

Exploring the experiences of farms using the Seasonal Worker Scheme in the UK

Migration Advisory Committee
Revealing Reality

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REVEALING REALITY



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Role of the MAC in producing this report

Members of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) and the MAC secretariat worked with the research team at Revealing Reality to develop, conduct and steer this research project. However, the robustness of the analysis is the responsibility of the authors, and the findings and views presented in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the MAC.

Executive summary

Users of the Seasonal Worker Scheme (SWS) viewed it as a critical source of labour

- Many farms within the sample faced considerable seasonal labour shortages due to the nature of agricultural work, their rural location, and challenges in attracting domestic workers.
- The SWS has become a crucial source of labour for these farms to deal with their seasonal peaks.

The SWS was viewed as mutually beneficial for workers and farms

- Farms using the scheme reported being largely satisfied with the quality and work ethic of seasonal workers coming through the SWS, and emphasised the desire to have as many returnees coming back for future seasons as possible.
- Most farms within the sample reported feeling that the work was appealing to migrant workers, with many seeking to earn as much as they could during their time in the UK. Some highlighted that the money workers could earn in a season in the UK would go a long way in their home country, and saw workers' desire to return for future seasons as testament to this.

Some farms in the sample were going beyond baseline expectations of the SWS to retain workers and incentivise them to return in the future

- Many farms in the sample had implemented measures to improve worker welfare, including enhanced accommodation package, organising social events, and having designated welfare officers.
- Ensuring worker satisfaction was a priority for many farms, recognising its link to productivity and worker retention, as well as the likelihood that seasonal workers may want to return in the future.

Some farms in the sample were not reliant on the SWS, and others actively avoided it

- Some farms were not reliant on the SWS due to their proximity to large labour pools, their ability to utilise local recruitment agencies, or their ability to flatten seasonal peaks either with automation or changes in the produce they chose to harvest.
- A small number of farms within the sample opted not to use the SWS due to concerns about a lack of control over worker selection, and negative previous experiences with scheme operators.

Some elements of the SWS presented challenges to farms in the sample

- Farms reported that the rigid time limits of the SWS, especially the six-month cooling-off period, did not always align with the unpredictability of agricultural seasons, making it difficult for farms to retain the right number of workers for the time periods they needed them.
- There was sometimes confusion about who is responsible for enforcing some of the scheme rules, such as the minimum amount of money migrant workers should have when arriving to work on a UK farm.
- Some farms described the reliance on third-party agencies for worker recruitment as a burden, both administratively and financially.
- Farms desired greater flexibility in the scheme, including the ability for workers to transfer between sectors.
- Most farms in the sample reported wanting clearer communication about the scheme's future.

Introduction

Background

The agricultural sector employs almost 500,000 people in the UK, of which 58,000 is seasonal or casual labour.¹ Farms have formerly relied on workers from the EU to fill these seasonal roles and supplement their permanent workforce, since the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS). However, following the UK's departure from the EU and the end of EU freedom of movement, access to migrant labour has been limited, leaving many farms questioning the future of seasonal agricultural labour.

Following concerns from the agricultural sector about the end of EU freedom of movement, and consequent labour shortages, a new Seasonal Worker Pilot began in 2019. This was subsequently turned into the Seasonal Worker visa.² The new Seasonal Worker Scheme (SWS) has aimed to address these concerns regarding labour shortages by providing UK farms access to migrant labourers.

Farms, once they pass several audits by the Home Office and the scheme operators who administer the scheme, are able to apply for as many workers as they need. Although the number of workers they get are not guaranteed, many farms in the sample expressed satisfaction with the SWS and a desire for it to continue. The prospect of their business closing was a very real possibility, should the SWS be withdrawn, among the employers interviewed.

Overview of the Seasonal Worker visa

The Seasonal Worker visa (SWV) allows migrant workers to come to the UK to do seasonal horticulture work and poultry production work.

- Horticultural workers can stay for up to six months within a 12-month period, followed by a mandatory six-month 'cooling off' period.
- Poultry workers can stay from 18 October to 31 December each year.

The SWV does not provide a path to settlement, and workers cannot bring dependants with them. Eligibility requirements for workers include:

- Being at least 18 years old
- Holding a certificate of sponsorship
- Having sufficient funds for self-support (unless exempt).

UK-based scheme operators administer the SWV, acting as sponsors and matching workers with UK employers.

For 2023 and 2024, the SWV allocates at least 45,000 places annually for horticulture and an additional 2,000 for poultry workers.

(For more details about the SWV, please see the Appendix (additional rules of the Seasonal Worker visa).

¹ [UK Parliament \(2023\). Agricultural Workers](#)

² [UK Parliament \(2023\). Seasonal Worker visas and UK agriculture](#)

Objectives of this research

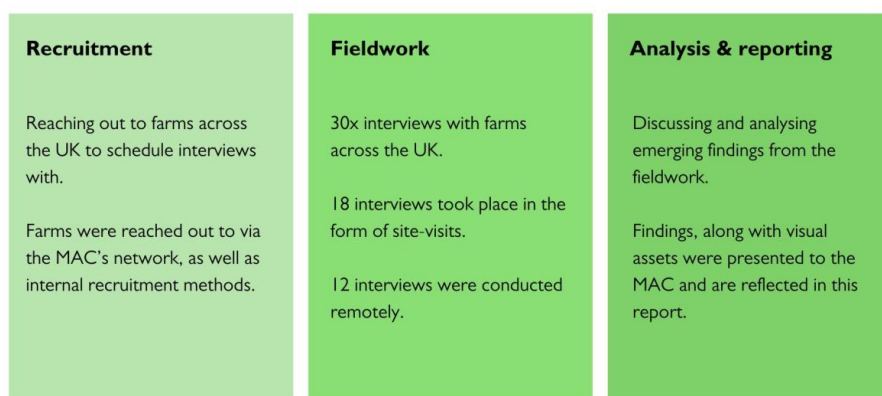
As the SWS increases in size each year, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) commissioned a review of the visa route to explore how well the route was meeting the needs of employers, employees, and other stakeholders like the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra).

Revealing Reality was commissioned as part of the MAC's review into the Seasonal Worker Scheme to carry out research with farms that do or could use the SWS.

The objectives of the research included exploring:

- Employers' labour needs, particularly for seasonal work.
- Employers' decision-making around using the Seasonal Worker visa route, such as the perceived benefits, costs, and alternatives.
- Employers' experiences of using or not using the Seasonal Worker Scheme.

Research methodology



Between August 2023 and May 2024, Revealing Reality interviewed 30 farms, during 18 half-day site visits and 12 one hour-long video calls. During site visits and remote interviews, Revealing Reality interviewed senior leaders within farms, including the owners, CEOs, heads of HR, Managing Directors and heads of Operations. During the site visits, researchers observed the day-to-day work involved in seasonal roles, and spoke to a wider range of employees like those in charge of quality control (QC), packhouse managers and line managers, and welfare officers. While the remit of the research was not to interview seasonal workers, research did have a handful of impromptu conversations with seasonal workers while carrying out site visits.

The 30 farms that took part in this research included:

- **Users and non-users** of the Seasonal Worker Scheme: 14 users and 16 non-users (3 who had used it previously and 13 who had never used it).
- **Farms across three sectors:** four poultry farms, 15 edible horticulture, and 10 ornamental horticulture. Within each sector were several sub-sectors. For example, edible horticulture farms included a range of different crop types.
- **Different sized farms:** including single site farms with 1-10 employees to those with multiple sites and sometimes hundreds of permanent employees. As far as possible, we aimed to look at organisations of similar sizes and crop types who both used and did not use the SWS to highlight the differences that using or not using it made, and to explore the role of different types of local labour markets in this decision-making.
- **Geographic location:** Those located in different parts of the UK, including at least one in each of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

For a full sample table, please see annex 2.

All farms that took part in the research have been anonymised so that attribution to quotations from farm employees only includes the type of farm, whether or not they're a scheme user, and the region in which they're based in the UK.

