

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

25th May 2022

Dear Priti,

Last week, as co-convenors of the UK Trade and Business Commission, we visited a fruit farm in Kent as well as the Port of Dover. The aim was to learn more about how our agricultural production is being affected by Government post-Brexit immigration policy.

We visited Winterwood Farms, a company based in Maidstone which employs around 300 members of staff. The farm previously operated on a model where students and young workers travelled to the UK from Europe to work on a seasonal basis. When the UK was a member state of the European Union they were able to do this with no issues. However, the new visa entry requirements have significantly inhibited the business's ability to hire new workers during the high season.

We were told that last year the farm had to leave 8% of its crop unpicked as a direct result of being unable to hire seasonal workers from Europe. As a result, this year it has planted fewer crops. The farm went on to explain how they were finding it difficult to hire British workers for a variety of reasons, citing the following challenges:

- a lack of a domestic UK workforce willing to apply for the necessary vacancies given the transport and other relocation costs for what is a short period of seasonal work;
- the farm relies on fruit picking in the right weather conditions, so if workers need to leave earlier than expected there are significant impacts on harvest. Being a largely seasonal occupation, it is not secure year-round employment and for those on Universal Credit it creates difficulties;
- the technology for cost-effective robot pickers is a long way off. Without the workforce, it means crops are left unpicked and the firm is now investing more in production overseas. The farm is estimating there will be 10% fewer available workers than last year. Whilst the farm is seeking to make other efficiencies, this will only marginally compensate for the reduced workforce.

We welcomed the decision taken by the UK Government to allow 5,000 visas for Poultry Workers and 5,500 visas for HGV Drivers in October 2021. Any sector that is short of workers should get the necessary support. We have identified that a scheme similar to this would benefit the fruit farming industry, and we urge the Government to introduce this as a matter of urgency. We would appreciate a meeting with the relevant Home Office Minister to discuss in further detail how such a scheme could be introduced.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,



Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP
Co-Convenor of the UK Trade and Business Commission



Peter Norris
Co-Convenor of the UK Trade and Business Commission