



Working for British Dairy Farmers

ROYAL ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH DAIRY FARMERS

PO Box 6799, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 9FJ
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About RABDF

The Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (RABDF) is the sole UK charity focused on practical dairy farming, helping to create a profitable and sustainable sector. It has unique relationships throughout the dairy supply chain and provides the joint secretariat with Dairy UK of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Dairy.

Labour on dairy farms is something the RABDF is passionate about, working hard to understand the challenges and identify possible solutions to the labour challenges. Since 2014 it has conducted four surveys and submitted various reports to Government highlighting the challenges that exist.

Reason for highlighting dairy workers to the Migration Advisory Committee

In May 2020, the RABDF submitted evidence to the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) on the importance of recognizing dairy workers as highly skilled as well as including them on the MAC Occupation Shortage List.

Unfortunately, dairy workers were not recognized as either skilled or in short supply during the last consultation.

Following further discussion with the industry and a survey of dairy farmers we would like to reiterate the importance of skilled EU dairy workers on UK farms and the need to have continued access to that labour in the short-medium term until a long-term solution is found.

While we are grateful current foreign workers have the option to apply for Settled/ Pre-Settled Status, we are concerned with only 31% of dairy workers staying employed on farms for five years or more¹ there is constant need for new dairy workers.

This is of increasing importance as the demand for dairy products has rocketed during the pandemic with consumers turning to dairy in the time of crisis².

Cheese consumption has risen by 15.7%, butter 16.1% and yoghurt 4.1%. With demand expected to continue, we must have a solid workforce that can help keep our dairy farms operating and for the demand to be met. This is also important in the context of the National Food Strategy and meeting the demands set out by Henry Dimbleby. Dairy is an important part of a healthy, balanced diet.



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Access to foreign labour is extremely important for the continued function of our industry. The tasks dairy workers undertake on-farm requires skill, experience and in some cases formal qualifications.

It is important the Government understands this and can distinguish dairy workers from workers in other agricultural sectors. Worryingly, there still appears to be confusion between seasonal workers who are key in some food producing sectors compared to the skilled/highly skilled permanent needs of the dairy farming. Without a continued access to this skilled workforce on the short-term there will be significant consequences on the economic viability of the sector.

Reliance on foreign labour on UK dairy farms

EU labour remains an important source of labour on UK dairy farms with almost half of dairy farmers (42.1%) completing a recent survey¹ employing foreign workers in the last five years. Of those employing foreign labour, 74% said they did because they cannot recruit from the UK. This has increased significantly since the last RABDF survey in 2016³, which indicated 63% of employers recruited EU labour due to insufficient staff.

There is an increasing reliance on foreign workers due to the changing nature of the UK dairy industry. While dairy producer numbers in GB have fallen by 27% between 1996 and 2018 (2.6m cows to 1.9m⁴), milk output has remained reaching its highest annual figure of 15 billion litres since 1990⁴. This is because we are seeing herd sizes increase as well as cows producing more milk.

It is these larger, more intensive operators, having an increasing reliance on foreign labour. Their dairy operations tend to function 24/7 with employees often working shift patterns.

Foreign workers are fulfilling these skilled roles due to the unsociable hours and the nature of the work which are frequently not accepted by our domestic labour force⁵ but are not uncommon in Eastern Europe.

In the 2021 RABDF survey of those employing foreign labour 74% said they did because they can't recruit from the UK. Other reasons included their flexibility in working unsociable hours (66%) and having a better work ethic (58.5%), which supports our previous thoughts.

A survey of 1,000 farmers in 2017 suggested over a third of the UK's milk is produced on farms that employ foreign staff. In this survey, the dairy farms surveyed produce over 2.23 billion litres of milk – 15% of the UK's overall annual volume – and had between them nearly 270,000 cows. While a total of 11% of employees were non-UK nationals (521 from 4635 total employees including family labour), almost 17% of dairy businesses had foreign



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workers within their workforce. More than half of these non-UK workers are in skilled/highly skilled positions of herdsmen or herd managers.