Caveat on sample - It is important to note that this sample is not representative of farming across the UK. The sample was limited to those that were eligible for the Seasonal Worker Scheme. It is possible that farms more reliant on the SWWS would be more enthusiastic about taking part, and while Revealing Reality made efforts to balance the sample by including non-users, this may result in participating farms being especially vocal about the value of the scheme. All the findings that follow should be read within this context.



Chapter One | Reliance on the SWS

Most farms within the sample had a high demand for seasonal labour

Given the note on the sample in the introduction, it is to be expected that farms across the horticultural, ornamental, and poultry sectors included in this research had a high demand for seasonal workers. The nature of their production meant they required additional staff to augment their permanent workforce at peak times.

“It’s because of the very nature of the product. It’s a perishable product, so we need this huge influx of people. So yeah, that’s where the challenge is and why we need this overseas immigrant workforce to come and do it” **Large poultry farm, scheme user, East of England**

“We’re talking about asparagus. Which is not well mechanised...so we rely on that seasonal labour. And clearly the growth of that business, and as a wider industry, is dependent on that seasonal labour. It’s a resource, isn’t it? Like water, soil, sunshine, or whatever else it might be. If you don’t have that piece of resource, we can’t grow asparagus. If we don’t have that seasonal labour, we can’t grow asparagus.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, West of England.**

All farms had a permanent workforce of varying size made up of both UK and EUSS workers

Central and Eastern European countries, particularly Poland, Lithuania, Romania and Bulgaria were key source countries for EUSS (EU settled or pre-settled status) employees for farms within the sample. Often, these workers had come to the UK on previous seasonal worker schemes and then settled in the UK full time. Farms within the sample often had one of these EUSS workers in a head of operations-type role. The permanent workforce also included UK workers who often lived locally and had been working on the farm for many years.

Predictably, numbers of permanent workers varied depending on the size of farm and the product. Larger farms in the sample had as many as 200-300 permanent staff, while smaller farms in the sample sometimes had as few as 5-10 permanent staff. Nonetheless, most still had to increase their labour capacity during peak seasons.

Many farms within the sample reported that production would drop dramatically, and contracts would not be fulfilled, if they did not have access to seasonal labour

Farms reported that contracts with supermarkets and other customers have been compromised in the past when they did not have access to seasonal workers. One large ornamental horticulture farm described difficulties in accessing seasonal labour, which caused production issues.

“We decided to pull on our larger contracts with [a large supermarket chain]. We said to them, unfortunately, we cannot guarantee the seasonal labour.” **Large ornamental horticulture farm, scheme user, East of England**

Another non-user who was in the process of trying to join the SWS reported that the business had to constantly adapt due to shortages in the availability of local seasonal labour.

“We had to get rid of [a large supermarket chain] after they said they wouldn’t pay more next year, and others. We have trimmed production down to just the farmers markets because before we had 45, 46 people working [...] and now we have 23. We had invested. We bought big truck tractors and we’ve got all of the equipment for full-scale outdoor cropping, and we barely use it.” **Small edible horticulture farm, non-scheme user, East of England**

Most farms within the sample did not feel able to rely on domestic labour to meet seasonal demands

Most farms interviewed had tried to recruit for seasonal roles locally, with little success

Most farms found recruiting locally for seasonal jobs incredibly difficult. Several farms reported that they had gone to great lengths to recruit locally over the past several years, primarily through routes such as the Jobcentre or websites like Indeed, as well as more local recruitment routes like nearby agricultural colleges, or word of mouth. Most reported limited success.

For example, a large edible horticulture farm with 240 permanent staff and around 300 seasonal workers reported trying to recruit locally:

“I spent hours at career fairs, job fairs, job centre visits with the people that had not been employed for years or a week. I spoke to every single person I could possibly speak to. I’ve spoken to hundreds, and we’ve had three people start with us from the Jobcentre. One of them has stayed. It’s the work. As soon as you say there’s manual handling involved, they say no.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, West of England**

One ornamental horticulture farm had a large booklet of emails they showed researchers with hundreds of emails exchanged with prospective employees they had tried to recruit locally.

“So we put our [name of scheme provider] jobs through as an advert up on the Jobcentre...there the responses I got for a seasonal job [passing researchers the booklet]. There are three English [residents], one which we invited to interview, and not one of them turned up.” **Large ornamental horticulture, scheme user, Midlands**

HR staff across several farms hypothesised that people were applying to roles only to show that they were looking for work to maintain their benefits.

“[The job] doesn’t pay for them to work for 40 hours a week. Because the money that they can earn doing 40 hours³ or 15 hours [doesn’t matter to them]... [they’re just here for] a tax credit, universal credit thing.” **Small horticulture farm, non-user, South of England**

Having not spoken to those people the farms were referring to it is difficult to ascertain each person’s situation. It is possible that there was a real challenge for some people who were being supported by benefits in that taking on a job, or more hours, may reduce their eligibility for that financial support, which may in the short-term be detrimental to them. This report can only offer the perspective of the prospective employer in these matters.

Rural locations and the temporary nature of the work made roles unappealing to domestic workers

Some farms were located in very rural areas. This, paired with sometimes poor public transport, meant that they were relatively isolated, and often only accessible by car. For example, one of the farms researchers visited was a 10-minute drive away from the nearest town, and a 25-minute drive from the nearest station.

This also meant that farms were often located away from where the local workforce were, meaning those local workers who wanted a job locally would typically look elsewhere.

³ Workers can earn up to 40 hours of work as there is always work to do on the farm, but they described how many opt for 15 hours or less so they can continue to claim benefits

“[Workers are] moving away from home predominantly because most of the unemployment isn’t in this rural area. It’s challenging on site. We have accommodation for our workforce; we don’t have accommodation for their dependants and families. This becomes very tricky.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, West of England**

Farms offered accommodation to their seasonal workers to address this challenge. However, the temporary nature of the role meant that UK workers would have to relocate for part of the year, which may not feel worthwhile for a short-term position, especially if they were already paying rent or a mortgage elsewhere. The short duration and rural location of the role appeared to be a deterrent to UK workers. These disadvantages were not so much of a deterrent to migrant workers who are already leaving their home country, meaning they want to live on site, and the temporary accommodation, even if small, suited them more.

“There’s not housing in the area that would allow people to come here temporarily. They’ve got to live in their caravans on site because there isn’t the accommodation. But the majority of the actual people who are unemployed aren’t in the areas where the work is. If they are on unemployment benefit and they come and earn a certain amount of money, they’re going to lose [their benefits]. And then these are all temporary roles as well.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, West of England**

Farms felt that domestic workers often perceived farm work as ‘low status’ or too challenging

Location was not the only factor deterring domestic workers: although some farms in less rural locations did appear to have more success filling seasonal vacancies. Local workers' views of the roles were also cited as a barrier. They spoke about domestic workers finding the roles too physically challenging or finding it too stressful to meet certain targets, while others spoke about perceptions of the work as low status and having negative connotations, such as being dirty.

“[Local workers] did not last a day, right? They came, they saw, they left.” **Large mushroom farm, scheme user, Northern Ireland**

“We had workers in the past which, let’s say, caused issues... They did not expect [this] type of work. They found the work too difficult, too stressful as they needed to meet targets.” **Small edible horticulture, scheme user, East of Scotland**

Some farms reported that even EU workers that would have been open to the work in the past appeared to have “moved on” to less manual roles as they developed better English-speaking skills.

“You cannot attract local labour... I don’t know whether people just deem agriculture as a dirty industry... All the Polish, the Lithuanians, the Latvians, they all started off on mushrooms and as their English got better they moved to say, [a large supermarket chain].” **Large mushroom farm, scheme user, Northern Ireland**

Farms who used it were heavily reliant on the SWS

Most farms interviewed who used the Seasonal Worker Scheme said that they depended on it to sustain their businesses. Farms said the seasonal workforce was increasingly made up of people recruited through the SWS, as well as Ukrainians who had come through the temporary BRP (British residency permit), as the availability of EU workers with settled status diminished. Farms emphasised that without access to the SWS, they would struggle to meet their seasonal labour demands, leading to reduced production, unfulfilled contracts, and potential business closures.

