



## Scottish Affairs Committee

**Home Office  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF**

17 March 2022

Dear Kevin Foster MP

The Scottish Affairs Committee visited Perthshire on 28 February regarding work about labour shortages in the ornamentals and edible crops sectors. This followed on from an evidence session we held in November 2021 about labour shortages.

We visited two farms in Perthshire, one was an ornamental farm, and the other was a fruit farm. We heard from both owners about the difficulties they were facing due to the seasonal workers pilot scheme.

### The seasonal worker visa route

During our evidence session on labour shortages on 16 November 2021, we heard how the seasonal worker visa route did not have a sufficient number of places, and that the visa and transfer costs were too high.<sup>1</sup> We were told on our visit in February that the seasonal worker visa route is oversubscribed and has been for some time.

On 24 December 2021 the UK Government announced that the seasonal worker visa route would cover the ornamental sector as well as edibles. This news was welcomed by the farmers we spoke to, but they told us that there just are not enough visas for the numbers of people that are needed to fulfil workload requirements.

### Guidance for employers

A major concern voiced to us was the timing of the new guidance for sponsors of participants on the seasonal worker visa route that came into force on 18 February 2022. The farmers we heard from told us that they received no warning that guidance was changing which led to the guidance being difficult to engage with; they saw that things had changed overnight and were not warned that any changes were coming. The new guidance coming into force at such a late stage in the planning cycle had become a hindrance to their businesses. There had been less than two weeks' notice between the guidance coming into force and the start of the season for some plants; we heard that some plants had their seasons starting on 1 March, the day after our visit.

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<sup>1</sup> Oral evidence taken on 16 November 2021, HC (2021-22) 879, [Q8](#) [David Michie]

## A local workforce

We are aware that the UK Government has launched the Pick for Britain Scheme to improve local uptake of seasonal jobs. The Pick for Britain scheme was described to us as an “abject failure” and with a very low success rate by the farmers we spoke to. The announcement of an extension of the seasonal workers visa on 24 December focused on encouraging a local workforce to take up available jobs. The statement said: “The number of visas will begin to taper down from 2023 and the sector will have to improve pay and conditions”.<sup>2</sup> This statement assumes that the reason that local workers do not seem to be taking up seasonal worker roles is about pay and conditions, and not other factors. However, this was not the experience of the people we spoke to.

## Higher wages

The owners of the farms we spoke to have tried to recruit locally but they told us that it had not been possible to recruit and retain staff, even with higher wages. We were told by one grower that even if you paid people £15 an hour you still would not get local staff to do this very physical work.

The biggest concern that the farmers we spoke to wanted to emphasise, was the unfeasibility of having to pay their workers at least £10.26 an hour, for an average of 48 hours a week. We were told that meeting this average is simply impossible given the changeable, weather dependent nature of the work. Furthermore, the wage increase for workers can lead to significant knock-on effects, such as a rise in the cost of fruit. The farms are not likely to be paid higher prices from the supermarkets when the supermarkets can import fruit more cheaply. We are aware of the UK Government’s view on this to be that “government is encouraging all sectors to adapt and make employment more attractive to UK domestic workers through offering training, career options, wage increases and to invest in increased automation technology”.<sup>3</sup>

## Lack of local interest

In our evidence session in November, we heard that: “Businesses have been trying very hard to recruit UK workers and it is very difficult to do that because of the nature of the temp role and the communal and seasonal nature of the work. What we really need to do is change that migration policy, have a better seasonal workers’ pilot”.<sup>4</sup> The temporary nature of working with ornamentals and edible crops is a barrier for the local job market. We understand that people in the local community do not want to do seasonal work, they want full time work.

We also heard that when some locals become seasonally employed on the farms they do not stay long in the roles. They have told the farm owners when they resigned that they were unaware of the physicality of the work. The farms explained the difficulties this causes for them: the business need workers who are prepared to do the physical work as well as people who stay the whole season. Each plant has different needs and specific training is required. Consequently, if people leave during the season we were told the investment in training feels as though it is wasted.

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<sup>2</sup> UK Government, [Industry given certainty around seasonal workers but told to focus on domestic workforce](#), 24 December 2021

<sup>3</sup> [PQ 125166](#), 28 February 2022

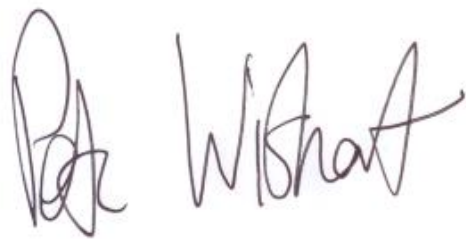
<sup>4</sup> Oral evidence taken on 16 November 2021, HC (2021-22) 879, [Q30](#) [David Michie]

## Ornamental and edible visa route

The Horticultural Trades Association welcomed the changes to the seasonal workers visa route which opened up the route to ornamental workers, but it is concerned that this expansion is not going to help their industry unless the numbers of visas significantly increase. It told us in an email: "our industry is competing directly with the already established edible agriculture industry for the same, limited, pool of workers; meaning our members have been unable to access these workers". The Horticultural Trades Association reported that the UK horticulture sector need access to 3,000 FTEs and this is between 300-500 people in Scotland. There are 30,000 seasonal worker pilot visas for both edibles and ornamentals. This is not enough.

I understand that the new guidance for sponsors of participants on the seasonal worker visa route are being reviewed following feedback. Could you please provide clarification about what has been changed with the regulations regarding seasonal workers? I would also appreciate a response to the farmers' concerns raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Pete Wishart'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Pete' written in a more compact, stylized manner and the last name 'Wishart' written in a more open, flowing script.

**Pete Wishart MP**  
Chair, Scottish Affairs Committee