic conversational English", we recommend that the Home Office must immediately lower the English language requirement to a "basic user" level (either the A2 or A1 scale) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for those Skilled Worker Visa roles in the food and farming sector.* (Paragraph 49)
10. We are disappointed that the Home Office Minister for Safe and Legal Migration refused to recognise that businesses recruiting overseas labour face costs far in excess

of the visa application charges. We were not satisfied with the Minister's response when he refused to accept this fact. *We reiterate our previous recommendation that the Government must urgently consult with the sector to establish what additional costs businesses face when applying for visas for vital overseas labour and to develop an action plan to minimise bureaucratic barriers and process costs. We call on the Government to publish a report and action plan within six months of the publication date of this Report.* (Paragraph 52)

11. Given the labour shortages facing the food and farming sector, we are surprised that the Government chose to ignore its own Migration Advisory Committee's (MAC) advice on which roles should be added to the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). While we note the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration's argument that adding roles to the SOL is not as impactful as it once was for better-paid roles such as pork butchers, it is likely to have been helpful for other lower paid roles. Furthermore, if the Government is correct that it would have made no difference then there was no downside in adding those roles to the SOL. Indeed, it would have been a powerful signal to food and farming businesses that the Government was doing everything possible to help the sector. *We recommend that the Government immediately add the food and farming roles that were contained in its MAC's September 2020 recommendations to the SOL. We also recommend that the MAC use its power to initiate its own inquiries to review the labour needs of the food and farming sector.* (Paragraph 59)
12. We welcome some of the reforms that Government has made to the Seasonal Workers Pilot, including accepting our recommendation that the scheme is extended to the ornamental sector and the provisional announcement of the number of Seasonal Worker Visas for 2022 through to 2024. *Given the expansion of the SWP scheme to include ornamentals, we recommend that the Government should immediately make available the additional 10,000 visas. The Government should publish monthly updates on the seasonal labour market to create an evidence base for whether further visas should be issued. The Home Office must also engage closely with the sector to ensure a smooth flow of seasonal workers and to make sure that UK Visas and Immigration is resourced to swiftly process Seasonal Worker Visas.* (Paragraph 68)
13. *We also call on the Government to make the Seasonal Workers Pilot a permanent scheme and for it to commit to announcing the number of visas that will be available under the scheme on a rolling five-year basis.* (Paragraph 69)

Longer term solutions

14. In the longer term, we agree with the Government that the sector needs to shift its focus away from immigration and toward domestic workers and technological innovation and development. While not able to deliver results overnight, a greater focus on the development and deployment of technology combined with attractive educational and vocational training packages to attract British-based workers could reduce the sector's dependence on overseas labour. It is vital that the Government works with the sector to develop a sustainable labour plan to make the most of these opportunities and potential. *The Government must produce a long-term strategy setting out how technology and labour will together meet the evolving needs*

of the food and farming sector. This work must be cross-departmental in nature and closely engage those within the sector who will be vital to achieving its successful implementation. (Paragraph 75)

Conclusion

15. The evidence we have taken leaves us in no doubt about the seriousness of the issues facing the food and farming sector caused by labour shortages. These include food security, animal welfare and the mental health of those working in the sector. In contrast, the Government has not demonstrated a strong understanding of these issues, and even on occasion sought to pass the blame onto the sector on the basis of incorrect information about its own immigration system. The Government must radically shift its attitude and work together with the sector to devise solutions that speedily help address the problems it faces, in the short, medium and long-term to help the UK's food industry and enable it to thrive. Failure to do so risks shrinking the sector and leading to higher food inflation at the price of the UK's competitiveness, thereby making the country more reliant on food imports as we export our food production capacity—as well as the jobs it supports—abroad. (Paragraph 81)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 29 March 2022

Members present:

Neil Parish, in the Chair

Kirsty Blackman

Geraint Davies

Barry Gardiner

Dr Neil Hudson

Mrs Sheryll Murray

Derek Thomas

Draft Report (*Labour shortages in the food and farming sector*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 81 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