“We wouldn’t have survived without it... we’d have to shut down.” **Small fruit farm, scheme user, East of England**

“If we did not have the Seasonal Worker Scheme then our business would be finished.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Northwest England**

“It’s because of the very nature of the product. It’s a perishable product, so we need this huge influx of people. So yeah, that’s where the challenge is and why we need this overseas immigrant workforce to come and do it.” **Large poultry farm, scheme user, East of England**

The seasonal workforce is increasingly made up of people recruited through the SWS

Previously, farms had relied heavily on EU workers to fill seasonal roles before the end of Freedom of Movement, with some of these workers remaining in permanent positions. However, as these settled workers aged out of the physically demanding work or moved on to other industries, farms increasingly turned to the SWS to meet their labour needs. The changing composition of the seasonal workforce was evident, with a growing proportion of workers now being recruited through the SWS from countries beyond the EU.

A small horticulture farm in the East of England had 60 workers during their peak season.

- 12 of these were Bulgarian workers with pre-settled status. While there were originally 30 Bulgarian pre-settled workers, many had moved onto other industries or aged out of farmwork.
- Nine of these were Ukrainian workers on a separate visa.
- 38 of these were workers on the SWS.

A medium horticulture farm in the East of England had 15 of these employees working on the fields.

- 250 seasonal workers were recruited alongside these workers during seasonal peaks.
- 100 of these 250 seasonal workers were on the SWS.

A large horticulture farm in the North of England had 1,400 workers in total on their fields.

- 400 of these employees were working full-time. Much of these employees were Eastern Europeans who had settled or pre-settled status.
- 1,000 were on the SWS.

A large poultry farm in the East of England had 350 workers in their food department.

- 50-60 workers were recruited through local agencies.
- 98 workers were on the SWS.

Farms reported recruiting workers from places like Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan through the SWS

Farms reported that most workers coming to the UK through the SWS were from "the Stans." This included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Some farms spoke about recruiting from other countries such as Nepal, South Africa, Kenya, India, Serbia and Macedonia, though this was rare in the sample.

Farms reported that even before the SWV was introduced they had seen a shift in the demographics of workers, coming from further East within Europe, such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Lithuania. Some EU farm workers and senior staff reported that EU workers from countries that used to provide workers found UK work less appealing now. For example, farms described how those from Poland no longer found it appealing to work in the UK due to their own economy shifting considerably over the past 5-10 years, to make it a more desirable place to live and work. Poland, like the UK, has its own Seasonal Worker Scheme.

"It's just interesting we seemed to be going further and further to the east of Europe." **Medium ornamental farm, scheme user, Midlands**

Many of the farms interviewed also had an influx of Ukrainian workers over the past couple of years. Ukrainian workers on the temporary BRP (British residency permit) were widely used for seasonal labour across the farms.

"At Christmas we had a whole load of guys come...and we were very worried about, you know, where it was they were coming from. And these guys arrived from Ukraine and were absolutely brilliant." – **Small poultry farm, scheme user, Southeast England**

"... The Ukraine war...which means that the numbers of Ukrainian workers has gone up a lot." **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Midlands**

Several farms reported that Ukrainian workers not on the SWS will often be on time limited schemes and therefore farms particularly reliant on them might need to request more workers.

Chapter Two | Farms which relied less on the SWS

Some of the farms in the sample were less reliant on the SWS than others. Indeed, some of the sample did not and had never used the scheme. Where farms were less reliant on the scheme, it was principally because they were able to rely more on domestic labour, or they had reduced the amount of labour required to sustain their business.

The ability to obtain domestic labour

Farms that were able to successfully obtain and retain domestic labour reported that their geography – being near large labour pools – and changes to their recruitment strategies, had played a considerable role.

Farms were able to fill seasonal roles locally due to their geography

Farms that did not use the SWS were often in locations where it was easier to access UK-based labour. This tended to be if they were located near a big town or city and had good recruitment links there.

For instance, one large ornamental horticulture farm in the south of England had a high demand for labour around Christmas and, thanks to its location, was able to depend on domestic labour. They used to use the SWS in the past but no longer need to. Being based near a city with a large population, they are currently able to recruit seasonal workers through local agencies. The farm is only about twenty minutes' drive from a city with a large population, which they think adds to the appeal for workers living there, as it is easy to get to. Many of those workers living locally in the UK were still from other countries.

"The borders came down whenever it was - 2012, was it not? And we could get more access to get Eastern Europeans. There was quite a lot that seemed to live on the south coast here." **Large ornamental farm, non-scheme user, South of England**

However, some of these local labour markets do not have large numbers of local people looking for work. This could be driven by a number of factors, including low rates of unemployment. In contrast to the example above, a similar size and type of business, a medium-sized ornamental horticulture farm in the Midlands, was more rural and struggled to recruit locally. They put out a job ad via the Jobcentre and only had three responses from English workers. The rest of them were from people from countries outside the UK, like Kazakhstan.

One large edible horticulture farm, user, in the West of England, said that they used to get more interest in farm work from the local population because of high rates of unemployment.

"Particularly in ex-mining areas, there was some unemployment, but dare I say it, [there was] cash-in-hand [work]. It's linked back to this benefits issue. If there was a scheme to allow people to work for a short period of time without having a significant impact on their income over a medium term, it possibly would enable us to attract those people in the local population who were available and were able to do that work in that period of time." **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, West of England**

Farms had successfully implemented changes to engage and recruit local people

As mentioned in Chapter One, while some farms interviewed still had access to EU workers with pre-settled or settled status, most were trying to attract domestic labour through extensive recruitment efforts. Some farms had also introduced new strategies to engage and recruit locally, such as by introducing job perks or marketing their farm on social media.

Despite the challenges in recruiting local workers for seasonal agricultural roles, some farms have found success by targeting specific demographics and offering attractive job perks. One small edible horticulture farm in the South of England has tapped into the local retired population, recognising their desire for steady, part-time work. It should be noted that tapping into this market is only likely to help fill a limited number of vacancies and is not likely to solve the need for people to do more physical labour.

"[In the farmers' markets], we have the retired people...most of them are in their 50s, they just want something steady, and they'll probably do three days of work." **Small edible horticulture farm, non-scheme user, South of England**

Farms have also introduced various incentives, such as offering to pay for accommodation and increasing salaries. These perks aim to make the roles more appealing to domestic workers who might otherwise be deterred by the temporary nature of the positions or the need to relocate to rural areas.

In addition to offering benefits, some farms had invested in targeted marketing efforts to attract locals. For instance, one farm in the East of England, which had built up a large following on social media, leveraged their social media presence to promote job opportunities. However, despite these efforts, the farm reported that many applicants were not committed to the demanding work, so they ultimately had to rely on domestic agency workers to fill the gaps.

While some farms did mention the use or attempted use of local agencies to help fill vacancies, they were not always available for farms, and were only partly successful in recruiting workers.

"They all came to me from Instagram, basically seeing our Instagram and getting in touch because they've heard of the farm...everyone that we've hired has come to us directly." **Small edible horticulture farm, non-scheme user, East of England**

Multiple farms reported relying on agencies to secure a reliable local workforce. While these farms often described agency labour as expensive and sometimes unsustainable, many farms in the sample were dependent on this solution to meet their seasonal labour needs in the absence of interest from local people.

"[Locals] sign up to an agency and then they get sent out to work, but they don't want to work and then you just send them home again and it's like, it's an absolute waste of time...I can understand why people want to use migrant labour." **Small edible horticulture farm, non-scheme user, South of England**

Developing strategies to reduce the amount of labour required

Due to the labour demand caused by seasonal peaks, and the uncertainty some farms expressed about the long-term prospects of relying on the SWS, some reported actively trying to implement changes that meant seasonal peaks were less of a challenge.

Farms had deliberately tried to flatten their seasonal peaks

Due to past challenges accessing the right labour at peak times throughout the year, some farms had deliberately implemented strategies to minimise their need for seasonal labour.

