

EFRA Committee: Seasonal workers in the Poultry Meat Sector



19 October 2020: Written evidence submitted by the British Poultry Council

BRITAIN URGENTLY NEEDS ITS CHRISTMAS FOOD HEROES

1. The Government's Immigration Bill will have a catastrophic impact on labour within the seasonal poultry meat sector as well as all year-round production. Poultry meat businesses are already facing the consequences of the pandemic. This, combined with the Government's Immigration Bill, is set to make access to quality British food harder for all.
2. Around 9 million British turkeys are reared for Christmas every year to some of the highest standards in the world. The seasonal turkey sector, vital to delivering the Great British Christmas, cannot survive without access to non-UK labour.
3. The Government must acknowledge that the food on the nation's dinner tables under lockdown is being produced in large part by the people who their proposed immigration policy undervalues.
4. As we move to begin a new chapter outside of the European Union, it is more important than ever to adopt policies that enable businesses to drive productivity, create good jobs and strengthen our food security in a thriving, independent UK post-Brexit.

HEAVY RELIANCE ON SKILLS OF EU WORKERS

5. The British turkey industry is heavily reliant on licenced and trained EU workers with specific farming, processing, and butchery skills (for instance WATOK trained, licenced). These skills cannot be replaced without a lengthy training and recruitment period. The type of skills turkey production requires are not available amongst UK workers, particularly not amongst the pool of those who are currently unemployed.
6. It will be unfeasible to train and upskill UK workers within the short window available. A period of at least 12 weeks is required to attain basic slaughter and knife skills and a further length of time for full proficiency and speed.

INABILITY TO SOURCE SEASONAL WORKERS IN THE UK

7. The biggest issue faced by the seasonal poultry sector in terms of sourcing local workers is that of the longevity of the contracts offered for seasonal work (between the months of October - December).
8. While the sector offers well above the national living wage the inability to offer long term contracts and labour intensive work makes it particularly unattractive for the small pool of

UK workers who are unemployed. The remoteness of farm work makes it less attractive for UK labour without the means for transport.

IMPORTANCE OF QUARANTINE ARRANGEMENTS FOR SEASONAL NON-UK WORKERS

9. Seasonal workers are unwilling to come to the UK if they must quarantine for 14 days before starting work. The seasonal turkey industry needs to bring in at least 1000 workers for the 2020 Christmas period. Non-UK workers are unwilling to travel because of the current quarantine requirements and face hiatus in wages.
10. Seasonal workers coming to the UK come year on year and they book their annual leave to come for a fixed period, meaning they cannot come earlier. Therefore, the industry needs a response ASAP as seasonal workers will need to confirm flight bookings, travel and accommodation very soon.

COVID-SECURE ARRANGEMENTS FOR SEASONAL WORKERS

11. Seasonal turkey producers have made provisions for COVID secure accommodation and have created work bubbles for non-UK seasonal workers. They have also put additional measures in place to ensure regular supervision to support the health and welfare of all workers and provide training on the various COVID protocols.
12. The industry has put a regular audit plan in place within worker accommodation bubbles and made provisions for COVID-secure transport to and from farm/factories so that workers always remain safe. Workers will be confined in bubbles through on-site accommodation, mobile homes, cottages, pods, static caravans and on farm dormitories.
13. Where onsite accommodation is not possible, accommodation will be chosen that allows workers to be grouped in one place, with COVID secure transport to and from the work place provided to ensure that contact between such workers and local communities is avoided.

CHRISTMAS SUPPLY MUST NOT COLLAPSE

14. There is a shortage of UK-based workers with the necessary training and qualifications to slaughter and process Christmas turkeys. If the sector cannot bring in trained workers from outside the UK, then the level and quality of production will be significantly compromised.
15. Given that the demand for all year-round turkeys has been in serious decline over the past few years, the turkey industry relies heavily on the supply of fresh seasonal turkeys to remain viable. If the Christmas supply chain collapses, most British seasonal turkey producers will not be in a financial position to remain viable in 2021 and the market will be replaced by imported products produced to lower standards.

WHAT DO WE NEED FROM THE GOVERNMENT?

16. The British Poultry Council is seeking an urgent exemption for non-UK seasonal poultry workers from quarantine restrictions. The proposed exemption will cover at least 1000 seasonal workers coming in the next couple of weeks from Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia.

17. Covid-19 has reinforced the importance of self-belief and dignity that comes wrapped up in food, and the crucial role played by key workers who are feeding the nation during these extraordinary times. We urge the Government to recognise the pivotal role of those working in the food supply chain and ensure that our sector maintains easy access to the skills needed to operate.

NEED FOR PERMANENT WORKERS

18. Every year we have about 7,200 vacancies that need to be filled with non-UK workers to rear a billion birds for meat. If these vacancies cannot be filled, it will have a significant impact on the production of, and therefore cost of food - all of which will pose a risk to affordability and potentially force people to go without food.
19. Government must ensure that British poultry meat, and the quality it represents, stays affordable and available for all. Losing control of how we feed ourselves as a nation would penalise British food producers at a time when we should be taking matters of food security into our own hands.

ABOUT THE BPC

20. The British Poultry Council is the voice of the British poultry meat sector and the trade association for producers of poultry meat from chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese.
21. Poultry makes up half the meat the country eats. As an industry, we are a vital asset to the UK's economy. We contribute £5.5bn GVA (Gross Value Added) and generate £1.2bn in tax revenue per annum. We also directly employ over 38,500 people in the UK. These people ensure that safe, nutritious and affordable food is available for all.

For more information about how the British poultry meat industry is campaigning to put #FoodOnEveryTable, please follow @BritishPoultry.

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