



Worker Voices in the Agriculture Sector

Director of Labour Market Enforcement

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Disclaimer:

This article represents independent research that was commissioned by the Director of Labour Market Enforcement in February 2020, to inform his Annual Strategy 2020/21.

Fieldwork took place in March 2020, during the very early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to its full impact on the labour market. Nevertheless, issues raised in this research continue to be pertinent and provide an important insight into worker voices in this sector.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official views, policy or position of the Director or any agency of HM Government.

1 Introduction and methodology

Background and research objectives

This report presents case illustrations and key themes from research commissioned by the Office for the Director of Labour Market Enforcement (ODLME) to explore experiences of working in the agriculture sector today. The accounts given in this research are intended to inform the evidence base for the Director's Labour Market Enforcement Strategy 2020/21. This research, alongside three complementary studies on the construction, social care and the hand car wash sectors, capture the stories and perspectives of workers in sectors at risk of exploitation. In the Director's 2019/2020 Labour Market Enforcement Strategy,¹ the agriculture industry is highlighted as one of the most at-risk sectors for labour market non-compliance and exploitation of vulnerable workers.

Labour provision in this sector is licensed by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), with over 600 licensed labour providers (also known as gangmasters) known to supply labour to the agriculture sector.² Despite the large number of licensed gangmasters, unlicensed activity is a concern in the sector; with as many as 30 per cent of allegations of unlicensed trading to the GLAA concerning the agriculture sector.³ In addition to the licensing regime, the GLAA have been granted police-style powers to investigate labour abuse and exploitation under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 across all aspects of the UK labour market.⁴ It has been estimated there are between 10,000 and 13,000 potential victims of modern slavery in the UK (this figure is an estimate of all modern slavery victims and not just those experiencing labour exploitation).⁵

While the ODLME has evidence to suggest that workers in the agriculture sector are at increased risk of exploitation, they wanted to better understand the experiences of workers in the sector. IFF Research were commissioned to carry out qualitative research, to speak to a small number of workers in depth about their experiences of working in this sector. The evidence derived from this work complements information received from other sources to feed into the Director's Strategy. Specifically, the research explores:

- How the worker first got into the sector (including what their lives were like when they sought employment in the sector, where they got the idea from to work in this sector, who found them employment etc.);
- What their job is like day to day (e.g., in terms of hours worked, pay, conditions, what they like/don't like about the work, how they feel about working in this sector);
- Awareness and understanding of their employment rights and whether or not they have suffered any labour violations in current or previous roles and, if so, have sought recourse to justice, or whether they were aware of other workers who had had such experiences; and

¹ ODLME (2019) *UK Labour Market Enforcement Strategy 2019 to 2020*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819014/UK_Labour_Market_Enforcement_Strategy_2019_to_2020-full_report.pdf

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ GLAA (2020) *Transition to the GLAA* <https://www.glaa.gov.uk/whats-new/transition-to-the-glaa/>

⁵ Silverman, B. (2014) *Modern Slavery: an application of Multiple Systems Estimation*.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-an-application-of-multiple-systems-estimation>

- How they view their future (for example, whether they are planning to remain working in this sector).

The results presented in the report are not intended to be representative, but instead provide case studies and real-life examples of the reality for people working in sectors where they may be vulnerable to exploitation and underpayment.

Characteristics of the agriculture sector

Work in the sector is highly seasonal; farms require resource as and when different crops are ready to be harvested. As a result, a large proportion of the workforce is necessarily only required to work for certain periods of the year, when work is available. The sector has a high reliance on migrant workers as UK-born workers often reject jobs in this sector, especially as a primary source of income. Recent research by Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has shown that a quarter (25%) of farms report that less than a quarter of their seasonal workers in 2018 lived in the UK all year round.⁶ Predominantly, workers are recruited from Eastern European countries, and arrive with potentially poor English language and literacy skills.

Methods

Qualitative interviews were conducted with agricultural workers to explore their experiences of working in the sector. This section outlines the approach taken to recruiting and interviewing workers in the agriculture sector.

Identification of and access to workers in sector

IFF partnered with an experienced recruitment agency, specialising in the recruitment of harder to reach groups, and this was used as the primary recruitment method to source workers to take part in the research. Our recruitment partner was tasked to recruit a range of seasonal agricultural workers, including a focus on non-UK workers.

