

# Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Labour in the Food Supply Chain, HC 231

Tuesday 17 November 2020

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Dave Doogan; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Julian Sturdy; Derek Thomas.

Questions 109 - 202

### Witnesses

**I:** Victoria Prentis, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Defra; Kevin Foster, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Future Borders and Immigration), Home Office; Tim Mordan, Head of Farming—Innovation, Productivity and Science, Defra; and Philippa Rouse, Director, Future Border & Immigration System Directorate, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Defra](#)



## Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Victoria Prentis, Kevin Foster, Tim Mordan and Philippa Rouse.

Q109 **Chair:** Welcome to our meeting, Ministers, to look at the availability of seasonal workers for both agriculture and food production. It is a pleasure to have you both here. Would you like to introduce yourselves for the record?

**Victoria Prentis:** I am Victoria Prentis, the MP for Banbury and Minister in Defra.

**Kevin Foster:** I am Kevin Foster. I am the MP for Torbay and the Minister for Future Borders and Immigration at the Home Office.

**Philippa Rouse:** Good afternoon. My name is Philippa Rouse. I am a director at the Home Office, responsible for the design and delivery of the future border and immigration system post-EU exit.

**Tim Mordan:** Good afternoon. I am Tim Mordan. I am a deputy director in Defra. I head up the team that looks after productivity, innovation and science.

Q110 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I shall start off with the first question. What assurances can you give to the food supply chain that it will be able to access the labour it needs in 2021 and beyond?

**Kevin Foster:** It depends what types of labour we are looking at. The food supply sector is a very wide and varied industry. Those recruiting for jobs at the skill level of school leaver or above—the new RQF 3 limit—will be able to turn to the future points-based system. We are suspending the cap in that system and removing the resident labour market test, so, for example, recruiting a range of roles will become slightly easier and, of course, that works on a global basis.

In the more general areas of recruitment, we can look at what is happening in the wider UK labour market at the moment. Chair, you will be familiar with the unemployment statistics. Very sadly, it is rising in all our constituencies. We expect that the food supply sector and others would, for more general recruitment, look in the first instance towards the domestic UK labour market including, it has to be said, those who have status under the European settlement scheme where we have, so far, granted 3.9 million statuses to those who have come to the UK under free movement. Of course, up to 31 December, people can still arrive in the UK under free movement.

We have that pool of labour. We have the UK pool of labour. Then, for where there are particular skills, there is still an ability to turn to the future points-based system. In addition, there are other migration routes to the UK that grant more general rights to work. For example, we will launch, at the end of January, the British nationals (overseas) settlement route, which is primarily about meeting our commitment to the people of



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Hong Kong given China's actions in breach of the Anglo-Sino agreement. Our ballpark estimate is 250,000 people over the next five years arriving under that route, but it could be more.

Q111 **Chair:** With the situation in Hong Kong and people arriving from Hong Kong, are you seeing these mainly from the financial sector and not so much doing manual work? Where do you see the situation with labour from Hong Kong?

**Kevin Foster:** Labour from Hong Kong will also be driven by what happens in Hong Kong with the situation there. We have seen developments even in the last couple of weeks related to the situation. Interestingly, there are already a number of routes from Hong Kong to the UK: youth mobility, study and others. We estimate that, of those who could qualify under the new BN(O) settlement route, about 70% would not be in roles at the moment that would potentially qualify under the points-based system. That is still open to them to apply, but it would make more sense for them if they qualified to apply under the BN(O). They have a general right to work.

Q112 **Chair:** I suppose my blunt question to you is whether the people coming from Hong Kong are likely to want to go and pick daffodils in Cornwall. Are they likely to want to move into food processing? We have to be realistic not only about the situation of the numbers but about what people will be likely to want to do. Pick for Britain was quite successful in May, but then the numbers fell off quite quickly. I am not convinced Pick for Britain would necessarily want to go out in November and pick broccoli. It is a serious question. It is about numbers, but it is also about availability of the workforce and that workforce actually doing the work that we need done.

**Kevin Foster:** I appreciate that. If we have jobs that the sectors say pay reasonably, we should not view migration policy as an alternative to offering reasonable packages, ensuring the appropriate terms and conditions and that migrant welfare is protected. Immigration should be about where you cannot recruit. For example, technical vets are one of the things regularly talked about in the sector of food production where we do not train enough here in the UK. That is something we need to resolve to get more people into those types of careers. We are very pleased to support the work that Defra is trying to do on that.

But I accept that that is a five or six-year training course. Even if everyone wanted to be a vet today, they could not start doing that job for a number of years. It is about balancing where a sector cannot access what it needs versus where people will not engage in, for example, investment in staff, decent terms and conditions, and good wages.

I accept the point but, like with domestic jobseekers and those already here, people are going to have to look at what is available to them and what employment is available. For example, the BN(O) route will be one where you do not have recourse to public funds. If you are looking to



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come to the UK, you are going to have to look at what jobs are available to you and potentially do a job for a number of years as part of building up your career. We should not assume that the food production sector is just about minimum wage jobs. It certainly is not.

Q113 **Chair:** I accept that, but I also accept that the food processing industry is very competitive. Our retailers in this country are extremely powerful. They keep the prices very low and the amount that they pay to those processors dictates, largely, the wages that some of those processors pay. I am not sure that the Government are going to go along to these retailers and say, "Shall we put up food prices as long as we can get labour being paid more?" We have to deal with a realistic world.

**Victoria Prentis:** Can I butt in on the realistic world?

**Chair:** I need to bring in Victoria now. Are you confident, as the farming Minister, that we are going to have an availability of labour to pick vegetables, pick fruits, process them and process our poultry? Our processing industry is also very reliant on imported labour.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am not in any way going to minimise the scale of the challenge. As you know, Chair, I come from a plum-picking background and the Secretary of State comes from a strawberry-picking background. I hope it will not be taken as criticism of the sector if I say that, for a very long time, we have used migrant labour for various reasons, which I am sure we will go into in the next hour or so, because it suited us as a sector to do so. We start, particularly in horticulture, from a position of using 99% migrant—EU, eastern European, whatever you want to call it—labour to pick the food that we eat.

The scale of the challenge is not lost on me. But we have just had the most challenging year you could possibly imagine, and the sector has shown the robustness and the resilience in the food supply chain, all the way through, which has in fact been very impressive.

Q114 **Chair:** But we have access to this labour at the moment.

**Victoria Prentis:** Absolutely, we have free movement.

**Chair:** There is free movement of people as we sit here. When we get to 1 January, the situation is going to be quite different. We also had furlough. We had Covid. We had millions of people at home and yet still we only had 5% in May. It might have been a bit more.

**Victoria Prentis:** Defra is obviously very close to the sector, and even more close after the year we have just had. We think we have gone from about 1% to about 11% native Brit.

Q115 **Chair:** Where do you get your figure of 11%? I would like to agree with you, but the statistics we have in front of us do not get anywhere near 11%.

**Victoria Prentis:** We have done extensive engagement with the sector by means of questionnaires and just keeping in touch with growers.



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Some people, like a grower in my constituency who took part in our surveys, did better than that. Others did worse than that. I am not saying it is uniform, and it really is not, but we do have a large body of evidence. That is an average, which may not be helpful to everybody but it is useful in terms of the discussion we are having this afternoon.

You asked me quite rightly what we are going to do next year. The answer is that we will try to increase the domestic take-up. Of course we will. That is clearly the right thing to do given where unemployment is at the moment. Also, speaking as a fruit grower, that is a sustainable source of labour that we need to look for going forward, and we need to look to increase that. We will work on that.

We also have, as Kevin said earlier, a large number of people who were born in the EU but now have settled status or pre-settled status here. That is something we have worked with them to get. For example, G's, a big grower, has worked very hard with its workforce, who have come back year after year and who have now settled in the UK, to ensure that they have the right permissions to stay. We have helped them with that in Defra and have advised where necessary, and we are very pleased to do that. We have a workforce, we estimate, of about 20,000 people who now have the perfect legal right to stay in the UK and to pick whatever they like, as required.

Q116 **Chair:** I get the issue that, if people are remaining, they may well do those jobs, but they may not do those jobs. What has happened historically is that they have moved on to different jobs. Once they have approved status, I suspect they will move on. It does not necessarily fill that gap. You also need to get these figures that you talk about to us PDQ, if I may say so, because we will put our report together very quickly. We need accurate statistics.

**Victoria Prentis:** I would like to provide you with the best statistics we have. We have the ONS figures. We have HMRC figures traditionally as well. Truthfully, because this has been such an unusual year, the best thing to do is for us to provide you with a summary of the information that we are getting from growers. That is the best way of finding out what has happened in this last, very difficult, year. Growers have had to cope with not just labour disruption but enforcing social distancing, difficulties with outbreaks on the farm and ensuring that their workers do not get Covid where possible.

It has not been an easy year for anybody and I do think it is quite important that you look at the information from the individuals, which we can provide you with. We have done an enormous amount of outreach this year in Defra. We have calls all the time with people right through the supply chain. Growers have very much been part of that and Tim, who is on the call, is in daily touch with many of them.

Q117 **Chair:** I have some figures in front of me that say the figure for home-grown labour was 14.6% in May, 0.9% in June, 1.2% in July and 1.1% in



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August. Now that it is pouring with rain, and wet and cold out there, I suggest that the number is even lower than that. I get the politics: "We need to reduce the number of people coming in." That is all part of a political agenda. We also need to grow food, pick it, process it and then deliver it. We actually want to grow more food in this country. That is part of the benefit of Brexiting the European Union.

**Victoria Prentis:** That is very much our plan, particularly in horticulture.

Q118 **Chair:** I am not convinced yet, and we will go through the detailed questions in a minute. Kevin Foster, as the Home Office Minister, are you prepared to say here on record that there will be enough labour to pick our vegetables and process our food in 2021?

**Kevin Foster:** We will work closely with colleagues in Defra and in the DWP to ensure that immigration makes an appropriate contribution. If someone does not want to provide good migrant welfare conditions, does not want to work with the DWP on recruitment and does not want to work with Defra on its schemes to look to the domestic market first but wants to come straight to the Home Office for immigration instead, I am not going to guarantee that that will be available for them.

To be fair, based on the messages we have had from the sector, through direct engagement with groups like NFU Scotland, which I wrote to and it wrote back, many in the sector are up for that idea. Immigration should be there for the "can't", not the "won't". That is where we would be clear on our policy.

Q119 **Chair:** As the Home Office Minister, have you had good contact with the NFU and others on the need for labour? I do not want you just to say that it is all the fault of the industry if it does not get the labour. The Government play a role in this. As we finally leave the single market and the customs union, and as we leave the free movement of labour, there will be substantially less labour to be had. Therefore, we have to take a certain amount of responsibility for it. You cannot just pass it on to somebody else. There will be some bad employers out there, but there will also be some very good ones and they are still going to have pressure getting labour. Are you confident that the good employers out there will have enough labour?

**Kevin Foster:** If people take part in the schemes that have been put forward and make their first efforts towards the domestic market, we are confident that we can come to an agreement. It makes eminent sense for the Home Office to work closely with colleagues in Defra and the DWP, who are close to both the labour market and the sector, rather than having a separate discussion about immigration in the open air, divorced from the discussion about labour with the sector and the industry, and with those who have the closest links to it. There is provision in the immigration rules for a seasonal worker visa. It is in there and it will be part of the immigration rules we laid on 22 October.



