

Professor Brian Bell,
Chair of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC)
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

2 October 2023

Seasonal Worker Visa Inquiry

Dear Professor Bell,

I am writing to input to the Migration Advisory Committee's inquiry into the Seasonal Worker visa scheme. For background, Scotland Food & Drink is a representative and leadership body for the food and drink industry in Scotland. We work in partnership to bring together businesses, trade bodies and the public sector to responsibly grow the value and reputation of the industry.

Background

This Summer we launched Scotland's new food and drink industry strategy: Sustaining Scotland. Supplying the World. At its heart is a simple vision:

“Scotland is the best country in the world to own, operate and work for a food and drink business. The country is renowned as a world leader in sustainable production and responsible growth, where resilient businesses across the entire supply chain flourish and prosper.”

Our industry is one of the largest in Scotland, employing more than 250,000 people. We are also a major contributor to the Scottish economy, with a turnover of over £15 billion, which arises from small, independent producers right through to large multinational companies. We produce a diverse variety of produce, including world class primary produce (beef, lamb, vegetables, grains, soft fruits, fish, seafood, dairy etc.) through to our value-added products including whisky, smoked salmon, cheese, and all manner of other sweet and savoury products for people to enjoy.

This industry is in many ways, *the* engine for economic growth in Scotland as well as the means to healthy, prosperous, and sustainable communities. We shoulder our share of responsibility for creating jobs, attracting investment, and boosting exports. We are proud to be a major contributor to Scottish tourism, with food and drink among the top reasons for visitors coming here. Our overall reach from farm to fork, and the accompanying requirement for labour, is vast. This means we cannot achieve success alone; we need the policy and regulatory environment to help unleash our potential.

We are not ashamed to be labour intensive. It puts us front and centre when it comes to building a productive workforce, providing high quality employment opportunities in communities across the country with a central purpose - to produce and supply high quality, sustainable food and drink across Scotland, the UK, and beyond. Within that core purpose is an unparalleled range of careers, on the land and at sea, in production sites, and along the supply chain, with

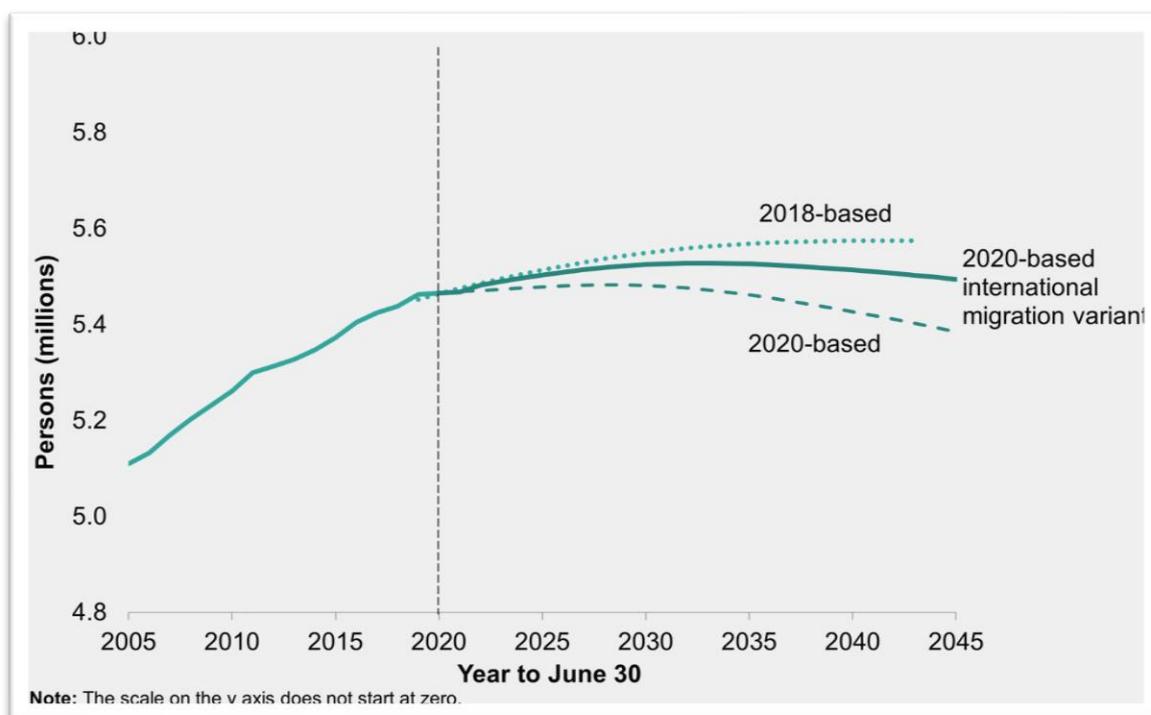
opportunities for all including jobs that need lower skills and those which require the highest levels of expertise across diverse fields such as engineering, marketing, supply chain management and more. Many of these roles are seasonal and relevant to your inquiry.