A recruitment screener was used to ensure workers were suitable to take part in the research and to monitor the demographic and employment profile of participants. Any significant quotas would have impacted on our ability to recruit, therefore we aimed for the best mix of worker types possible, with respect to the following:

- Age (16+), gender;
- UK/EU nationals (the research specifically aimed to include workers of non-UK nationality, given the seasonal agricultural workforce is predominantly composed of workers from Eastern European countries);
- Mix of contract type and hours;
- Whether worker has raised an employment issue with their employer, union, community group or enforcement agency; and

⁶ Defra (2019) *Seasonal labour in horticulture for England* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/seasonal-labour-in-horticulture-for-england>

- Whether the agricultural work was/is the main source of their household's income.

Recruitment was a challenge for the research, and specifically finding seasonal, and seasonal non-UK workers proved difficult. Initially recruitment focussed geographically around the Bristol area as our recruiter had good links to capitalise on here for recruitment in the sector but, owing to difficulties in finding seasonal workers, this was broadened out nationally. We found that, whilst it was relatively straightforward to find agricultural workers willing to participate in the research, it was easier to find workers who worked all-year-round and UK seasonal workers, rather than non-UK seasonal workers. This is despite the fact that UK seasonal workers in agriculture are in the minority compared to non-UK workers. Further UK workers could have been recruited however we needed to diversify the worker stories beyond this pool.

Anecdotally, the timing of the research played a role in the initial difficulties finding non-UK seasonal agricultural workers. A short fieldwork period, combined with fieldwork beginning before the UK picking season had fully started, meant it is likely there were fewer of this type of worker in the UK available for the research.

Further strategies were used to help access non-UK agricultural workers. The ODLME provided access to an agricultural labour provider that matches workers to farms. This organisation circulated an information sheet about the research to the workers in their network. The organisation translated the information sheet to ensure non-English speaking workers would be reached. IFF also placed adverts in several social media groups who act as intermediaries for those recruiting seasonal agricultural workers.

Of these two strategies, using the labour provider contact passed on by ODLME proved most successful, and resulted in two interviews with Romanian agricultural workers. Thus utilising “warm” or “trusted” intermediaries to reach out to workers using translated materials appears to be an effective route to access this niche group. Whilst this may give a “partial” (and more positive view) in terms of the stories gained, one of our European workers had had various prior experiences to draw on and it was a first step into a difficult to reach community for research. Posting in the Facebook groups was not successful; however, we anticipate the timing of the picking season may have played a part. Translating materials and finding a trusted individual in such groups to post may also be worth consideration for any future research given the success of recruitment through the labour provider.

Finally, a “snowballing” technique was used with completed interviewees, whereby workers were asked whether they knew of any friends or relatives working seasonally in the agricultural industry that would be interested in participating in the research. A key learning here for this sector was that, as there was very little interaction between the UK and non-UK agricultural workers whilst working, UK workers could provide UK contacts but did not know any of the non-UK workers they had worked alongside. It was therefore difficult to use the technique to break out beyond our UK seasonal worker group and, unfortunately, our two non-UK workers did not follow through with their contacts.

Overall, six interviewees were recruited via our recruitment partner, and two via the labour provider. Once recruited, for all respondents an information sheet was developed to inform potential participants about the research and provided a point of contact for queries or to confirm participation.

All participants were offered a financial incentive of £40 for their time and participation in the research.

COVID-19 impact on field work

Recruitment and data collection took place in the period between 19th February and 18th March 2020, which coincided with the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK but before the lockdown was introduced on 23rd March 2020. The pandemic had minimal impact on recruitment and data collection, as recruitment and interviews were completed prior to lockdown. All respondents were given the choice of a face-to-face or telephone interview, however all opted to undertake their interviews by telephone. It is unclear though whether this choice was the impact of awareness around 'social distancing' or personal preference.

Topic guide

A semi-structured topic guide was developed and agreed with ODLME in advance of fieldwork. The topic guide was built on previous research into worker experiences in the warehousing⁷ and restaurant⁸ sectors, and covered the following themes:

- Background, current living and family situation;
- How they first got into the agriculture sector and their current employment situation;
- Their experiences at work;
- Understanding of their employment rights;
- Understanding of potential sources of information and support; and
- Aspirations for the future.

The topic guide also included a list of resources and helplines, should the participant raise any concerns and request any advice or support.

All interviews were carried out by experienced qualitative researchers.