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The first port of call, if you have a labour need, should be to look at the domestic market. We have been saying that across sectors, not just this one. You work with the schemes and then immigration is about where you cannot, not where you will not, take part in those schemes. In particular, it is about protecting migrant welfare, which is one of the core objectives of the Home Office.

**Q120 Chair:** Would you accept, Ministers, that producing food, and delivering it to our public and those who need food, is one of the most important parts of Government? We did an inquiry into Covid and the food supply. It is a just-in-time food supply, and that was while we did not have extra checks at the border and extra paperwork. I am not going to go there at this moment, but you see my argument. We need to make sure that we can grow as much food in this country as possible, harvest it and process it because we need to be able to feed our people. It is going to be more difficult getting food through the border with a new system if we are not at all careful.

**Kevin Foster:** We recognise the needs and the demand, but I would point out the inherent lack of security in being heavily reliant on lots of international travel to produce food. Earlier this year, we had a position where one country, where there is recruitment and there is an immigration opportunity, closed its borders to its own citizens leaving to do seasonal work. Part of food security is ensuring that we are not wholly reliant on international travel, particularly knowing that some are even looking at recruitment in places like Nepal and Barbados under one or two of the seasonal schemes. That has an inherent risk to it. Even if there is a visa opportunity there, and we have not issued anywhere near the 10,000 visas under the seasonal workers pilot that was available this year, you may still find that that labour supply is not available.

**Q121 Chair:** If you have not issued the 10,000 visas this year, is that partly because it is so bureaucratic that it is difficult to get in?

**Kevin Foster:** No.

**Victoria Prentis:** That has mainly been a Covid problem. We think we are on about 6,500. The scheme is still running. As you know, international travel has been very difficult. To go back to your earlier question, Chair, I think very few things are more important than food security.

**Q122 Chair:** The 6,500 are there because, at the moment, there is a free movement of people across the European Union. I do not think you can judge the 6,500 figure this year as sufficient for next year. Is that the judgment you are making?

**Kevin Foster:** We are engaging with colleagues on what would be an appropriate figure for next year, taking into account a range of factors. As we have pointed out, those who have come this year from the EEA can register for pre-settled status. Assuming it was their first visit to the United Kingdom being resident here, they could register for that position.



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As I say, our whole focus is that immigration must be seen as part of the overall strategy to provide labour for this sector, not as a separate debate that we have in complete isolation from the strategies for ensuring good terms and conditions, migrant welfare and an overall supply, including recruitment domestically.

**Chair:** I will park it there. I am sure we will come back to some of these issues as we go along.

Q123 **Dave Doogan:** Continuing on that theme, Minister Foster has raised a couple of times migrant labour conditions and welfare. There will be growers up and down the country who are slightly uneasy at the implicit allegation within that. They will probably be at pains to point out to Government Ministers that it is a seller's market when it comes to migrant labour. If you do not provide proper conditions, you will not get the labour. You certainly will not get it year on year. Would Minister Prentis recognise that as a dynamic that prevails within UK agriculture?

**Victoria Prentis:** On the conditions in which people are working and are housed, we have made significant progress in recent times. You are right to say that the migrant worker is perfectly capable of upping and going to the next farm. It is a bit of a seller's market and you can choose where you wish to work. I have seen a grower in my own constituency who provides excellent accommodation. He is quite an interesting case study and I recommended that the Department use him as a case study.

He traditionally employs about 18 Bulgarian workers. This year, because he could not get everybody in, he stuck with seven who have settled status and who were able to carry on working for him. For the rest, he had to look for other sources of labour and he ended up with five local British workers. It was not entirely straightforward, but in the end he was very happy with them. There was more fallout and definitely more training required. There was quite an effort made to recruit, and I can talk about that later if you want to go into recruitment. It was an interesting study. I have seen his housing and it is superb.

Q124 **Dave Doogan:** That is good. Moving from farm to farm tends to be the nature of migrant labour. That is something that migrant labour from elsewhere brings to the dynamic here in the UK, which settled domestic British labour cannot. One of the key impediments to British workers replacing foreign workers in this sphere is the fact that they will sooner or later find themselves living very far away from where the harvest is. Does that not represent a fairly significant impediment to Government?

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes, this is one of the problems. Seasonal work is, of its very nature, not permanent. This is one of the big problems we have in attracting a local workforce. When I was a little girl growing up on a plum farm, we used seasonal UK workers who were themselves migrant workers. That type of migrant worker does not really exist so much anymore. Probably half of our workers were locals who repurposed themselves, whether that was because they were students or, at



completely the other end of the age spectrum, early retirees. They came to pick plums for a couple of months every summer as well.

It has always been a very mixed picture. It has become much less of a mixed picture because we have relied on a certain type of migrant worker for the last few years. We may go back to a slightly more mixed picture.

**Q125 Dave Doogan:** Building on that point, maybe not in terms of plums and apples but in terms of vegetables and soft fruit, that two-month season is now an eight-month season. That is another significant indicator that means settled British labour cannot satisfy that demand.

**Victoria Prentis:** It depends slightly on what you mean by “settled British labour”.

**Dave Doogan:** Students, people at school or retired people.

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes, fair enough. Of course, most of the demand comes in the summer months. The peak of our demand is definitely May, June, July and August. The Secretary of State and I always fall out slightly over when peak is because we come, as I said earlier, from slightly different ends of the horticultural spectrum, but there is no doubt that the peak of demand is in the summer. There are students available then, and I am quite sure that, going forward, student temporary work over the summer is one of the places we will be looking.

I also agree with you that, if we are looking for the sort of migrant worker to do a full eight or nine-month season—after all, people are picking cauliflowers in Cornwall today—it is pretty much a year-round job. There is always something to be picked. No, I do not think that student labour can meet that demand. Of course I do not.

**Q126 Dave Doogan:** Minister Foster, according to the Office for National Statistics, Government data on seasonal workers has serious gaps in it. How can your Department confidently devise an immigration policy for the food supply chain and seasonal workers scheme without an accurate understanding of the sector’s labour requirements?

In the evidence that he has given so far, he has put particularly heavy emphasis on what has happened this year, in terms of the seasonal agricultural workers pilot scheme numbers coming in and UK workers working in the sector, both of which have been heavily influenced by Covid, which we hope will not be a factor in subsequent years. Can he address those two points, please?

**Kevin Foster:** In the Home Office, we work with the Migration Advisory Committee and the labour market analysis it does, along with our own analysis. In this area, we very heavily lean on the Department for Work and Pensions and, in particular, Defra for the analysis they do of the sector. You would expect immigration to be discussed as part of discussing the labour supply and not something that we are discussing



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completely separately in the Home Office. Hence, there has been close liaison and working together.

Yes, of course I have referred to what has happened this year. It is perfectly appropriate, particularly looking at issues of food security and supply, which the Chair has rightly pointed to, that we also point out the rather obvious fact that disruption to international travel will have a serious impact on our food security, if we are wholly dependent on migrant labour to travel during that period. It is appropriate.

I would love to think that, by the summer of 2021, the economic impacts will have completely unwound in terms of the employment market. That is probably being slightly optimistic, to say the least. His own prediction earlier this year was that the 10,000 would not be enough. I have his letter from January. But the impact came in and, even where there was a visa opportunity, people could not actually leave their country because their own country said they could not leave at the time for seasonal work, even though our process would have allowed them to.

We are conscious of the analysis that is provided. We work with colleagues in the DWP. Of course, immigration rules are not set in stone. They react to demands and react to the future. For example, the immigration rules that talk about the ability to have a seasonal workers scheme do not set a cap number.

**Q127 Dave Doogan:** Do you think it is acceptable that the sector does not quite know what the regime will be for next year at this stage, as we draw this year to a close? You mentioned dialogue that you have had with the National Farmers Union of Scotland. I wonder if you are aware of what the National Farmers Union of Scotland has said just today, which is that, if a fit-for-purpose seasonal workers scheme is not in place for 2021, its members have indicated that there will be significant crop loss with many moving out of seasonal horticulture altogether. Are either of the Ministers aware of that situation? What are they going to do to address it?

**Kevin Foster:** We are aware of the ongoing comments that NFU Scotland is making. Colleagues from the Scotland Office have made sure that those are passed on. We are having productive conversations with them in relation to the wider immigration system as it touches on and affects Scotland.

We have to look partly at what the international travel situation will be in April and May. We cannot necessarily guarantee that sat here today. Similarly, there is a logic in terms of food supply security to turn towards domestic labour in the first instance and, as I say, we are working closely with Defra. There will be a scheme with certain rules that people are familiar with. But it is also right that, in the first instance, we have looked at the domestic market and looked to provide opportunities to those who have been affected by Covid-19. He touched himself on the fact that eight-month periods could make quite a difference this year.



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But we do not set things in stone for ever to come. It is about making sure that, via immigration, we provide for the needs that cannot be met domestically, including skills in other areas, not about providing opportunities to say, "I will not take part in schemes to recruit domestically where possible."

**Q128 Dave Doogan:** When will the sector get sight of the details of this scheme, given how very late it is in the day?

**Kevin Foster:** We expect that that should be via colleagues in Defra and the DWP, who will be leading on this, rather than via the Home Office. It is safe to say it is imminent.

**Q129 Dave Doogan:** What does "imminent" mean?

**Chair:** Yes, "imminent" has been quite a while. How imminent is "imminent"?

**Kevin Foster:** It is quicker than soon. We expect by the end of the month to have confirmed where we are.

**Victoria Prentis:** I hope so.

**Kevin Foster:** There is nothing to stop people getting out and signing up to schemes to recruit domestic labour and starting that work now. There is no reason why they cannot be doing that.

**Dave Doogan:** I assume the end of the month you are talking about is the month of November.

**Q130 Chair:** Yes, I think so. It is high time. Ministers, you do realise that crops will rot in the fields. The whole idea of Brexit is to increase our food production, not reduce it. I can understand, Kevin, from the Home Office it is statistics and figures but, in the end, it is about getting that crop harvested. We have 70,000 to 80,000 workers at the moment working in horticulture. We have had very few home-grown workers this last year, even with Covid and people not working, so I do not think we can afford to be complacent. Dare I say it, there seems to be a slight degree of complacency in the Home Office because it does not necessarily fit your figures.

**Kevin Foster:** To push back slightly, there would be an element of complacency if we just assumed that international travel will be great and fine in March, April and May and that people can travel here as long as they had a visa. We saw this year completely the opposite impact, when crops here, and in certain parts of Europe, did not get picked. A strong reliance on international travel produces that weakness. Secondly, we do have flexibility, working with colleagues and in our migration rules, where there are genuine shortages of labour.

It would also be complacent not to reflect on whether migration should be the alternative to offering fair terms, conditions and packages. Should we be playing up to, as you rightly touched on, the impact of some major



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buyers and supermarkets looking to push prices down based on the ability to access this type of labour via the migration system? Is that where we should be or should we say, "No, your first stop is the domestic labour market"? You work with Defra and the DWP to recruit. If you cannot, after those sorts of efforts, you can eventually turn to migration. Do we say that we do not want that to happen and that we want to put migration first in the queue?

**Chair:** We will ask you questions in a minute about how we stimulate the amount of home-grown labour.

**Victoria Prentis:** There is no complacency from us. We are, as I said earlier, in touch with the industry. We do feel that we need to mobilise and support domestic recruitment as a new addition to this sector. It was this year, but it will be more next year. We think there is more that we can do in the future, although not immediately, with investment in automatism, for example, and robotics. There are good existing mechanisms for migrant workers, and we will talk about the seasonal workers pilot. There is no complacency from us at all.

