

The British poultry industry's experiences of the new immigration system

Evidence written by the British Poultry Council

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Background

1. 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.
2. The British poultry sector is an unsubsidised sector that directly employs approximately 40,000 people in the UK. We contribute £5.4 billion GVA to the UK economy and generate £1.2 billion in tax revenue to the exchequer.
3. Around one billion birds are reared for meat every year in the UK and nine million turkeys are reared specifically for Christmas. Poultry is half the meat this country eats, with 20 million birds processed each week by people who possess a range of skills necessary to feed the nation.
4. The British poultry industry was granted 5500 temporary work visas to support short term seasonal supply following calls to extend the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme to the sector – around half of which have been taken up, but this figure remains unconfirmed by Defra. The scheme has proven successful but has undoubtedly demonstrated the importance of adopting realistic policies that enable British businesses to drive productivity, create good jobs and keep food moving to strengthen food security for Christmas and beyond.
5. Access to vital resources, including non-UK labour, is necessary whilst the British poultry industry transitions into a higher skilled workforce. This year has seen unprecedented challenges from Covid, Avian Influenza and Brexit, demonstrating the need for additional resource in industry and government areas.

Christmas Production 2021

6. Intervention from Government to 'save Christmas' via the temporary visa scheme has provided much-needed support to poultry businesses to produce safe, affordable and nutritious protein for consumers across the country this winter.
7. Given that our member businesses had to try to make alternative plans this year, including carefully managing levels of production, the visa scheme has been most welcome by industry to ensure quality British turkeys feature as the centerpiece of tables across the nation. Because we have people to process birds, we can be the most productive version of our industry and deliver an excellent Christmas for all this year.

8. Productivity is underpinned by a secure workforce. The success of the visa scheme is proof that when Government prioritises food production by engaging with industry to protect the integrity of supply chains, the right outcomes are achieved: quality food for all.
9. To ensure the resilience of our supply chains, we require certainty in our workforce. That translates to realistic policies that secure enough people to feed the nation at the levels consumers expect from us and the levels we expect from ourselves.
10. The British poultry industry is working towards higher-skilled, tech-driven, sustainable production and has concrete plans to invest. However, we must have time and space to ensure investment in technology and people can be realised. Government must continue to work with and engage with the British poultry meat industry to build a system that works for everyone. We need a system that works proactively in food production, actioning realistic measures to support supply chain in the longer-term.
11. Our ask is clear and simple, focusing on longer-term solutions that promote resilience. Poultry meat producers must have space and time to invest in new technologies and their workforce to put British food back on the road to recovery. The British poultry meat industry would welcome a similar scheme designed for non-UK labour to enter the country to work across farming and processing over a period of two years to keep food moving. This temporary measure would ensure industry has space and time to upskill their British workforce and put into action their investment plans in automation and technology.

Case studies

Below is a selection of case studies from British Poultry Council members highlighting experiences using the visa scheme. These businesses range from small companies to large scale producers to ensure as wide ranging and as accurate a portrayal as possible.

Case Study 1

Background: Member applied for 80 visas but admitted they would have applied for 400 had the scheme opened earlier in the year to allow for more time. *“The workers are great...we are impressed with their fantastic work ethic. They are working very hard.”* Workers are from Russia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan.

Issue: *“Having the visas is one thing, finding people at such short notice is another.”* Member reports that it was difficult to attract people at later notice than they would typically recruit for temporary seasonal work and though they got the 80 visas they had applied for it came at the cost of placing less birds on the ground than in years previous. A quarter of the visas were filled by turkey catchers that had received training from and worked with this member previously. These individuals were deliberately sought out by the member to ensure maximum efficiency given the short timeframe poultry meat businesses had to apply, recruit, process, and train non-UK labour.

Member reports that the scheme itself was *“relatively straightforward given the timeframe we were working in”* and that costs were no more expensive than paying UK agency fees as long as workers stay for the full six-week period.

Solution: Member highlights the importance of earlier sight of a scheme designed to allow poultry workers to come into the country to ensure ample preparation time to successfully recruit the numbers required, suggesting January

2022 as a reasonable time frame to take sight of scheme since they are *“already having conversations about Christmas 2022 with customers.”* If not, this member has admitted they will be forced to place less birds on the ground on both a seasonal and longer-term note, jeopardising the productivity of the business and the food on people’s plate in the coming year: *“Overall, the scheme has been a success and we are happy with where we are for Christmas 2021, but we need a long-term solution. It is vital we start thinking about 2022.”*

Case Study 2

Background: Member had 350 people arrive via the temporary workers scheme between the 8th – 22nd November, the majority of whom arrived by 15th.

