

## Food Ethics Council response to Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry into challenges to the food supply chain from shortages of workers

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**Respondent type:** Charity (registered charity and company limited by guarantee)

### Summary

1. The Food Ethics Council believes that the implications of Brexit on food and farming will be many and varied, and that the UK leaving the EU is a 'seismic event' in terms of its importance. It is vital that we use this opportunity that Brexit presents to both protect the relatively high standards the UK currently enjoys on issues such as environmental protection, workers' rights, farm animal welfare and food safety, and to go further. As well as affecting access to labour, Brexit could also affect the way that the labour force is treated. **In other words, at issue is not just a *capacity* question of *who will grow our food*, but an *ethical* question of *how they will be treated*.** Seizing the opportunities provided by Brexit' must include revitalising food and farming. As part of that, it is vital to attract and retain people to be able to produce our food and steward the land in the years ahead.

### Who we are

2. The Food Ethics Council is a registered charity whose mission is to catalyse fair, sustainable and humane food systems by helping businesses, government and civil society navigate ethical challenges surrounding food and farming.
3. We are considered by stakeholders to be experts on fairness and sustainability in food and farming, and the leader on ethical food issues. Our role is three-fold:
  - (i) Hold the UK Government and other key UK food system actors to account
  - (ii) Convene key decision-makers and experts, equipping them with the research, information, tools and safe space to explore ethical questions themselves, allowing them to reach practical solutions
  - (iii) Advocate and promote ethical considerations surrounding food and farming, in particular to those in positions of influence. We challenge policies and business models promoting unhealthy, unfair and unsustainable practices and products – and promote alternative, fair ways forward.
4. The Food Ethics Council is an expert body consisting of 16 Council members, leaders in their fields, bringing extensive networks and a range of expertise, from academic research and ethics through to practical knowledge of farming, business and policy.
5. We have held a series of meetings about the EU referendum, food and farming over the past 12 months, which we have drawn on in responding to this consultation. We were one of only a handful of organisations that genuinely explored implications for food and farming from both potential outcomes of the EU referendum before the June 2016 vote, and we arranged a programme of events to reflect that. This included one of our bi-monthly Business Forum meetings for senior food executives on "***Brexit food ethics: Beyond migrant labour. How can businesses tackle ethical issues relating to the food and farming workforce post-Brexit?***", held on 27th September 2016 in London. Whilst we have done other related work in the past, much of this is from several years ago, therefore this response draws predominantly on the write-up from this recent Business Forum, held under the Chatham House Rule, and which is directly relevant for this inquiry. The report in question is available on our website here:  
[http://www.foodethicscouncil.org/uploads/publications/160927%20Beyond%20Migrant%20Labour\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.foodethicscouncil.org/uploads/publications/160927%20Beyond%20Migrant%20Labour_FINAL.pdf)

### **Introduction and scope of the inquiry**

6. The UK agri-food sector employed 3.9 million people in the first quarter of 2016. A large number of these employees are temporary, seasonal workers from other EU countries. Whilst agriculture (particularly horticulture) is particularly reliant on migrant labour, so too are significant parts of the food manufacturing and the catering/ foodservice sectors in the UK. Hence we would encourage the Committee to consider workforce issues across the full length of food and farming value chains, rather than just the UK food *production chain*.
7. The focus of the inquiry is on gathering evidence on the ability of the UK food production chain to source enough workers to produce affordable food and grow their businesses. The production of affordable food and opportunity to grow their businesses is of course hugely important for those companies working on UK food value chains. However, we would argue that these should not be regarded as the only objectives of the food system. Our vision is a food system where everyone can enjoy healthy food that is produced and traded fairly, sustainably and humanely.