Q131 **Derek Thomas:** This is for Minister Foster. It is not about the ornamentals or SAWS, which will come up later, if you can try to avoid that. But it is about the data that the Department holds and how it informs policies. For example, a seasonal worker may arrive in Cornwall and spend their time picking winter veg, before moving on to daffodils, then to cattle feed, fodder beet for example, and then to early spring or summer produce. Can you answer whether the new immigration policy means that can no longer happen? If that is the case, how do my farmers, and farmers across Cornwall, keep these people in enough employment to ensure they find it worthwhile coming to the UK, given that we are not assuming there will be no inward seasonal migration?

**Chair:** That is to say they have a visa and everything to go with it. I will let Victoria have that one, because it is about the picking of the vegetables and the moving of the labour.

**Victoria Prentis:** Derek, is your question really about the fact that, under the current seasonal workers scheme, it is edible horticulture that is covered? Are you worried about people moving between, for example, thinking about Cornwall, daffodils and edible horticulture?

**Derek Thomas:** I am not worried about it; this is just what happens at the moment. People move through different produce and products. Does the immigration policy kill that dead? Does that mean, then, that people will choose not to come here because there is not enough work for them?

**Victoria Prentis:** This year, under the pilot, only edible horticulture is covered. At least in theory, people should not be picking, for example, daffodils under that pilot scheme. My experience and Defra's experience would show that most of the migrant labour picking daffodils in Cornwall, for example, are people with settled or pre-settled status. They are people who have the perfect right to pick daffodils and to stay in the UK



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to do so. That is what we are anticipating will form the labour force in the early part of next year for the ornamentals and for the daffodil sector in particular.

We are in touch with the industry, and we have not had a lot of concerns raised with us by daffodil growers for next spring. We are keeping abreast of that situation. If you know of any particular cases, please let me know.

**Kevin Foster:** Minister Prentis has well described that the current seasonal workers visa is for edible horticulture. From a Home Office perspective, we are open to considering whether that should become more general if, for example, Defra identifies a need in the sector.

**Victoria Prentis:** Indeed, that is a conversation that we have had as Ministers several times this year and it is under active consideration.

**Kevin Foster:** Take turkey farmers, as an example.

**Chair:** It seems to be on your radar.

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes, Cornish daffodils are of course on my radar given the make-up of your Committee.

**Chair:** They are marvellous flowers and particularly good because they come from Cornwall. I have been in competition with Cornwall occasionally.

**Victoria Prentis:** You are accused of being a bit Devonist.

Q132 **Derek Thomas:** This is a blatantly straightforward question. Why are jobs in agriculture and food supply, particularly at the hard end, so unattractive to school leavers and British people?

**Victoria Prentis:** As I said earlier, it is partly because they are temporary while most people want a permanent job. It is partly because they are not traditionally near areas of unemployment. A lot of the picking is rural, of its very nature, so it is not near good transport links or cities. That is one of the reasons why it has been so attractive to migrant workers who want to live on-farm. Of course, permanent local workers would not want to do that.

The other reason—and I can say this looking at the EFRA Committee because many of you will have experienced it yourselves—is that it is very hard work. It is outside. It is backbreaking. The hours are long. Although it is not low paid—I would not want to put it in that category; you can do very well if you are a productive, active worker—it is very, very hard work.

**Derek Thomas:** When I left school, I did daffodils and I lifted hay and straw bales. I did fodder beet, which was a miserable job to do in February, particularly when it is dry.



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**Victoria Prentis:** I know.

**Chair:** I know all about fodder beet.

Q133 **Derek Thomas:** I have done a lot of those jobs and you are absolutely right that it is hard work. Why is it that our young people and our workforce are shying away from hard work while Romanians, Lithuanians and Bulgarians, et cetera, seem to cope with it? What is it that we are feeding our people wrong? Is there something that we are doing in school?

**Victoria Prentis:** It is not the hard work that is putting them off. It is the impermanence of the job. Yes, you and I, as teenagers, were both very happy to work for a short time like that. I did not have a lot of choice, believe me. But what most school leavers want, and what we want to train them to do, is a permanent job, not a temporary job. That has a lot to do with it.

The other reason is the geography of where these farms are. Neither of those is necessarily insuperable. I should have said earlier that I am working very closely with the DWP Minister, Mims Davies, on this. We have met already and we will meet again to discuss specific schemes to help both school leavers and the newly unemployed into these roles. I do not think British people are shy of hard work at all, but that is one of the reasons why these jobs are not automatically attractive.

Q134 **Derek Thomas:** Shell picking is an example. You can go to Newlyn, get a job all year round for the rest of your life and earn good money shell picking. There are some, but not a massive number of young local people doing that job. In the past, the Government have done fantastic work to get people into STEM, to particularly focus minds on certain skills and certain jobs where we have shortages, in the NHS, teaching, et cetera. What plans do you have to grasp the nettle and give farming and food production a real boost by getting Government promoting the job satisfaction, the money, as you rightly say, that can be made and the skills, particularly as it develops into a more technological sector? What are the Government planning to do to really make those jobs catch the imagination of parents, schools and their children?

**Victoria Prentis:** I am definitely going to answer that, if I may. We are really ambitious in Defra in this space at the moment. I do not want to sound derogatory at all, but we are hoping to professionalise the whole idea of going into these fantastic agricultural jobs that many of us on this Committee are quite comfortable with saying are fantastic. They brought us all to where we are today, and it is very much where we want young people to want to work.

I am really excited about the idea of an institute for agriculture and horticulture. I would not necessarily say that I had all my funding ducks in a row to launch it yet, but I am really hopeful that that sort of concept will pull the whole sector up and make sure that the genuinely good work



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being done at the moment by the Food and Drink Sector Council, the Skills Leadership Group and the Agricultural Productivity Working Group is brought together and professionalised.

We also fund a large number—I think 32—of different levels of apprenticeships. There is a wide range of those, and we want to advertise these and make sure that people understand that agriculture can be a really future-looking, productive, scientific career for them as school leavers. I have had meetings with Gillian Keegan, the Minister for Apprenticeships, on this and she came out nearly as excited as I am by the future in apprenticeships and agriculture. That is worth looking at.

AHDB has done excellent work over the years in creating new methods of training both in seasonal workers and in the wider agricultural space. Together, with a real drive and energy behind this, which our Secretary of State really shares, we can do great things.

**Q135 Derek Thomas:** Are you going to be able to get the Secretary of State, Gavin Williamson, to put those kinds of subjects on the curriculum? Is that not what is needed?

**Victoria Prentis:** It would be great if farming was taught as part of all sorts of subjects. As you lot all know, it covers so many aspects of life. Nothing is more important than food in my view.

**Kevin Foster:** This is why we want our immigration policy to work together with supporting this type of work. The shortage occupation list and things like that are a great way to point many of our students towards it and training. We want this to be supported and considered in line with that. If people only hear about these types of sectors when we talk about immigration, that is not going to inspire a school leaver to the great futures that Minister Prentis has just talked about.

**Q136 Chair:** I welcome what both of you are saying, but there is another issue with the DWP, which is about having the flexibility. Can those people who are unemployed at the moment take a seasonal job? Can they then get back into universal credit? The whole idea is to make our market more flexible and there still need to be improvements there. Kevin, what is your view? Is there more that the DWP needs to do?

**Kevin Foster:** We need to make sure that our labour market is set up in a way that facilitates people going to jobs that are vacant. As I say, next year we are going to have people who are struggling to find work and we need to be realistic about that given the impact of Covid. We are working to provide opportunities. Migration is there for the “can’t” where you cannot recruit. I accept that you cannot go to the supermarket and pick up a vet who has seven years’ training. But we are dovetailing with these types of strategies. Yes, you can go abroad if you need to for particular skills and talents, but we want people to see the exciting jobs.

I spend a lot of my time as immigration Minister saying to sectors that it is not about saying no, but saying, “If your first phone call is to the Home



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Office, that is where it is wrong. Your first phone call should be to Defra, DfE or DWP.” That is where we want to see this working together. There are some great jobs and great futures out there that we want kids to be aiming towards.

**Q137 Chair:** We do all need to work together. There are many people out there who want to do some part-time work but they are very often terrified of going off universal credit and whether they can get back on to it quickly. That is where, between you and the whole of Government, we need to tighten this up so that people have the flexibility. I was always sold by our own party in Government that universal credit is about flexibility. I do not necessarily see it on the ground. If we are going to solve a lot of this problem with seasonal workers and more home-grown labour, our own people need to be able to claim universal credit, get work when it is available and, if it is not available, go back on universal credit or perhaps move.

**Kevin Foster:** It is about having a co-ordinated labour market strategy for how we tackle it, in this sector, from the point of view of Defra, the DWP, the Home Office and others, and being clear. Again, we want to be part of a coherent strategy. We do not want, from the Home Office’s perspective, to have a debate one day about skills, training, getting people in, the type of passion we have just heard about and the type of jobs that are available in the sector, and then have a debate the next day about immigration where we are just talking about the minimum wage.

**Victoria Prentis:** The furlough scheme worked well. People were able to do these sorts of jobs while on furlough, and that was something that we worked very hard on.

**Q138 Chair:** Minister, you have fallen neatly into my trap. If you had 11% when furloughing was going on in May, and then 1% in June and thereafter when furlough was around, how are you expecting to get all this home-grown labour next year?

**Victoria Prentis:** Unfortunately, we have much higher levels of unemployment.

**Chair:** Unfortunately, you are probably right.

**Victoria Prentis:** We are joking together, but this is not funny at all.

**Chair:** No, it is not.

**Victoria Prentis:** The reality is that we will have higher levels of unemployment next year.

**Chair:** Let us try to make sure that the flexibility is there in the market for people to get those jobs.

**Victoria Prentis:** As I said, I am meeting Mims Davies regularly. The sorts of conversations we had with the Treasury over the furlough scheme and making sure that that works for this sector are ones that we



will continue to have. We understand completely that that is the very nub of the problem. These are not permanent jobs.

**Q139 Ian Byrne:** We have just had a fascinating conversation about co-ordination, working together and making plans. That is really fascinating. Listening to the evidence, it is clear that we need a vehicle for retraining and upskilling for new careers in the food sector and other sectors across the economy post-Brexit. We have one ready to go on the shelf with decades of experience: the union learning fund. I can speak from personal experience as one who has enjoyed this resource and has spent six to 12 months doing a little bit on the legal background and unemployment. It is magnificent, but it also gives you the opportunity to go into other sectors and other skills.

Unfortunately, the Department for Education has decided to scrap this resource in 2021. Minister, would you impress on the Secretary of State for Education that this decision should be reversed in light of what we are all speaking about here? This resource could be utilised with business, trade unions and Government working collaboratively to ensure the skills that we need and to guarantee the food security of the UK, as we are talking about on this Committee. It just beggars belief, when we are all talking about upskilling, that such a magnificent resource is going to be consigned to the dustbin of history. Again, would you impress on the Secretary of State for Education that this should not happen?

**Victoria Prentis:** I am sure you have already done so in your own very persuasive way, Ian.

**Ian Byrne:** I cannot speak as powerfully as you, Minister.

**Victoria Prentis:** Let me take that away, if that is all right.

**Q140 Chair:** Yes, please do. The point that Ian makes is a very good one. If we are going to solve this situation, it has to be solved across the piece. It cannot be solved by Defra or the Home Office on its own. We have to work as a Government on education, flexibility in employment and all those issues. Ian, thank you for that.

