

Written evidence submitted by Dr Roxana Barbulescu, Prof. Carlos Vargas Silva and Dr Bethany Robertson, ESRC (LS0080)

**EFRA Select Committee Labour shortages inquiry, by Dr Roxana Barbulescu, Prof. Carlos Vargas Silva and Dr Bethany Robertson, ESRC- Feeding the nation**

We are academics working across migration, labour market and farm labour. Dr Roxana Barbulescu, Associate Professor in the School of Sociology and Social Policy University of Leeds, Professor Carlos Vargas-Silva is Director of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) and Professor in Migration Studies at the University of Oxford. Dr Bethany Robertson, Research Fellow University of Leeds, all members of the research project Feeding the nation.

**Evidence base for the submission.** The following submission builds on evidence collected as part of the ESRC funded project Feeding the Nation: Seasonal Migrant Workers and Food Security during COVID 19 Pandemic (<https://feedingthenation.leeds.ac.uk/>).

**Data and methodology.** The evidence consists of 73 qualitative interviews with migrant workers (domiciliated EUSS and non-domiciliated 53 and 20 on Tier 5 Seasonal Worker Pilot visas), a postal survey and follow up interviews with 53 farmers and farm managers in horticulture. The study uses a national UK-wide sample. The interviews are in-depth one hour long. For the migrant workers, the interviews were conducted in their native languages. The data was collected in the period May2021-October 2021.

**1) Seasonal worker visa provisions for 2022-2024: key impact of delayed announcement**

The announcement by Defra and Home Office arrived on 24th of December 2021<sup>1</sup> reiterating the timescale of 2020 when the announcement was made on 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 2020<sup>2</sup>. The delayed announcement in 2020 meant that migrants, farmers and recruitment agencies faced significant planning difficulties. First, Seasonal Workers with temporary Tier 5 visa had little time to arrange to be away for six months. Some had bought expensive flight tickets on short notice, for example spending over £600 for a one-way ticket Ukraine - UK and incurred debt to pay it. For others, the delayed start of the recruitment in the UK also impacted the studies of those in education in the home country.

We found that uncertainty prior to the announcement about the continuation of the Seasonal Workers Pilot led to anxiety. The timing of information transfer about temporary visas is crucial to determine the likelihood that the number of seasonal workers required can be accessed and to make growing decisions for the following season.

Furthermore, the picking season for ornamentals - particularly daffodils - starts at end of January, which leaves business little time to recruit with due process. These effects are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/industry-given-certainty-around-seasonal-workers-but-told-to-focus-on-domestic-workforce>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/up-to-30000-workers-to-help-reap-2021-harvest--2>

likely to attenuate in 2023 as the number of visas for this year has been confirmed. The confirmation of a multiyear scheme is key to developing a cohort of returning seasonal workers with temporary visas.

## **2) Automation technology is not currently viable for all horticulture**

Farmers showed an openness to innovation by researching or implementing automated or mechanical technologies where possible, especially in packhouses to move packaged produce. Many quoted a 5-10 year lag in harvesting technology in development being ready due to fragile crops requiring a non-destructive, highly selective process normally achieved through manual labour. Additional barriers to technology adoption include financial resources and availability of skilled labour for supervision and maintenance.

## **3) Domestic workers are not in the right place at the right time**

Growers experienced little to no availability of local people to fill seasonal roles in 2021 due to low unemployment in rural areas and competition from sectors who could offer higher rates of pay. The lifestyle of domestic workers was found not to be conducive to seasonal roles in rural locations and led to low retention. Despite this, efforts to encourage participation included improving worker facilities, training, wages and creating flexible shifts for adults with school children and for 16-18year olds.

## **4) Worker welfare concerns: payment, working conditions and accommodation**

In the study most significant concerns with worker welfare focused on working conditions, such as payment, maltreatment like derogatory names calling such as ('slow picker' or 'the lazy one' and being shouted at) and finally, the quality of accommodation. Whilst participants noted that wages were always paid on time, they often suggested that they were paid less hours than those worked and explained that they do not understand how the numbers of hours were being counted. For example on many farms, the time spent to move from one field to another or to bring the kit to the row was not counted. Furthermore, some migrants spoke of stretches of days when the produce was not ready and picking has to stop. Zero-hour contracts are not a familiar type of contract to many of the seasonal workers with a temporary visa. The workers assumed they would be working a standard programme (40h/week) and, in addition, they would have the opportunity to do overtime.

Regarding accommodation, seasonal workers indicated that it is key to determining their experience. While work or pay were similar, the accommodation and facilities on site did vary substantially from farm to farm. For example, some had older and less serviced caravans than others, some host four people in a caravan whilst others two.

## **5) Language driven challenges and further need for translations**

Language driven misunderstandings are common at the workplace. Not all participants had copies of their contract in their native language. Little command of English also meant that it was difficult to learn about their rights and responsibilities, therefore further accentuating the vulnerability of these communities.

To raise awareness of the right and duties of seasonal workers, we have created a set of multilingual and multimedia informative materials available here. The materials were co-

produced in collaboration the charity New Europeans UK and legal firm Seraphus <https://neweuropeans.uk/seasonal-workers/> . The guide includes translations to

- Romanian,
- Ukrainian
- Russian,
- Polish,
- Bulgarian,
- Tagalog.

#### **6) Domiciliated Seasonal workers with EUSS: aging and prospects for return migration beyond 5 years**

Since 2019, the seasonal worker scheme has not been designed to meet demand but to work in conjunction with renewed efforts to recruit domestic workers -domiciliated migrants and British workers- and a commitment to automate. Seasonal workers with EUSS are on average in their 40s thus older than temporary visa holders who are in their 20s. The majority of the EUSS seasonal workers interviewed suggested they had plan to remain in the UK the next 5 years in order to secure the settled EUSS status but expressed uncertainty for beyond this period and developed medium term plans to return.

#### **7) Labour shortages in horticulture negative impact rural economies**

In response to labour shortages experienced in 2020 and 2021, we found that farmers have scaled back production thus impacting negatively the rural economies. Local production has suffered and it had a levelling down effect on the affected rural communities. Access to labour threaten the survival of seasonal horticultural businesses and we found that it determines the viability of profitable crops and employing permanent staff from local areas. We found that growers have implemented redundancies in admin and HR due to reprioritising the wages of seasonal harvesting teams.

#### **8) Labour shortages impact the future of farming**

Interviews with horticulture growers reveal that crops have been left unpicked due to a lack of harvest staff at the right time. Wastage of produce has led to lower yield, efficiency, and financial losses. As a result, edible and ornamental production is decreasing with reduced planting or removal of current growing systems. Many farmers spoken to were motivated to stay in the sector by the future succession of their farm, but they felt the viability of their children to acquire the family business was threatened by the impact of labour shortages.

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