



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural
Affairs**

Room 285
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont

From: Clerk to the Committee

Date: 19 March 2025

To: AERA Committee Members

Subject: Final Note of Informal meeting with the Chair of the UK Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) - Review on the Seasonal Workers Scheme Visa on 20th February 2025.

This note summarises the informal meeting held on 20 February 2025, via MS Teams, with the Chair of the UK Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) on the subject of the MAC Review on the Seasonal Workers Scheme Visa.

At its meeting on 27 March 2025, the Committee agreed to publish the note of this meeting on its website.

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) is an independent, non-statutory, non-time limited, non-departmental public body that advises the UK Government on migration issues.

The meeting was attended by:

Professor Brian Bell, Chair of MAC
Mr Keith Ruffles, SW Review Lead, MAC
Mr Brian Wilson, Senior Policy Advisor (NI), MAC

Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

Apologies:

Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)

1. By way of introduction, Professor Bell set out to reassure Members that the Review process on the Seasonal Workers Visa Scheme had taken nine months, had gathered evidence from stakeholders, including in Northern Ireland and the Committee had visited a mushroom farm here.

2. He stated that a main recommendation from the MAC is that the scheme should continue as there will always be the need for seasonal workers across the UK, as the work is temporary and often in areas with a 'thin' labour market and to maintain current levels of food production in the UK the short-to-medium term.

3. The Committee then heard an overview of the recommendation 'themes' from the report including; scheme certainty, scheme/visa flexibility, fairer work and pay, greater enforcement of employee rights and consideration of the 'Employer Pays Principle'.

4. With regard to employee rights, the Committee heard that employees sometimes can find themselves in a "state of bondage" as a result of having to take out loans at extortionate interest rates to pay for flights and accommodation to work in the UK.

5. Indeed, firms sometimes over employ, then send workers home after a short period. MAC proposes that that workers should not have to bear the cost solely themselves and suggest that the direct employers/farmers and others in the supply chain, including supermarkets, could also bear some of the cost burden, such as flights, minimum amount of money paid to workers sent home early etc.

6. At present, the Home Office could only make farmers shoulder extra cost burden but clearly the entire supply chain should be involved and work is being done but it is progressing slowly. Professor Bell also stated that more clarity was needed on migrant workers' wages and bonuses as very little data is available. The MAC is broadly in favour of the 'Employer Pays Principle' but did not make a specific recommendation in that regard as more work needs to be done.

7. The Committee highlighted to Professor Bell that the mushroom sector in Northern Ireland has found that they are at a competitive disadvantage compared to the sector in the Republic of Ireland. This is as a result of more favourable access to labour compared to the Northern Ireland growers having to access migrant labour through the Seasonal Workers Scheme. In addition, by sharing a border with an EU member state it was highlighted that workers come to be trained and work in Northern Ireland but then can travel across the border to work once their visa has expired.

8. Professor Bell responded that the demographic has shifted since the decision to leave the EU. Since then, and as their home countries have experienced greater economic prosperity, many EU workers have returned home. The majority of seasonal workers now come from outside the EU who do not have an automatic right to work in the EU once their visas have expired.

9. The Committee heard that regarding welfare issues the Seasonal Workers Scheme is well designed to counter worker exploitation and there has been a relatively small number of complaints in this regard. There is also a robust system in place where enforcement agencies can enter work places to conduct monitoring. However, the MAC has recommended a more coordinated approach between the bodies currently involved in worker welfare and a clearer delineation of responsibility for each.

10. In comparison to the care industry - if a care company (with care homes) lets a migrant worker go then they have to leave the country. With the Seasonal Workers Visa, the contract is with the recruitment agency and not the individual, so if the employer is poor or abusive they can request a move to another company. However, some Members stated they had heard of some horrific stories of employment conditions in mushroom farms here.

11. The Committee also heard from Professor Bell that as the mushroom sector require workers on a year-round basis, due to its production cycle, and that any visa longer than six months requires a UK health surcharge to be paid (and it is not clear who would pay that), the seasonal visa with its restriction of 6 months in a given year, is not going to address the sectors' labour needs. Unless, it was suggested by Professor Bell, that it may be of benefit to have a system of two cohorts of workers of 6 months each to enable good employees to have the opportunity to return, therefore saving and time and money on training.

12. The Committee discussed with Professor Bell the issue of the mushroom sector having all-year-round production cycle but not being able to attract more local workers, which would reduce the reliance on migrant labour. The issue of the failure to attract domestic workers due to the low wages and the nature of the work involved was discussed as well as the relatively low unemployment rate in Northern Ireland.

13. It was also discussed that low wages are paid to suit particular economic business models and whether a change in practices could entice local workers. Professor Bell posed that there is a deeper question to be

addressed, which is why local workers cannot be recruited. Also, he proposed that innovative methods were required by employers to attract local workers, such as flexibility in working hours and targeting different demographics such as older workers for hospitality roles, which would have traditionally attracted younger workers.

14. Examples were given by Professor Bell. Firstly, of a transport company that previously had taken advantage of EU freedom of worker movement and after Brexit had to reconsider its terms and conditions to attract local workers with increased flexibility of working patterns. Secondly, of a pub chain who had successfully focused on recruiting over 50's.

15. The hospitality sector was discussed as an industry with similar issues and that it would be difficult to envisage a visa scheme purely for the mushroom industry. The issues surrounding the migrant labour needed for the fishing industry were also highlighted as an issue of concern to Members.

16. With regard to the visa scheme, it was suggested by Professor Bell that it is of little benefit to the economy to encourage low wage workers to come to work in less skilled jobs and industries and a focus should be placed on higher wage jobs and that overall, the UK Government wishes industries to be less reliant on migrant labour.