

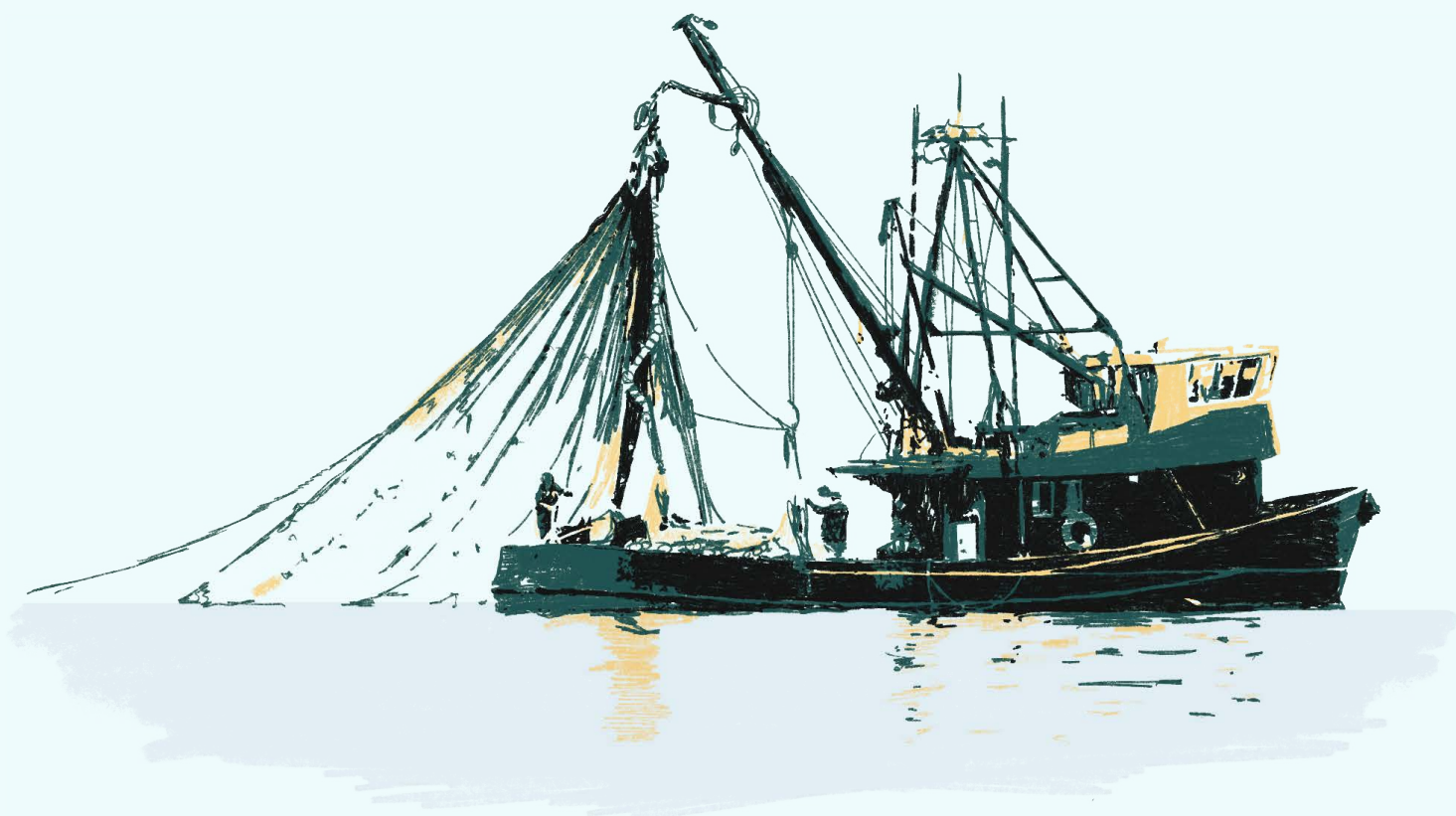
Report

**FOCUS ON
LABOUR
EXPLOITATION**

Unravelling the nets:

An examination of the seafarer visa policies and their impact on migrant fishers in the UK

December 2025



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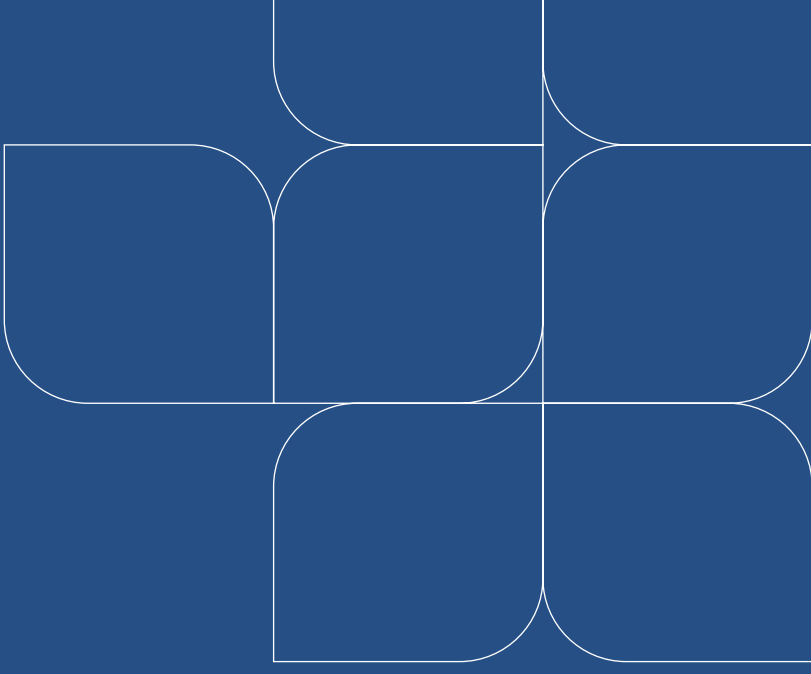
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Designed by Let's Dance.

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“Yung mga rest day depende yun sa huli man gud. Kung maraming huli doon sa laot, balik ka agad, mag-unload. May uban, 2 days stambay para pahinga, dapat balik naman pagka-3 days. Ang iba tulad namin, hindi. Parang tawag sa amin, “fighter” kasi walang tulugan. Balik-balik ka lang basta maraming huli, kay yun ang gusto nila, kasi yung porsyento nila, malaki. Malaking kita sila doon.”

“Rest days depend on the catch. If we had a large catch at sea, we would return to port right away to unload. Some crews would then rest for two days before heading back out to sea on the third day. Others, like us, don’t. They call us “fighter” because we don’t sleep. We keep going back out to sea, especially when the catch is abundant. That’s what they want because their percentage is big. They make a lot of money that way.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (13 years in the UK)

Glossary

Code 7 is part of the Home Office coding system of numbers and letters used to notify immigration staff of the conditions attached to a person's leave, the reasons for a refusal and to alert them to any concerns. Code 7 pertains to the conditions attached to the leave granted to seamen or crew joining a ship or an aircraft.

Contract seamen¹ are seamen who are under contract to work on a specific ship at a particular time. They include passengers who seek entry to the UK to join a ship as crew. Contract seamen are a category of seafarers.

Contract Seaman Leave / Code 7 leave is permission granted to a person entering the UK to join a ship as a crew member. Legally known as Contract Seaman Leave under paragraphs 12–13 of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971, it is recorded operationally under Code 7, the Home Office code for this type of leave. While Contract Seaman Leave is the legal category and Code 7 the administrative endorsement, the terms are often used interchangeably in practice.

