

Call for Evidence

House of Lords Committee on the Horticultural Sector April 2023

1. This submission is made by Dr Hannah Pitt from the University of Cardiff who focuses on skills for food growing, and Dr Lydia Medland at the University of Bristol who researches seasonal work and labour migration for the horticultural sector. The submission builds on our collective collaboration on the [Good Work for Good Food](#) international Forum, focusing on questions posed by the inquiry for which we have expertise.
2. We note that domestic horticulture includes growers operating to very divergent scales and production principles, with produce entering localised and global supply chains. **This diversity aids resilience and is worth enhancing.**

Key challenges, risks, and opportunities facing the sector

3. There is currently a mis-match between public health priorities and horticultural production and supply. While the Government recommend all adults and children to consume at least five fruit and vegetable portions a day, the UK is not producing the crops to support this. Latest Government statistics say that “Home production of vegetables contributed to around 57% of the total UK supply in 2021” and, “Home production contributed 15% of the total UK supply of fruit in 2021” ([DEFRA, 2022](#)). Even this domestic production is threatened by multiple crises.

Labour crisis and the existing workforce

4. Labour refers to work done by all involved in production, not solely waged workers. Landowning farmers, their family, tenant farmers, market gardeners, small holders, independent contractors, full-time and part time employees of horticultural businesses, workers in plant nurseries and seasonal agricultural workers, many of whom are now migrant workers coming to the UK on the UK’s Seasonal Worker Visa Route make horticulture possible.
5. Challenges facing this work force include:
 - General challenges related to living in or rural areas, namely
 - cost of rural housing and access to it,
 - access to social services (medical care, education, social care, public transport)
 - rising costs of inputs such as electricity, gas and fertilisers.
 - Limits to the improvement of horticultural businesses and livelihoods of those working in them, namely
 - tight margins meaning that sometimes it is not profitable to plant and harvest produce,
 - difficulty raising the prices of produce due to fixed contracts with retailers,
 - limited avenues to market due to concentration with a few large retailers, (alternative routes to market e.g. via vegetable box schemes are possible for some but not all).

Competition with imports

6. **The committee should be mindful of the history of inequity in English horticulture** and the possible continuity of exploitative relationships. Imports constitute approximately half of fruit and vegetable consumption in England. This reliance dates back decades and in some cases

centuries, and involves many trading relationships that originate in colonial ties including production by enslaved peoples in colonies.

7. A primary driver for overseas horticultural production is availability of people willing to work for far below the cost of labour in the UK. Dr Lydia Medland's research found: a UK farm worker would be expected to earn around £70.70 for a seven hour day ([Gov.UK, 2023](#)), while in Morocco an agricultural worker growing tomatoes would earn around £5.50 per day ([Medland, 2019](#)). Even accounting for the different contexts, these low labour costs do not represent high earnings for workers in poorer countries, rather, such workers are subject to similar pressures from retailers and others to keep prices, and therefore wages, low ([Medland, 2019](#)).
8. The ecological costs of long supply chains which often go hand in hand with low wage labour are also often offshored; these ecological costs such as depleting water tables in areas of intensive production and desertification of previously fertile lands are borne by already poor and marginalised people.
9. Trade *can* be beneficial to all. However, as recent food shortages showed, high dependency on overseas production can leave England with a food security issue with growers leaving the sector, or would-be farmers and growers unable to access land to grow food. Challenges faced daily are leading some growers to leave the sector and further investment overseas. These pressures need attention now, and should not lose out to the appeal of potential automation.

Cost of Living Crisis

10. In response to the cost of living crisis, **Government could support affordable food clubs, extended vegetable box schemes and provisioning to publicly run institutions.** This would support growers *and* consumers, with uplift in profits enabling decent wages to horticultural workers. The crisis is driving people to consume a poorer mix of foods with fewer fruit and vegetables, making it difficult for growers to increase prices, and hence profitability. However, English consumers pay relatively low food prices in comparison to European countries.

Skills and recruitment challenges, particularly in relation to skilled jobs

11. Work in *horticulture* is seen as largely unskilled; this misconception grossly under-estimates the complexity of tasks across growing operations and depth of expertise which workers across them develop in their roles ([Pitt 2021](#)). Difficulties recruiting experienced workers are apparent across types of grower and job types, in part because of lack of provision of specialist horticultural education programmes in the UK ([Pitt 2022](#)). On-the-job learning and informal training provision has been used by the sector to compensate for this which is particularly significant for pathways into smaller scale and agro-ecological horticulture. Narrow economic margins reduce capacity to invest in skills development at all scales of operation.
12. **Government should provide strategic oversight of knowledge development and workforce planning for horticulture.** Whilst many sectors experience recruitment challenges, horticulture

is different due to the seasonality of work, unpredictability of growing crops, and product perishability.