**Victoria Prentis:** Ian and I frequently discuss food supply issues. I always find those conversations very useful.

**Chair:** Ian, we will get the Minister to reply to us and to you. Thank you very much for that.

**Q141 Mrs Murray:** Minister Prentis, the Chair alluded to Pick for Britain having been a success, but could I just hear you say it, please, and give us your reasons as to why it was a success?

**Victoria Prentis:** Pick for Britain worked well. We must view it in context, which is that we started with 1% Brit labour and we went up to about 11% at that point. It was always a platform. It was not what we refer to in the Department as a dating agency. It did not actually do the matching. It just advertised the roles. At its peak, it had about 2 million



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hits as a website, which is useful. We had 27 growers at the busiest time advertising their roles on there. We know there was a lot of interest in those roles.

The website is still up. We are actively looking at whether we continue it and whether we continue to call it Pick for Britain. I am personally keen on doing that; it now has a bit of a brand behind it. The website is a good one. I am really proud of it. It does answer frequently asked questions. It dispels some myths. It gives you some idea of what life is like picking and packing.

That is one example. I am not saying that it is the full solution at all to our labour needs, but it is one really good example of the sort of scheme that can be helpful in getting enthusiasm in the domestic market, which it definitely did. My student daughter was on it looking for jobs. It definitely spoke to the sort of people we need to get enthusiastic about doing these roles.

**Q142 Mrs Murray:** You said 11% was the high range that it secured. If the Covid restrictions had not been relaxed over the summer period, did you have any additional plans to ensure that farmers had enough labour to pick their crops? Is that something you are looking forward to after 1 January in order to make up any shortfall that a future immigration policy will not fill?

**Victoria Prentis:** That is a difficult question to answer. Earlier this year, in the initial lockdown, we all believed that it would be shorter than it ended up being. We did make plans that, with hindsight, we did not need to use because we were able to do the other schemes to bring in the people we needed. We were able to help with, for example, rules about quarantining on-farm and to use the seasonal workers pilot.

What is important, because none of us has a vision of what is going to happen in the next few definitely difficult months, is that, as a Department and, indeed, as a Government, we continue to work very closely with the sector to find out what is happening on the ground and what their needs are on a week-by-week basis. That is how we were able to react in a way that meant we managed to pick the food this summer.

I would like to thank the growers, who are very open with us about their needs and who have had to start using us in a different way from that in which we have been used in the past. I hope that we can keep in touch over the next few months and we will adapt to circumstances as we need to.

**Kevin Foster:** I would say very similar to what Minister Prentis has said. The Pick for Britain initiative was very welcome. It makes roles easy to find. It shows the sector itself wanting to turn to the domestic market first and to immigration second for where it could not fill the need. It helped to build some genuine idea of where there may be vacancies. It also provides information. From a Home Office perspective, if people are



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not taking part in it, that would raise the question of why, given it was a really good initiative from Defra and others, and us not necessarily being the alternative to taking part in it. We will follow that and monitor the position.

Similarly, we did not expect the lockdown to be as long. When I came into this role, I did not expect that in April I would have a 99% drop in traffic at the border and people arriving in the United Kingdom. That was truly extraordinary. We are still running massively down on international travel, and we have all the way through summer. There are factors outside our control as a Government that we will have to factor into this as well for next summer. We are working closely with colleagues in Defra. We welcome Pick for Britain. It was a great initiative and it shows us wanting to work together on these issues, rather than having separate discussions about international recruitment from what we are doing domestically.

**Q143 Mrs Murray:** Did your Department have any concerns expressed to it from farmers about manpower and their workforce? Did it actively promote or signpost them to the Pick for Britain website in order for them to fill the gaps?

**Kevin Foster:** I am not sure that that is an immigration question.

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes, that is probably for me. We did, very forcibly.

**Q144 Mrs Murray:** If farmers had contacted the Home Office because they had problems with overseas people coming and they were really panicking, were they made aware that they could look at the Pick for Britain website to possibly fill the gap?

**Kevin Foster:** There were a couple of categories of issues. We did not have so many with the principle of the system because, as I touched on earlier, we have not issued the maximum number of visas. We could still have issued more. The concerns were more about there not being access where, for example, in-country restrictions in places like Ukraine shut our visa application centre. That is not something I can change as a Home Office Minister here in the UK. Where international air routes were suspended, there was no ability to physically fly here even if you had permission, and that included within the European Union.

There was constructive work between the two Departments. Minister Prentis has touched on the discussions we had about the border health measures to ensure an appropriate regime. We were clear that seasonal workers were not exempt. They had a special arrangement that allowed them to quarantine on-farm. Some people reported that they were exempt but they were not. There was an arrangement that was perfectly appropriate and met the needs to isolate on-farm. The feedback the Home Office had this summer was more about problems with international travel and the physical journey. We did work with Border



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Force and Defra in other areas. There was facilitation of particular flights and those sorts of things.

If someone was concerned about actual recruitment, we would normally point them towards the DWP and Defra. As we say, people's first port of call, if they are concerned about recruitment, should be the DWP and Defra. The Home Office should be here when you cannot—I know I keep saying it—not if you just will not put your jobs up on Pick for Britain or if you do not want to. We would expect people to make reasonable adjustments such as allowing very local workers to drive into work. We did not think that was an unreasonable request to make.

Q145 **Chair:** Victoria, you said of Pick for Britain that Defra is not a dating agency. Do you think it should be? It is a serious point I am making. Should Defra be more proactive in attracting people into work and then matching them up a little more with the farms? I do not literally mean a dating agency, but how can we fit that together? Are you considering that?

**Victoria Prentis:** We are assessing that at the moment. We are assessing its value this year. Given that we had to stand it up really quickly, I think it was a success and it filled a bit of the gap. Yes, we are looking at new models for next year. It may be that we do other sorts of matching that are not called Pick for Britain because, as a platform, that is working well and, while refining it for a domestic market, we want to stick with that. We can definitely look at other things we can do.

There are, at the moment, agencies that help migrant workers come to the country. Some of them may well repurpose themselves to target the domestic workforce. The DWP is very good at that as well.

Q146 **Chair:** You may well be giving some encouragement in that direction, not only directly with Defra but with those agencies as well.

**Victoria Prentis:** We can do that. With the DWP, I am seriously having conversations at the moment about whether the production of buses to get people to the right places would have a beneficial effect. We are very open-minded about the solutions to this issue, and we are looking at it in a very granular way. I would not want to pretend that we have all the answers at the moment, because we do not, but we are open to looking at many models.

**Chair:** You are prepared to think slightly outside the box.

**Victoria Prentis:** Absolutely, and we are genuinely looking forward to what you tell us in your report.

**Chair:** I am glad to hear it.

Q147 **Dave Doogan:** Both of our Ministers today have talked up the success of Pick for Britain. The one concession I would make to Minister Prentis is that it was stood up very quickly. But success is not about developing a brand, and it is certainly not about how many applications the system



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took in. The dynamic that growers have explained to me is that you will get thousands of applications, you will interview a few hundred, you will employ a few dozen and then literally single figures will still be there after a couple of weeks. You have gone through all that cost, delay and expense to get half a dozen really good workers, whereas you just do not have that variability when you are bringing in migrant labour from abroad in large groups.

Can the Ministers give us an undertaking, when they are making an evidence-based assessment of how valuable and efficacious this scheme was, that they will do it on the basis of how much labour it delivered on the ground and nothing else?

**Victoria Prentis:** We will look at it in the round. I accept some of the criticisms that you have just made, in that you get a lot of applicants, you have to process them and then you have to train people and try them out. You get left with a much smaller group than you started with. That was not a failing of Pick for Britain. One of the growers in my constituency advertised his new roles through Facebook. He got so many applicants he literally had to take the phone off the hook. He said he was overwhelmed by enthusiasm from local people. In the end, he whittled down the enormous group to a much smaller one and ended up with five new local workers.

This is not a fault of Pick for Britain; this is a fault of a workforce that has not been here in the past and that we need to educate and help to fill the roles we need in the picking sector. I am open-minded about how we do that.

Q148 **Dave Doogan:** Do you think that is realistic, though? Maybe it is just the inevitability of it, in that these roles are not necessarily very suitable for domestic workers who are settled, who are paying mortgages, who have kids at school here and who will not live on-farm and should not be expected to live on-farm.

**Victoria Prentis:** As I said earlier, these roles are not for everybody. They are not permanent roles. They are very difficult roles and they are often far from where people live. I absolutely accept all those things. But I also think that we can make and take greater steps domestically to fill more of these roles than we have done in the recent past.

Q149 **Dave Doogan:** In accepting that, do you support the position that the Home Office is taking, which is domestic labour first and only then, once that has failed, can you access labour from abroad? As I am certain you well know, a farm and a producer will set out their capacity at the beginning of the year and, if they have a labour failure, it is not, "Oh well, I will go and find my labour from anywhere else." That is a disaster.

**Victoria Prentis:** What I do think, very strongly, is that we have had 1% of British people working in horticulture and we have to increase that figure. I agree with the Home Office on that.



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Q150 **Dave Doogan:** I agree with that, too, but it is the perilous position that we have put our growers in in that pursuit that concerns me.

**Victoria Prentis:** It is important that we look at the reality of what is happening on the ground. We have just adapted to the most horrific year that has been thrown at us. The supply chain and the growers have reacted magnificently. We will do everything we can in all parts of Government to help them meet the challenges of the next few years.

Q151 **Geraint Davies:** Minister Prentis, we have been talking primarily about the overall quantity of labour needed. I just want to ask about the different quality of labour for different sectors in the market. You will know that 95% of people working in abattoirs are from the EU, for instance. If we have a difficult or no-deal Brexit, we may need to do more import substitution than we did before, so labour will be needed in a different way in different places. How have you considered that? It seems to me that we are going to have a shortage overall, but also a qualitative problem on matching the needs of emerging markets versus those that are contracting.

**Victoria Prentis:** We are in very close contact with all parts of the industry in Defra. We have just had the peculiar challenges of this year and we need to continue to work very closely with industry to match its needs next year. We do not yet know whether we have a deal. We hope we have, but we do not know, so we will have to deal with those challenges as and when we know the outcomes.

Q152 **Geraint Davies:** Even if we have a deal, my understanding is that 95% of abattoir workers are from the EU. If you are a sheep farmer, particularly in Wales, you have this double-whammy of a shortage of people to process meat and the possibility of tariffs in exporting them. On the first point, what are you going to do about abattoirs?

**Kevin Foster:** I presume you are talking about vets.

**Chair:** No, we are going to have a direct question on vets. We are talking about the semi-skilled workers who are processing meat.

**Kevin Foster:** The idea of a double-whammy, that they would lose those workers who are already working, is not the case. Those who are here before 31 December of this year can apply for pre-settled or settled status if they have been here for more than five years. The process to apply for that is free and fairly simple, and 4.2 million applications have already been received. Those who are already employing EEA workers can continue to employ them. Of course, they have rights to work and they can switch employers. There is no particular restriction on them if they are EUSS eligible. Then there are a number of roles at school leaver and above that would qualify under FBIS.

It is right, certainly in the current employment market, as we have touched on several times, in those roles that do not need extensive work-based training to undertake, that people look to the fact that we are



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seeing worrying figures on unemployment. Their first priority should be to recruit in the domestic market, not least because of some of the sad figures we are seeing on unemployment.