Crew are all individuals employed in the working or service of a ship including the captain.

Entry clearance is the official authorisation granted to a person outside the UK that allows them to travel to and seek entry to the UK. It is usually granted in the form of a visa or entry certificate.

Examination is an official process where an immigration officer assesses an individual's right to enter the country and determine whether they require leave to enter, and if so, what leave should be granted and on what conditions.

Fishermen are crew working aboard a fishing vessel. They are subject to the same rules as contract seamen.

Joining Ship is a form of Home Office endorsement indicating that a person has been granted Contract Seaman Leave to enter the UK for the purpose of joining a ship's crew (see Contract Seaman Leave / Code 7 leave). To be able to enter the UK to join a ship, visa nationals that do not hold a seaman's book issued by a country that has ratified ILO Convention 108 or 185, are required to apply for Contract Seaman Leave prior to entry in the UK. This leave comes in the form of a visa, referred to as Joining Ship visa, and is evidenced by an entry clearance vignette on the passport.

¹ The definitions presented in this glossary and later throughout the report are taken from UK Government guidance and international instruments. Some terms, such as "contract seamen" or "fishermen" use masculine, rather than gender neutral language. In this report, the terms apply to all individuals.

Non-visa national is a person whose nationality is not on the UK's Visa National List. That is, those that do not require entry clearance (a visa) in advance of travel to the UK as a Visitor, or for any other purpose for less than six months.

Offshore workers are foreign nationals who arrive in UK Territorial Waters (UKTW) for the purposes of working in those waters, and without first entering the UK landmass. Offshore workers are considered to “enter” the UK when they commence working in UKTW.

Seamen are seafarers who earn a living by working on a ship and include contract seamen and other crew members.

Seafarers are those employed or engaged or working in any capacity on board a seagoing ship, whose normal place of work is on a ship. Seafarers include contract seamen or other crew working or servicing the ship.

Seafarers Identity Document is an internationally accepted document which allows its holder to land at foreign ports without needing a visa. It is also known as a seaman's book.

Temporary shore leave is short term permission given to a ship's crew members to go ashore in the UK whilst their vessel is in port, on the condition that they join/rejoin and leave with the ship when it departs, leave the UK either on the ship to which they are being transferred or in line with arrangements made for their repatriation. A temporary shore leave may be in the form of a Contract Seaman Leave, a leave to enter for discharge, repatriation, or for hospitalisation.

Transit visa is the term commonly used by fishing industry practitioners and fishers to refer to the Contract Seaman Leave. As used in this report, it should not be confused with the Visitor in Transit visa that applies to those who are going through UK border control but leaving the UK within 48 hours.

UK Territorial Waters is the sea extending 12 nautical miles (approximately 22 km) from the coast of the UK.

Visa nationals are those included in the UK's Visa National List requiring entry clearance prior to travel to the UK as a visitor, or for any other purpose for less than six months.

Well boat is a type of fishing vessel equipped with a well or tank designed for the storage and transport of live fish.

Abbreviations

EEA - European Economic Area

FWA - Fair Work Agency

IELTS - International English Language Testing System

ILO C108 - 1958 International Labour Organisation Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention (No. 108)

ILO C185 - 2003 International Labour Organization Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention (Revised) (No. 185)

ILO C188 - 2007 International Labour Organization Work in Fishing Convention (No. 188)

ISL - Immigration Salary List

RQF - Regulated Qualifications Framework

SID - Seafarer Identity Document

TSL - Temporary Shortage List

UKTW - UK Territorial Waters

1. Introduction

The United Kingdom's fishing industry has played a central role in the social and economic fabric of coastal communities for centuries. While it began as a local and seasonal endeavour, the sector expanded over the 19th century, with a recorded estimate of 71,000 individuals regularly employed in sea fishing in the UK in 1899 (The House of Commons, 1901). The number of regularly employed fishermen² fell in the 20th century, with a recorded estimate of 38,000 regularly employed fishermen in the UK in 1950 (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1951). It has since steadily declined into the 10,000 mark at the start of the 21st century (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2005). In 2024, Seafish, the UK public body supporting the seafood industry, estimated the number of full-time employed fishers at 7,263 (Wright, 2025).

The decline in the last three decades has been attributed to the difficulty of attracting local workers to replace an ageing workforce (Seafish, 2025). This is due to the demanding physical conditions of fishing, the perception that it is a dangerous and low-paying job with limited future prospects, and access to a more competitive labour market (Hansard, 2018; Sparks and Zhou, 2025). As a result, the UK's fishing industry has become increasingly reliant on migrant workers (Hansard, 2012; Sparks and Zhou, 2025). Initially, employers turned to labour from within the European Economic Area (EEA). But, as early as the 2000s, fishing vessels began hiring workers from outside the EEA—particularly from the Philippines—for their maritime skills, basic English proficiency, and the cost advantage of paying a fixed monthly wage instead of a share of the catch (Hansard, 2012; International Transport Workers' Federation, 2022; Sparks, 2022; Sparks and Zhou, 2025; Wright, 2025).³

While migrant fishers are essential to the continued functioning of the industry, the legal and immigration frameworks governing their entry and employment remain opaque and poorly understood. The procedural and practical implications of the entry pathways for migrant fishers in the UK remains largely uncovered in existing publications. This lack of clarity raises significant questions regarding the recruitment, entry, and working and living conditions of these workers, particularly concerning their rights and protections. The highly remote and invisible nature of the job and the significant power imbalance between worker and employer have meant there is little oversight of the different ways to bring in and employ migrant fishers on UK-flagged

2 The definitions presented in this report are taken from UK Government guidance and international instruments. Some terms, such as “fishermen” use masculine, rather than gender neutral language. In this report, the terms apply to all individuals.

3 ‘Share of the catch’ is a traditional fishing business model where proceeds from a catch are used to first cover expenses, with leftover profits shared between crew, often through a hierarchical formula.

vessels. This report analyses the entry pathways available to migrant fishers to join a fishing vessel in the UK, examining specifically the fragmented seafarer visa and entry clearance policies and fishing-related immigration rules and guidelines and what impacts these have on access to rights for migrant fishers.

Foremost among these frameworks is the Contract Seaman Leave, more commonly known as the Code 7 leave. The Contract Seaman Leave is a form of immigration permission, similar to transit visa arrangements (and is often referred to as a transit visa). In a survey conducted in 2023, Seafish found that 30% of UK fishing crew were “operating via a transit visa” (Contract Seaman Leave) (Motova-Surmava, 2023). The Contract Seaman Leave permits individuals to enter the UK to join fishing vessels which will leave for international waters ‘in a reasonable amount of time’; it does not grant migrant fishers the right to work or reside in the UK. This has created a complex intersection of labour, immigration and jurisdiction issues concerning migrant fishers working in UK-flagged fishing vessels.