Interview format and length

Participants had the option to take part in the qualitative interview either by telephone or face-to-face. All participants chose to take part via telephone. Of the eight interviews completed, six were carried out in English and two were carried out in Romanian by a member of our in-house research team who translated the topic guide ahead of interviews taking place.

Interviews lasted up to 60 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participant. Interview notes were written up by the interviewer from the recording, and where interviews had been conducted in Romanian detailed notes written up in English by our researcher. An analysis session took place with the research team to discuss the findings.

⁷ IFF Research (2019) *UK warehousing sector and the worker-employer relationship*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814589/Warehousing_Sector_Director_of_labour_market_enforcement_July_2019_IFF_research.pdf

⁸ IFF Research (2019) *UK restaurant sector and the worker-employer relationship*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814592/Restaurant_Sector_Director_of_labour_market_enforcement_July_2019_IFF_research.pdf

Participant profile

Overall, interviews with eight seasonal agricultural workers were completed. A mix in gender, age, nationality and employment type was achieved. The demographics also show whether this job was their main source of income and whether they had raised an issue about their working conditions, as shown in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1 Demographic profile of participants:

Respondent	Gender	Age	Nationality	Employment type	Main source of household income	Raised an issue about working conditions
Janet	Female	56	UK Citizen	Uncontracted	Not known	No
David	Male	55+	UK Citizen	Uncontracted	Not known	No
Sameera	Female	39	Non-UK (outside of EU)	Zero hours contract	Not known	No
Daniel	Male	19	UK Citizen	Temporary	Yes	No
Adam	Male	19	UK Citizen	Temporary	Yes	No
Tommy	Male	18	UK Citizen	Temporary	Yes	Yes
Bogdan	Male	33	EU Citizen	Temporary	Yes	No
Simona	Female	55	EU Citizen	Temporary	Yes	Yes

The following sections provide detailed case studies of the experiences of each worker from the agriculture sector, followed by a summary of the overarching themes. To protect the anonymity of research participants, each person has been given a pseudonym and some details have been altered.

2 Worker voices in agriculture – case studies



Daniel – Leafer, tomato nursery

Age: 19

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: A few months (2019)

Status: temporary worker with written contract

Getting into the sector

Daniel grew up in the UK and lives at home with his parents and sister. Since completing his A Levels in the summer, he's been focused on finding temporary work and doesn't mind too much what sector it is in. As such, he has had a varied start to life in employment: after finishing his education he worked for a couple of months in a tomato nursery (September to November 2019) and has been working as a warehouse operative since then.

Having flexibility is important to Daniel in a job as he wants to make sure he can still enjoy his personal time. He likes to keep his evenings and afternoons to himself so enjoyed the 'early start, early finish' of his role at the tomato nursery. The location of the job in the nursery was very convenient and was just a short 5-minute drive to get to and from work.

He found out about the job at the tomato nursery through a friend who was working there at the time. Although from time-to-time he found the work physically exhausting compared to jobs he has had in the past, he knew what he signed up for and the intensity of the work matched what he expected.

"It's [the role] lived up to what was explained; pretty much spot on."

Working in agriculture

Daniel estimated that there were around 100 workers in the tomato nursery facility, with about 25 doing the same job as him. His role was a 'leafer', picking the leaves of tomato plants and clearing them into lorries.

In general, he liked the work environment and felt that his managers treated the workers fairly. They were laid back and didn't mind workers taking time off if they needed. For example, whilst working there, he needed to take a few hours off work one day to pick up his A Level results, which his managers were more than happy to grant him.

He felt that his managers were open to listening to views from their workers and the workers were encouraged to give ideas of how to improve the work environment and processes. Daniel didn't give any examples though of how these ideas had been implemented by management.

Facilities were fairly basic, but there were toilets, a vending machine, seating areas for breaks, and showers available on site.

He felt that he was fairly treated by his managers both in terms of pay received and working conditions. Daniel felt that his working hours and conditions were consistent, and staff were given breaks at their own discretion when they needed them. He could not think of any instances where he or his co-workers had been mistreated or exploited. Daniel was not aware of the GLAA or whether his employer was registered with them, other than his manager he wasn't sure who he would talk to if there was a problem and felt he could sort out any issues himself.

"I'd speak to supervisor/manager; if this didn't get any results, I'd look on the internet to find out what I could. You could talk to them about discrimination or not being paid correctly/right amount; being exploited about the hours worked or not getting breaks; being asked to come in on days off or refused days off. I'd try and sort out any issue myself first."

