

## **Written evidence submitted by Pro-Force Ltd (LS0087)**

Submitted by James Mallick, Director of Compliance.

### **About Pro-Force**

Pro-Force are the UK's largest provider of labour to the horticulture sector, providing in excess of 15, 000 workers per year to edibles and non-edibles. Pro-Force is also a significant labour provider to the food production and distribution industries placing circa 10, 000 workers a year in to these sectors. For the last 2 years we have also been servicing the transport sector through our driving division.

Our recruitment activities focus on three key streams; UK based workers, seasonal workers with EU settled or pre-settled status (EUSS) and seasonal workers through the Tier 5 Seasonal Workers Scheme (SWS). These recruitment streams are active through our UK offices, our offices in the EU and offices further afield, most notably in Ukraine.

The assignments we offer vary in length due to the seasonal nature of the sectors we supply but we also have multiple assignments that offer longer terms placements.

### **Experience of 2021**

2021 was inevitably going to be an easier year for labour supply due to the reduced impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic however it still posed significant challenges to the availability of labour and in turn our ability to service the industries we supply.

The largest impact on labour availability for the horticultural sector was the reducing pool of workers from the EU. Our average rate for EU returnees is circa 60% per year, historically the 40% non-returnees would have been replaced by new workers from the EU, however the changes in UK Immigration have required the replacements to be provided in the horticulture sector through the SWS. Our SWS was oversubscribed in 2021 and we rejected orders for in excess of 3, 000 placements. As a commercial entity that derives its profit from the recruitment and placement of workers on assignment with our client base, we would have filled these orders through our other streams (UK and EU based offices) if we could.

Our worker surveys in 2021 revealed many positives such as 83% of respondents who either strongly agreed, or agreed, that they were provided with good information during the recruitment process and 97% either strongly agreed or agreed that they have a good understanding of their job and what is required of them. Despite 88% either strongly agreeing or agreeing that they have access to suitable and hygienic kitchen and sanitary facilities in their accommodation it shows that there is still work to be done. We plan to work with our client base to further improve conditions to ensure 100% of workers are satisfied and recognise that meeting the FPC guidelines on accommodation is not sufficient despite achieving the minimum standards. It comes as no surprise that workers in general wanted to earn more, as it is the primary reason they are in the UK, with 32% reporting a desire to earn more. Overall, the Pro-Force scheme remains attractive to applicants with 92% of workers reporting that they would recommend working with Pro-Force in the UK to

a friend and returnee rates are strong with over 50% already expressing the desire to return in 2022.

Our ability to attract workers in to the labour food production sector was significantly reduced despite many of our clients increasing basic pay to above national living wage (£10 per hour) and offering better overtime premiums. The poultry sector benefitted significantly from the welcomed introduction of the Tier 5 scheme for Christmas production with all clients provided by Pro-Force commenting that they *“would not have achieved their required production levels without the additional labour”*. One client commented that they were able to switch on production lines that had been left dormant for a significant period due to an inability to source the labour required to run it effectively.

Our success in the Pork Butcher and HGV schemes were much more limited due to the skill base being limited in general across the globe and the attractiveness of a short-term placement in the UK when workers are likely to be employed permanently in their home country. This is despite our client base offering very attractive packages including the cost of visa fees, travel and UK accommodation being met by the employer.

### **Plans for 2022**

Pro-Force have seen a significant increase in demand for horticulture visa placements in 2022, with orders totalling in excess of 16, 000 and we continue to see reduced levels of EUSS applications. We have had to reject a large number of these requests and clients have been advised to seek alternative supply arrangements through advertising locally and engaging with the other SWS operators. In a recent survey of clients that have had requests rejected, 91% have considered alternatives including contacting the other operators, 80% have been unsuccessful in securing visa allocation due to the scheme being oversubscribed and 98% continue to forecast a labour shortage in 2022. A number of growers have contacted us to advise the lack of labour is business ending for them and they will not be planting in 2022 if the situation does not improve urgently. The vast majority of orders we have rejected are not from farms that have performed badly in previous years and if there were no limitations on our ability to supply them with labour, we would fully satisfy those orders. As stated earlier the placing of workers is our source of revenue and if we could recruit the labour through alternative means we would of course supply these labour needs.

Orders have been rejected on the basis that we will be able to access some of the extra 10, 000 visas available, without which the situation will be far worse. The seasonal nature of the horticulture sector means timing of the release will be critical and effectively the extra visas will be needed by April to allow for July arrivals at the height of the demand for labour in the sector. Naturally, we are only able to comment on labour demands from our client base but based on that data the extra 10, 000 visas are absolutely required and there is sufficient evidence that we would require more if we were to fill all the demand we have received.

Our clients in the Food Production sectors continue to face unprecedented labour supply shortages despite further improving pay rates to in excess of £10 per hour. So severe are the labour shortages in some areas of the UK that some of our clients are already downgrading production plans for the year.

As a result of the relationships developed through the temporary poultry scheme, we have continued to recruit workers from both within the UK and workers with EUSS that are not currently in the UK with some success but nowhere near enough to fill the demand. The limited success is occurring at a time when many industries are not at full labour demand (both in the UK and across Europe) so we do fully expect the level of applications to reduce in the coming months and labour shortages to become problematic by the middle of 2022.

The level of EUSS applications from outside of the UK have reduced to such a level that we have already closed our offices in Bulgaria and are currently reviewing the viability of our offices in Romania.

We are actively working with our client base to improve the visibility and attractiveness of jobs to communities local to them, and will continue to support them in this both through their own recruitment campaigns and through those managed by Pro-Force. However, with circa 3% of our labour pool for horticulture coming from UK based workers in the last 2 years it is hard to see an improvement in this with a reducing unemployment rate and an increasing number of job vacancies.

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