

Seasonal Migrant Workers

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we all support greater investment in technology within the agricultural sector, we are never going to be able to have a technological solution for harvesting in conditions such as those on hillsides in south Devon?

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Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

It is a pleasure to follow Tom Brake and, like other colleagues, I congratulate my hon. Friend Kirstene Hair on securing this debate. Hon. Members have spoken compellingly about our need to address this issue here and now, and I will focus mostly on issues of time, because we do not have the luxury of that on our side.

I am sure that Members across the House will join me in paying tribute to our farmers and fishers. If we think it is cold here, imagine what it is like on a Dartmoor hill farm right now, or out on a Brixham trawler. We should pay tribute to all those who put food on our plates, and thank them for what they do. I particularly thank Riverford farm in my constituency, the National Farmers Union, and all those farmers who have written to me about this issue for the work they are doing to collect evidence for this debate.

As I have said, we do not have the luxury of time, and Riverford farm has made the point compellingly to me that this autumn it has to make crunch decisions about employing workers for the following year. There is still great uncertainty about the transition period, and as we have heard so compellingly from Members across the House, even if a transition period is in place, there is a shortage in our workforce here and now, and we could use the mechanism of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme to address that.

The Government have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to research the impact of leaving the European Union on the UK labour market, and to consider how to align immigration policy with a modern industrial strategy, but that is not due to report until autumn. It will then take time to implement such a scheme, and I do not think we have the luxury of that time.

Many nations across the EU already supplement their workforce with a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, so will the Minister give us some hope that the Home Office will take a decision on this issue sooner than we would expect under the current timetable, with a report coming forward in autumn? As we have heard, the uncertainty is delaying investment now for the future, and we need something to take back to our constituents who work in these important businesses. They are already making great efforts to recruit locally, but as we have heard, even with those efforts and schemes to encourage and retain a UK-based workforce, they are still dependent on a workforce that is supplemented from outside the country.

As the mother of someone who works in the robotics industry, I appreciate the investment going into those technological solutions. I am afraid, however, that it simply will not provide all the answers we need to make sure our crops are picked in a timely manner. There can be nothing more heartbreaking than seeing crops rotting in the fields, as I am sure the Minister will reflect in her closing remarks.

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Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

I really think this is entirely in addition to it. I remain of the view that we should be focusing on the issues of frictionless trade and keeping very close links to our European Union partners as we exit the EU. I think these issues will arise irrespective of that, as we have heard. Whatever the situation with transition, I hope that the Minister will consider this as something we could use to supplement the arrangements we will have.

Most of all, I would like the Minister to give us some indication of when we are likely to see a decision. Farmers in my constituency here and now are starting to make decisions about their future plans and investment that will impact not only their businesses; remember that they also employ a local workforce in many other capacities, and their decisions will affect them. The implications for our industry are very far reaching and I hope the Minister will give some indication of when we are going to see an answer.

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