Recent reports have highlighted the misuse of the Contract Seaman Leave for employing migrant fishers on fishing vessels operating within UK Territorial Waters (UKTW) (International Transport Workers’ Federation, 2022; Sparks, 2022; Sparks and Zhou, 2025). Employers have reportedly exploited ambiguities in maritime and immigration law to recruit fishers under transit visa conditions in lieu of UK work visas, leaving many with no formal residency status, restricted access to justice, and minimal regulatory protections (International Transport Workers’ Federation, 2022). In practice, this has created structural conditions conducive to exploitation, including cases of underpayment, excessive working hours, restricted freedom of movement and, in some instances, forced labour (Sparks and Zhou, 2025). Research by civil society organisations and academic institutions has begun to document the precarity and systemic vulnerability experienced by migrant fishers working under such arrangements (International Transport Workers’ Federation, 2022; Sparks, 2022; Sparks and Zhou, 2025). These concerns are amplified by the geographic specificities and regulatory remoteness of fishing vessels, where inspections and enforcement are rare (Stevenson, 2018).

Despite growing awareness, UK policy responses have been inadequate (Hansard, 2012; Focus on Labour Exploitation et al., 2025). While the government has clarified that foreign nationals working in UKTW would need permission to do so and has extended the Skilled Worker visa route to include fishing roles beginning 2023, the costs, administrative burden, and unfeasible requirements mean it is seldom used (International Transport Workers’ Federation, 2022; Murphy and Quintana, 2025). The continued reliance on the Contract Seaman Leave to enter in the absence of worker protections maintains a system where exploitative practices are structurally embedded (Focus on Labour Exploitation, 2025). The Maritime Labour Convention, which came into force for the UK on 7 August 2014, sets out the minimum working and living rights for seafarers but excludes seafarers working on fishing vessels from its coverage. Instead, protections for fishers are provided under the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (ILO C188), which the UK has ratified and implemented through domestic regulations. However, the enforcement of ILO C188 in the UK faces serious limitations (Sparks and Zhou, 2025). The

Maritime and Coastguard Agency, responsible for monitoring compliance, lack enforcement powers regarding wages and other key labour rights. Inspections focus primarily on vessel safety and documentation rather than detecting forced labour or human trafficking. Surveyors are not required to interview fishers even when they speak English, and there is no access to interpreters. As a result, issues such as recruitment debt, underpayment of wages, and working conditions may go unexamined, raising concerns about the effectiveness of protections for fishers under current UK implementation practices.

Labour exploitation in the fishing sector is not simply a matter of individual bad actors but is underpinned by legal and regulatory gaps that facilitate poor labour standards, limited inspections, and a lack of meaningful enforcement at sea. Addressing these issues requires urgent reform; however, an understanding of the existing entry and immigration rules for migrant fishers is essential to make effective recommendations on how all workers employed in British vessels can access rights as workers. This report begins to address this knowledge gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the seafarer and fishing-related visa and entry clearance policies in the UK and their specific impact on migrant fishers.

2. Methodology

This report employed a qualitative research methodology to examine the complex immigration and labour issues faced by migrant fishers in the UK. This is the first of two FLEX reports focused on the experiences of migrant fishers in the UK. This first report identifies key regulations, requirements, and processes of entry pathways for migrant workers in the fishing industry. The second, upcoming report, will cover the working and living experiences of workers.

We conducted a comprehensive desk-based review of existing legislation, official guidance and policy documents related to seafarer visas, focusing on the policies that apply to fishermen working on UK vessels. Given the complexity of these systems, the summary of immigration rules presented in this report were legally reviewed through pro bono support from a solicitors' firm.

We also conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with Filipino migrant fishers and a diverse group of relevant stakeholders, conducted between July and October 2025 (23 on Contract Seaman Leave and 1 on a Skilled Worker visa). We spoke with 6 different stakeholders, including individuals from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), informal support networks, and international NGOs. These interviews provided a more detailed understanding of the experiences, challenges and support systems available to migrant fishers.

The focus on the experiences of Filipino fishers and insight from Filipino stakeholders is intentional, as they constitute a significant and particularly vulnerable group within the UK's fishing industry. Reports have highlighted that while the UK fishing industry has become increasingly reliant on low-paid foreign labour, Filipino fishers are one of the most prominent nationalities employed as deckhands on UK-flagged vessels (Sparks, 2022; Cundy, 2023; Murphy and Quintana, 2025; Sparks and Zhou, 2025). The Institute of the Americas (2023) has noted that the Philippines alone provides almost 30% of all seafarers globally, which provides context for why they are such a prominent group within the UK's migrant fishing workforce. This group is often subject to exploitation through visa loopholes and precarious working conditions, making their experiences central to understanding the systemic issues within the sector (Clements and Whitlock, 2024).

The interviews were designed to capture the experiences of Filipinos working as fishermen in the UK. The interviews specifically focused on recruitment trends and visa application processes (covered in this report), and working and living conditions on fishing vessels, and the challenges they faced due to their lack of migration status in the UK (covered in the second upcoming report).

This report builds on the learnings of a Worker-Driven Social Responsibility pilot programme in Scotland that sought to build worker-driven, market-enforced mechanisms and systems to improve working conditions in the UK fishing industry.

3. Seafarer visa & entry clearance frameworks

The rules and guidance on seafarers are spread across multiple sources, including primary legislation, secondary legislation, Home Office guidance, and international law obligations. This has created an extremely complex immigration system, which can be difficult to navigate for workers, or result in workers having to seek assistance to navigate.

This report analyses entry pathways for fishermen to join a fishing vessel in the UK as set out in the following provisions and documents (see figures 1 and 2 for a visual representation of entry routes):

- Section 8(1) of the Immigration Act 1971
- Schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971
- Section 43 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022
- International Labour Organisation Convention No. 108 on Seafarers' Identity Documents (1958)
- International Labour Organization Convention No. 185 Seafarers' Identity Documents (Revised) (2003)
- UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) guidance on considering applications from seamen arriving in the UK (UKVI Seamen Guidance)
- UKVI guidance for how it handles applications made outside the UK from seafarers (UKVI Seafarer Guidance)
- UKVI guidance on the Immigration Rules concession for offshore well boat workers

As an overview, seafarers who enter the UK to join or change ships will require leave to enter if they are a visa national and do not hold a valid Seafarer Identity Document (also known as a seaman's book). However, seafarers arriving in the UK by ship and intending to leave under engagement with the same ship generally do not need leave to enter and are covered under section 8(1) of the Immigration Act 1971. If any work is undertaken within UKTW, seafarers will require work permission under the Point Based System. Seafarers working as crew on vessels exercising the right of innocent passage or transiting from

non-UK waters to a port in the UK (or vice versa) remain exempt.

Significant amendments to the UKVI Seamen Guidance were made in June 2024. Previously, crew arriving as passengers could be granted Contract Seaman Leave if they were under contract on a ship, provided the vessel did not intend to operate ‘wholly or largely’ in UKTW. The wording ‘wholly or largely’ suggested those who entered under this permission could perform some work within UKTW and provided a measure of flexibility for crew joining vessels that might have planned to operate within UKTW briefly. The Home Office has since removed the wording ‘wholly and largely’ from the guidance, such that only crew arriving as passengers departing on vessels ‘not intending to operate in UK waters’ can now be granted the Contract Seaman Leave.

3.1 Crew members entering and leaving the UK on the same ship

Section 8(1) of the Immigration Act 1971 provides that persons arriving as crew members of a ship may enter the UK without requiring formal leave to enter if they are under contract to depart on that ship, and none of the exceptions therein apply.⁴ Such persons may remain in the UK until the departure of the vessel. No stamp or endorsement is required for entry under this section (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024).

