



The National Federation of
Fishermen's Organisations

Our ref: NFFO/3910/MC/jl

20th February 2026

Alistair Carmichael MP
Chair, Environment, Food & Rural Affairs Committee
House of Commons
Palace of Westminster
Westminster SW1A 0AA

Dear Alistair,

Thank you for your letter of 11th February. I welcome the opportunity to provide further information to the Committee on the impact on the fishing industry of the loss of sector-specific visa arrangements. I regret that, in the time available, I am unable to provide more quantitative analysis of the problem. Please note, though that the NFFO is working to develop this and will be happy to share the results with the Committee when the work is completed.

Different parts of the fishing fleet employ foreign workers to different extents, but there is such a high degree of interdependency between the different fleet segments that these significant changes constitute a very widespread threat to the continued sustainability of fishing businesses.

Without sufficient time to adapt, suddenly barring foreign workers is likely to cause the collapse of businesses that depend on them. Their many other, *British*, employees will be made redundant; supply chains will be disrupted; and the continued viability of port infrastructure will be seriously endangered. I cannot conceive of any good outcome for our national economy, our food security, or for the lives of working people in coastal communities that could result from such a policy.

The claim that fishing businesses have not taken sufficient advantage of existing visa routes is unfair. Firstly, some businesses plainly *have* used that route. They have done everything that the Home Office has asked of them, as quickly as possible. Others were still in the process of trying to work through a new and complicated system when they learned that it was to be made unavailable to them. It is hardly reasonable to move the goalposts and then blame the players for not scoring fast enough.

The UK fishing sector has struggled for years to recruit domestic workers, with little success. A significant reason for this is the requirement for young people to stay in education up to the age of 18. A fishing apprenticeship syllabus exists but has never been widely delivered and I am not aware of any providers currently offering it. With no training courses in fishing available for them to take, most of the 16-year-olds who would once have left school to fish are now spending 2 years in college, learning other trades. At the point when they are free to enter the workforce, they have already acquired different skills and made contacts with other employers. The opportunity cost to them of changing tack and trying their hands at fishing is simply too high in our uncertain economy.

Far from passively accepting this, the fishing industry has been working hard to develop proposals for recruiting and training more domestic workers. They will require advice from and partnership with the education sector, and appropriate funding, but we firmly believe that they are credible and achievable. They cannot be realised overnight, however. We need *time* to interest young people in a life working at sea; to train them properly, and to help them find a suitable place on a fishing boat. If the businesses that could have taken them on have, in the meantime, been forced into failure by government immigration policy, the whole endeavour will have been pointless.

I have spoken before parliamentary Committees in the past about the need for greater coordination of policy and action between government departments. The present situation illustrates my point depressingly well. The advent of the Fishing and Coastal Growth fund looked likely finally to provide the means to develop and enact our ambitions to improve domestic recruitment. Simultaneously, however, immigration policy looks likely to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Without enough time to adapt to new rules on overseas workers, the fishing industry and the UK economy will suffer.

The Home Office statement to which you referred mentions concerns about the exploitation of migrant workers. This is a serious matter and there is plainly no place in any UK industry for companies that abuse their workers, whether domestic or migrant, or which fail to properly reward their labour. On any occasion where such things are found to occur, the full force of the law should be brought to bear. The fishing industry cannot claim to be better than any other sector in unfortunately containing a small number of individuals who are willing to mistreat their fellows, but nor, I think is it especially worse. I have not seen data that demonstrates a disproportionate number of prosecutions for labour offenses by fishing businesses. Unless that is in fact the case, the Home Office's comments in this regard seem unjustified.

Penalising an entire industry because of a perceived (yet unevidenced) risk of illegal behaviour by a tiny minority of bad actors seems a strange policy. I can imagine no reason why the deliberate failure to provide sector-suitable visa arrangements could be considered protective of workers' rights. Surely, we might expect the opposite to be true? Sadly, Minister Tapp has declined to meet with the fishing industry, so his rationale remains unclear to us.

The major problem with the visa routes that remain for the fishing industry is the enhanced level of written English language proficiency that is now required. There is no conceivable reason why deckhands on fishing boats should be required to meet a standard that would enable them to study for an undergraduate degree, yet that is our new situation. Fishermen need to be hard working, brave and skilful: they are very seldom required to write essays.

My industry responded with enthusiasm to the government's professed commitment to domestic economic growth. I firmly believe that fishing has an important part to play in this, especially in coastal communities, where few other proposals for sustainable growth have been forthcoming. I would urge policymakers not to let their desire to reduce the number of foreign workers come at the expense of British businesses and British jobs.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mike Cohen', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mike Cohen
Chief Executive