[Adjourned till Wednesday 20 April at 9.30 a.m.]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 26 October 2021

Tom Bradshaw, Vice President, National Farmers' Union; **Graeme Dear**, Chair, British Poultry Council; **Derek Jarman**, Chair Designate, British Protected Ornamentals Association; **Charlie Dewhirst**, Senior Policy Adviser, National Pig Association

[Q1-67](#)

Nick Allen, Chief Executive Officer, British Meat Processors Association; **James Russell**, Senior Vice President, British Veterinary Association; **Ian Wright CBE**, Chief Executive Officer, Food and Drink Federation

[Q68-101](#)

Tuesday 9 November 2021

Kate Nicholls OBE, Chief Executive Officer, UKHospitality; **Andrew Opie**, Director of Food and Sustainability, British Retail Consortium; **Tom Southall**, Policy Director, Cold Chain Federation

[Q102-146](#)

Dr Ben Broadbent, Deputy Governor, Bank of England; **Madeleine Sumption MBE**, Director, Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford; **Professor Jo Swaffield**, Head of Department, Department of Economics & Related Studies, University of York

[Q147-168](#)

Tuesday 16 November 2021

The Rt Hon George Eustice MP, Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; **David Kennedy**, Director-General, Food, Farming and Bio-Security, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

[Q169-282](#)

Tuesday 14 December 2021

Kevin Foster MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Safe and Legal Migration), Home Office; **Philippa Rouse**, Director, Senior Responsible Officer, Future Border & Immigration System Programme, Migration & Borders Group, Home Office

[Q283-408](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

INQ numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Agricultural Industries Confederation ([LS0008](#))
- 2 Anonymous A1 ([LS0062](#))
- 3 Anonymous A2 ([LS0092](#))
- 4 Anonymous A2 ([LS0070](#))
- 5 Arla Foods UK ([LS0031](#))
- 6 Association of Independent Meat Suppliers ([LS0015](#))
- 7 Association of Independent Meat Suppliers ([LS0077](#))
- 8 Association of Labour Providers ([LS0088](#))
- 9 Association of Labour Providers ([LS0053](#))
- 10 Barbulescu, Dr Roxana; Vargas-Silva, Professor Carlos; and Robertson, Dr Bethany ([LS0035](#))
- 11 Barbulescu, Dr Roxana; Vargas-Silva, Professor Carlos; and Robertson, Dr Bethany ([LS0080](#))
- 12 Boxford Suffolk Farms Ltd ([LS0024](#))
- 13 British Apple and Pears Ltd ([LS0059](#))
- 14 British Egg Industry Council ([LS0048](#))
- 15 British Egg Industry Council ([LS0052](#))
- 16 British Growers Association ([LS0011](#))
- 17 British Meat Processors Association ([LS0023](#))
- 18 British Meat Processors Association ([LS0069](#))
- 19 British Poultry Council ([LS0093](#))
- 20 British Poultry Council ([LS0085](#))
- 21 British Poultry Council ([LS0066](#))
- 22 British Poultry Council ([LS0040](#))
- 23 British Retail Consortium ([LS0068](#))
- 24 British Retail Consortium ([LS0016](#))
- 25 British Summer Fruits ([LS0076](#))
- 26 British Summer Fruits ([LS0017](#))
- 27 British Veterinary Association ([LS0046](#))
- 28 Country Land & Business Association ([LS0032](#))
- 29 Centre for Rural Policy Research (CRPR), University of Exeter ([LS0029](#))
- 30 Cold Chain Federation ([LS0064](#))
- 31 Cold Chain Federation ([LS0037](#))
- 32 Cornwall Council ([LS0018](#))

