

**Written evidence submitted by Lea Valley Growers'  
Association (LVGA) (LS0073)**

**Labour Shortages inquiry: supplementary evidence**

Lea Valley Growers' Association (LVGA)

**EFRA Committee – Evidence – 11<sup>th</sup> January 2022**

**1. Background**

Lea Valley Growers' Association (LVGA) represents around 100 business members of the Commercial Horticultural Industry in the Lea Valley; predominantly in the districts of Epping Forest & Harlow, however, membership extends to nurseries throughout the UK.

The Horticultural Industry, located in the Lea Valley has been established since the mid 1800's.

Fresh produce sales from these businesses exceeds **£500 million per annum with over 2,500 employed**. Most crops grown are all-year-round or long season crops in high-tech greenhouses.

**LVGA horticultural businesses grow over 160 Million Cucumbers & Sweet Peppers per annum (around 75% of the UK crop) along with 20 Million Aubergines and 30,000 tonnes of Tomatoes along with ornamental plants.**

**[2. Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 16 November](#)**

The Association take this opportunity to express their extreme disappointment with the Secretary of States comment that Farmers (Growers) are taking a commercial Risk when deciding whether to grow British Food during a period of labour shortages.

Labour shortages have occurred due to government policy on the restriction of labour from overseas and are out of the control of British Growers.

Over half of Lea Valley growers have taken the decision not to plant this year, which, will result in increased foreign imported food from countries who do not produce to the same environmental and food safety standards as British Growers.

These comments show a fundamental lack of understanding of British Horticulture and/or a blind determination to ignore the evidence provided by Food producers in favour of the fantasy that manual food worker roles can be filled by a domestic workforce.

**3. Seasonal Workers Scheme**

The announcement that the Seasonal Workers scheme has been extended from 2022 to 2023 at the same 30,000 level and reduced to 28,000 in 2024 would have been wholly inadequate on its own, however, to include Ornamental growers within the same numbers in nonsensical.

If you wanted to devise a plan to force British edible Growers out of business and create a hostile environment between edible and ornamental growers, this would be one way of achieving your aim.

Hundreds of thousands of tonnes of food and flowers were thrown away or left to rot last year with a value of around £61m due to a chronic lack of seasonal workers, this policy will only accelerate the demise of more British Growers as they struggle to compete for the same small pool of workers.

The protected edible salad season in the Lea Valley is ten months long so the scheme is of limited but essential use to our growers.

The Secretary of state recently told the Oxford Farming Conference that “Farmers must “stand their ground” on price inflation and ensure that the rising costs they face are reflected in the prices paid to them by supermarkets for their produce”

British Growers have been working with supermarkets for decades to increase the price paid in line with the cost of production.

British Government policy on Free trade or low tariff deals including agricultural products has resulted in the increased importation of lower priced fresh produce from countries who do not produce to the same environmental and food safety standards as British Growers.

Those British producers who take a tough position with retailers on price historically see their contracts lost to cheaper foreign imports.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

**The Lea Valley Growers Association reiterate their recommendations provided to the initial hearing.**

- The larger LVGA horticultural businesses have invested heavily in automated systems and are trialling robots and robotic systems with universities and engineering development companies; however, commercially viable robotic pickers are decades away from production.

**It is essential that the Government returns to a position where, with minimal rules and regulations, UK agricultural and horticultural businesses can employ non-UK citizens to fill seasonal and non-seasonal positions.**

- The “pilot project” for 30,000 SAWS workers needs to be increased to a minimum of 70,000 without delay and be inclusive of ornamental plant growers.
- The minimum salary to allow workers into the UK should be reduced from £25,600 to £20,000 without delay.