A few farms stopped or reduced production of certain seasonal crops which they found particularly arduous, expensive, or inefficient to produce. For example, one edible horticultural farm stopped growing iceberg lettuce because it was increasingly costly to grow it in that particular climate.

Some farms also made efforts to change the processes of production to extend the period of time within which seasonal work could be completed. For example:

- One large poultry farm told researchers that it was becoming increasingly common in the industry for farms to freeze and store poultry rather than process it all fresh. This farm was not currently employing this strategy and reported that the ability to do so would depend on negotiations with customers (in this case, supermarkets). Others were trying different techniques like:
- Another farm in the south of England attempted to flatten seasonal peaks by diversifying the types of crops they grew. This meant they had a longer harvest period, and were less reliant on seasonal labour over short periods of time.
- A farm in the south of England used polytunnels to manage the growth of their fruits, and to make sure that harvest times aligned with contracts they had with supermarkets.

Large edible horticulture farm in the northwest of England

This large vegetable farm has strategically focused its production on root crops - 1,450 acres of carrots and 350 acres of parsnips across growing areas from Scotland to Suffolk. However, this specialisation in root vegetables is a recent shift, as the farm has phased out growing brassicas.

The farm reported that the decision to concentrate solely on root crops was driven by cost-effectiveness and the ability to store these vegetables for longer periods compared to brassicas, thereby flattening their seasonal peaks.

"Recently, they stopped growing brassica and focused on root veg," stated the HR manager. "It is more cost-effective, and root veg can be stored for longer. They freeze better."

Most farms interviewed used automation to either augment, or rely less on, labour

In some cases, automation did minimise farms' seasonal labour needs, but it also made farms' overall production more efficient, particularly when it came to packing and growing (rather than picking). Farms invested in automation to increase efficiency as new technology became available and financially viable, to reduce labour demands and improve labour retention by removing certain manual tasks. However, there was a shared view among farms that for the most part, automation augmented rather than replaced the need for labour due to the unique demands of certain agricultural tasks, and the current availability of technology. It is within this context that the farms using the SWS emphasised the need for it to continue.

"There's a misperception that automation means you go to no labour, whereas automation just means a reduction in labour." **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, North of England**

Automation had in some cases reduced the number of workers needed for a particular task while increasing the productivity of the existing workforce. For example, one large edible horticulture farm that invested in automation in their packhouse highlighted that while this had not reduced the need for labour, it did increase speed and efficiency so that with the same workforce they were able to produce far more, much faster. They did report that in the future they expected the degree of automation to eventually reduce, but not eliminate, the need for labour.

The ability to automate crop harvesting depended on the nature of the crop and the tasks involved in picking/harvesting it. Some crops required gentle handling or decision-making during harvest, which were harder to replicate with technology. Crops that were reported as more difficult to automate included asparagus, mushrooms, spring onions, and soft fruits such as blueberries and strawberries – which needed someone to feel them for ripeness, as well as needing dexterity to pick them. On the other hand, automation was reported to be more feasible within ornamental horticulture and for particular crops such as carrots and potatoes.

Farms reported that automation was not possible for all crops

A scheme user from a large edible horticulture farm in the southwest of England was growing asparagus alongside potatoes and onions. Asparagus is a difficult crop to automate the harvesting of. While they are making large capital investments in automation and research relating to automation, the nature of the crop means that labour is essential.

"Asparagus certainly isn't [well mechanised]. It requires seasonal labour. So clearly the growth of that business, and as a wider industry, is dependent on that labour." **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Southwest of England**

However, the potato and onion side of the business is very well automated because there is more predictability, and less delicacy needed in the harvesting of the crop. In the packhouse, automation was being widely used. *"There's millions of pounds of investment in automation already."*

“I don’t think [automation has] reduced the labour requirement by half, but it’s 30 to 40% less labour required now than would be if we had not invested anything in any of that technology...But I still need one group of people in the packhouse.”

On the other hand, a large ornamental horticulture farm, scheme user, was able to automate large swathes of their production process (such as irrigation, planting seedlings, moving plants around the greenhouses), and therefore was able, over time, to considerably reduce their need for labour.

Where automation was possible, it was often seen as very costly

Some farms within the sample were concerned about the cost of investing in technology that was often in the early stages of development. These farms highlighted that investing in automation usually incurred a very significant cost – large capital investments of sometimes hundreds of thousands of pounds or more. This clearly entailed some risk, and several farms reported that given the unpredictability of how effective automation will be in some cases, the risk may not be worth it.

“Automation is going to require enormous investment, as in millions. The automation is in a funny place at the moment in that there’s a lot of money being spent in some countries...but nobody is sure which is the right system to go.”

Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Northern Ireland

A large edible horticulture farm in the midlands faced similar uncertainties with investing in automation. This farm reported that they might invest in a new broccoli line (in the packhouse), which would cost £5 million. This investment would mean that instead of 200 people being needed to operate the line, only 100 people would be needed. The farm stressed that this means they would still require seasonal labour to operate the line even after this large investment.

“We’re waiting until a few months before the season starts to know whether the scheme will carry on the next year. And this is a massive issue in terms of investing in automation.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, North of England**

Some farms spoke about hesitation in investing in automation because they were unsure if they would have enough workers to maintain production levels, which would justify the return on investment in automation. These farms acknowledged that this concern seemed somewhat circular, and applied to other large capital investments beyond automation, such as making their businesses more environmentally sustainable.

Chapter Three | The Efficacy of the SWS

Farms reported numerous benefits to using the SWS, including the quality and reliability of workers recruited via the SWS. However, the scheme was not without its challenges. Farms faced difficulties navigating the complex administrative processes, managing cultural differences, and bearing the associated costs of using the SWS. Despite these challenges, most farms in the sample using the SWS viewed it as essential to their operations and made efforts to create a positive experience for their workers.

Overall, farms had a positive experience of the workers recruited through the Seasonal Worker Scheme

Farms reported that workers recruited through the SWS valued working there, and were hard-working and productive

Farms reported that workers recruited through the SWS were generally highly motivated and productive workers, and viewed the SWS as a valuable opportunity given the amount of money they could earn and how far that money could go in their home country.

At a large edible horticulture farm in the southwest of England, researchers had an impromptu conversation with several Tajik workers, who shared that after just one season of working in the UK, they had earned enough money to purchase a house upon returning to Tajikistan. Many farms within the sample noted that workers would ask for more hours and expressed a desire to return the following season. Farms recognised that this was a contrast to some of the workers who used to come to do seasonal work, for whom the appeal was not the same.

“The guys in the field...are earning a fortune if they’re working hard...but the guys that were coming in [before the SWS] they could not see that money because they weren’t prepared to put in the work.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Southwest England**

All farms using the SWS provided training to these workers. Training was essential for workers to be able to perform their tasks, but was also reported by farms as a good opportunity for workers, as it provided them with skills they could then build on during the season, and potentially take on more responsibility if they performed well. This was often a quick process, with most workers adjusting to the work in the first few weeks. However, there were reported instances of workers who did not like the work, or who were struggling with it. In some cases, this meant it took more than a few weeks for workers to become productive – sometimes up to five or six. In other cases, farms reported workers being capable of doing the work but not wanting to. This was not commonly reported within the sample.

“With some people, you showed them once and that’s it, they want to do it, they do it right and they get up to speed. A couple of weeks is more than enough...For other people, it’s a bit more difficult, and then the worst thing comes when you know people can do it, but they don’t.” **Medium edible horticulture, scheme user, Southeast England**

“We’ve had people through the Seasonal Worker Scheme...we had a couple, two years ago...they didn’t perform in any jobs. And when we asked them nicely to go a bit faster, and to see how the workers around them worked, they said we were stressing them.” **Medium edible horticulture, scheme user, East of Scotland**

In instances like those cited above, it was reported that the seasonal workers went home after mutual agreement with the employer.

Scheme users also reported that their goal was to have a high percentage of returnees coming through the scheme given that they thought the workers were productive, and to avoid the need to train up a whole new cohort for each season. More on this in the section about recruitment and retention below.