**Victoria Prentis:** My concern is more for the seasonal workers who have come in rather than the more permanent roles in abattoirs, for example.

Q153 **Chair:** Are you confident, Minister? I have a big chicken plant in Willand near Tiverton where 70% to 80% of the workers are central and eastern European. Are you confident that we will have enough people to be able to process that poultry? We need this market. It is an amazingly good market with great poultry and good welfare standards, but they do need to be processed.

**Victoria Prentis:** Shall we talk about turkeys?

**Chair:** These are chickens, not turkeys. We are not talking about turkeys and Christmas, thank you very much.

**Victoria Prentis:** One of the very recent announcements, which was made, I think, by the Department for Transport and Defra last night, was an adjustment for seasonal workers who come in to help with turkey processing in time for Christmas. I mean it very seriously. That is an example of what I keep talking about, which is very close working with the sector. Where we are aware of a need and, believe me, we will be aware of it, we can adjust accordingly. The very recent derogation, if you like—it is not one formally—is a means of allowing people to self-isolate on-farm. It is not in any way getting round the rules, but just applying them in a way that suits turkey processing. That was agreed last night, which is helpful.

**Chair:** That is helpful.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am not trying to pretend that this is not going to be without incident this winter. Of course it is. We are having a variety of challenges thrown at us. We are adapting to them as we find them, and we are in very close contact with the industry.

Q154 **Geraint Davies:** The British Retail Consortium said to us that, if we have a bad Brexit and we get food shortages in terms of imports in January, and if we combine that with a lack of person power in food processing and domestic production, there could be a double-whammy in food supply in the middle of a pandemic. Are you concerned about that, and what contingencies do you have?

**Victoria Prentis:** This is what we work on all day to try to avoid. We have had a very difficult year. We are anticipating a difficult winter and we are adapting to circumstances in order to meet the needs. If you know of specific concerns, please let me know.

Q155 **Geraint Davies:** Thank you. Minister Foster, my understanding is that a lot of EU nationals have in fact left Britain prematurely. Some were encouraged by Brexit, but Covid has encouraged people to “go home” as



well. What are the net numbers of EU people who have left in 2020?

**Kevin Foster:** Over the last couple of years, we have still seen net positive flow from the EEA. It is very disappointing to hear comments that people have been encouraged to “go home”. In fact, what we are seeing is that many people who have made their lives here—our friends and neighbours—are applying to the EU settlement scheme. We are still seeing thousands of applications every day to the EU settlement scheme, with 4.2 million applications already and 3.9 million statuses granted. The flow we have seen has actually been positive.

We cannot ignore what is going on in the jobs market. We have had the impact of Covid-19, and fewer people are recruiting. If someone is thinking of moving to the UK to get a job, they will inherently be looking at the situation in the employment market as it stands today, as we might see similarly across other migration routes. The scheme is still there. We are really delighted: 4.2 million applications is a fantastic place to be with seven months still to go.

Q156 **Geraint Davies:** Given that the transition period is about to end, this is the last chance for people to come here. They are taking that last chance, but presumably next year, if the economy is down and if people are looking from afar at an economy that is shrinking more than other European economies, it will not be that attractive to come here. Alongside these other issues, is that a big problem? You are saying that there is no problem now, but there will be one next year, will there not?

**Kevin Foster:** I thankfully do not share the negative view of where the UK economy will go once we get through the period of the current restrictions. We saw that over summer with the very strong bounce-back. We are seeing very strong interest in things like our new student visa routes that we have launched. I accept that they are not directly in this area. We are still seeing strong interest in tech and our global talent routes that we have launched. I would not share the negativity. Of course, we will see the BN(O) settlement route launched in January as well, which will give us a flavour of the attractiveness of this nation and its economy on a global stage.

Q157 **Geraint Davies:** I was just making the point that, in quarter 3, we were the fastest-contracting economy of the G7. The average person will not look at those stats, but it is not very positive for encouraging more workers when we will need more for growing next year, in particular if you are not letting them in.

**Kevin Foster:** It is a bit of an odd point to make that there will be a retracted economy. Naturally, if there is a retracted economy, there will be less demand for labour because jobs will have fallen out and potentially leave more people unemployed. I do not think that would then be an argument for increasing the labour supply in the United Kingdom to match up to a smaller economy. It would be a bit weird to argue that one.



We know there are skill shortages in sectors across our economy. That is why the future points-based system makes it simpler in many ways. We are removing the resident labour market test and suspending the cap for people to recruit, including in food production. We cannot ignore the impact of Covid-19 on the economic statistics at the moment. We can all get off into our own views on how Brexit may or may not have affected that, but most people would say that, looking at Covid-19 and the impact that all developed economies are seeing at the moment, that is the predominant driver of where economic statistics are. The feedback we are seeing on a global level—I regularly engage with employers from places like India—is that they are actively looking at the opportunities that the United Kingdom and the new points-based system brings for them.

**Q158 Geraint Davies:** You are predicting that, even with a bad Brexit, there will not be food shortages because of the restrictions on immigration in a nutshell. You are predicting that will not happen next spring.

**Kevin Foster:** You were talking about borders and food coming across the borders. That was your first premise. It inherently is not food that is being produced in the United Kingdom if it is coming over the UK border. There will be measures in place. We have already announced our border operating model working closely with Defra. There is great co-operation there, and with the devolved Administrations, to be fair. Some areas of agricultural regulation are being devolved. For example, ports in Wales are a devolved matter.

We are looking proactively at what we can do on key skilled vacancies. We have touched on vets. We have touched on other parts that are absolutely key to food production. We will be able to recruit on a global level, not just a European level, under the new scheme. We are seeing some strong things there.

I accept that there are people who feel that we should just turn to the migration system in every instance, but I look at where we are with the statistics. I see that there are 3,325 people on unemployment-related benefits in Swansea West as of 8 October. That is why we really need to look at what we can do, as Minister Prentis outlined, to get people into these sectors and jobs, recognising that there will be some elements of skilled or particular seasonal surges that cannot be met via the domestic market. I am positive about the future and the future of farming.

**Q159 Geraint Davies:** Just so I am clear about this, there are 3,000 people unemployed in Swansea who may have been doing all sorts of other things, running businesses or whatever. In difficult times, they should basically hope that they can pick fruit instead. Is that what you are saying?

**Kevin Foster:** No, I do not think that is the comment I made, although there is unemployment in the UK. I suspect I will hear from you next week about the need to support and get people back into work, due to lost work over the recent period. We need to make sure that this is part



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of a co-ordinated strategy. To be honest, the idea that we are going to have food shortages is the sort of stuff that people heard a year ago and decided their opinion on in the general election.

**Q160 Geraint Davies:** You have mentioned Wales again. What would your advice be to a Welsh sheep farmer? They are very concerned that they might face a combination of tariffs and not enough people in the abattoir to process the meat.

**Kevin Foster:** My advice to a Welsh sheep farmer, which they will be pleased to know, is that we are keeping the sheep shearers' concession as part of the new immigration system. That particularly benefits the Welsh industry. If you are not familiar with it, it is a way you can apply at the border to come in and shear sheep if you are a non-visa national. That has an element of seasonality to it for obvious reasons.

They will be very pleased to see what we have done on the EU settlement scheme to keep their existing EU staff and make clear that their home is here in the UK. We welcome them and wish for them to stay. They will see the visions. People like butchers qualify under the new thing. There is a much broader sense, rather than our current rest of the world rules, which are very academically focused. Inherently they say "graduates", so that inherently focuses much more academically.

They can recruit a range of other labour. There is the British nationals (overseas) route. Many in those routes are inevitably going to see the advantages of relocating into places like Wales and Scotland, given the huge quality of life choice. There are very specific skills, but the idea that the first port of call should be to look at the domestic market should not be particularly controversial. We should look at getting people in Swansea, for example, back to work. We should look at where we can offer training and inspiration. If that is a controversial suggestion, I would be surprised.

**Q161 Geraint Davies:** The point is that there will be less work on the sheep farms because they cannot export them any more. Minister Prentis, do you have any suggestions about sheep farmers in Wales? They are worried about the tariffs, food processing and a lack of people in abattoirs.

**Victoria Prentis:** We are straying a bit from seasonal agricultural workers here.

**Q162 Chair:** Victoria, you talk much about developing our own workers. If you talk to the poultry industry, there are 1,000 workers from the EU in the poultry industry. They are helping to not only pick the turkeys, but process them, carve them and cut them up. As noted by the British Poultry Council, we have to have trained people. If we put our optimistic hat on, we can all accept that we can have more home-grown labour to do these jobs, but it is not going to instantly appear on 1 January. How do we get from here over the hurdle of 1 January and then keep our



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processing plants going? At the moment, they are heavily reliant on EU and other labour. That will not be transformed overnight. Do you agree with that?

**Victoria Prentis:** Another point on that is that people who work in processing in particular have to comply with a lot of certification. It is not a role you can just float in and out of. That is probably going to be the saviour of that particular type of work. They are not the sorts of temporary jobs that I am really worried about, which are the picking and the packaging jobs that we have been talking about so far today. Many of those roles, which you have correctly identified as being filled at the moment by people who may well have been born in eastern Europe, are now filled by people of settled or pre-settled status. The industry has worked well with us and, indeed, with the Home Office, to ensure that the people who work in those sectors have the right ability to stay.

Q163 **Geraint Davies:** Your points are well made, Chair. If we have a shortage of people with specific skills in abattoirs and food processing, alongside problems for sheep producers and the like, what strategies are there to move people from one sector to another and train people up, in particular if we have to do more production of import substitutes due to a deal? Is there quite a sophisticated approach to this, to help businesses diversify and change as the nature of demand changes?

**Victoria Prentis:** It is really with a lot of business engagement, which is what we are doing at the moment and what we have done over the last very difficult year. We will be doing a great deal more of that. We have a long-term plan, which I talked about earlier, for training people to get into skilled agricultural jobs. That is something we are very passionate about in the Department and we have a real vision for. In the short term, getting over the bumps of Covid and the end of the transition period this winter, we are working very closely with the industry. The arrangement we have made for turkey farms is just one very current example of that close working.

Q164 **Geraint Davies:** We have a lot of poor people who do not have any food, and we have had these hunger problems with the pandemic. If we have a glut of lamb because we cannot sell it due to tariffs, will the Government intervene to ensure people are given the lamb and it is bought? Will there be market intervention by the Government to ensure that we do not have wide-scale hunger alongside a surplus of certain types of food?

**Victoria Prentis:** I would separate the two parts of that question. We are still very much hoping for a deal and tariff-free access to the EU. If we get to a situation where a large tariff is imposed on lamb, we will deal with that. We have plans in place. We have prepared several times, in fact three and a half times really, for a no-deal Brexit. Those plans are very well rehearsed.

On your other point, we had an excellent debate on food and people being in food poverty in Westminster Hall 10 days ago following the very



helpful report that you put together as a Committee. I have also talked to Mr Byrne about it, both in Westminster Hall and privately. We have very robust plans in place as a Government to cope with shortages and food poverty this winter. We continue to work on those as the situation evolves.

**Chair:** Geraint, we will park that there. I am pretty certain that the Minister has real sympathy on getting food out to those who really need it. We will work as a Committee with the Minister and the Government to help deliver that. I thank you for your support.