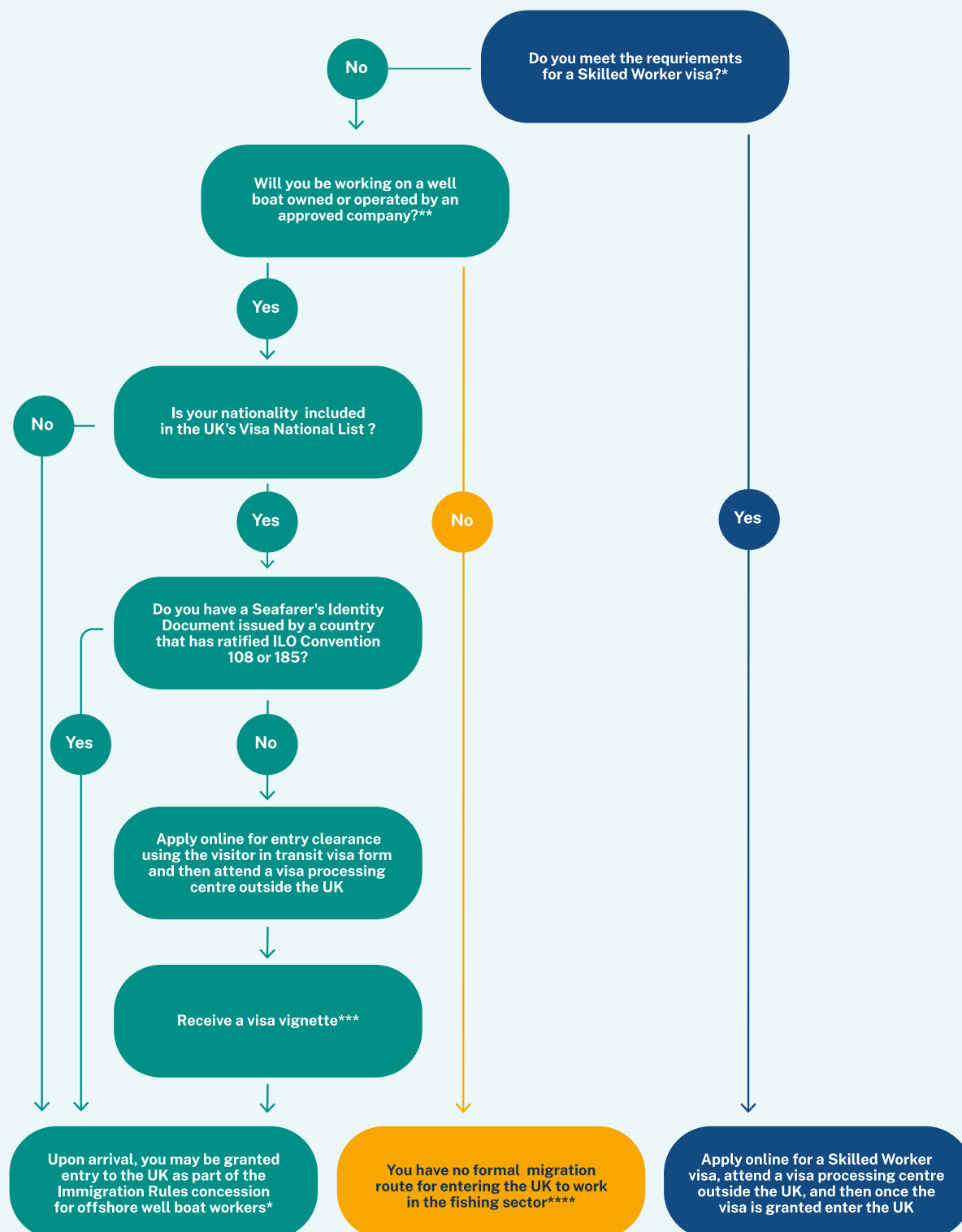
To be clear, the exemption under section 8(1) only applies when a seaman arrives on a vessel of which they are a crew member and are engaged to leave as crew on that ship (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024). Fishermen arriving as passengers on a different ship or plane fall outside the scope of this exemption. Thus, fishers and other crew members who do not fall within the scope of section 8(1) of the Immigration Act 1971 and who are not otherwise exempt pursuant to an international agreement will need leave to enter the UK, which may be obtained through one of the following entry pathways:

- A.** Temporary shore leave under schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971
- B.** Visa waiver under ILO Conventions 108 & 185
- C.** Skilled Worker route
- D.** Offshore well boat workers concession

⁴ Crew members may not enter the UK without leave if there is a deportation order in force against them; they have at any time been refused leave to enter and have not since been given leave to enter or remain; an immigration officer, for any reason, requires them to submit to examination under Schedule 2; or they are offshore workers as defined under section 11(A) of the Immigration Act 1971.

Figure 1.
Migration entry pathways for fishing
work within UK territorial waters

- Skilled Worker visa
- Immigration Rules concession for offshore well boat workers
- No migration route



* See section 3 of this report for current eligibility requirements.

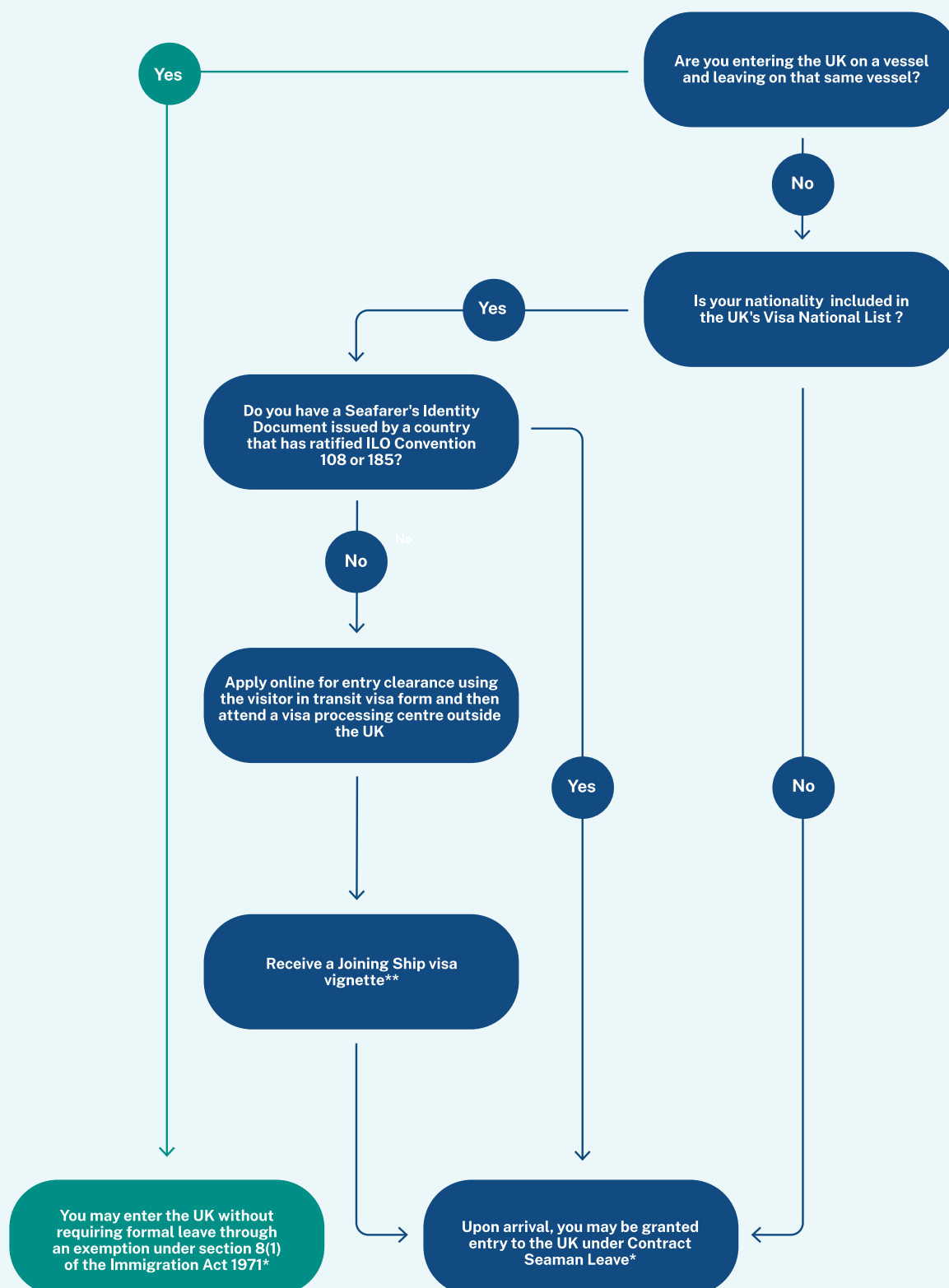
** The offshore well boat workers concession ends in February 2026, after which workers will no longer be able to rely on this route to enter the UK unless the Home Office decides to extend the concession further.