Seasonal Workers

13. The covid-19 pandemic highlighted long-standing challenges securing sufficient workers, and intensified more recent impacts of additional pressures associated with end to free movement of labour from the EU. Attempts to recruit UK workers during 2020 highlighted the challenges around employing domestic population for seasonal rural roles. Efficient production benefits from retaining workers and their return year on year. Businesses which recognise this invest in good care and rewards for their employees (see experiences from [EC Drummond](#) and [Riverford Organic](#)).
14. Large scale production of fresh produce in the UK is likely to be dependent on immigration of considerable numbers of seasonal workers for years to come. These growers have suffered from uncertainty regarding seasonal worker visas, and been hampered by delays and inadequacy of the latest rounds of seasonal workers schemes. It is also clear that inadequate inspection and enforcement of the scheme leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation, and risks conditions tending to enable trafficking ([FLEX 2021](#)).
15. Particular challenges for migrant workers include:
- Vulnerability to exploitation due to multiple factors including the threat of deportation, the need to cover costs already expended on travelling to the UK, the fact they are tied to a single employer and the fact that the recruiting agents (operators) are also responsible for their welfare.
 - Short stays limited to up to six months in duration.
 - Limited resources and access to public services.
 - Physical and social isolation in rural locations far away from support networks.
 - Lack of local and social cultural networks and skills (e.g., language / knowledge of how services work).
16. **Government should provide clarity around the long-term availability of and routes to seasonal immigration** to enable UK growers to plan and expand domestic production, and avoid off-shoring with subsequent risks of reduced environmental and labour standards.

Pathways into agro-ecological horticulture

17. A considerable number of UK citizens want to work in horticulture at smaller scales, growing to agro-ecological principles (e.g. organic, permaculture). Their entry is hampered by lack of suitable educational programmes, resulting in reliance on informal training provision through arrangements such as internships and long-term volunteering. These opportunities are often incredibly valuable, and have enabled many to become successful growers, however they are open to exploitation, lack quality control, and are not accessible to all (e.g. those unable to work voluntarily for sustained periods). Providing training also places additional strain on established growers already at risk of self-exploitation.
18. **Those who educate future growers should be recognised as providing a public service and be invested in accordingly.** Funding should be accompanied by measures to guarantee quality learning for trainees.

The availability of funding for science, research and development to enable innovation

Technological innovation

19. Rapid expansion of new technology in horticulture is not about to replace the seasonal workforce, and is not likely to benefit the workers who are currently filling these roles. Automation through technology such as robots, AI, and indoor growing require careful consideration to avoid unjust impacts and repercussions ([Reisman, 2021](#); [Rose & Chilvers, 2018](#); [Rotz et al., 2019](#)). Agri-tech innovations risk exacerbating inequities and unsustainable food systems. **Consideration of these risks should be central in discussions of their potential, with social and political dimensions considered alongside technical potential** ([Rose & Chilvers, 2018](#)). Technological advances are not inherently ‘bad’ or ‘good’, and workers’ interests must feature more prominently in assessments of innovation. **Agri-tech innovations should not foreclose diverse ways of doing and owning horticultural production.**

Research and development

20. The end of the horticulture levy, and associated cessation of AHDB activity focused on research and knowledge exchange is a considerable loss, removing a significant form of collective investment in horticultural expertise. This risks absence of strategic oversight of research and development, and further consolidation of specialist expertise within individual private companies.

Lessons learned from horticultural policy and practice from the devolved administrations

21. Recent initiatives supported by funding via Welsh Government have benefited horticulture in Wales, and present positive learning for England’s Horticulture Strategy.

Independent advice and training

22. [Tyfu Cymru](#) has provided a comprehensive programme of training and independent business advice to all types of commercial grower. The programme benefited from being free to access and responsive to growers’ needs. It has also become a key connector between the sector, Government and other stakeholders, facilitating the Wales Horticulture Alliance and development of a vision for Welsh horticulture. Its evolution into part of Farming Connect will provide continuity of provision, and should enhance integration with other agricultural support.

Grants for small horticultural businesses

23. [Evaluation](#) of a pilot programme found that relatively small investment in growers can have significant impacts, but horticultural enterprises have been excluded from many funding routes open to other agricultural operations. Welsh Government has responded by introducing specific financial support for new and existing horticulture operations, and farms looking to diversify into horticulture.

Wales Future Farmer Horticulture Network

24. As part of [Resilient Green Spaces](#), a European Rural Development funded project, Lantra and Landworkers Alliance piloted a horticulture development programme for trainees based on Welsh farms. The project developed a comprehensive curriculum endorsed and certified by Agored Cymru, and provided regulatory training, promoting safe working practices. The

project partners are exploring how to continue supporting the network of growers who provide on-farm training.

The effectiveness of Government planning and policymaking in relation to horticulture

25. There have been problems in the post-Brexit Seasonal Worker Visa Route due to the timing of the announcements regarding how many visas will be available in future years. Growers need to be able to plan recruitment in advance and not knowing how many visas are available is an impediment to this. **Government should announce policy decisions with sufficient advanced notice for growers and opportunities for oversight by stakeholders.** Transparency could also be improved by releasing detailed policy documents rather than press releases.
26. **We welcome the intention to establish a strategy for horticulture** for England so that the needs of the sector can be collectively endorsed and prioritised, whilst raising the profile of horticulture as a priority sector. This can only enhance public recognition of horticultural work as a valuable profession.