Farms reported that workers recruited through the SWS were generally suited to, and happy fulfilling, the roles that needed filling

The roles and tasks performed by migrant workers differed from farm to farm. On the farms involved in this research, they broadly ranged from picking and cultivating (or on poultry farms, slaughtering and processing the birds), to packing and production. There were grades for some roles, meaning that workers could earn more seniority, and with it, higher pay. For example, migrant workers could become QA (quality assurance) staff or manage some production lines. These different grades came with different pay rates.

“Initially, [seasonal workers] would come to work on the line, so that’s the packing of the tomatoes. The next year it could be that they become a line leader or a QC (quality controller).” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Midlands**

Farms where migrant workers were picking in fields or greenhouses also offered performance-based bonuses for higher picking rates. In these instances, workers would be on a flat pay rate that could be increased based on how much they were picking, and the quality of what they picked. This ability for workers to increase their earning was seen as appealing, according to farms.

“We pay minimum wage, always minimum wage. But our pickers, according to their productivity, they also get bonuses on top.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, in Northwest England**

This base salary plus performance bonus was reported to be a considerable incentive for migrant workers, whose earnings could count for a lot in their home country, as mentioned above. The same was not reported to be true of UK workers.

One farm claimed that the top performance bonus workers were earning the equivalent of £50,000 per year based on their hourly pay. It was not clear how this was worked out, and given seasonal peaks, it could never be the case that there was enough produce to pick, on this scale, year round.

Some farms said that they could re-allocate jobs to workers based on their preferences, but the choices were limited. For example, on fruit farms, if someone was not dextrous and struggled with cultivation, pruning, and picking, they could ask to move to the packhouse.

“We had two seasonal workers in the packhouse because they weren’t keen to work in the field, so we moved them into the packhouse.” **Small edible horticulture farm, scheme user, in East of England**

As above, sometimes this had an impact on pay, with performance bonuses more common in picking jobs. This pay difference was not always reported to matter to migrant workers, with a few farms reporting that the packhouse was a popular choice for some workers, particularly among workers on the SWS for the first time, who thought the indoor work might be easier. Others reported that workers preferred to be picking and earning the most money possible.

“All [workers] want to go to the packhouse.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, in Northern Ireland**

This did vary depending on the worker, though. For example, one large edible horticulture farm in the southwest of England said they had experienced teams of men working outdoors, picking, who became frustrated when they had a woman in their team who they perceived to be picking slower than them, arguing that she should therefore work in the packhouse instead.

In general, farms found those recruited through the SWS had the appropriate skills needed for the roles and were easy to manage. Several farms reported being surprised by how many women were coming through the SWS. They expected more men to come through the SWS as their seasonal workers in the past had been predominantly men, and they thought this kind of manual labour tended to attract men more. Although they also acknowledged that some of the more intricate work that required more dexterity was often suited to women.

“There’s a lot of ladies, they’ve got very good communication skills and they’re quite dextrous...we’ve got more ladies than men.” **Medium ornamental horticulture, scheme user, Midlands**

Generally, farms reported they were able to balance the roles between men and women so that everyone could work productively in roles they were content in.

Farms were meeting the baseline requirements set out by the SWS

All farms said they complied with the SWS rules around providing accommodation and other facilities for workers on the SWS

All the farms using the SWS knew they or scheme operators had to provide accommodation for the workers. According to [government guidance](#), scheme operators are responsible for 'monitoring all the workers [they] sponsor, ensuring that workers are housed in hygienic and safe accommodation that is in a good state of repair.'⁴

It is important to note that all farms that took part in this research volunteered to do so. It is unlikely that any farms failing to comply with SWS rules would have chosen to take part in the research. Considering this, the sample cannot be said to be representative of farms' compliance to the SWS rules in the UK. Researchers were also shown around the sites by members of the farm staff, and could only go where they chose to take them.

Among the farms visited, accommodation was usually provided onsite, and the rent was always offset. The amount that accommodation was offset varied from farm to farm. According to the Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority, farms and workers on the SWS may agree to wage deductions for items like accommodation, however deductions must not take seasonal workers' pay below minimum wage.⁵

For example, a small edible horticulture farm in the east of Scotland charged each worker on the SWS for their accommodation and took this directly from their salary. The farm has roughly 50 caravans which accommodated between one and four people. In 2023, each worker paid £58 per week for space in a caravan. The farm said they chose to pay slightly under the maximum they could charge (around £63) because of additional costs for electricity. Each caravan received the first gas bottle and electricity card for free upon arrival, which the farm said lasted on average for about one month, and they paid for gas and electricity thereafter. Workers were paid a base rate of £10.42 per hour, with opportunities to earn more through a bonus scheme based on their productivity, measured by how many trays they filled. They said some workers earned up to £15-20 an hour by filling more trays.

⁴ GOV.UK (2024). *Workers and Temporary Workers: guidance for sponsors; sponsor a seasonal worker*. SE3.4

⁵ Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority. *Your rights – Seasonal workers scheme*



When farms did not use on-site accommodation, some used accommodation provided by other farms. One poultry farm said they use accommodation owned by a horticulture farm in the area. This horticulture farm used their accommodation for seasonal workers earlier in the year, meaning it had already been audited, and was vacant during the poultry season. Other accommodation reportedly used included an out-of-season holiday camp and local hostels.

When on-site, accommodation predominantly consisted of caravans, camper vans and mobile homes. However, it also included accommodation pods that could be dropped into the right place, re-purposed farm buildings used for dormitory accommodation, and temporary housing that had been built for something else, elsewhere, and then brought in to house migrant workers. All farms in the sample emphasised that the accommodation provided to migrant workers went through regular checks and rounds of maintenance to make sure it was appropriate to live in. Many farms had staff members in maintenance roles whose job it was to do this.

Accommodation was organised in a variety of ways. Often, those from the same countries were housed together. Farms stressed that this wasn't mandatory, but was usually preferred by migrant workers as they often spoke the same language and had other cultural similarities such as food, washing habits and routines. Couples were also housed together, and often accommodation consisted of pairs of couples. Others housed people according to which crops they were working with, and which scheme operator had sponsored them. At one large edible horticulture farm, seasonal workers from one operator would work on courgettes and would be housed together in accommodation owned by that agency. For this farm, this made things easier in terms of allocation of work and shift patterns.

All farms in the sample made efforts to ensure information was translated into relevant languages

All farms were aware of their obligation to provide contracts to prospective workers on the SWS in their native language, and all reported doing so.

Overall, the farms did not have an issue with there being no English language requirement for workers coming through the SWS. Some employers acknowledged that this would slow down recruitment, given the need to provide evidence of English language proficiency. However, many also acknowledged that ensuring that all information pertinent to their seasonal employees was communicated in their language was sometimes

challenging. For example, they were occasionally notified about the origin country of some of their seasonal workers very shortly before they arrived at the farm.

While many of the workers on the SWS at the farms interviewed were from ‘the Stans’ in central Asia, and often had Russian as a common language, some did not and therefore had to be catered for on an individual basis when it came to translating information. Often, it was the role of welfare officers to either make sure any operational information was translated appropriately or to translate things themselves, often using tools like Google Translate. Most farms interviewed were making a concerted effort to ensure the appropriate information was translated for their workers. For contractual documents, farms often used translation services.

“Most of them, their language is Russian and our manager can speak six or seven different languages. We got all the documents [translated to] Russian.” **Small edible horticulture farm, scheme user, East of England**

For example, many farms within the sample had laundry facilities near the workers’ accommodation that they could use. Often, they had information posters relating to the laundry process translated into the relevant languages. Several farms had poster boards in other areas too, such as in canteens or games areas, and several farms had posters relating to how to spot exploitation on these boards for workers to read.

Most farms interviewed were aware that workers recruited through the SWS could request transfers to other farms, though not all had direct experience dealing with it

Overall, across the sample, this did not pose a serious challenge to employers, and requesting transfers did not appear to be particularly common. In cases where they had dealt with the transfer process, some farms saw it as relatively straightforward to deal with. For those who had experience processing transfer requests, they reported it was usually due to a worker not liking the job, feeling as if there were better opportunities elsewhere, or wanting to join a friend or family member elsewhere. In these cases, employers said they were happy to help people transfer.