*** in 2026, UKVI plan to stop issuing visa vignette stickers to all successful applicants applying to come to the UK and they will only get an eVisa.

**** Depending on personal circumstances, individuals may have other forms of immigration status/entry clearance that provide the right to work in the UK (e.g. status under the EUSS,

Figure 2.
Migration entry pathways for fishing
work outside of UK territorial waters

- **Contract Seaman Leave (Code 7 route)**
- **Exemption under section 8(1) of the Immigration Act 1971**



* See section 3 of this report for current eligibility requirements.

** in 2026, UKVI plan to stop issuing visa vignette stickers to all successful applicants applying to come to the UK and they will only get an eVisa.

3.2 Crew members granted temporary shore leave: Schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971

Temporary shore leave is given to crew members who might have otherwise been eligible for entry to the UK without leave under section 8(1) of the Immigration Act 1971 but have been examined, for any reason, by an immigration officer under section 8(1)(c). Temporary shore leave is granted under paragraphs 12 and 13 of schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971. Under these provisions, an immigration officer can examine anyone arriving in the UK by ship or aircraft, including among others, transit passengers, crew members, and anyone believed to be an offshore worker. Examination is an official process where an immigration officer assesses an individual's right to enter the country and determine whether they require leave to enter, and if so, what leave should be granted and on what conditions. The purpose of this examination is to ensure that only genuine crew are allowed ashore and only for the limited purposes intended.

A temporary shore leave may be in the form of Contract Seaman Leave, a leave to enter for discharge, repatriation, or for hospitalisation.

3.2.1 Contract Seaman Leave

This is the leave to enter that is given to seamen or fishermen who arrive in the UK as passengers on a ship or plane for the purpose of joining a ship as a member of its crew (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024). Contract Seaman Leave is granted under schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971, under which the immigration officer may limit the duration of any leave they give that person to enter the UK. This is normally done by requiring that person to depart the UK in a ship specified by the notice giving leave. Contract Seaman Leave is intended for crew members who are working in vessels operating outside of UKTW as well as for crew members seeking leave to enter to transfer to crew another vessel in the UK and thereafter leaving the UK on the specified vessel. It only grants permission for an individual to transit from their port of entry to the port of departure of the ship they are joining or transferring to. Leave is granted until the vessel's next departure with a specified date that they must leave the UK, normally within 7 days. Contract Seaman Leave does not grant any permission to work or reside in the UK, it is temporary, conditional and purpose-specific, i.e., allows the seaman to embark on and serve aboard the named ship.

There are several ways in which visa nationals⁵ can be granted Contract Seaman Leave to be able to enter the UK to join a ship (Home Office, 2025):

1. Visa nationals who do not have a seaman's book issued by a country that

⁵ Visa nationals are those included in the list of nationalities requiring entry clearance prior to travel to the UK as a visitor, or for any other purpose for less than six months. This list includes the Philippines and Ghana, which have the largest populations of migrant fishers in the UK.

has ratified ILO Convention 108 or 185 are required to apply for Contract Seaman Leave prior to arrival in the UK. This leave comes in the form of a visa, referred to as Joining Ship visa, and is evidenced by an entry clearance vignette on the passport of visa nationals (see next page).

2. Visa nationals who hold a seaman's book issued by the country that has ratified ILO Convention 108 or 185 are not required to apply for a Contract Seaman Leave prior to arrival in the UK. Holders of valid seaman's book may enter the UK visa-free. They are granted Contract Seaman Leave upon arrival in the UK to transit to the port of destination (see section 3.3.1).

What is Code 7?

The Contract Seaman Leave has been commonly referred to by industry practitioners as the Code 7 leave or transit visa (International Transport Workers' Federation, 2022; Sparks, 2022; Motova-Surmava, 2023; Sparks and Zhou, 2025). A lesser used term to refer to the Contract Seaman Leave is 'Joining Ship' visa (McKinney and Meade, 2023) (see section 3.2.1.1).

For clarity, we discuss the different terminologies used to refer to the Contract Seaman Leave granted under schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971. Code 7 is part of the Home Office coding system of numbers and letters used to notify immigration staff of the conditions attached to a person's leave, the reasons for a refusal and to alert them to any concerns (LexisNexis, n.d.). Code 7 pertains to the conditions attached to the leave granted to seamen or crew joining a ship or an aircraft.

The term 'Code 7' is found in the UKVI Seafarer Guidance as the endorsement to be used by a decision maker who grants entry clearance for crew members to join a ship in the UK:

The endorsement a decision maker must use is:

- Main endorsement: Joining Ship
- Cat D endorsement: Code 7; No recourse to public funds; To join ship*
- Add endorsement – (name of ship) (name of port)
- Duration: 6 months

Code 7 is also mentioned in the UKVI Seamen Guidance as leave to be granted to contract seamen who meet the requirements for entry to join a ship in the UK. Code 7 endorsement is usually accompanied with the date they must leave the UK, usually within 7 days, and requires the seaman to depart the UK on the ship they are crew members of, as opposed to a Code 5N leave, which does not require the seaman to depart on the vessel they are crew members of. The Code 5N leave may be granted for those seeking leave to enter for discharge, either for repatriation (for up to 7 days) or hospitalisation which requires the seaman to leave the UK within a specified period after discharge from hospital (normally not more than 7 days) (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024).

Code 7 leave is interchangeably used with the term ‘transit visa’ by industry practitioners, which may in part be because applications for entry clearance from outside the UK (in the form of a Joining Ship visa) require applicants to submit their application using a Standard Visitor or Visitor in Transit form (see section 3.2.1.1). ‘Transit visa’ has been used to refer to the Contract Seaman Leave granted under schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971 in academic research, parliamentary briefings and debates, official reports and news articles (Hansard, 2012; International Transport Workers’ Federation, 2022; McVeigh, 2022; McKinney and Meade, 2023; Motova-Surmava, 2023). This transit visa should not be confused with the Visitor in transit visa that applies to those who are going through UK border control but leaving the UK within 48 hours.