Employment status, pay and conditions

Workers received a written contract for seasonal work. Daniel held a contract for 37.5 hours a week and worked these hours exactly each week. He was paid via BACs transfer.

As a 19-year-old, Daniel's hourly pay was above the minimum wage rate to which he was entitled. He was paid at a rate equivalent to the National Living Wage for those 25 and older (£8.21 per hour in 2019/20). Daniel assumed that every employee was paid at least the minimum wage to which they were entitled.⁹

He had heard of the National Living Wage but didn't know how it related to the National Minimum Wage or how it is calculated.

Daniel had to pay for his own travel, which living nearby was not too much of a financial burden. The company provided a uniform and personal protective equipment.

He remembered that everything was laid out clearly for him in terms of how and when he would receive payment by management, and there was never a problem with payment for hours worked or timing of payment. However, he was less sure about his holiday entitlement, and thought that he had to work 10 days to 'get one holiday day'. Although he was not 100% clear on his holiday rights, he had taken a couple of days of holiday to which his managers told him he was entitled.

Health and safety was not discussed when he was employed; he thought he was given some information about health and safety by a manager at the beginning of his employment but couldn't be sure, and it wasn't something to which he paid much regard. He wasn't aware of any other health and safety protections he was entitled to as part of his job. However, overall, he felt safe at work.

The future

Daniel enjoyed his time working as a 'leaver' and fully intends to return to the job when the season starts again. He liked the laidback atmosphere, working with his hands and spending time with people of different nationalities. In the long-term he aims to join the Navy as an air serviceman.

⁹ National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates for the 2019/20 period can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>



David – vegetable and flower picker

Age: 55+

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: Two picking seasons (2018 & 2019)

Status: temporary worker without a contract

Getting into the sector

David grew up in the UK and trained as a chef. He has worked in kitchens for the past 40 years. Now self-employed, he works a variety of shorter-term contracts in restaurants and hotels and works events such as BBQs, weddings and functions. David also picks up some work as a courier. He enjoys the freedom of being able to jump from job-to-job.

For the past few summers, he has worked on farms as a picker in the spring and summer months. He likes to work as a chef predominantly in the winter months and be outside on the farms when the weather is better.

David lives with his wife, who is the main provider of household income, and his adult son.

David works for a company that finds labour for a number of farms in the area. As he understands it, the farm pays the company an agreed amount and it is then the company that transfers wages into the workers' accounts. David has worked on around 12 different farms, all within an hour's drive from home.

He started farm work on the recommendation of a friend from one of the kitchens and really enjoyed it. He has a few friends in similar positions to him who do the same thing.

"I wanted to try something different from chefing and the outdoor life sounded nice to me in the summer. Fresh air and the like."

David found starting work very easy. There is a "gaffer" (manager) who employs people and works in a managerial role. David arrived at the farm on a Monday morning with his National Insurance number and bank details and was given a day's trial. After successfully completing a day, he was invited to work longer term.

Working in agriculture

David estimated that there were nearly 200 workers on the farm. He didn't know if any were illegal workers there, although he had his suspicions. Around 90% were Eastern European and he knew that they all worked 7 days a week through the season. David found them all to be friendly although interaction was limited because they didn't speak English and he didn't speak Romanian, Latvian or Polish (the three nationalities he found to be most prevalent). He noticed that a lot of the workers were couples or families and that they all tried to work as much as they could. He suspected that they return to mainland Europe in the winter when there is less work in the UK.

The facilities were very basic with portaloos for toilets that weren't always perfectly clean. There was a large shed where people could take their breaks although those with cars tended to sit in there to

eat their lunch. Tea and coffee would be provided for breaks and on especially cold days, hot soup would be distributed.

What was being picked depended on the time of year and farm he was placed at. David was picking potatoes, swedes, parsnips, carrots, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and flowers, mostly tulips, but some smaller farms produced roses.

Normal hours were from 8am until 5pm. Upon arrival the “*gaffer*” would tell them which field to go into, what was going to be picked and how it needed to be cut before it was added to the pile. What was being picked differed from day-to-day but it would be the one task for the duration of that day.

David would often drive a tractor to collect the pickings of others. There would be a half hour lunch break at 12pm and a fifteen-minute break at 3pm that all workers took together.