Q165 **Ian Byrne:** Minister Foster, the Food and Drink Federation told us that the new immigration policy looks like being more costly and bureaucratic for companies, including food supply chain businesses. Is it correct?

**Kevin Foster:** I would challenge that slightly. If you purely recruit from the European Union, you will have to become a sponsor and people will have to apply for a visa to come in. However, if you are looking at our wider immigration system in terms of those who recruit, we have over 34,000 sponsors across a range of sectors. There is a range of businesses that recruit from not just within the EU and the UK labour market. We are doing things like removing the resident labour market test, which is quite burdensome. We are suspending the cap in terms of the skilled worker visa, which will make it slightly simpler for those going through the recruitment process. Those two changes drop the time to bring a skilled worker into the UK by eight weeks.

We are doing a range of reforms. We have said we will go further, over the next year, working with the sectors to try to reform and simplify the sponsorship process. We are starting to do some quite different things in our visa application processes for customers as well, building on what we have learned from the EUSS. For example, most EEA nationals applying to the skilled worker route or our new student route will be able to do so using a smartphone app from home, rather than going off to a visa application centre, which became an issue earlier this year when many of them had to close with Covid.

We are generally looking to simplify our system. Yes, free movement is coming to an end. That has been clear for some time. But we are looking to work with the sector and to simply both the nature of our immigration rules and how they operate for customers.

Q166 **Ian Byrne:** You are very upbeat this afternoon, and this has not been reflected in the evidence that we have received over the last couple of months. There is genuine fear about what is coming down the line. To build on what you have just spoken about, what support are you providing to the farmers and the food producers to adapt to the new system, given that they have had less than 11 months to adapt, and have had to deal with the pandemic and other changes related to Brexit?



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**Kevin Foster:** It was important to be clear early on where the rules would sit and where the key principles would be. For example, we published the details of the new system back in July so that people could start becoming familiarised with it. If you are a tier 2 sponsor already, we will just roll your sponsorship licence over into the new skilled worker system with the same expiry date as you have currently. A large number of businesses do not need to reapply just because we are changing the type of visa we issue.

There is an employer information campaign going on. There have been a number of engagement events with the sector. I understand that representatives from the sector and the industry sit on one of the Home Office's consultative panels; I see Philippa nodding. We are giving quite a lot of information there. We have changed the fees, for example, for those telephoning to query their own visa applications, to cut the cost, which was quite significant. We are trying to produce more of a customer-focused service.

We are going to continue looking at how we can review and reform our process so that those who want to engage and go along with it have a much better, much more streamlined experience of dealing with our immigration system. Linked to that, we are dealing on the other side with making sure that our system of enforcement is appropriate. The feedback that we have had on things like the EUSS has been very strong and very good.

Overall, we accept that there is a process of change. People are going to have to adapt to the fact that there is now one global system rather than a two-tier system. We believe that the system we will bring in on 1 January delivers what the public wanted to see in terms of the UK making decisions about its own border policies. At the same time, it still provides access to the skills and talents that businesses need and a more simplified process than those who currently engage with our tier 2 skilled worker process go through.

Q167 **Ian Byrne:** It would be interesting to speak to some of the MPs on here who are involved in this sector and see if they have experienced what you are saying. Have there been collaborations with the NFU to get this information out? It is key that people know how to traverse the system. I would be interested to know what collaborations you have done and what success you have had with that style of engagement, because sometimes it falls down.

**Chair:** Minister, can we keep the answers just a little tighter? Time is going on.

**Kevin Foster:** We are always happy for our officials to engage with particular sectors. I regularly engage with Members of Parliament. We are likely to have more sessions for people to do so. You will appreciate we are slightly hamstrung by not being able to offer physical sessions. We have done a lot virtually. We are still engaging with the sector.



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We are looking to go through a simplification process with our immigration rules. For example, we have changed the English language requirements to make them slightly more logical. Those who have studied at state schools and got a GCSE in English do not have to go and sit an English language test.

**Q168 Julian Sturdy:** To talk about the pilot scheme in a bit more detail, the UK had an agricultural workers scheme for some time between 1945 and 2013. There has been a need for labour from British workers. How confident are you now that we can rely on local people for the seasonal labour that agriculture needs?

**Chair:** What are the numbers that we might require in seasonal workers?

**Kevin Foster:** I will not rehearse all the arguments we had earlier in the session. To be clear, the immigration rules still contain a provision for a temporary tier 5 temporary seasonal worker visa, as it is called. That is in there. Obviously, it is then subject to the further guidance that we put in. For example, the pilot this year said up to 10,000 places. We have not used anywhere near that number, although I accept the Chair's point that free movement is still running. There will be discussion.

We accept that this will be part of the mix of supporting the sector's needs. It is like any other sector. We expect to see you trying to recruit domestically with immigration coming in where you cannot, rather than if you will not take part in schemes like Pick for Britain and other areas. We always reserve the ability to remove access to migrant labour where there are concerns about welfare or terms and conditions being imposed.

**Q169 Julian Sturdy:** What lessons have you learned from the pilot scheme? It has obviously been difficult with the pandemic, but is there anything specific that you feel you can take away from the pilot and take forward?

**Victoria Prentis:** We think the pilot has been useful. It has probably not been representative of a normal year this year because people could not travel. Uptake was probably 6,500 visas, whereas we would normally expect the full uptake. Whether it is something we should continue into the future is being assessed very actively at the moment. We feel it has been useful and worked well.

**Q170 Julian Sturdy:** Given the circumstances that it has been conducted in, which were obviously very difficult circumstances with restrictions on travel, do you really feel that you have enough evidence to base future decisions on?

**Victoria Prentis:** We can assess the type of work that was done this year and the type of labourer who came in this year under the scheme. We can assess how well the visa process worked, which was well. That went extremely well. We were very pleased with the processes. We can have a useful discussion about that, but of course travel was not normal this year. We cannot pretend it was.



Q171 **Julian Sturdy:** Do you feel there is scope to expand into other sectors and areas that have not been targeted yet: ornamentals, et cetera?

**Victoria Prentis:** We had a discussion about that earlier. It is an active topic of discussion between Defra and the Home Office at the moment whether we should expand, in particular, into daffodils.

Q172 **Julian Sturdy:** Yes, we talked about daffodils earlier. You say you are having these discussions, but surely these are really important decisions that these businesses need clarity on. A lot of these businesses will be making decisions now for next season regarding planting, et cetera. You say you are having discussions, which is encouraging, but surely those businesses need answers as soon as possible because they currently cannot make decisions.

**Victoria Prentis:** I accept that. We are very hopeful that the answers will be with you shortly. The scheme is under active consideration at the moment; I am just sorry I cannot give you all the answers today. In terms of the daffodil season, which of course is the first one next year, we are not getting enormous amounts of concern from growers that they will be unable to pick. Broadly, our understanding is that they are relying on domestic settled status and pre-settled status labour for the early part of next year. We are very much in touch with those growers. Whether or not it would be useful to have them as part of the pilot scheme is something that we are definitely still discussing.

Q173 **Julian Sturdy:** You are still discussing. Could you give us set timescales of when we are going to get those answers? More importantly, when are those businesses going to get those answers?

**Victoria Prentis:** Kevin thought that it would be by the end of the month.

**Kevin Foster:** We are expecting them probably by the end of the month. Looking at the unique circumstances of this year, which have been touched on a number of times, we have to say again that one of the issues this year has been international travel restrictions. We would gently say to some businesses that they also need to have in the back of their minds what would happen if there was not an ability to travel more widely again in March and April.

Similarly, earlier this year, one of the countries that are regularly recruited from closed its borders to its own citizens leaving. That was not a UK decision; that was a decision by the country concerned. Similarly, there is a need to very carefully consider the position of being able to have labour come in. It is a vulnerability if you are totally reliant on international travel routes being open.

Q174 **Mrs Murray:** My question has more or less been answered, but I do have a couple of things that I would like to ask. First of all, the Minister said that she felt there was not any real need for people in the ornamentals such as daffodil pickers, for instance, to be part of this scheme because



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most of their workers are domestically sourced. That is not what I am picking up, and I am pretty sure other colleagues are not as well.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am sorry, Sheryll. I did not express myself clearly. No, I tried to explain that we are not having the sorts of conversations with the daffodil pickers that I feared we might have. I suspect that they have sourced settled status and pre-settled status labour for January. If you are getting more concern, please pass it on. We were expecting worries from those quarters in Defra, of course we were. We will absolutely do everything we can to fulfil their needs.

I feel there is certainly a discussion to be had, and, indeed, we are having it with the Home Office, about including non-edible horticulture in the pilot. That is something we can definitely see the value in as Defra. I am sorry I did not express myself more clearly.

Q175 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you for that clarification. Clearly there are visas that have been issued to some of these workers under the existing SAWS scheme that will run into the early months of 2021. Will they still apply after 1 January? Will they be extended?

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes, they roll forward.

**Kevin Foster:** They would potentially have to apply for extensions.

**Victoria Prentis:** I do not think so.

**Kevin Foster:** If their visa deadline is a particular date, it runs for that time. It is a status under UK migration law; it is not a status under EEA free movement rules.

**Victoria Prentis:** They run for the full extent of the visa that they have. For many of the people who are currently applying to the pilot scheme, or indeed still could because there are still spaces, their permission to be here will continue into next year.

Q176 **Mrs Murray:** From the figures you gave us earlier, there are about 4,000 spaces. You said uptake was 6,000.

**Victoria Prentis:** It is around 6,500, so there are around 3,500 left. Those are approximate figures, but they are better than nothing.

Q177 **Mrs Murray:** Finally, you said the people who came here would be able to isolate on farms so that they could still continue to work for edible harvesting. That would not apply to those who are here to harvest ornamentals or poultry, would it? Is there anything you can give to reassure me that this could be extended to those workers if necessary?

**Victoria Prentis:** The special arrangements for isolating on-farm were extended yesterday evening or this morning to include the turkey processors in particular, in the run-up to Christmas. Yes, we will absolutely look at need as it arises, which is what we have done in the turkey world. If there are specific concerns, please get in touch.



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Q178 **Mrs Murray:** If we are still under restrictions in the early months of next year running up to spring, Easter and Mother's Day, we might see the need for flower pickers in particular to enjoy that extension as well. Are you saying to me that you would consider extending it to bring in those workers, if that was necessary?

**Victoria Prentis:** We are already having active discussions about the pilot and whether it ought to include non-edibles such as daffodils. We will have those discussions now regardless of need. If the daffodil pickers in your constituency and nearby are having difficulty finding the pickers that they need, please give us early warning. As a Department, we are very much in touch with that industry, not least because of where the Secretary of State comes from, but we are on an official level, too. Seriously, we always welcome any more information that MPs have.

Q179 **Mrs Murray:** Would you actively go out and inform colleagues about this?

**Victoria Prentis:** I have already talked to several of your Cornish colleagues about daffodils. If there are others that you feel we need to have a conversation with, of course we will.

**Mrs Murray:** Thank you, Minister. That is very helpful.

Q180 **Chair:** I want to try to nail how many of these seasonal agricultural workers we need. At the moment, we have 70,000 to 80,000 seasonal workers. They have mainly come from the EU with free movement. We have slightly missed the point, you see. When we get to 1 January, they will not automatically come in. The workers who have settled status will carry on doing some of these jobs. We have some home-grown labour, but not a huge amount at the moment.