Horticulture's contribution to mental and physical health

27. It is widely known that gardening in communal or private green spaces, such as allotments, is good for well-being ([Pitt, 2014](#)). Paradoxically, there are also widely known negative impacts and risks of working in the commercial horticultural sector. Such health risks include musculoskeletal problems such as back and knee pain due to the time spent bending one's body to the height and needs of the crops grown. They also include the health impacts of exposure to pesticides and other inputs used in intensive growing contexts. The intensity of workplace regimes ([Rogaly, 2008](#)) are responsible for many of the negative impacts experienced by horticultural workers. **When considering the health impacts of horticulture it is therefore essential the inquiry considers different forms of engagement in the activity, and to recognize potential positive and negative effects.**

Vision for Good Horticultural Work

28. We would like to draw attention to our joint work with colleagues Dr Nicol and Dr Klassen as part of the Good Work for Good Food Forum ([Klassen et al 2023](#)). Here we identify three competing visions for good food work and nine principles for decent horticultural work for all:

“The principles we propose emerged from the Good Work for Good Food Forum, and in response to concerns regarding visions for food systems that often eclipse, rather than prioritize, the rights of food workers.

Good food work across all sectors and all scales should:

- 1. Be recognized as valuable and skilled;*
- 2. Be fairly paid, often well-paid, and personally fulfilling;*
- 3. Be available to everyone regardless of personal identity or immigration status;*
- 4. Be safe and be carried out in a healthy and supportive environment;*
- 5. Use technology where it assists workers;*
- 6. Include opportunities for skills development and career progression;*
- 7. Provide workers with access to social security support;*
- 8. Have conditions and terms determined together with workers; and*
- 9. Enable workers' freedom of association and engagement in collective action.*

These nine principles should be underpinned by appropriate international law, enforced by nation states, respected by private actors, and open to scrutiny by trade unions and civil society groups. Furthermore, it is important that actors whose role it is to protect and enforce labour standards, such as labour inspectorates, be independent of migration enforcement agencies, who may undermine their protective roles and decrease workers' trust in them. In order for labour standards to be enforced, national labour inspectorates should be given sufficient resources to undertake this work, in line with ILO targets."

Contact:

Dr Hannah Pitt Pitch2@cardiff.ac.uk Dr Lydia Medland lydia.medland@bristol.ac.uk

References:

- DEFRA, 2022. Latest Horticulture Statistics., [Latest horticulture statistics - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/latest-horticulture-statistics)
- FLEX. 2021. *Assessment of the Risks of Human Trafficking for Forced Labour on the UK Seasonal Workers Pilot*. <https://labourexploitation.org/publications/assessment-risks-human-trafficking-forced-labour-uk-seasonal-workers-pilot#overlay-context=publications/assessment-risks-human-trafficking-forced-labour-uk-seasonal-workers-pilot>
- Gov.UK, 2023. Workers and Temporary Workers: guidance for sponsors: sponsor a seasonal worker (accessible version) [Workers and Temporary Workers: guidance for sponsors: sponsor a seasonal worker \(accessible version\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/workers-and-temporary-workers-guidance-for-sponsors-sponsor-a-seasonal-worker)
- Klassen, S., Medland, L., Nicol, P., & Pitt, H. (2023). Pathways for advancing good work in food systems: Reflecting on the international Good Work for Good Food Forum. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*. Vol 12 Number 2. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.122.004>
- Medland, L. 2019, *A Harvest of Bare Living Conditions: A Moroccan Enclave Within the Global Food System*. [A harvest of bare living conditions — University of Bristol](https://www.bristol.ac.uk/food-systems/working-papers/a-harvest-of-bare-living-conditions/)
- Pitt, H. 2022. Horticulture in the UK - Characterising knowledge ecosystems. Available at: https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2633208/Results-Report-Skills-Ecosystems-FINAL.pdf
- Pitt, H. 2021. [What knowledge is required to grow food? A framework for understanding horticulture's skills 'crisis'](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.05.001). *Journal of Rural Studies* 85, pp. 59–67. (10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.05.001)
- Pitt, H. 2014. Therapeutic experiences of community gardens: putting flow in its place. *Health and Place* 27, pp. 84–91. (10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.02.006)
- Reisman, E. (2021). Sanitizing agri-food tech: COVID-19 and the politics of expectation. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 48(5), 910–933. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2021.1934674>
- Rogaly, B. (2008), Intensification of workplace regimes in British horticulture: the role of migrant workers. *Popul. Space Place*, 14: 497–510. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.502>
- Rose, D. C., & Chilvers, J. (2018). Agriculture 4.0: Broadening responsible innovation in an era of smart farming. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 2, Article 87. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2018.00087>
- Rotz, S., Gravely, E., Mosby, I., Duncan, E., Finnis, E., Horgan, M., LeBlanc, J., Martin, R., Tait Neufeld, H., Nixon, A., Pant, L., Shalla, V., & Fraser, E. (2019). Automated pastures and the digital divide: How agricultural technologies are shaping labour and rural communities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, 112–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.01.023>