“If they really don’t like the job, I’ve said to them...I can get you a transfer. They wanted to go to Scotland for grapes...they wanted to go and travel and see a bit more of the country. That’s fine.” **Large horticulture farm, scheme user, Midlands**

“[If] they really don’t like the job...I can try and get [them] a transfer.” **Large horticulture farm, scheme user, Northwest England**

“I don’t get [workers transferring out]. What I do get is my brother works for me...is there a possibility that his brother can get a transfer?” **Large edible horticulture, scheme user, Midlands**

In some cases, workers were transferred to other farms based on the seasonality of the crops on both farms. For example, some farms could pair up easily with others in this way – such as daffodils and asparagus. For some crops, the seasons are short. This means workers will not be booked for the whole six months, and the scheme providers will pre-arrange the movement of workers from one farm to another if the crops on the respective farms are seasonally complementary. Some farms also reported that work can dry up despite the fact they had booked workers for the full time period, in which case they are able to try to facilitate a transfer to ensure people can work for the duration of their visa time period.

“[It] is why I like working with them [scheme provider], because you can just have that open conversation and say if we need to keep them, we’ll try and find something, but when [production has] dropped off greater than we [thought] it would... and they transfer them over to I don’t know what, [another local farm] or something like that.” **Large ornamental horticulture, scheme user, South of England**

There were also examples of workers just turning up at farms hoping for work. For example, one large edible horticulture farm had experienced this several times, but they were aware that if these workers' sponsor was a different scheme operator, they would not be able to offer them work.⁶

"We have to go to the agencies and see if they can accommodate [the transfer request]." **Large edible horticulture, scheme user, Midlands**

Some farms went beyond the baseline requirements of the SWS to retain workers

Some farms wanted to go beyond the baseline requirements to ensure their workers were happy and settled for the period they worked on the farm. Many farms within the sample also reiterated the value of workers returning in future seasons. Returnees were preferable given the aforementioned time farms had to invest in training new workers coming in. Therefore, going beyond the baseline requirements was considered a worthwhile investment to try to attract workers to come back in the future.

Some farms went beyond the baseline offering for accommodation, such as by providing free energy to seasonal workers living in caravans. Other farms provided workers with cards they could top up to manage their own energy use.

"Last year they paid £58 per week per person for accommodation. On arrival they have their first gas and electricity card for free." **Medium edible horticulture farm, scheme user, East of Scotland**

Some also provided things like bedding, free Wi-Fi, and pots and pans in order to make sure workers felt comfortable and had what they needed to settle in quickly.

"Our thought process is that if you want to attract workers and keep workers, you've got to look after them...that's why we're happy to provide all the linen, pots and pans and plates and cutlery." **Small edible horticulture farm, scheme user, East of England**

Several farms provided access to cars so that workers could drive to the local shops to do their weekly food shop or explore the local area during their time off. Others provided weekly minibuses or coaches to the supermarket.

"We have to be...very competitive. We do free transport from lots of different areas...we obviously have a subsidised canteen here, we obviously have the staff shop." **Large poultry farm, scheme user in East of England**

Some farms in the sample, particularly poultry, offered additional incentives to increase worker retention during peak periods

Retention of workers was not a huge issue for most of the farms interviewed. Farms reported that workers coming through the SWS were generally eager to do the work and diligent in doing so, and that the main problems arose when workers wanted more hours than they were getting. However, some farms did experience challenges with retention around Christmas, when workers wanted to go home to their families. This presented a greater challenge to poultry businesses, many of whom had sharp seasonal peaks around Christmas. This was particularly relevant for workers who lived closer to the UK and for whom it was easier/cheaper to get home.

"We can't force people to stay...if they're coming from Europe, if they feel they've earned enough money and a cheap flight comes up, and if you wait until three or four days before Christmas, its three times the price, they're going to fly home. And we get that." **Large poultry farm, scheme user, East of England**

⁶ Workers on the SWS could only transfer to farms covered by the same scheme operator.

While most farms interviewed were not going beyond what was required of them in terms of covering costs, some felt they needed to pay for additional things such as travel in order to encourage workers to stay for the duration of the seasonal peak.

“It was really the companies [scheme operators] we work with, it was their recommendation [to pay for travel including flights for the seasonal workers] to get good people into us, and the number that we required. They said to get these people over you want to make it as attractive as you possibly can.” **Large poultry farm, scheme user, East of England**

Another farm reported offering to pay for migrant workers' living expenses for the first few weeks after their arrival. This acted as an incentive, but was also a practical requirement at times, with many workers not turning up with enough money to cover basic needs.

“There were quite a lot of challenges in terms of like people showing up with no money, and not clear whether we should be helping them.” **Large poultry farm, non-scheme user, in Central England**

Several farms, particularly the larger ones, had welfare officers in place

The larger farms tended to have these roles – sometimes under different titles such as Head of Welfare or Head of People. More often than not, these roles were filled by European workers who had pre-settled or settled status. Many of these workers had come to the UK originally on previous seasonal worker schemes. These employees were typically in charge of all the pastoral needs of workers on the SWS.

“I have a welfare officer who speaks five different languages, who is my right-hand woman, who deals with every need, whether it be bank card being blocked or needing to go to the dentist.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Southwest England**

“They are pastoral, they're driving them to the dentist and helping bring them to the bank etc. They're there as people to listen to them as well.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, West of England**

Some farms were putting on extra-curricular events and activities to try to increase migrant workers' welfare

Several employers recognised that because the farms were remote, and migrant workers lived on site full time, there was a need for some extra-curricular activities. Some also had communal spaces near or around their accommodation so they could cook and eat socially. For example, one large edible horticulture farm had barbecues available outside each mobile home. Another medium edible horticulture farm had a communal eating area with a large pizza oven that workers could use. Many farms within the sample had provided access to gyms and games rooms, or organised socials and parties for their SWS workers. For example, one large horticulture farm put on Christmas parties for their workers each year.

“We have a Christmas party for them each year where we go to the beach, we hire a band.” **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Southwest England**

There were some specific challenges farms experienced with components of the SWS

Many farms within the sample felt the time limits of the SWS were too rigid

The six-month window of the SWS came up regularly in interviews. Many within the sample, particularly edible horticulture farms, reported that this six-month window was too rigid to reflect the unpredictability of their seasons. This was particularly true for farms that had more than one seasonal peak throughout the year.

“We work for 12 months a year but we will go through quiet periods purely because of the weather. So, this year it was warm in September, so we got a flush of products at the beginning of October. That's pushed everything back so we've just had two weeks of really quiet time, but from Friday everything will pick up until February for two weeks when it

drops off again. But in March we go into our promotion season and we will be flat out. [...]. So, I prefer 12 months.”

Large horticulture farm, scheme user, Midlands

Several farms advocated a nine-month visa period to allow for this flexibility when farms' need for seasonal workers extended beyond the six-month period. Some of these farms were aware that this would mean having to cover the NHS surcharge, and some felt this was a cost worth incurring.

Some also thought that the rigidity of the six-month cooling-off period did not match the unpredictability of seasons. For example, they wanted SWS workers to start five months into the cooling-off period if the weather meant production was shifted forward. One small fruit farm in the East of England echoed this; *"You're just working with the weather."* The farm really appreciated returnee workers on the SWS, who were more productive after gaining some experience on the farm. However, sometimes the farm struggled to get returnees at the time they needed. If their season started earlier than usual, returnees could not come back to work at the farm because they needed to wait for the six-month cooling period to finish, and would hence not be available at the start of the next season when workers were needed.

Meanwhile, one farm reflected that the six-month period was a good motivator for workers on the SWS to do as much work as possible. They worried that a longer period might negatively impact productivity.