Have you identified the gap? How many seasonal agricultural workers does Defra, and I emphasise Defra, believe we will need to allow into this country when there is no automatic free movement of people on 1 January? This is different than we have been for many years. We are not really facing up to reality.

**Victoria Prentis:** Believe me, we are facing up to the reality.

Q181 **Chair:** What is the figure?

**Victoria Prentis:** I am not sure that I accept all your figures. I accept absolutely that the NFU says there are 70,000 workers in this space. Our figures are much lower than that.

**Chair:** You cannot answer me and say your figures are much lower than that. What are your figures?

**Victoria Prentis:** Let me tell you where our figures are taken from. ONS and HMRC data would indicate that a figure of about 40,000 is more realistic. Of course, it is like asking, "How long is a piece of string?" Not



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everything grows at the same time of year and a lot of these workers work on different farms.

**Chair:** Let us put 40,000 on the table.

**Victoria Prentis:** Let us start with 40,000.

Q182 **Chair:** How many of those 40,000 jobs are going to be filled by those with settled status?

**Victoria Prentis:** I genuinely believe that the officials are all over this and know what is going on. We have about 20,000 people who may have started their lives in eastern Europe but now have settled status or pre-settled status. They are here and are actively working in this industry. I have told you that we were able to achieve around 11% native Brits this year.

Q183 **Chair:** It was 11% in one month. That does not average out as 11%.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am confident that we can build on that.

**Chair:** That averages out as 5%.

**Victoria Prentis:** You can do the maths between 40,000 and the 20,000 settled status that we have here.

**Chair:** Therefore, you are saying we need 20,000.

**Victoria Prentis:** I would put the figure in that range.

**Chair:** Without leading you as a witness, 20,000 is the figure that you will require.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am as in touch as you are with the NFU, and I know that it would put the figure a little higher. We have to keep in touch with the industry and react to its needs. I very much hope there will be a seasonal workers pilot that continues into next year and I have given you the figures as we see them.

Q184 **Chair:** That is very good of you, Minister. I now turn to the Home Office Minister and say that the Defra Minister has suggested that we may well need in the region of 20,000 seasonal workers next year. Is that the Home Office figure?

**Kevin Foster:** The Home Office is looking for the figures we can get with domestic recruitment. We are looking at the need in the sector and the demand this year in terms of travel.

Q185 **Chair:** Are you sympathetic? Defra has done a lot of work to get to this type of figure. It is probably still, dare I say it, quite a conservative figure at 20,000.

**Victoria Prentis:** It is a conservative figure.



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**Chair:** I suspect you might want to come up with an even more conservative figure. Could you please be a little more open as to where you think that figure might be?

**Kevin Foster:** We engage in active discussions about where exactly the numbers should be. We look across our immigration system and our numbers. For example, I touched on sheep shearers; that is inherently a seasonal thing that we do not include in the seasonal worker figures because it is a route for non-visa nationals. In terms of where we are, we look at the fact that we obviously agreed a pilot of 10,000 last year. To cover off the points on what sectors it covers, we do not have an in-principle objection—

Q186 **Chair:** Minister, sorry to interrupt you. Would you accept that 2021 is a different year to 2020 because you no longer have automatic access to that neighbour? Therefore, I do not think you can necessarily say that you did not quite meet the 10,000 visas this time. The Home Office is in the region of 10,000 visas, if I can be so bold. Are you going to be open enough to be able to say where you believe you are? How are you going to fill the gap between what the industry and Defra believe they need? The industry believes it needs more than 20,000.

**Victoria Prentis:** It does.

**Kevin Foster:** We start from the position that we agreed previously, 10,000. We will look as we get to the end of the EU settlement scheme, because many people who have come this year have registered on pre-settled status, which means they would be able to come back in spring next year as well, to be clear. The rules are not that you have to permanently live for 365 days in the United Kingdom if you are on pre-settled status. You can live six months out of 12 in the UK and still qualify for pre-settled status, so there will be quite a number. As we get towards the end of the system, we know who is registered for that and where they might be likely to do it from. We start at 10,000.

**Victoria Prentis:** A great deal of work is being done by growers at the moment to ensure that people have the ability to stay here. It is partly because of that that we are not absolutely certain of our figures. It is important that you take figures from industry into account as well.

**Chair:** I can assure you that, when we decide to put our report together, we will be very firm on what we believe is needed, but we accept both of your positions.

Q187 **Dave Doogan:** Minister Foster, what is the impediment to saying what the figure is? What is the political, if it is political, risk to you and your colleagues giving a figure that is then undersubscribed or oversubscribed? What is the risk? Why can you not say?

**Kevin Foster:** First, it is not so much a risk in a political sense. It is about making sure that, in our migration policy, we are supporting our overall strategy to the UK labour market. I do not want to provide



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immigration as an alternative to the great policies that are being expanded to get more people to work domestically or, as an alternative, to take part in them. We are very clear that immigration is there for those who cannot, not will not, take part in particular schemes.

I am not particularly focused on the politics of this. I appreciate that might be the focus for others. Our focus is on ensuring that, where we meet needs, we support efforts to make sure domestic recruitment is being done where possible. There are some great initiatives around Pick for Britain. That is not really where we are.

Last year we agreed the 10,000 figure. In edible horticulture, we are actively engaging with Defra and others across Government about whether that number should be higher. Crucially, a fair point has been made about looking at whether it would be appropriate, given the way some of those workers operate—they go from different products to different things—to make that more generic seasonal work in agriculture, while ensuring that it does not become a route to going off and doing other things that would undermine the wider immigration system.

**Victoria Prentis:** We do not need figures written in stone at this point. We clearly need to look at whether the seasonal workers pilot needs to be expanded next year. Yes, it is right that we have discussions about numbers, but this is a journey. It really is. Your ambition for British horticulture is as ambitious as mine. We need to get domestic labour into this market if we are going to really achieve our goals. This is not going to happen between now and January, but it will happen over the next few years.

I know Julian is very ambitious in the automation and technological spaces, which we have not had the time to go into. That is definitely where we will go, and that will address some of these needs as well. I would not want you to get hung up on numbers.

Q188 **Dave Doogan:** Minister Prentis said in response to Sheryll's question that she is quite comfortable—I am paraphrasing—and is not aware of any particular issues in the daffodil sector. Could I urge her to pick up the phone to Grampian Growers in my constituency, which works very closely with the daffodil growers? You can imagine the daffodil-growing world is a very small world. They are not very comfortable at all.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am very happy to do that. I am sure that officials will have been in touch already.

**Kevin Foster:** To reassure you, in any number, we look at the prevailing market circumstances.

**Victoria Prentis:** We talk.

**Kevin Foster:** To be clear, we are not suggesting that the immigration rules themselves should specify a hard and fast number, in the same way as the pilot went from 2,500 to 10,000. Similarly, we should not have



immigration as the first resort. We continue to review the position in the UK, as we do across all other sectors. We have had to make quite a number of adjustments this year to include visa waivers and everything else to react to the emerging situation. We expect that we might need to do that across wider sectors, including this one, coming into next year as things change. We look at what has happened in Denmark recently, which meant that we had to immediately stop visitors from Denmark, and what effect that might have in key sectors.

**Q189 Chair:** Is there going to be great flexibility from the Home Office in the future?

**Kevin Foster:** This is the way we are looking at our future immigration system. We have freed up the MAC to work to its own commissions rather than just the ones that I or the Home Secretary give it. Sectors can lobby Brian Bell, ask to do things, and go out and give independent advice, which is then available to Parliament and others to debate.

We have a system that we believe is more responsive, in that it is a global system. Look at how we are responding to the situation in Hong Kong, creating one of the largest routes to settlement in the United Kingdom for those outside the EEA for some time. Similarly, we might find ourselves, having talked about labour shortages, sitting here next summer talking about a developing situation in Hong Kong that means we certainly do not have a shortage of labour in the United Kingdom. Immigration rules change and adapt over time, but they need to be part of our labour market strategy, not an alternative to it.

**Q190 Dr Hudson:** Can I thank both Ministers for being before us today? I want to get on to skilled workforce and migration. First, can I welcome both of your earlier comments when you talked about cross-Government working on training people in these important sectors in agriculture and food production? One thing we have learned from this Covid crisis is that people are now well aware of the importance of food and where it comes from. I welcome that the different Government Departments—Home Office, Defra and the Department for Education—are talking, because that is a positive way forward to train people up in these sectors, upskill and bring it into school curricula. Victoria, I welcome your comments about an institute for agriculture. Those are positive steps across Government.

I now want to talk about skilled workers in the agriculture and food supply chain. What is your forecast of the change in numbers of migrants from both EEA and non-EEA countries under the new immigration rules compared to now?

**Kevin Foster:** We have published a full impact assessment of what we believe will be the impact of the new skilled worker route. Fundamentally, in terms of skilled workers and the requirements, we expect that many more will qualify who are non-EEA nationals. We are going from a very academically focused level of skilled worker, graduate level, to school



leaver level. It is broadening into a much greater range of genuine skills that people find in the workplace, some of which are under more pressure for recruitment than some graduate roles happen to be. We expect that we will see slightly more migration from outside the European Union in those roles.

We expect that we will see some reduction in EEA migration given that free movement has ended. It is a different position for those who qualify under FBIS, the new points-based system, in that they will still be able to come here. We believe, from what we see so far from the rest of the world recruitment into skilled roles, that the package we have put up is an attractive one. It is based on the job being at an appropriate level, the salary being appropriate and the general salary threshold of £25,600 being there. There are some exceptions to that around those on the shortage occupation list, for example, and then things like the standard requirement to speak English. That is in general, but a full impact assessment has been produced for the new skilled worker route as well.

**Victoria Prentis:** Neil is a vet, so this is a good moment to recognise that about a quarter of the vets in the UK come from EEA countries. The chief vet is always very keen to recognise their contribution to our veterinary needs. As I am sure you are aware, Neil, the future veterinary capability and capacity project is working hard with vets in the UK to make sure that we have the capacity we need going forward.

**Kevin Foster:** Vets qualify under the points-based system, to be clear on that point.

**Chair:** It just takes a little while to train a vet, does it not?

**Victoria Prentis:** It does.

Q191 **Dr Hudson:** I have a little experience of that, having trained and trained many vets. Thank you, Victoria, for that answer. You have very neatly pre-empted my second question, so you predicted it well.

Yes, I do declare an interest as a veterinary surgeon. Both of you have spoken today about the capacity and looking forward. As you say, Victoria, a significant proportion of the UK veterinary population comes from the EU. In the food hygiene sector, over 90% of vets in the abattoir system come from Europe. It is a key crisis point that we really need to keep an eye on that that sector is adequately supported.

Kevin, earlier in the session you talked about a lag in terms of training. Yes, there is a five to six-year lag. The veterinary profession is working on retaining vets within the profession as well. I welcome that vets were put back on the shortage occupation list, which should give some short-term measures.

To reiterate the question to both of you, are you confident moving forward that we will have the veterinary capacity in the food production sector in the short term, as well as non-veterinary qualified staff? Defra is



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bringing in animal certification officers. Are you confident that we have enough in the short term and the medium term as we come through the transition period?

**Kevin Foster:** Yes.

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes. We are working very hard on that with the FVCCP. It does not trip off the tongue. We are working together with the Home Office on that.

You asked about the end of the transition period. We have provided funding for training for vets to become OVAs, which enables them to help with export health certificates. We have gone from a baseline of around 600 people who were qualified as OVAs less than two years ago to double that now. That will be very helpful, but the number of vets in the country is something we need to keep a close eye on, as you know.