The success we have enjoyed over recent years is at risk from unprecedented challenges we have been navigating in the aftermath of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. These have led to significantly rising input costs across all aspects of business, and it is difficult to pass these costs on during a cost-of-living crisis, especially for smaller businesses. Being labour-intensive compounds these challenges, increasing the pressure across a wide range of recruitment and retention issues, requiring both cost and capacity to resolve.

The Evidence

Primary food production is the starting point of the food chain, involving roles in farming, horticulture and agriculture, fishing and aquaculture. This initial stage has a ripple effect on downstream operations, such as processing and manufacturing, making its smooth functioning indispensable. We know from our engagement with the industry and the statistics produced by Government and agencies that there are shortages of personnel right along the supply chain and the upshot is an increased risk to the viability of the businesses, Scotland's food security, our export potential, and overall economic stability. Some labour requirements are seasonal, including certain sectors of agricultural production and processing.

Scotland's population is predicted to fall over the longer term and this will be most marked in rural areas. This is shown in the chart below (National Records for Scotland [report](#), January 2023.)



Another factor is Brexit, and the change in workforce availability, from the EU. A recent ONS report ([here](#), dated May 25 2023) shows that net EU migration is now negative. The impact of this on Scotland, which benefitted from higher workforce

availability through EU migration, is significant, especially when you consider that this has been replaced by a more rigid scheme with lower limits on skill and salary levels. The clear impact, in the absence of a domestic workforce to fill the gap, is shortages.

Comprehensive Workforce Strategy

We believe there is a clear need for a comprehensive workforce strategy for Scotland, and indeed across the UK. This should encompass education, training, skills development, automation, recruitment, and retention policies, *alongside* controlled migration. We agree with the Scottish Government that we should create a joint UK Government-Scottish Government forum (with representation from both the Migration Advisory Committee, the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, and local delivery partners), to support the design, implementation, and oversight of our migration strategy.

One element linked to this where we would especially like to see further development is the [Scottish Rural Visa Pilot](#). However, this is also not sufficient by itself. 42% of our survey respondents are not in a rural area and are also suffering from labour shortages.

The Case for Migration in Scotland

As outlined above, and as the MAC is no doubt already aware, labour shortages exist because of several reasons including ongoing fallout from Covid-19, competition from other sectors, perception of roles in the industry, the cliff edge caused by Brexit, rural population decline, lack of the necessary skills and more. Overseas recruitment is challenging right along the supply chain, partly because of the complexity of immigration processes. Seasonal Worker Visas have a part to play in this. It can make it easier for employers to hire workers which are essential to both the businesses and our economy.

From a societal perspective, evidence from many sources, including Ipsos ([here](#)) shows that the UK population is generally supportive of controlled migration, where people come to live and work to fill gaps in labour, especially in seasonal roles. People recognise that it is ultimately good for our country to be able to produce and supply the food we need within our communities and for export. Within Scotland this need is greater than other parts of the UK, due to our demographic context.