Why UK dairy farms struggle to recruit from the domestic workforce

Recruiting staff on dairy farms is becoming increasingly difficult with 63% of farmers in the 2021 RABDF labour survey saying they have had difficulties recruiting in the last five years¹.

This is up from 51% in 2016 and 40% in 2014 when the RABDF last surveyed farmers using repeated polls about labour.

It is something that is of increasing concern with almost all respondents (80%) saying staff recruitment was something that worried them and almost a third (32.5%) saying they would consider leaving the industry due to a lack of dairy labour.

Employers in the most recent survey believe unsocial working hours and not enough people interested in dairy farming are two of the main reasons for people not wanting to work on dairy farms, with 28% of employers reporting staff leaving due to unsociable working hours.

This is despite 77% of employers saying they had made changes on their farm to make the workplace more attractive. Changes included creating dedicated staff facilities; offering more time off and not working weekends; offering attractive house packages and pensions to name a few.

The 2021 RABDF labour survey found once farmers have recruited employees staff retention is high, with almost a third of employees remaining for more than five years and 61% employed for two years or more. This indicates there is not an issue with the work on dairy farms, the issue of a lack of labour is due to the recruitment of that labour in the first place.

The latest findings are supported by a 2017 YouGov survey of more than 2,000 adults which found only 4% of UK adults would consider all key aspects of working on dairy farms personally acceptable. Of those that would consider at least one of the features of dairy farming acceptable, such as working in a rural location, interest diminished when they found out the role was in dairy farming.

Of the 10 features listed relating to a working environment, six were strongly related to dairy farming. These include working with animals, working with machinery, being mainly outdoors, situated in rural locations, working within small workforces, and a requirement for flexibility in working hours due to the likelihood of some early morning/late evening and weekend working.



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The YouGov survey highlighted:

- 4% of people were willing to consider job roles that included all the main [six] features of working on a dairy farm.
- Of those finding any of the features related to dairy farming personally acceptable, between 63% and 85% of respondents appeared to lose interest once they were aware the role was in dairy farming and were unlikely to consider a job in the sector.
- Working with machinery and animals was particularly unpopular, as was working in a rural location.
- Skilled or well-qualified workers were likely to consider a role in dairy farming despite competitive pay.

Both surveys indicate there is a poor image when it comes to working on dairy, with many UK workers simply not liking the thought of some features of dairy farming, the need for flexible hours and working outside.

Why should the labour on dairy farms be classed as skilled?

Employees are mostly undertaking skilled work, with the recent survey categorising 64% of workers as skilled. The rest were classed as skilled and unskilled (33%) with respondents only classing 3% of their workers as unskilled.

The dairy sector has very different labour needs compared with other farming sectors – such as fresh produce businesses which rely on seasonal unskilled labour from EU countries.

The range of tasks undertaken on a dairy farm often requires workers to undertake both skilled and unskilled jobs in a day.

First and foremost, most dairy farmworkers are responsible for upholding cow health and welfare which is why it is fundamental they are classed as skilled.

Upholding the high welfare standards, the UK dairy industry is renowned for its vital, which is why the industry needs access to this labour.

This skilled workforce looks after, but not exclusively:

- Cow husbandry
- Precision nutrition
- Operating high welfare standards
- Safeguarding milk quality
- Youngstock management
- Safe and accurate use of machinery and equipment



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They are simply not employed just to do the 'dirty work'. A lot of the work requires technical understanding, which can be gained not only through formal qualifications but also from practical, on-farm experience.

Many of the foreign labour working in the UK have years of experience on farms in their home country, even if, in some cases, they do not have any formal qualifications. However, there is also a proportion of foreign labour that are educated to degree level, including degrees in Veterinary Science and Engineering, for example.

Solutions

From all the surveys RABDF has undertaken over the last seven years they have each highlighted a problem with the image of dairy farming. The long and unsocial hours seem to be the main limiting factors when it comes to recruiting staff on dairy farms.