3.2.1.1 Application process for Contract Seaman Leave from outside the UK

Visa nationals that do not hold a seaman’s book from a country that has ratified ILO C185 or 108 must apply for entry clearance to join a ship in the UK before they travel to the UK, in the form of a Joining Ship visa (UK Visas & Immigration, 2024).

Applicants would utilise the usual Standard Visitor or Visitor in Transit form. They will be prompted to provide the main reason for their visit, and if the option ‘Transit through the UK’ is selected, there is a further option ‘To start work on a ship or aircraft’ to be selected. From thereon, the travel details will need to be added onto the form, including the organisation or agent who arranged the trip, expected date to depart from the UK, port of departure, flight number or name of the ship of departure from the UK, work to be carried out on the ship, any payment received while in the UK, and any further information to be disclosed.

This application must be submitted through a UK visa application centre in the applicant’s country of origin or residence. Key requirements include:

- A passport or bona fide documentary evidence of identity and status
- Proof that they are under contract to join, as a member of its crew, a ship in British waters and which is leaving British waters
- Proof that they do not intend to take other employment
- Proof that they do not intend to base themselves in the UK
- Proof that they intend to leave the UK on the next sailing
- Proof that they are not a person whom any of the general grounds for refusal or leave to enter set out in Part 9 of the Immigration Rules apply (UK Visas & Immigration, 2024)

Applicants may need to get their biometrics recorded. With out-of-country applications, VFS Global is, at present, the official partner of UKVI to facilitate the biometric process.

Once approved, the visa is issued in the form of a vignette (visa sticker) placed in the passport, typically with the label 'Joining Ship' allowing entry into the UK, solely for the purpose of joining the designated vessel. As of 1 July 2025, the standard fee for a Joining Ship visa is £70 (UK Visas & Immigration, 2025b).

Upon arrival in the UK, they must present the following to the Border Force officer to qualify for entry as a contract seaman:

- A valid passport
- Entry clearance (showing a 'Joining Ship' endorsement)
- A valid contract of employment establishing that they are 'actually employed in the working or service of a ship'
- Confirmation that the vessel to be joined is at port in the UK and due to leave UKTW (this will normally be in the form of a letter from the ship's owner or agent confirming the vessel's location and sailing orders and giving a guarantee about the maintenance, accommodation and repatriation of the passenger) (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024)

A seaman's book is not a mandatory requirement for entry as a seaman under contract to join a ship in the UK (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024).

According to interview respondents, Filipino fishers commonly travel to the UK on Joining Ship visas to join their assigned fishing vessels. In most cases, the manning agency manages the entire application process, liaising with relevant visa processing centres to secure this visa endorsement. Fishers have reported little involvement in this process, aside from attending biometric appointments at the visa processing centre, relying on the agency to prepare and submit the necessary documentation.

While this can reduce the administrative burden on the fishers themselves, it also creates a dependency that may leave them uninformed about their visa conditions and rights. One respondent, who has worked in the UK as a fisher for over 13 years, shared that he had always entered the UK on a 'transit visa.' He explained that the manning agency simply told him, 'You will get a transit visa to be able to enter the UK,' but provided no clear explanation of the restrictions or limitations of the visa. Over time, he gradually learned about these limitations, such as not being allowed to go ashore without leave, through his co-workers and his own experiences in the years of working in the UK.

According to the fishers we interviewed, the manning agency told them they would be traveling to the UK on a “transit visa.” When we asked whether the agency had explained the visa’s conditions and restrictions, they said:

“They just told us not to bring cigarettes, because they would check that when you arrive.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (18 years working in the UK)

“No one did, ma’am. We only know what we heard from our acquaintances who have been working there...You cannot work in the harbour outside of your boat.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (9 years working in the UK)

“They just reminded us not to go out frequently.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (1st time in the UK)

“I was told that once the visa is delivered, that’s when our ticket will be processed, and then, we’ll know our destination.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (1st time in the UK)

“We were told that we’re not allowed to linger in the pier because we are only on transit visa, we’re only joining ship. [We can’t stay long in the pier], it is not allowed. I think it was just a maximum of 3 days [then we have to go back to sea].”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (13 years working in the UK)

“I don’t think so, ma’am. I don’t recall anything.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (3 years working in the UK)

“Yes, they did. You can’t transfer to another boat; you can’t work for another company. Even if it’s still fishing, but it’s with a different boat, that’s not allowed.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (14 years working in the UK)

“You’re not allowed to stay in the harbour for long, because it’s only a transit visa. Once you unload the fish, which takes only 1 day, you have to go back to sea. You can’t stay long at the harbour.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (11 years working in the UK)

“At first, it was explained that the transit visa is only valid for 2-3 days at the harbour. After that, you should go back to sea. [That was before], maybe because they know I’ve been going back several times, so they didn’t need to explain it to me anymore.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (19 years working in the UK)

“I don’t recall anymore, ma’am.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (1 year working in the UK)

“We were told how many days before the visa was going to be released. [It would be] around 2 weeks.”

Interview participant, Filipino fisher (3 years working in the UK)

3.2.2 Leave to enter for discharge, repatriation, or for hospitalisation

When a vessel arrives from outside UKTW, the master of a vessel must submit a crew list within 12 hours of arriving to the nearest immigration authority. The crew list must detail all people on the ship at the time of arrival and all crew seeking to discharge from the vessel (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024). Temporary shore leave is then granted when the crew member is able to prove satisfactorily to Border Force that:

- They have a passport or other document to establish their identity and nationality or citizenship
- They do not intend to seek or take employment in the UK
- They are not a person to whom any of the general grounds for refusing leave set out in Part 9 of the Immigration Rules apply
- (For crew members being discharged) they intend to leave the UK either on the ship to which they are being transferred or in line with arrangements made for their repatriation
- (For crew members being repatriated) they have satisfactory travel arrangements including assured admission to their final destination and all countries on the way
- (For crew members seeking entry to receive hospital treatment) they confirm the owners or agents will make arrangements for them to be repatriated when their treatment is completed (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024)

The Home Office recognises that it is not always practical to attend crew in remote locations. Leave to enter for discharge, repatriation or hospitalisation may be granted by fax, email or orally over the telephone (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024).

3.3 Visa waiver under ILO Conventions 108 & 185

The UK has ratified the 1958 International Labour Organisation Seafarers Identity Documents Convention No. 108 (ILO C108), which provides for internationally recognised seafarer identity documents (SIDs) to facilitate seafarers transiting other countries to join and leave ships. ILO C108 is applicable to 'every seafarer who is engaged in any capacity on board a vessel' and most countries have extended its application to fishers.

Article 6 of ILO C108 states that:

Each Member shall permit the entry into a territory for which this Convention is in force of a seafarer holding a valid seafarer's identity document, when entry is requested for temporary shore leave while the ship is in port.

Visa national seafarers who would normally be required to acquire the necessary leave to enter the UK to join their ship are not required to do so if

they hold a SID, commonly referred to a seaman's book, issued by a country which has ratified ILO C108 (UK Visas & Immigration, 2024). The holder does not need to be a national of the country that issued the seaman's book (International Labour Organization, 1958). In the UK, eligibility for a British Seaman's Card has been extended to fishermen since 2023 (The Merchant Shipping (Seamen's Documents) (Amendment) Regulations 2023).