The Scottish Government's January 2020 [report](#), Migration: Helping Scotland Prosper suggests that "migration is a key lever to address depopulation of rural Scotland ... out-migration and the ageing of the population that remains, means natural change cannot contribute to recovery in these areas.

The report outlined several principles of a successful migration policy including:

- Encourage and enable long-term settlement in Scotland, welcoming people with the range of skills we need to work, raise families and make a positive contribution to society.
- Scotland should be able to attract talented and committed people from Europe and across the world to work and study here without excessive barriers, and our migration policy should support mobility, collaboration and innovation.

We support these principles. Many, but not all, food and drink businesses are based in rural areas, where local workforce options are even more limited. Seasonal workers can stimulate local economies and contribute to the UK Government's 'levelling up' agenda.

Seasonal Work Needed

A [report](#) commissioned by the Scottish Government suggests that estimated demand for seasonal workers in agriculture alone is between 7,500 and 9,255.

It states that:

“Seasonal migrant workers are crucial to farms with seasonal crops which cannot be mechanically harvested as there is an insufficient domestic workforce. Labour restrictions and issues with the Seasonal Workers Pilot visas pose risks to this subset of the agricultural sector. Returnees are highly valued and recruitment methods are influenced by the relevant migration schemes in place.”

These are some sectors which need seasonal worker availability.

1. **Soft Fruit Picking:** Scotland is known for its berries, particularly strawberries and raspberries. These fruits have a very specific harvesting window and require a large number of workers to pick the fruit at its peak. Seasonal labour shortages can lead to a significant percentage of the crop going to waste, impacting both farmers and downstream businesses.
2. **Fisheries and Seafood Processing:** Scotland is a major producer of seafood, including salmon and shellfish. The fishing season is often restricted to particular months, and the subsequent processing is labour-intensive. A lack of seasonal workers can result in decreased catches and processing delays, affecting the supply chain and export capabilities.
3. **Dairy Farming:** While not entirely seasonal, the calving season in dairy farming does require additional hands. A shortage during this critical period can lead to decreased milk production and associated products, impacting not just local supply but also export revenues.
4. **Whisky Production:** Harvesting of grains like barley that go into whisky production is a seasonal activity. Labor shortages during the harvest season could hamper the production of one of Scotland's most significant exports.
5. **Tourism-Linked Demand:** Scotland's tourism season, particularly in rural areas, often coincides with increased local consumption of food and drink products. A lack of seasonal labour to meet this demand could mean missed revenue opportunities and a negative impact on Scotland's tourism reputation.
6. **Meat Processing:** A lack of seasonal workers in times of increased demand, such as Christmas, can result in delays and increased costs, which can be particularly damaging for low margin businesses.
7. **Vegetable Harvest:** Most crops (potatoes, carrots, brassica, legumes etc.) have specific harvesting seasons. Labour shortages can result in delayed harvests, leading to reduced quality and waste, thus impacting both economic and environmental sustainability goals.

As a final point, whilst our interest pertains primarily to Scotland, the benefits of a successful migration strategy for Scotland extend beyond our borders. A stronger Scottish food and drink production sector contributes to a stronger UK economy. Our exports, especially in sectors like seafood, whisky, and key processed foods, are well-regarded globally. Ensuring their continued quality and availability upholds the reputation of the UK.

In conclusion, I hope that your inquiry will recommend simplifying, and expanding the Seasonal Worker visa scheme to allow sufficient recruitment into this vital industry. Fundamentally we ask that this is based on business need. This will help ensure that we can continue to maintain the highest standards across the food and drink sector, drive economic growth, protect our food security, and uphold Scotland's status as a leading food and drink producer and Scotland as a welcoming country for all.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue, and for your efforts in continuing to advise and guide sensible immigration policies across the UK, with special regard for Scotland.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joe Hind', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Joe Hind

Policy Manager