**Kevin Foster:** We work closely from a migration point of view. One of the interesting bits of engagement I recently had on the migration system was the issue of these food hygiene vets and the fact that it is mostly done via migration. In one part of our Union, I had a strong push that we should make sure they come via migration. I asked, "How many do we train domestically in that area?" The answer was near zero. We can give migration routes, but we also have to be conscious in the back of our minds that we are in a competitive global market for highly trained and highly qualified people. They can go elsewhere, which means that we need to make sure that we have that push and co-ordinate on training.

We welcome what Defra is doing. It is one of the reasons I am meeting with the Minister for Employment and the Minister for Skills. We want immigration to be seen as where we have a shortfall and where we cannot. We should also make sure that it is not seen as the only solution. An immigration opportunity does not guarantee that we will fill every post, as in our NHS, for example. It has very enhanced abilities to recruit skilled labour across the whole world, but that does not mean that it can fill every single nursing post by recruiting in the global market.

Q192 **Dr Hudson:** That is a fair point. I will just clarify that. Within the UK veterinary school sector, to get accreditation with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, the European veterinary authorities and the American veterinary authorities, all vet schools have to train up students and vets who have the potential to go into a broad range of veterinary practice. That includes food hygiene. Veterinary public health is a key part of all veterinary curricula, but you are right that the veterinary profession needs to work domestically to encourage more graduates to pursue that as a career path as well. They have the potential to go into those areas. It is just that, in many cases, they do not.

**Kevin Foster:** I can understand why as well. It is also about making sure that we link up our skills policies and our wider policies so people see the



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opportunities there are in veterinary work, and the pretty decent salaries that follow with it, in some parts of that sector.

Q193 **Dr Hudson:** It is good for our Committee to get the clarity from both your Departments that in the short term, once we get through the transition period, staffing levels will be capable of servicing that really important part of the food processing sector. Otherwise, we are going to get a bottleneck and unfortunately have food security issues.

**Kevin Foster:** Fundamentally, if someone has the relevant qualifications, which will be determined by the employer and other things, not by the Home Office, there is no reason why they will not qualify. To be clear, there is no idea of EEA or non-EEA recruitment under the points-based system. If it qualifies, you can recruit globally.

**Victoria Prentis:** The collaborative work that we are doing with the BVA and the Royal College will pay dividends in the future. I accept that it will take some years for those dividends to be felt fully.

Q194 **Dr Hudson:** The new immigration system has different levels of bureaucracy and potentially some charges associated with that. Have you looked at how that might affect the competitiveness of UK businesses moving forward, bearing in mind that some companies and businesses will be quite small and might not have big HR departments that can navigate people through these potentially complex processes? In the short term, when they are trying to get people quickly, will there be a competitive problem for some of our smaller companies and businesses?

**Kevin Foster:** We accept that there will be a change in process for some that only recruit from the UK and the EU, having to become licensed sponsors. We have been looking at our processes. For example, scrapping the resident market test and suspending the cap will sound quite minor, but they are quite cumbersome processes that those that recruit from the rest of the world currently have to operate. We are going to look at the sponsorship process as well.

As I touched on earlier, we are also looking at the rules themselves, the thresholds and how we can simplify them to make them more user friendly. We have dropped the settlement figure and removed the time limit for skilled work. People can settle once they are here in the United Kingdom as skilled workers.

For EEA nationals to start with, and we are hoping to roll this out more widely, we are building on the experience of the EU settlement scheme. You can apply from home using a smartphone app and potentially a laptop. We are trying to reduce some of the other barriers, like travelling to the local VAC to give your fingerprints and facial biometrics. We can make those sorts of things simpler and move forward. Plenty of companies recruit on a global basis already. Support and advice is available. We are looking to what we can do in future to further simplify the system.



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Q195 **Dr Hudson:** I want to come back on a question the Chair raised on the match-making analogy. If any of our critical food production companies, businesses or whatever get to a point where there is a shortfall in labour, could Defra and the Home Office potentially provide emergency assistance to navigate people through so that they can get workforce in? Otherwise, we will end up with bottlenecks. Is there capacity for Government to respond to that?

**Kevin Foster:** To give an example, earlier this year in the pandemic, when the NHS needed to bring people in, we had visa application centres closing and difficulties with travel. We put in place visa waiver schemes, with a very trusted sponsor, it has to be said, the NHS, and ensuring that national security checks were still done, because that is a core of our visa regime. We can put in place leave outside the rules in certain circumstances.

To be honest, many of us hope that we do have a labour shortage across the overall economy next summer, because it will mean a lot of people have got back into work. The alternative in most general skills is that, sadly, we are more likely to have a surplus than to have a shortage. Our systems can adapt. They can change where needed, but we will always ask, "Have we tried to sort this out in the UK labour market first?" Earlier this year in the pandemic, when there was a particular crisis point and the NHS needed to get people in more quickly, we did suspend and vary some elements of the tier 2 visas.

Q196 **Dr Hudson:** Can I press you on that point? I am really pleased to hear your response about how you can respond in a crisis in an NHS situation. Victoria, does Defra have it on its radar that, if there is a potential pressure point in food security, production and processing, it could work with the Home Office on crisis intervention?

**Victoria Prentis:** Absolutely, and that has been the day job, all of this very difficult year. As an example from our point of view, I talk about the way that we have allowed people to quarantine on-farm as opposed to the normal rules, which would be quarantining in a house when they could not go to work. That is one example of cross-Government working with the Department for Transport and the Home Office, to make sure that we could get the seasonal work that we needed.

**Kevin Foster:** Sometimes it will be operational. For example, with students, we had an issue of very few flights from China operating. Border Force has worked with universities to have charter flights straight from China into Belfast, for example. It might not necessarily be the immigration rules; it might literally be the practicality of getting here that we need to try to overcome. Those have worked very well and very productively. To reassure you, we can react if there are genuine problems or crises. We can work together to deal with that, but it is not the sort of thing that should be the game plan to deal with problems.



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**Victoria Prentis:** We undoubtedly have challenges this winter. We all accept that and will work together to deal with them. I also accept completely Kevin's end goal, which is that we need more domestic workforce in this space.

**Dr Hudson:** Thank you. That is very helpful.

Q197 **Chair:** Ministers, you must also recognise that the veterinary profession takes time to train vets.

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes.

Q198 **Chair:** That is obvious. I have one final question. We have talked a little about it, Victoria. How much technology and automation can we get to make a real difference in replacing the labour market and in what timeframe? There are two questions linked to that. How much do you believe farmers and food industry will need to invest in technology to offset the changes in the labour market? What are the Government doing to incentivise further investment by farmers and businesses? Does this need to be incorporated into the Agriculture Bill?

**Victoria Prentis:** Yes. It does not need to be incorporated into the Agriculture Act because we have passed that, I am very pleased to say. You will hear a lot more about our future agricultural policies from the Secretary of State in the next week. I do not want to be a spoiler, but I would definitely say that, in Defra, we are passionate about science, technology and the future for British agriculture in this space.

We have several initiatives at the moment across Government that are working on bringing these technologies to the market as soon as we can. While we start from probably, to coin a hackneyed phrase, a world-leading space, this is still a very low base at the moment. We are still picking most fruit very firmly by hand and by eye.

We have a lot of work to do, but we are really excited about it. We have a transforming food production fund that is providing up to £90 million for industry-led collaborative R&D projects. This is split between four strands: the future food production system, science and technology into practice, and other international collaboration and investor partnerships. We have already allocated a good sum of £7.6 million to currently live TFP automation projects. I have many examples of those that I would be very happy to share with the Committee, but probably not now.

**Chair:** Possibly not today.

**Victoria Prentis:** It is hard to keep me quiet in this space, Chair.

Q199 **Chair:** We look forward to what the Secretary of State has to say. All the robotic systems and others for picking are very expensive to develop before they become commercially viable.

**Victoria Prentis:** They are.



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**Chair:** Therefore, we will need a pump-priming exercise from the Government to help.

**Victoria Prentis:** Absolutely, and Defra is committed to helping growers in this space. I would not like to pretend it is the solution to our labour shortages at the moment because it is not, but it will be in the future.

Q200 **Chair:** We will park it there, and we will look forward to the Secretary of State's statement next week. You have been notified of this question on fishing. I refer to the 30 October letter sent to the Secretary of State from part of the fishing industry. They say the arrangements that Defra and the MMO have put in place requiring all documents to be submitted to the MMO before catch certificates are issued—this is when they export fish—will prevent their industry exporting to the EU within 48 hours. Naturally, with shellfish and all types of fish, the faster we do it, the better.

If the fishermen can use their apps to put this quickly through the MMO and get the certificate for export issued quickly, it will work. But at the moment they are worried about the bureaucracy. They have to provide their logbooks and all sorts of stuff for logging the catch of the fish. Somehow or other, we need to speed it up. Sheryll is shaking her head, but this has come from people like Jim Portas and others. It is a serious point. We can fix it.

**Mrs Murray:** I am going to let the Minister answer, but I understand the fishing certification is quite a smooth procedure. It was discussed on the local politics show on Sunday. I raised it. Those particular people do not have it entirely as it is. I am going to let the Minister answer.

**Victoria Prentis:** Chair, I was not aware you were going to raise this right now, but I am aware of the issue. I am told that the Secretary of State will respond to the letter from certain people in the fishing industry in due course.

To give a high-level answer, catch certificates have been required here for some time now. A catch certificate can provide assurance that fish have been caught legally. We will require catch certificates for imports of fish from the EU. At the end of the transition period, most exports of fish and fisheries products will require an accompanying catch certificate. I will answer the letter that you refer to. In fact, the Secretary of State is answering it.

**Chair:** I apologise, because I thought you were going to be notified of the question. I apologise if that is not the case.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am sorry the message did not get properly through.

Q201 **Chair:** We can get into a place where we can make this work. I would just like you, as Defra and the MMO, to make sure that this is seamless. Fish goes off very, very quickly.



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**Victoria Prentis:** We have done a great deal of work towards the end of the transition period to ensure that day-old chicks and fish, both fresh and live, can travel as quickly as possible. It is something that we are working very hard on at the moment.

**Chair:** Yes. I believe there is a hub going in in Scotland. There could possibly be a hub in Kent, I do not know.

**Mrs Murray:** I am happy to share the response that I got from the Secretary of State on Sunday with regard to this subject. He said, "The industry should know all they need re: environmental health certificates. They are quite simple documents for fish, and the French plan to check them on arrival at Boulogne rather than at the border." It is important to have that on the record because you raised it. That came from the Secretary of State on Sunday.

Q202 **Chair:** Sheryll, thank you very much for that clarification. That is now on the record. Thank you, Minister. If you or the Secretary of State can come back in writing, it will be useful.

**Victoria Prentis:** The Secretary of State is writing to the people who wrote to him from the fishing industry directly. I am sure we would be happy to share it with the Committee if appropriate. Perhaps I will have to check with them.

**Chair:** Can I thank both Ministers very much? We have had a very frank and open discussion today. We are naturally very concerned to make sure that the industry continues and flourishes, that we produce and process even more food in this country, and that we have enough labour to do it. I thank you both for your answers. I am sure you await our report with great interest.

If you do not mind, I will ask you both to vacate the room because we are going to discuss the heads of the report now. I thank you both very much for your time and your answers, and for remaining with us for nearly two and a half hours. I appreciate that. Thank you both very much.