ILO C108 has been updated by the 2003 International Labour Organization Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention No. 185 (Revised) (ILO C185), which addresses the evolving global security concerns and modernises the seafarer identification process by mandating the use of biometrics. Although the UK has not yet ratified the new convention, it allows visa-free entry to holders of SIDs issued by nations that have ratified ILO C185 and, as a result of this ratification, have denounced ILO C108. The visa waiver applies only to seafarers who are joining a ship due to leave UKTW (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024). A work authorisation will be required for SID holders who will be working in UKTW.

3.3.1 Application process when entering on a Seafarers' Identity Document

ILO C108 does not give a right of entry and can be refused if the immigration officer does not believe the person will comply with the conditions of entry (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024). Crew members seeking to enter the UK to join their ship must present the following documents evidencing purpose of entry, alongside their passport and their seaman's book (GAC Services Shipping Department, 2021; International Transport Workers' Federation, 2022; Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024):

- 1.** An immigration support letter from the agency or a letter invitation from their employer that guarantees to pay for the expenses of their stay, accommodation, medical expenses, insurance, and safety on board the vessel
- 2.** A valid employment contract
- 3.** Other travel documents such as flight and hotel bookings and medical certificates

They are granted Contract Seaman Leave upon arrival in the UK to transit to the port of destination.

3.3.2 Temporary shore leave on a Seafarers' Identity Document

Crew members requesting to go ashore temporarily while the ship is in port must still be granted leave to enter despite holding a valid SID. This is done in the same manner as the grant of leave to enter for discharge, repatriation or hospitalisation, as discussed in section 3.2.2 (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024).

3.4 Skilled Worker visa route

The Contract Seaman Leave was designed for seafarers on international merchant vessels who are transiting through a UK port to join a ship that will quickly depart for international waters. It was not intended for migrant fishers who live and work for extended periods on UK-flagged vessels, many of which operate within UKTW (International Transport Workers' Federation, 2022).

The UK government introduced legislation in 2022 to clarify that foreign nationals working in UKTW would need permission to do so. Section 43 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 created a legal distinction between working within and outside the 12-nautical-mile limit with the introduction of offshore workers. Offshore workers are defined as foreign nationals who arrive in UK waters for the purposes of working in those waters, and without first entering the UK (Immigration Act 1971, sect. 11A(1)). Offshore workers are considered to "enter" the UK when they commence working in UK waters (Immigration Act 1971, sect. 11A(3)).

Crew members who are working on ships that visit more than one port in the UK are considered offshore workers who need permission to work. The Home Office has suggested that the most appropriate form of permission for most offshore workers would be the Skilled Worker visa, but other forms of permission are available (Home Office and UK Visas & Immigration, 2024).

Migrant workers in the UK who are employed under the Skilled Worker visa are entitled to a range of legal protections as compared to those entering under the Contract Seaman Leave or Code 7 arrangements. The Skilled Worker visa allows individuals to live and work in the UK and are covered by UK employment law, meaning they are entitled to the national minimum wage, limits on working hours, right to rest breaks, and the protections under the Employment Rights Act 1996. They may also access and use the National Health Service (NHS) in a similar way to an ordinarily resident person in the UK and accrue eligibility for settlement after five years of continuous lawful residence. Existing Skilled Worker visa holders can continue to bring dependants under certain circumstances (see next page). This is in stark contrast to workers granted Contract Seaman Leave who do not have permission to work in the UK.

To qualify for a Skilled Worker visa following the most recent changes in July 2025 (UK Visas & Immigration, 2025a), migrant fishers must meet specific criteria, which include:

- **Salary Threshold:** The job must be on the list of eligible occupations for sponsorship and must meet the minimum salary requirement set by the UK government, at £41,700/year or the occupation's specific going rate, whichever is higher (UK Visas & Immigration, 2025c).
- **English Language Proficiency:** Applicants must prove they can speak, read, write, and understand English to at least a B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale. From 8 January 2026, first time applicants will need at least B2 level.

- Sponsor: An offer of employment from a UK employer approved by the Home Office for a sponsor licence.
- Skills Threshold (Qualification requirement): The skill threshold for the Skilled Worker visa increased to Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) Level 6 or above, meaning only degree-level jobs are eligible for sponsorship unless the role is on the Immigration Salary List (ISL)⁶ or the new Temporary Shortage List (TSL) (Migration Advisory Committee, 2025).⁷

The changes effective from 22 July 2025 mean many occupations previously at RQF Level 3 (A-level equivalent) are no longer eligible for sponsorship for new applicants post this date. Some RQF Level 3 occupations⁸ remain on the ISL under the previous framework, but only until it is abolished entirely by 31 December 2026. From then, roles below RQF level 6 will only be eligible for temporary visas under a new, time-limited shortage scheme, i.e. TSL, if they are deemed critical to the economy and supported by a workforce strategy. The new rules also prohibit new dependents for workers sponsored in RQF 3–5 roles via the TSL or ISL. This means new dependents may not be sponsored by workers in RQF 3–5 roles unless they were already granted leave before 22 July 2025.

English language requirements also pose a concern around accessibility and is a significant barrier for many fishers. Many fishers may not have completed secondary education, making it difficult to meet language requirements designed for university-educated applicants. The cost of repeatedly taking the exam further compounds their disadvantage.

According to one NGO worker, some Filipino fishers have recently begun taking the IELTS as part of requirements for overseas employment:

“We encouraged them to take the IELTS, but many ended up failing. From what I observed, they’re being made to take the same version of the IELTS that’s required of professionals. The IELTS is really difficult, especially for our fishers who didn’t graduate from school, some only reached Grade 6, or maybe just part of high school, right? So maybe they could lower the standard, or come up with another system... It’s also expensive, and the fees are high and our fishers really struggle, especially since they have to take it again and again.”

6 The ISL is a UK Government list of occupations where employers only need to pay 80% of the usual minimum rate that applies to qualify for a Skilled Worker visa.

7 Introduced in July 2025, the TSL provides time limited access to a UK Government list of occupations classified as medium skilled (RQF 3-5). It is envisioned by the UK Government to act as a “targeted, time-bound migration route to help address labour shortages in specific occupations crucial to prioritised sectors”. Commissioned by the Home Secretary, the TSL is currently undergoing a review by the Migration Advisory Committee.

8 Fishers (SOC Code 5119 – Agriculture and fishing trades not elsewhere classified) and deckhands on large fishing vessels (9 metres and above) (SOC Code 9119 – Fishing and other elementary agriculture occupations not elsewhere classified).

The need for a UK fishing visa

The UK fishing industry is potentially facing a cliff edge in the coming year. The Migration Advisory Committee's recently released stage one report on the TSL did not include fishing related occupations in their recommended list (Migration Advisory Committee, 2025). Employers can hire workers on ISL occupations up until the end of 2026, which is when the government has said that the ISL will be abolished. However, unless this situation changes, there will be no formal visa route into the fishing sector. This will almost certainly mean that the industry will face a shortage of workers (in a sector that already faces difficulties in domestic recruitment) and/or more workers will be pushed onto the Code 7 route.

Fishers on the Code 7 route are left in an especially precarious situation, with little clarity over who is responsible for protecting their rights. When working beyond UK Territorial Waters (UKTW), it is uncertain which laws or authorities are meant to safeguard them, even if they are working on UK vessels. Yet, if they work within UKTW under the same arrangement, they are in breach of the immigration rules and therefore, subject to immigration removal and confiscation of earnings. This uncertainty around their legal and regulatory position also raises doubts about whether those on the route will have their labour rights protected by the upcoming Fair Work Agency (FWA).

