

Agriculture

Time runs short for UK to recruit tens of thousands of fruit pickers

Low take-up of jobs by local workers risks produce rotting in fields



Thousands of overseas seasonal workers have been prevented from travelling to the UK by the coronavirus outbreak © Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg

Judith Evans in London YESTERDAY

Only 150 people have taken up jobs picking fruit and vegetables in the UK after a recruitment drive by a charity that garnered 50,000 expressions of interest, underscoring the difficulty the agriculture sector faces in maintaining the smooth running of the food supply chain.

The low conversion rate highlights the acute pressure the UK faces after coronavirus prevented travel for many of the 70,000 to 80,000 overseas seasonal workers who normally pick crops from lettuce to berries and apples.

Industry recruitment campaigns are being backed by the government's Pick for Britain [portal](#) in attempt to organise a mobilisation of UK fruit and vegetable pickers.

But the National Farmers' Union warned that time was running short to avoid produce being left to rot in fields once peak harvesting season starts in late May as recruiters struggle to find UK workers. And early evidence shows recruiters will find it difficult to find pickers.

Concordia, a work placements charity that is running a recruitment campaign with two other ethical labour providers, said that, of 50,000 expressions of interest for fruit-picking jobs, some 6,000 people accepted an interview, but more than 1,000 people rejected roles formally offered to them; only 150 have taken up offers of work. Pro-Force, another recruiter, said it had experienced similarly low conversion rates.



Overseas pickers often travel from one farm to another over the harvesting season, while UK workers want to stay near their homes © Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg

Tom Bradshaw, vice-president of the NFU, said the numbers highlighted “the sheer numbers we are going to need to apply, to get to the number of recruits we require. There isn’t the level of flexibility in the picking jobs that many people assume”.

“We need tens of thousands of UK workers . . . Not to be able to harvest that fresh fruit and vegetable crop, which is so needed to keep the country healthy, would be disheartening and for the businesses involved it would be devastating.”

Mr Bradshaw said the sector would need even more workers than usual, since overseas pickers — many from Bulgaria and Romania — often travel from one farm to another over the harvesting season, while UK workers want to stay near their homes.



Farm work can often involve back-breaking labour © Neil Hall/Reuters

George Eustice, the environment secretary, said on Sunday that only a third of the usual number of overseas pickers had arrived in the UK so far.

Recruiters are targeting UK workers laid off or furloughed in the pandemic. But Mr Bradshaw said some furloughed workers were reluctant to commit for longer periods in case their regular employers reopened.

Concordia said: “The main barriers to people accepting roles have been that the candidate is unable to accept the length of contract, that the farm is too far away from their home, that they don’t want to travel [or] commute, care responsibilities that prevent full-time work or that they only want to do part-time work.”

Louise Wickens, who normally works freelance for a company providing ponies for children’s parties, now works for MWW Farms in Worcestershire. Working six days a week, she has been harvesting purple sprouting broccoli for just above the minimum wage.

“I’m a physically fit person but it’s hard going. The people I’m working with, from the Czech Republic and Romania . . . it’s crazy how much they can pick compared with the amount I can pick,” she said. “I don’t know how they do it. I am going to try and persevere.”

One chartered plane provider, Air Charter Service, has run five [flights](#) for agricultural workers from Romania and has a sixth planned, bringing in a total of about 1,000 workers, said its commercial jets director, Matt Purton.

Mr Bradshaw said recruitment for April jobs had gone well but the peak season was “the bit we are really worried about. The recognition of the importance of this industry [by government] was something we needed to see but now it’s got to translate to people turning up to work”.

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