

Seasonal Worker Interest Group - EFRA Committee

The UK's horticultural Seasonal Worker visa Scheme (SWS): Defra's role in oversight and monitoring

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The Seasonal Worker Scheme (SWS) is a temporary visa route that facilitates the recruitment of workers to the UK to work in horticulture or poultry production. The route, which first started as a pilot in 2019, is a joint initiative from the Home Office and the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Since then, the scheme has expanded from under 3,000 visas issued in 2019 to up to 33,900 in the first three quarters of 2025. At the time of writing, the route is confirmed until 2029, with 41,000 6-month long visas allocated for the horticultural sector in 2026.

How the scheme is organised: Roles and responsibilities

The Home Office and Defra are jointly responsible for delivering the visa route. The Home Office leads on immigration policy and operational delivery of the visa, **while Defra selects, manages and monitors scheme operators, along with gathering stakeholder insights on the route.** Compliance and enforcement responsibilities are discussed in the [Migration Advisory Committee's report](#) on the SWS.

Responsibilities around worker welfare, including compliance with employment legislation, have largely been delegated to scheme operators (see SE3.4 in the [Home Office Guidance for Sponsors](#)), who are also visa sponsors and recruit workers. Scheme operators must be endorsed by Defra and licensed by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA). At the time of writing, there are six scheme operators for the route.

Enforcement of immigration rules and guidance is the responsibility of the Home Office, partly by conducting farm inspections through the UKVI Compliance division. The GLAA monitors scheme operators but does not monitor conditions on farms under the licensing scheme, and [it does not normally proactively investigate scheme operators' compliance with SWS rules](#). Enforcement agencies regulate other aspects of work and life on farms in the UK, with HMRC enforcing National Minimum Wage legislation in the UK, Agricultural Wages Enforcement Teams in Northern Ireland and Scotland, Local Authorities Environmental Health departments, and the Health and Safety Executives (HSE and HSE NI). In the horticultural sector, most enforcement work is complaints-driven.

The role of Defra and existing regulatory gap

Although Defra is a key actor on the scheme, it does not bear any formal responsibility for the enforcement of scheme regulations. And in the absence of adequate and proactive oversight of scheme operators and growers' compliance with SWS rules, there is an evident regulatory gap on the SWS that needs filling. Both evidence from support organisations' casework and data from the annual Defra survey of seasonal workers point to certain systemic issues in scheme compliance that require improvements in oversight and monitoring. Non-exhaustive examples of this are outlined below.

[Defra's own survey data](#) points to the absence of clear, trusted grievance mechanisms. At present the structure of the scheme means that workers take a huge risk to raise a complaint, and doing so may result in a deterioration in conditions or penalties, such as fewer shifts, dismissal or non-provision of a transfer. According to the Defra survey just 15% of workers who had a complaint raised a grievance, with workers who did not complain citing barriers to doing so, like the fear of losing their visa.

The transfer mechanisms operated by scheme operators are also unclear, and there appears to be a lack of systematic and well-communicated decision-making. Moreover, a substantial number of transfer requests lodged by workers to scheme operators are refused, even though Home Office guidance states refusals are only possible in extenuating circumstances (e.g. when a worker has little time left on their visa). Of 19% of survey respondents who reported requesting a transfer in 2024, 38% had it refused, according to the latest Defra survey data. In nearly one-third (31%) of these refusals, no reason for the decision was given by the scheme operator or no response was received by the worker altogether. [FLEX's survey](#) of seasonal workers puts the number of refusals amongst the third of workers who requested a transfer even higher, at 55%."

Support organisations note frequent reports of scheme operators failing to pay workers for time spent in the UK without employment, despite this being a requirement outlined in Home Office guidance. This includes (i) time between arrival in the UK and start of employment, (ii) time between placements, and (iii) time between the end of employment and confirmation that a worker must leave the UK.

[Worker Support Centre](#) (WSC) casework in this area from engagement with 697 people in relation to seasonal agriculture in 2024 highlights serious failures of Scheme Operators to ensure compliance with the worker welfare provisions in the Home Office guidance. These include: serious health and safety breaches and barriers to healthcare (47 workers raised health and safety concerns including 10 injuries, 2 of which were life altering, 10 workers raised barriers to accessing healthcare when needed); unfair treatment (145 workers raised dismissal related issues, including 19 who were dismissed following raising a complaint, 68 workers raised poor treatment encompassing harassment or verbal abuse); non-payment of wages (99 workers raised issues related to pay, including 54 reporting non-payment for work); poor accommodation (113 people raised issues with accommodation, 100 of which related to very poor living conditions). WSC casework and engagement with workers in 2025 shows a similar pattern with increasing reports of worker repercussions (including dismissals, barring from the scheme, or withdrawal of work) for contacting third party organisations, or raising concerns on farms or with Scheme Operators.

Limited enforcement action has been poorly planned

The very limited instances of enforcement have resulted in immigration implications for workers, whose permission to remain in the UK is strictly tied to a single scheme operator (visa sponsor). It is clear that the revocation of a scheme operator's licence without a written and published mitigation plan to support workers has potentially wide-ranging consequences. Our organisations have previously pressed the government to put in place a publicly accessible plan to deal with the fallout of licence revocation for workers, and asked for information to share with workers to no avail. We maintain that the government must learn the lessons from the two scheme operators' sponsor licence revocations, to avoid further

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detrimental impact to workers on the scheme, and to avoid deterring workers from raising grievances due to the possibility of loss of permission to remain and work in the UK.

Debt bondage and the Employer Pays Principle

A key contributory factor to the power imbalance that allows exploitation of workers on the Seasonal Worker Scheme to occur is that of debt bondage. This takes place when workers accrue large debts in order to come to the UK on the Seasonal Worker visa, leaving them effectively trapped and powerless to leave exploitative situations. Alma Economics placed average relocation costs on the SWS at £1,142 per person - far higher than salaries in source countries.

A mooted solution to remedy this imbalance is the implementation of the Employer Pays Principle (EPP). Over summer, the Seasonal Worker Taskforce and Defra commissioned independent research into the EPP which holds that recruitment costs should be borne by employer rather than worker, as a means of preventing debt-bondage. The feasibility [study](#) was published, and Defra at the same time said it had no current plans to implement [EPP](#).

Areas for scrutiny

In context of the above, we identify three areas for potential scrutiny by the EFRA Committee:

1. The role of Defra in regulating and enforcing scheme operators' compliance with SWS rules.
2. Improving seasonal workers' welfare by having written guidance on how workers on the scheme will be supported to maintain their visa and employment in the event of sponsor licence revocations.
3. The role of Defra in supporting farm compliance with labour standards in relation to the treatment of seasonal workers, before Rural Payments are distributed.

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