A potential solution to this problem would be the introduction of a Fishing Worker Visa. This would formally recognise fishers as workers and do much to end an informal reliance on the misuse of a route that puts workers at high risk of labour exploitation. It is important that any new visa must contain options to ensure all workers on the visa can access rights in practice and challenge exploitation. This would mean options to change employers in practice, visas with renewal options and visa design which addresses the power imbalance between visa sponsor and worker, to read as visa sponsor and worker, such as sector-wide sponsorship. This is key to the government's commitment to make work pay for all workers, make fishing a sector with attractive and safe labour standards and ensure the provisions in the government's flagship Employment Rights Bill apply to all workers.



Moreover, fishermen recruited under the Skilled Worker visa route face significant upfront costs. While the roles within the ISL benefit from discounted visa fees, Skilled Worker visa applicants must pay an application fee of £590 for a visa up to 3 years, or £1,160 for a visa for more than 3 years. In addition, all applicants are required to pay the Immigration Health Surcharge, currently set at £1,035 per year. For a three-year visa, this can bring the individual's costs to over £3,000. Moreover, applicants must have at least £1,270 available in their bank account to show that they can support themselves when they arrive in the UK, unless the sponsor confirms that they can support the applicants' costs during their first month in the UK up to £1,270 by 'certifying maintenance' on their certificate of sponsorship. Total upfront cost for a fisher applying for a 12-month Skilled Worker visa may reach up to £2,895.⁹ For migrant fishers, these financial barriers can be prohibitive and contribute to heightened risks of debt, dependency, and exploitation within the recruitment process.



Employers must pay a sponsor license fee of £574 if they are a small sponsor, or £1,579 if they are a medium or large sponsor. An employer can qualify as a “small” sponsor if at least 2 of the following apply:

- Annual turnover is £15 million or less
- Total assets are worth £7.5 million or less
- Have 50 employees or fewer

They must also pay a Certificate of Sponsorship fee per worker at £525, as well as the Immigration Skills Charge of £364 per year if they are a small sponsor, or £1,000 per year if they are a medium or large sponsor. Total upfront cost for a small sponsor-employer to sponsor one fisher for a 12-month period is £1463. For each additional worker to be sponsored thereafter, the total upfront cost is at £889 for a 12-month period.¹⁰

There has been a low uptake of Skilled Worker visas (Sparks and Zhou, 2025). Northern Irish vessel owners have found the cost of obtaining these visas prohibitive, impacting them the most as they are pushed to fish in less productive areas outside of territorial waters (Wright, 2025).

⁹ As of October 6, 2025.

¹⁰ As of October 6, 2025.

3.5 Offshore well boat workers concession

In February 2022, a concession to the Immigration Rules was introduced allowing short term (up to six-month long) grants of leave to enter for migrant workers that are employed by a set number of approved companies owning or operating well boat¹¹ vessels within UKTW (UK Visas & Immigration, 2025d).¹² This is a time limited concession. Workers may be granted leave for up to six months but will not be granted for any period extending beyond 8th of February 2026. While workers may be employed within UKTW, time spent under the concession will not count towards settlement in the UK, and they are also not entitled to recourse for public funds. Workers must also be aged 18 years or older on the date of entry to the UK.

To be eligible for leave under this concession, workers will need to produce:

- A valid passport
- A letter from their employer stating that they are employed by an approved company and will be required to work on a well boat within UKTW
- An employment contract that shows that the person seeking entry clearance will be earning an annual salary of £26,200 or over (or equivalent for periods less than a year)

Further, UKVI guidance on this concession states that visa nationals should apply for entry clearance prior to travel to the UK unless they can produce SID from a country that has ratified ILO C108 or C185. Those requiring entry clearance should apply online on Gov.UK, selecting the visitor in transit visa and then when prompted, selecting the “to start work on a ship or aircraft”. To meet the requirements for this clearance, workers need to produce the same set of proofs as detailed above. Upon entry to the UK, visa nationals are required to report to an Immigration Officer to apply for leave to enter under the terms of this concession.

¹¹ A well boat is a type of fishing vessel equipped with a well or tank designed for the storage and transport of live fish.

¹² At the time of publication, there were 18 listed approved employers.

5. Conclusion

Entry pathways for migrant fishers in the UK are complex and opaque. As this report has highlighted, the UK fishing immigration system is not merely difficult to navigate but actively creates worker vulnerability. Given the complexity of the system, it is unrealistic to expect a migrant fisher to understand the full implications of different entry pathways and their rights in the UK. Consequently, migrant fishers are heavily reliant on manning agencies to navigate entry routes into the UK and on their employer (or skipper) for information regarding their employment rights and restrictions. This dependency is compounded by factors such as living aboard on a vessel, limited access to community and information, and restricted movement. This combination of dependence and precarious immigration status creates real and significant risk of labour exploitation by solidifying a power dynamic that places the migrant fisher in a state of complete reliance on their recruiter and employer.

The design and implementation of the current fishing immigration system have created a situation which sacrifices labour protections. The predominant entry route for migrant fishers, the Contract Seaman Leave (Code 7 leave), legally restricts migrant fishers to working outside of UKTW. If they work within UKTW, they are immediately in breach of their immigration conditions. Further, for fishers working outside UKTW on the Code 7 route, there is considerable uncertainty over which laws and authorities are responsible for protecting their rights, even if they are employed by British employers. This legal ambiguity also means fishers are often compelled to accept terms and conditions that are inferior to British employment standards and rights.

This situation may also get worse in the coming years. Fishers coming in through the Contract Seaman Leave will likely fall outside of the remit of the upcoming Fair Work Agency (FWA), due to their jurisdiction only being within UKTW. This is particularly concerning, given that the UK fishing is facing a potential cliff's edge in the coming year, due to the high likelihood that there will be limited or no entry pathways using the Skilled Worker visa, therefore pushing more workers onto the Code 7 route. Without a viable, alternative visa, this change will only drive misuse of the Code 7 route, especially with very low levels of domestic recruitment in fishing. By not offering a safe and regular labour migration route, the UK is leaving its fishers under water.

Recommendations

To address the issues identified in this report, and to make entry routes into the UK fishing industry safer and fairer for migrant fishers, the following recommendations should be considered.

- 1.** Establish a Fishing Worker Visa. This would formally recognise fishers as workers and help end the misuse and overreliance on a route that puts workers at high risk of labour exploitation. It is important that any new visa must contain options (such as switching employers, and opportunity to renew the visa) to ensure all workers on the visa can access rights in practice and challenge exploitation. This is key to the government's commitment to make work pay for all workers and ensure the provisions in the government's flagship Employment Rights Bill apply to all workers.
- 2.** Alongside creating a Fishing Worker Visa, introduce a bridging visa similar to Australia's 'Workplace Justice visa,' enabling migrant fishers with restricted immigration status who have been exploited to take claims against employers without losing their immigration status or permission to work.
- 3.** Conduct a formal review of the use of the Contract Seaman Leave (Code 7 leave) which includes the collection and publication of statistics on the use of this leave.
- 4.** Ensure labour market enforcement in UK fishing and that labour market enforcement is applied on all UK-flagged vessels.
- 5.** Ensure that the Fair Work Agency is accessible to migrant fishers in practice and provided with robust enforcement powers which enable them to protect and support fishers.

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