

SUPPLEMENTARY WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY G'S FRESH (LS0086)

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

SUPPLEMENTARY CALL FOR WRITTEN EVIDENCE

25th January 2022

THE SEASONAL WORKER SCHEME EXTENDED TO END OF 2024.

G's welcomed the news that the Seasonal Worker Pilot scheme has been guaranteed until the end of 2024. However, our confidence in being able to source sufficient numbers of workers for our operations diminished as a result of the declining quantity of visas available.

Additional points:

- 1) Although the SWP "pilot" has now transitioned to a 3 year "scheme", G's do not have confidence in the future labour supply. The announcement that from 2023 the number of visas available will reduce, goes some way to negate the assurance gained from the confirmation of the continuation of the scheme. The announcement does not provide certainty in the future labour supply and does not represent a long-term solution to labour shortages.
- 2) The number of Visas available in 2022 has been confirmed at 30,000 and a further statement from the Government said the scheme will be "kept under review with the potential to increase by 10,000 if necessary". We have no information on how the industry will establish what constitutes 'necessary', what information/evidence we will be required to provide and the independent organisation that we should provide it to. We urgently need to know the criteria the Government will use in their decision-making process.
- 3) The 30,000 (or 40,000) visas available for 2022 remains short of the G's forecasted and the total agriculture industry requirements. The announcement that by 2024 the number of visas will be reduced to 28,000 is hugely disappointing and potentially devastating for the industry. Of course, government has not provided any clarification on how the figure of 28,000 was calculated, or if the additional 10,000 visas allowed in 2022 will still be available in 2023 or 2024. The UK labour market is recovering quickly (4.1%), the feared spike in unemployment levels (caused by the pandemic) have not been seen and similar patterns are evident across Europe. The tapering of the visa scheme over the next 3 years is counter intuitive to the needs of the industry, the number of workers returning to the UK with settled status has greatly reduced. We urge Government to establish an independent, transparent, and qualified method for calculating the labour shortages across the agricultural and horticultural industry.
- 4) In 2020 and 2021 the announcement on the continuation of the pilot and the number of visas available came far too late, and it seems likely that we will be in the same situation for 2023. The inordinate amount of time taken to confirm the SWP scheme for 2022 has created increased risk and pressure for G's resulting in a reduction in hectareage for some labour-intensive crops.
- 5) The Government's insistence that the domestic workforce will "plug the gap" only demonstrates an unwillingness to accept the data/information that has been provided by growers, NFU and other trade bodies on many occasions. G's have previously shared data on the volume of innovation and mechanisation taking place

and have demonstrated the need to access capable, motivated people from outside the UK, in addition to recruiting local people, including those with settled status.

- 6) We understand the reasoning for including Ornamentals in the SWS however, the number of visas available has not accounted for their additional requirement. If the additional 10,000 visas are not released the fruit, salad and vegetable growers experience an 11% reduction in the number of visas available.
- 7) Kevin Foster stated that 5,550 visas were unused at the end of September 2021 (the number of unused visas is disputed by the industry). We understand the importance of this statement and challenge the calculation on the basis:
 - a) Late appointment of the 2 new operators resulting in them being unable to supply workers to growers in early season.
 - b) Delay in visas being processed and issued. Operators and growers were badly affected by the delay and this issue created uncertainty and potential applicants to look for work in other countries.
- 8) Government is considering increasing the rate of pay for workers using the SWS to £10.10 per hour, 6.3% above the National Living Wage. Kevin Foster acknowledged that most seasonal workers are already being paid above National Minimum Wage. In fact, the Government's statistics show that in the last quarter of 2019 the average hourly rate was 11.6% higher than the relevant NLW rate, so it is unnecessary to legislate for this increase. Even with the SWS there is a lack of availability of workers and therefore market forces will dictate the rate needed to attract and retain workers.

By increasing pay the Government has decided that this will improve conditions for the workers, however if this recommendation is based on the Government's SWP survey we would make the points below:

- a) Response rate of 26% - therefore 74% did not respond
- b) The Government acknowledged that the survey is flawed "The data from the survey of workers is not necessarily representative of all seasonal pilot workers due to a number of limitations".
- c) The survey does not contain information on which operator the workers were recruited/employed by, or which farm they were working.
- d) Some of the survey questions are leading, e.g., were you treated fairly by farm managers? **If not, how were you treated unfairly.** These questions are negative and initiate a negative response, rather than asking an open question.