The industry is already looking at long-term solutions however, these will take time, which is why we are asking for some reprieve by including dairy workers on the MAC Shortage Occupation List.

Having access to foreign workers in the short-term will allow some of the medium to long-term solutions to kick in. From our research we would estimate the industry needs access to about 650 foreign dairy workers a year.

It is clear more needs to be done to promote dairy farming as a career choice to the next generation beginning in primary schools and reinforcing throughout secondary schools and colleges.

Dairy farming isn't about mucking cows out and sitting on a tractor, it encompasses so much more and requires a whole set of skills. It requires farmers to be scientifically minded when it comes to breeding decisions, balancing rations, understanding, and managing disease risks, for example. They must be mechanically minded operating the different machinery on a farm. They must also be business focussed to run a profitable dairy farm.

It is also important as an industry the image of long and unsocial working hours is addressed.

The RABDF is in the process of pulling together literature that can help farmers promote the positive image of working on a dairy farm, improve interaction and recruit the right workers and retain them. The literature will contain simple advice on the use of social media, improving the image of dairy farming by making sure farms are always presentable. It will



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also include back to basics skills on interview techniques, writing a job description, holding open days and farms walks and selling your farm as a place to work.

The medium to long-term solutions we are working towards include:

- **Setting up an industry task force to address the image of dairy farming.** This will cover aspects such as:
 - How to successfully implement shift patterns
 - Better recruiting techniques
 - Use of technology to reduce labour input
- **Working with land-based colleges to promote dairy specific courses.** RABDF communicates with all the land-based colleges and has collaborated with them to host all dairy-based course information on the RABDF website. The RABDF website is recognised as the place to go to get information about all dairy educational courses. This is something we plan to use more to promote dairy specific courses and generate more skilled labour from within the UK.
- **Promoting dairy farming as a career to non-farmers.** Post-Covid we plan to work with inner-city youth group On Side Youth Zone to take inner-city children on to the farm to showcase the diverse range of jobs that exist in dairy farming and how the industry can offer a viable, successful, and fulfilling career.
- **Technology.** The use of technology and robotics has its place on dairy farms and can be used to remove some of the mundane tasks such as scraping cubicles, and to ease feeding. However, there is not the technology available currently to replace labour.
- **Apprenticeship Schemes.** Apprentices already make up a valuable part of the workforce on dairy farms with over half (57.5%) of RABDF 2021 survey respondents employing an apprentice and 86.5% saying they would consider taking on an apprentice. Of those that would not consider an apprentice the main reason given was the lack of time to teach them new skills. Promoting apprenticeship schemes and building on existing ones in the industry is a must.
- **Entrepreneurs in Dairying Course** – Designed to give motivated individuals the skills and confidence to start their own business in producing dairy
- **RABDF Young Membership** – We continue to offer free membership for anyone that completes our Entrepreneurs in Dairying Course.

Conclusions

RABDF appreciates the dairy sector needs to address its underlying lack of attractiveness as a career option to the domestic workforce. However, there is no short-term fix for this. It will require a change in practices on dairy farms, education and promotion of dairying farming as a career to non-farmers, which all take time.



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While work is ongoing to educate, inform and recruit from outside the industry, we still need access to this skilled foreign labour force (estimated about 650 foreign workers a year) to allow our industry to keep functioning and meet the increasing demand for dairy products.

The technology is simply not there to replace labour on our farms at the moment. Farmers that have invested in milking robots, for example, will admit it doesn't reduce the workload with skilled operators still required to use, maintain and monitor the kit.

The RABDF is committed to working toward the long-term solutions and educating the next generation starting in primary schools of the varied and rewarding career choice dairy farming offers.

We hope this information demonstrates to you the importance of foreign labour on UK dairy farms and that you will consider including dairy workers on the MAC Shortage Occupation List in the short-term.

References

1. RABDF survey 2021
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5. 2017 EU YouGov survey <https://www.rabdf.co.uk/labour>

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