"I know our managers like the six months, because six months is actually not a long time, but it's enough time to work really hard and then have your cooling off. Whereas if you come for nine months...the productivity may be [affected]. I think knowing that they're here for six months and wanting to get as much money as they can helps." **Large horticulture farm, scheme user, Southwest England**

Poultry farms expressed further concerns about making the most of workers on the SWS for the six weeks they were in the UK. One large poultry farm reflected that poultry farming is more inflexible than horticulture, *"You can't leave birds out on farms, so they have to be processed."* Another poultry farm was worried about making the most of their seasonal workers' time in the UK because of the associated costs of the SWS.

"My biggest issues are the cost for the short period of time that I want to recruit. You know, if I was recruiting for six weeks or more then that money wouldn't be a problem." **Small poultry farm, non-scheme user, East of England**

The mushroom farms in the sample also articulated that they don't have seasons in the same way as other edible horticulture farms, but still have labour shortages. They recognised that a wholesale change to the rules of the current SWS might not be appropriate. Instead, they advocated having a separate visa for farms whose labour demands are more consistent throughout the year.

Many farms within the sample reported challenges with the SWS processes being mediated through third party providers

Farms within the sample recognised the scale of the recruitment task in bringing seasonal workers in, and scheme providers' role within this. Many experienced challenges related to the role of these providers. These can be categorised as follows:

- There was reportedly a considerable administrative burden due to the scheme operators' involvement.
- While larger farms generally had a good relationship with scheme operators and got what they asked for, several smaller farms did not.
- Some farms reported confusion over who was responsible for enforcing the various SWS rules.

Some farms explicitly stated that they would prefer to circumvent scheme operators entirely and deal with recruitment of workers on the SWS directly, even if that meant taking on sponsorship.

Some farms reported a considerable administrative burden associated with mediation between scheme operators

This burden was exacerbated when farms were using multiple scheme operators to spread the risk of not getting the number and type of workers they needed from one provider alone.

"We pay £800 - £1,000 to be audited by each agency each year and we do use four agencies because we need to spread our risks, because we ordered 380 workers from [scheme operators] a couple of years ago and they only

provided 90, so we were in a right mess at that point." **Large horticulture farm, scheme user, Northwest England**

Farms using multiple scheme operators reported that each operator had to audit them (and often they in turn would carry out due diligence on each provider). Given each operator's audit was largely the same, farms felt they incurred an unnecessary extra cost. In addition to scheme operators, most farms interviewed reported being audited by several other parties such as the Home Office, supermarkets (where these were customers), and food hygiene organisations, to name a few.

"[The scheme operators] all do their own audits... I think this year we have six people from the Home Office here for four days or something. We have, I think, now 50 days of external auditing." **Large horticulture farm, scheme user, North of England**

Some farms expressed a wish to have one centralised auditing process that all farms had to comply with, whether they used multiple scheme operators or not.

Generally, larger farms in the sample had stronger relationships with scheme operators than the smaller farms

Farms' relationships with scheme operators varied, and some had relationships with multiple operators to ensure they could meet their labour needs and spread the risk in case one operator could not guarantee the labour they needed. Many of the larger farms in the sample who had a high number of workers on the SWS had strong relationships with scheme operators. They felt able to clearly set out the labour they wanted, and did not report any major challenges in getting what they asked for. According to some farms, this more stable and consistent stream of workers coming through the scheme was a relatively recent trend happening mainly over the last year or two.

"Over the last 12 months, the agencies have nailed it and supplied us with people we are happy with 90% of the time." **Large edible horticulture farm, scheme user, Midlands**

For example, one large edible horticulture farm in Worcestershire got hundreds of workers on the SWS each year, usually getting the number they asked for. They also requested couples so they could use their accommodation more efficiently and seamlessly (e.g. having two couples in each mobile home), and ideally returnees or workers who had not worked on other farms and so were not trained in a different way. Usually, scheme operators met these demands, speaking to the specificity of some farms' requests and operators' ability to fulfil them.

The process for engaging with scheme operators also varied. Farms with established relationships with scheme operators contacted them at a certain point in the year for the following year's request and set out what they needed via email. Meanwhile, those who did not have established relationships with scheme operators did not know the expected time to contact them, and did not necessarily know what they could ask for, bar the number of workers.

Some smaller farms in the sample found this process of engaging with scheme operators more challenging. For example, a small horticulture farm in the south of England reported having tried to access the scheme multiple times and struggling to do so.

"I tried ringing up [the scheme operator] and never got through to anyone. [...] I've talked to [a scheme provider], and they sound good. I chased them after a month, and they said they would send the contract on Monday. They kept saying Monday and nothing came." **Small horticulture farm, non-scheme user, East of England**

It should be noted that it cannot be claimed that there is any deliberate attempt on the part of the scheme operators to focus less on smaller farms or not take their requests as seriously. It may well be that larger farms have dedicated roles within the business to communicating with scheme operators and setting demands; whereas on smaller farms, it may be the owner doing this, who will likely have less capacity to do so. Notwithstanding, it is true that some smaller farms within the sample reported having challenges getting the workers they want through scheme operators.

Some smaller farms expressed dissatisfaction with scheme operators

A small edible horticulture farm, non-user, in the East of England tried applying for the SWS. They did not hear back from most of the scheme operators they contacted. This experience put them off and left them with little confidence that they would be provided with the labour they needed through the SWS.

On the other hand, a large edible horticulture farm, user, also in the East of England, was approached by scheme operators at the start of the SWS. This farm knows the scheme operators personally, is able to communicate their needs and tends to get the workers they need (they get around 1000 workers in total over the year).

Some farms reported confusion about who was enforcing SWS rules

Across the sample, most farms thought the SWS rules were intuitive and easy to comply with. However, it was not always clear to all farms who was responsible for enforcing the various rules.

For example, most farms interviewed either did not know about the rule stipulating that workers on the SWS should arrive at the farms with £1,250 of their own money, or said it was unrealistic. Indeed, most farms said they had no real expectation that anyone would turn up with that amount of money, and their experience suggested they did not. Farms also did not know if there were actually any consequences for not complying with this rule, or who would be responsible for enforcing it or stepping in if workers did not have access to money.

"I think they [seasonal workers] are told to bring some sort of money, but they are never going to have that £1,200. I would like for them to be able to support themselves for two weeks. It's not a big issue as long as they don't come and suddenly go off sick and we have to feed them and look after them and it's our responsibility." **Large vegetable farm, scheme user, Northwest England**

"I did not know that was a rule. And how am I meant to implement that?" **Small poultry farm, non-scheme user, Essex.** [While not a user of the SWS this year, this farm had used it in previous years and had intentions to do so again.]

Given farms had no expectation that workers on the SWS would turn up with that amount of money, many put mitigations in place to ensure they wouldn't go without money in the first week or so on the farm. One large edible horticulture farm sometimes covered initial expenses for workers, if necessary, on arrival. For example, they would provide up-front money to buy food at the supermarket. Several farms did similar things, usually on a case-by-case basis.

However, one large poultry farm had the following to say about when workers on the SWS turned up without the requisite money to support themselves:

"Eight workers came in and you could not fault them, but they did not know what was happening. They came in with no money, expecting us to support them. They did not have any food, any drink, so we had to take them to [a large supermarket chain]. [...] The agency told us they [workers] would come in with a card with money on it, but they [workers] knew nothing about a card. So we contacted the agency, they went back to the government but they [the workers] just never got any money." **Large poultry farm, former scheme user, Central England**

On further inspection, it transpires that the £1,250 is common across several immigration routes. In this case, the scheme operators can agree to cover costs if necessary for the first month. However, this was not widely known by farms.

This confusion about the rules and who was responsible for enforcing them extended beyond those rules that seemed arbitrary or unrealistic like the £1,250 rule. For example, one large poultry farm reflected on an experience relating to the strict time limits of the SWS.

"The responsibilities were really high. When we got our men, we were given an ultimatum to get them out of the country by the 31st December. The bus did not turn up and we weren't sure, was the onus on us? Was the onus on them?" **Large poultry farm, former scheme user, South of England**

Some farms reported considerable financial costs associated with using the SWS

Several farms reported that the cost of the SWS was significant within their overall business expenditure. The key costs include:

- Cost of recruitment
- Cost of accommodation
- Cost of training new workers and the cost of workers not being productive for sometimes several weeks
- Cost of hiring or retaining certain staff to manage, support, or communicate properly with seasonal workers
- The administrative processing fees that scheme operators charge

One large edible horticulture farm said their seasonal labour bill (including wages, accommodation, investment in training, etc.) was £12m – more than a third of their annual turnover, which was around £30m. They have 1,200 total staff including seasonal labour, with 45 permanent staff.

