

Farms use charter flights to bring seasonal workers to UK

Local recruitment bearing fruit but migrant staff needed to help train new labourers



Vegetable growers near Ely, Cambridgeshire. The need for extra workers will increase from May as more crops ripen © Si Barber/FT

Judith Evans in London APRIL 16 2020

UK farms and recruiters are turning to charter flights to bring in seasonal migrant workers to ensure the spring and summer harvest can proceed despite the coronavirus crisis.

G's Fresh, a leading produce supplier, has chartered an aeroplane on Thursday to transport 150 workers from Romania, which has banned all scheduled flights. Air Charter Service (ACS), the company providing the flight, said it was in discussions about another five potential flights to Britain before the end of June.

The flights are taking place in addition to large-scale campaigns to recruit UK residents, including those laid off from other sectors because of coronavirus.

Anthony Gardiner, marketing director at G's Fresh, said a campaign to recruit local workers had been "extremely successful" but added: "The people coming tomorrow are our returnees who we offered contracts to at the end of last season. They've got established food hygiene and handling skills, also health and safety. We need these people to come back to support and train our UK workers."

Pro Force, a recruiter for the farming and food sectors, said it was looking at charter flights from various countries in addition to local recruitment.

Britain normally recruits 70,000 to 80,000 migrant seasonal workers to harvest fruit and vegetables, many from eastern Europe, in addition to longer-term arrivals who work in sectors such as food processing.

But the pandemic has disrupted that pattern of travel: many scheduled air, train and bus services have been cancelled and some countries have closed their borders, while farmers say some workers fear catching coronavirus or being unable to return home if they travel.

Asparagus harvesting has already begun in the UK and the need for workers will increase in May as more crops ripen.

Matthew Purton, group commercial jets director at ACS, said seats on charter aircraft cost at least double those on scheduled flights. “This is a completely new line of business for us,” he said.

It is not clear who will cover the additional cost of the charter flights. Some recruiters and farms pass on the cost to workers, although G's did not specify whether it was doing so.

Pro Force said it would need to fill about 20,000 to 30,000 vacancies during the harvesting season and that about 4,000 people had applied in the UK so far, many of them laid off from sectors including hospitality and retail during the outbreak.

Siobhan Marsh, compliance manager at Pro Force, said the company wanted to fly in returnees on scheduled flights or, if necessary, on chartered aircraft. “We will prioritise our staff who have been trained and have been coming back for years,” she said.

Concordia, another big recruiter in the sector, said it had looked at charter flights but was focused on local recruitment, after 32,000 UK-based workers applied for jobs in what chief executive Stephanie Maurel called a “phenomenal” response.

Ms Maurel said she was “nervous that there might be an extra element of risk involved” with flights. “But this remains on the table — everything is on the table to support farms,” she said.

Images from Romania’s Cluj airport at the weekend showed people crammed into its departures hall awaiting flights to Germany, which is chartering planes to fly in thousands of workers. This raised concerns about potential coronavirus transmission.

Mr Purton said ACS was being helped by governments in reducing coronavirus infection risk and was taking measures including providing masks and hand sanitiser and ensuring flights are not completely full so that social distancing can take place.