

Written evidence submitted by Pro-Force Ltd (LFS0040)

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About Pro-Force

Pro-Force are one of the UK's largest providers of agricultural labour to both the edible and ornamental sectors, as well as significant providers to the food production and distribution industries. Pro-Force place approximately 15, 000 workers a year on temporary assignments that usually last up to a maximum of 6 months, we sometimes combine assignments to deliver longer term work but this often requires workers moving across the UK. Pro-Force are also a Seasonal Worker Pilot operator.

Experience of 2020

At the start of 2020 our EU recruitment was expected to provide 70% of the labour orders we had from our clients (this includes EU workers living full time in the UK), the remaining 30% was due to be covered by the 5,000 Seasonal Worker Pilot visa's. Orders for pilot scheme workers outstripped our Certificate of Sponsorship allocation by 50%.

Initially we expected the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic to be catastrophic to our ability to recruit and provide enough labour to our clients, however the reality was not as bad as first feared.

We did see some A2 & A8 nationals returning to agriculture from sectors that had been hit hardest by the lockdown measures, however as soon as hospitality and the wider economy reopened the vast majority returned to their normal jobs leaving our clients short of the labour they required.

Our recruitment from A2 countries, these have been the mainstay of agriculture workers for the last 10 years, went well and was on a par with 2019. We believe the situation was improved by the EU wide impact Coronavirus had on economies creating increased unemployment or increased labour availability as a short-term impact of the closure of some industries.

The reopening of the Ukraine visa offices (our main source country for pilot workers) in June 2020 was invaluable, without which we would not have filled our orders. This source was essential not only in supplying our client requirements but also replacing both British nationals and EU nationals who did not stay for the whole season.

Pick for Britain

Pro-Force heavily engaged in the scheme and featured prominently on the website. We also worked closely with a number of student bodies to highlight the jobs available. We experienced a high level of applications, circa 15, 000, but the level of successful placements was very low (circa 3%) by comparison to our other recruitment streams. It is important to point out that there may have been a lower level of placement caused by our clients being able to recruit more of their own labour than normal (much of which would have come from the population local to them), and also the

geographic challenges of available applicants not living in close proximity to the jobs and not wishing to move.

Of the 450 UK based workers (this includes British and EU workers living in the UK) we placed with our clients less than 4% remained on the assignment at the end of the season.

Common feedback from the British nationals placed by Pro-Force was that many of them wanted to “do their bit” at time of national crisis and we do not see this as a long term, viable option to provide the labour the industry needs in 2021 and beyond.

Plans for 2021

There is a high level of nervousness from our client and a low expectation that the EU settlement scheme will provide enough labour for the industry.

Settled and pre-settled status applications for Pro-Force workers are going well but it is anticipated that even if all of our workers were granted pre-settled or settled status, we would have an average of 50% of the labour we need when taking in to account the annual returnee rate.

In 2021 it is our intention to supply 3% of our client’s workers through British workers. While we do not consider this to be a significant source of labour, it is right that our industry engages home nationals when unemployment is high. It is expected that after a tough winter period and increased unemployment, industries such as hospitality will bounce back in the early summer of 2021 reducing the availability of UK based workers, this coincides with the start of the peak seasonal demand for agricultural labour.

Orders for pilot workers from just the existing users is expected to be circa 7,000. Based on the increase in labour demand of pilot workers between 2018 and 2019 we are realistically anticipating demand of circa 12,000.

If the industry does not have access to a scheme, we will not be able to provide all of our client’s labour requirements, and some of our clients are saying they would reduce plant crops next year if they are only able to recruit UK based labour or EU workers with Settled or Pre-Settled Status.