“Our recruitment bill [what is paid to scheme operators] while using some agencies would have been about £35,000 to £40,000. It’s now £200,000.” **Large horticulture farm, scheme user, West of England**

A large poultry farm in the east of England had the following to say about the cost of the wages for workers on the SWS over their seasonal peak:

“We have had seasons where we’ve had to pay for everything, so the travel to the UK, accommodation, transport...the cost was very, very, very high. We want to make the package as attractive as we possibly could for that five-week period...I believe it cost us about £1.7 million in wages. For five weeks, the cost was astronomical.” **Large poultry farm, scheme user, East of England**

Before the UK left the EU, this farm used to recruit workers directly from countries in the EU, mainly Bulgaria and Romania, as well as using agencies for about 50% of the seasonal workforce. Now, they are totally reliant on scheme operators to provide seasonal labour.

There were other additional costs incurred by employers through using the SWS as well as recruitment and wages. Several farms reported the considerable cost of setting up and maintaining accommodation. Putting in place training for all seasonal workers coming in for the first time, and the cost involved in their being less productive for the first few weeks, also had an impact. And in some cases, such as a large edible horticulture farm in the southwest of England, farms were creating roles just to deal with the incoming workers on the SWS. This particular farm had hired a welfare officer who dealt with more of the pastoral side of supporting all the workers on the SWS. This was costing the business about £30,000 a year.

For one large edible horticulture farm with 240 permanent staff and around 300 workers on the SWS recruited via Fruitful and Proforce, the admin cost alone of the SWS was approximately £100,000 per year.

For larger farms, this cost was usually accepted, sometimes grudgingly, as necessary in order to get the labour they needed. However, some smaller farms reported these costs as more of an issue, especially given that the time period the labour is required varies greatly.

“We’ve got to pay £500 per person. We’re a small family business. You’ve got to pay [the same] for a visa if it’s six months or a few weeks.” **Medium poultry farm, scheme user, Midlands**

This £500 sum refers to the lump sum some farms paid scheme operators for workers on the SWS. Other scheme operators required farms to pay weekly for seasonal workers. Those paying weekly preferred this as it allowed for more flexibility, for instance if the farm needed workers for a short period than originally planned.

In addition, some farms highlighted the administrative processing fees that scheme operators charge each time an employee transfers to a different farm (note that within this sample, it was reported that transfers were not common). One farm suggested that, given this, scheme operators had no incentive whatsoever to try to ensure employees stay at their farm for the duration of the season.

“I think we get scrutinised by the Home Office, but the agencies have a bit more of a free rein. For example, we had one worker from [a scheme operator] who stayed for two or three months and then transferred to another farm, because we could offer them 32 hours but not much more. So, the agency charged the other farm £280. The worker was there for six weeks and then said they’d like to come back to us, when we had more work available, and the agency billed us another £280.” **Large horticulture farm, scheme user, Northwest England**

It should be noted that this farm explicitly reported that they wouldn’t want any employee to stay at their farm if they wanted to work elsewhere. Some farms suggested it might be fairer if they were required to pay reduced admin fees for returning workers through the SWS, given – they assume – there is less work for scheme operators to do overall for returning workers.

There were also several indirect costs of the SWS. For example, several farms reported that new workers coming in need 4-6 weeks of training and experience before getting up to the speed and quality standards required of them. However, this would obviously apply to new domestically sourced seasonal workers and workers on the SWS alike. In general, it highlighted the importance of returning seasonal workers.

Some farms in the sample expressed the wish for workers on the SWS to be able to transfer between sectors

The view was sometimes expressed that the SWS rules should be more flexible in terms of worker allocation. Some spoke about past times when seasonal workers were able to move between farms in different sectors if they were in the same location, once demand for one ended and demand for the other started.

The farms that expressed this view saw the distinction between sectors as arbitrary and practically limiting. For example, a large poultry farm reported frustration at not being able to access workers from nearby farm after they were done with harvesting there, all because workers could not transfer between sectors.

“In an ideal world, you wouldn’t have two separate visas. What we used to do in the past is that they [seasonal workers] would finish on the pumpkins down there [a farm down the road, whose accommodation they regularly hire], they would stay in their accommodation, everything would stay the same but then we will employ them for the next six weeks [for Turkey season].” **Large poultry farm, scheme user, East of England**

“There’s plenty of people that come in on the horticultural scheme on six-month visas who are still here in December or could be here in December. Why don’t you let them swap over in December or November to seasonal poultry?”

Small poultry farm, scheme user, Southeast England

Annex I – additional rules of the Seasonal Worker Scheme

Key rules for the SWS

Seasonal Worker visas are granted through scheme operators who are licensed to recruit seasonal workers for seasonal work in the horticulture or poultry industry. Scheme operators must issue a Certificate of Sponsorship to workers they wish to employ, acting as their licensed sponsor.

The scheme operator is responsible for ensuring that the various rules of the SWS are complied with, including:⁷

- The work environment is safe and complies with relevant Health and Safety requirements.
- Employers take adequate steps to ensure workers understand Health and Safety procedures, including providing translations into the workers' first language if required. There is no English language requirement for workers.
- Workers are treated fairly by their employer, including not penalising workers for failing to work at the fair piece rate.
- Workers are given an employment contract in their first language, as well as in English – these must not be zero-hours contracts.
- Workers must be guaranteed at least 32 hours' work per week.
- Workers are paid properly – this includes paying the minimum hourly rate, alongside satisfying relevant National Minimum Wage regulations, including those on fair rates for piece work, and Holiday Pay.
- Workers are allowed time off and proper breaks.
- Workers are made fully aware of procedures if they are sick or injured, including how to make a claim on any medical insurance they may have.
- Workers are provided with appropriate equipment to do their job safely and are not charged for it, including any replacements of worn and accidentally damaged items.
- Employers with whom scheme operators have placed workers do not impose additional, unnecessary charges on workers, whether directly or indirectly.
- Workers are housed in hygienic and safe accommodation that is in a good state of repair.
- Workers are not transported in unsafe vehicles.
- Workers are not threatened with or subjected to violence.
- Workers are not subject to any discrimination.
- Workers' passports, travel documents or any other identity documents are not withheld from them.
- Procedures are in place to enable workers to report any concerns to scheme operators.
- Workers may make a request to transfer to a different farm.
- Workers are made fully aware of the expectations on scheme operators and the employer, and how to report any concerns where those expectations are not met.
- Workers must have enough money to support themselves in the UK – they will usually need to have at least £1,270 available (unless exempt).⁸
- Employers must show proof of trying to recruit employees from the UK at DWP or elsewhere.

⁷ [GOV.UK \(2024\). Workers and Temporary Workers: guidance for sponsors; sponsor a seasonal worker](#)

⁸ [GOV.UK. Seasonal Worker visa \(Temporary Work\)](#)

Anex 2 – full sample breakdown

Site visits completed	Remote interviews completed	Total
18	12	30

Quota	Quota	Site visits completed	Remote interviews completed	Total
SWV	User	15	6	21
	Non-user	2	4	6
	Both	1	2	3
Type of work	Horticulture	12	8	20
	Ornamental	4	0	4
	Poultry	2	4	6
Region	England	12	9	21
	East Midlands	0	1	1
	West Midlands	3	0	3
	East of England	2	3	5
	Yorkshire & Humber	1	0	1
	Greater London	0	0	0
	North East	0	0	0
	North West	0	1	1
	South East	5	4	9
	South West	1	0	1
	Northern Ireland	5	0	5
	Wales	0	1	1
Size of farm	Scotland	1	2	3
	Small	4	5	9
	Medium	5	2	7
	Large	9	5	14