- 33 Cranswick Plc ([LS0071](#))
- 34 Cranswick Plc ([LS0091](#))
- 35 Cucumber Growers Association ([LS0006](#))
- 36 Dairy UK ([LS0039](#))
- 37 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([LS0063](#))
- 38 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([LS0058](#))
- 39 Eville and Jones ([LS0056](#))
- 40 Federation of Wholesale Distributors ([LS0055](#))
- 41 Fermanagh and Omagh District Council ([LS0014](#))
- 42 Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) ([LS0075](#))
- 43 Food and Drink Federation ([LS0043](#))
- 44 Fresh Produce Consortium ([LS0074](#))
- 45 Fresh Produce Consortium ([LS0038](#))
- 46 G's Fresh Ltd ([LS0086](#))
- 47 G's Fresh Ltd ([LS0067](#))
- 48 G's Fresh Ltd ([LS0050](#))
- 49 Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership ([LS0083](#))
- 50 Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership ([LS0034](#))
- 51 Horticultural Trades Association ([LS0081](#))
- 52 Horticultural Trades Association ([LS0025](#))
- 53 Karro Food Group ([LS0090](#))
- 54 Kernock Park Plants ([LS0004](#))
- 55 Lea Valley Growers' Association ([LS0073](#))
- 56 Lea Valley Growers' Association ([LS0020](#))
- 57 Lincolnshire County Council ([LS0051](#))
- 58 Logistics UK ([LS0049](#))
- 59 Philippe, Mr Mandangi ([LS0027](#))
- 60 Masstock Arable (UK) Ltd t/a Agrii ([LS0003](#))
- 61 National Sheep Association ([LS0030](#))
- 62 National Farmers' Union ([LS0045](#))
- 63 National Farmers' Union ([LS0061](#))
- 64 National Farmers' Union Scotland ([LS0028](#))
- 65 National Farmers' Union Scotland ([LS0082](#))
- 66 National Pig Association ([LS0060](#))
- 67 National Pig Association ([LS0054](#))
- 68 National Pig Association ([LS0078](#))
- 69 Nestlé UK & Ireland ([LS0047](#))

- 70 New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and New Anglia Agri-food Industry Council (and Agri-food Sector Skills Group) ([LS0036](#))
- 71 Northern Ireland Pork and Bacon Forum ([LS0065](#))
- 72 Martin, Oei ([LS0002](#))
- 73 Ornamental Horticulture Roundtable Group ([LS0021](#))
- 74 Pro Force ([LS0087](#))
- 75 Provision Trade Federation ([LS0084](#))
- 76 Provision Trade Federation and UK Seafood Industry Alliance ([LS0033](#))
- 77 Quality Meat Scotland ([LS0026](#))
- 78 Riviera Produce Ltd ([LS0012](#))
- 79 Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers ([LS0079](#))
- 80 Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers ([LS0022](#))
- 81 Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons ([LS0009](#))
- 82 Scotland Food & Drink ([LS0019](#))
- 83 Scottish Land and Estates ([LS0010](#))
- 84 Seafood Scotland ([LS0041](#))
- 85 Sofina Foods Inc ([LS0072](#))
- 86 Staples Vegetables ([LS0013](#))
- 87 T. Soanes and Son (Poultry) Ltd ([LS0001](#))
- 88 UKHospitality ([LS0057](#))
- 89 Wayland Farms Ltd ([LS0007](#))
- 90 West Sussex Growers' Association ([LS0005](#))
- 91 West Sussex Growers' Association ([LS0089](#))
- 92 Western Fish Producers' Organisation Ltd; Falfish Ltd; More Seafood Ltd; Whitelink Seafood Ltd; Seafood and Eat it Ltd; and Brixham Trawler Agents ([LS0044](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Moving animals across borders	HC 79
2nd	Environmental Land Management and the agricultural transition	HC 78
3rd	Tree planting	HC 356

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	COVID-19 and food supply	HC 263
2nd	Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair-Designate of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)	HC 1042
3rd	The UK's new immigration policy and the food supply chain	HC 231
4th	Flooding	HC 170
5th	Air Quality and coronavirus: a glimpse of a different future or business as usual	HC 468
6th	Public Sector Procurement of Food	HC 469
7th	Covid-19 and the issues of security in food supply	HC 1156
8th	Seafood and meat exports to the EU	HC 1189