Issue: This member has made it clear that these were the latest possible arrival dates for training and induction purposes: *“Any later and we would be spinning our wheels.”* Any shortfall in such a high-pressure timeframe would erode Christmas output for 2021 and increase costs significantly with birds rolling into the next year. This member has outlined that this is the last thing that they want, and that they welcome the visa scheme and are doing everything to make it as successful as possible to avoid impact on Christmas 2022.

Solution: Earlier indication of a repeat of this scheme (Spring 2022 at the latest) *“to be really meaningful for both employer and employee.”*

Case Study 3

Background: Member used labour provider Pro Force to get 27 visas for the processing of Christmas turkeys. They begin processing from 20th November – 20th December.

Issue: This member has been consistently trying to recruit locally for seasonal labour since *“early summer 2021, July at the very latest.”* Despite taking Government advice and participating in efforts such as the DWP-Job Centre Scheme to market the industry, no workers in Britain applied. *“We do everything we can to recruit locally as we know it’s beneficial for everyone, but the people just aren’t there.”*

As one of our smaller producers, this member traditionally offers 5 weeks’ seasonal work. This means the visa process has been more costly as opposed to what it would be for a larger business given the tighter time frame in which they operate. Visas were taken up by workers who had been trained by and worked for the business before, making the process as efficient as possible: *“These guys possess the skills necessary – because they are skilled jobs that require training – and are ready to jump straight into work.”* There was no issue with the visa provider but there was delay in the form of confusion at border control. Visas for three workers were not processed on time meaning that there was hold-up at border control, despite individuals possessing a ‘right to work’ paper.

Solution: Confusion was soon clarified but this small crease could be ironed out with a scheme that is prepared far enough in advance that everyone has sight and awareness of: *“Lateness didn’t give us very much time at all”* to recruit, this member pointed out, *“but earlier sight of a similar scheme next year would take the pressure off both us as a business and our recruits.”*

Christmas 2021 has been saved: what next?

12. There is a shared feeling across industry that the scheme was most certainly not 'too little' but neared being 'too late,' which risked undermining its effectiveness. If the scheme had been announced earlier in the year, it could arguably present itself as more attractive for employers and employees. However, with Government intervention and luck that 'regular', trained seasonal workers were willing to return for the season, on the whole, the British poultry industry is happy with where it finds itself right now. We are confident in the number of people we have recruited to process birds this Christmas.
13. However, we must not forget that the problems we see with seasonal production are reflective of long-term, year-round production. Christmas has been a successful first step and demonstrates the potential there is for Government and industry to collaborate to turn the challenges with face with labour into an opportunity for change.
14. Mentality needs to shift from short term intervention into long term, proactive change to build a system that works for food production, not against it. Whilst industry plays its part by investing in automation and upskilling to inject resilience into industry's core to build that home-grown workforce, a scheme designed for non-UK poultry workers to enter the UK over a period of eighteen months to two years must be realised to ensure productivity does not decline.
15. Technology, a skills focus and a non-UK workforce can coexist temporarily to avoid jeopardising our productivity to sustainably feed the nation. In a response to our highly publicised letter to the Home Office, we received a commitment to keep the Shortage Occupation list "*under review to ensure it adapts to the changing needs of the economy.*" As a result of the unprecedented challenges this year has brought, a review of the Shortage Occupation List is vital in the immediate, featuring the processing, catching, driving and operative roles the British poultry industry are in short supply of. A year is too long to wait and doing so poses a real risk to British food security.
16. Despite the "*changing needs of this economy,*" some things remain the same. People must eat, and businesses must thrive. In times of unpredictability, change, and unprecedented challenges those factors matter more than ever, and we have proven this year that the British poultry industry can, and will, deliver.
17. To be the most resilient version of industry going forward, Government's Christmas focus must shift into a rest of year mindset, extending that willingness to engage. If we can collaborate as successfully as we have done with seasonal production, then we have the means to transform the longer-term year-round labour challenge into an opportunity UK food security, create good jobs, allow viable businesses to flourish and create a greener food sector. The first step is prioritising labour in food production by designing a similar, longer-term scheme for poultry workers year-round.
18. The scheme must be announced early enough to maximise its effectiveness and attractiveness, giving poultry meat businesses time and space to ensure industry's productivity will not drop whilst upskilling a British workforce and investing in new technologies. A non-UK workforce, technology and a skills focus can all coexist temporarily to put British food back on the road to recovery.