### **How can businesses tackle ethical issues relating to the food & farming workforce post-Brexit?**

8. As well as affecting access to labour, Brexit could also affect the way that the labour force is treated. **In other words, at issue is not just a *capacity* question of *who will grow our food*, but an *ethical* question of how they will be treated.**
9. Some argue that the UK needs to make food and farming jobs more attractive to British workers, as agriculture will have to shift towards healthier diets and more environmentally sensitive production methods, which will in turn require an increase in labour input. Others point out that a fall in migrant labour will be an impetus for further technological advances, already supported through the agri-tech strategy.
10. Around 460,000 people in the UK work in food manufacture alone, many of them migrant workers. With a depleted workforce, how will UK food businesses continue to operate? Is there a willingness amongst UK citizens to undertake this hard, seasonal work? And how will they be protected post- Brexit? Trade unions are likely to play a key role in making sure both UK and future migrant workers are protected at work. We believe it is sensible to explore options to allow migrant workers to work in particular food and farming sectors (e.g. horticulture) in the UK on a seasonal basis after Brexit.
11. Whilst many employers in the UK food and farming sectors are fair-minded, it has been claimed that there is a dark side to some migrant work. Some workers experience coercion, entrapment, control of their bank accounts, their passports withheld and suffering physical violence. This dark underbelly is fed by modern day slavery and people trafficking.
12. Worryingly, there may be a rise in illegal workers. We have heard anecdotally there are already criminal networks operating in this area, and that the issue is likely to increase post Brexit. This is a critical issue for migrant workers, who are often already afraid for their jobs. The stakes are much higher when the worker is in the UK illegally, with the very high result of deportation if s/he is caught. This also pushes abuses of workers further into the shadows. Workers are rarely likely to complain about pay and conditions if they are in the country without any protections. Hence, the risk of further exploitation of workers in the future may increase. Organisations such as the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority ('GLAA' - formerly the Gangmasters' Licensing Authority) have an important role to play here, and should be supported. Similarly, the Groceries Code Adjudicator
13. Issues over availability of suitable quality labour are not just a post-Brexit concern for food and farming businesses. These issues are very live concerns and parts of the sector are already finding it difficult to recruit and retain enough staff. In the rush to secure sufficient numbers of staff, it is vital that short cuts are not taken and that all those working in food and farming are treated fairly.
14. Although it is possible that industry will have to police itself in future, there are government enforcement agencies that work to stamp out illegal and exploitative practices in the food and farming sectors. They too will be affected by Brexit. One example is the GLAA, which works closely with the European agency EUROPOL. Once the UK has left the EU, it will no longer automatically work alongside that agency.

15. Anecdotally we have heard it reported that since Brexit, companies have seen a decline in people from outside the UK who want to work in the industry, as well as an increase in uncertainty amongst current employees. The exchange rate has also caused problems, because what people earn is now worth less than it would have before the referendum. Some workers are leaving the UK to find work in Germany and Norway, for example.
16. With the population of UK farmers growing older, and with food sector jobs widely perceived as unattractive, more needs to be done to transform the appeal of our food and farming sectors. The furore around Brexit risks distracting from long-term structural issues within the industry, which include the ability to attract new and young talent. The UK came a worrying 25th out of 25 countries on 'participation of youth in farming' in the recently published Food Sustainability Index (BCFN Foundation and Economist Intelligence Unit). More optimistically, there are opportunities to create a vibrant, profitable, sustainable sector that includes better jobs for the farmers, producers, growers and cooks of tomorrow. Seizing the opportunities provided by Brexit' must include revitalising food and farming. As part of that, it is vital to attract and retain people to be able to produce our food and steward the land in the years ahead.
17. We should use the opportunity that Brexit presents to transform what is generally regarded as 'success' in the food system, i.e. we should get away from striving to reduce the number of workers as part of 'economies of scale' and 'measures to improve efficiency' and instead should celebrate the creation of *more and better* jobs in food and farming.

We would be happy to talk to the Committee members further, including bringing in relevant expertise from our Council members.

**Submitted by: Dan Crossley, Executive Director, Food Ethics Council  
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