David really enjoyed working outside and finds it preferable to a “*hot, sweaty kitchen*”. He found he was able to enjoy the scenery too but sensed this wasn’t true for everyone, that for the Eastern European workers, it was “*just about the money*” as he felt they may not have opportunities to undertake other types of work.

What David did not like was the weather. Work would never be cancelled because of the elements so it was possible to get very cold and muddy. David was however in a position where he could choose which days to work based on the weather forecast.

David has never had any cause to complain and feels like the company working for the farm to find employers has done a “*good job*”. He is aware that some people have had fights and on these occasions the workers involved have been immediately dismissed. Mostly because of the language barrier, David was not involved and chose instead to keep a low profile which, coupled with the language barrier, meant he never found out what caused the incidents.

“I know people have had fights... Don't know why they started – didn't get involved... When you're the only British person there and there's a couple hundred Europeans. They might think you're trying to gang up on them [if you get involved]. I wanted nothing to do with it.”

The farms appeared well-regulated, and David felt that they were always well-treated. The machinery always worked, and he always felt that if there were issues or something seemed dangerous, that he would easily be able to bring it to somebody’s attention.

The “*gaffer*” was the one in charge and David had faith that he would have been approachable and sorted any problems. David was aware of some cases where workers argued with the “*gaffer*” but didn’t understand the language. He was never aware of any mistreatment.

Employment status, pay and conditions

Workers did not receive a contract. An email would be sent stating the dates of work available and workers would then reply to indicate their availability. Workers would then speak to the “*gaffer*” and as long as their work was to a sufficient standard, they could work as much as they liked.

Although there were no discussions about workers' rights or health and safety, David never felt at risk, as he didn't really feel there was anything "*dangerous*" about the job. Workers needed to provide their own equipment – boots and gloves – but he personally felt there was no sense of risk.

"We weren't given any safety equipment or training at all but not a problem. In the field you're picking and putting things in containers – there's nothing dangerous really."

He began driving the tractor having told the "*gaffer*" he had experience although this was never checked, and no guidance given.

The hourly pay was above the minimum wage. Money would be paid directly into bank accounts weekly and David was never aware of any instances where people did not get paid. All workers were freelance, and David was not aware of any holiday or sickness pay.

It did not appear that David was familiar with the term the National Living Wage. He did not appear to understand that the minimum wage rate for those aged 25 and over, is now called the National Living Wage.

In addition to the weekly pay, there was a bonus based on performance that would be given as a lump sum at the end of the season (late September or early October). David wasn't clear how this was calculated but workers simply saw it as a welcome supplement (it is unclear whether this may have been accrued holiday pay).

David was not aware of the GLAA, and apart from talking to his "*gaffer*" and going to the offices he wasn't sure where else he could go if he had a problem whilst working.

The future

David enjoyed his time working on the farm. He got a lot of satisfaction from the physical work and being outside. He would recommend the work to local people and though it's unlikely that he'll return this summer due to catering commitments, he certainly hopes he will in the future.



Sameera – Vegetable and fruit picker

Age: 39

Nationality: Non-UK (outside of Europe)

Time working in sector: Three picking seasons (2017, 2018 & 2019)

Status: temporary worker with a zero hours contract

Background

Sameera grew up in South Africa where she studied at university and gained a Masters' degree. She came to the UK 20 years ago, initially on a holiday visa, which she then extended to a 2-year working visa. She has since settled and married her spouse and they have a daughter together.

Since moving to the UK, she has worked in a variety of jobs including work at an optician's, on a sheep farm and asparagus picking work. She has worked on a family-owned farm for the past three years during picking season (April to September), picking strawberries and raspberries, as well as some vegetables.

Getting into the sector

Sameera found the role through a recruitment agency on her local high street. She had initially approached them to find night shift warehouse work, as she was seeking flexible work to fit around caring responsibilities for her daughter who had recently been diagnosed with health issues. However, the agency told her about fruit picking, which appealed to her for the chance to be working outside.

She felt that the recruitment agency prepared her well for the role, giving her an overview of the farm, what she would be doing, and telling her to bring warm clothing, sun cream and sturdy boots to work.

She likes the flexibility of the seasonal work because it allows her to work for just part of the year and she can choose whether or not to work each year: she receives an email from the agency in March explaining when the season will start and she can reply to take up the opportunity or not.

"It's up to me if I want to go back every year, I like it and it's my choice."

Working in agriculture

The season starts in April and finishes in September. Sameera estimates that between 100 to 200 people work for the farm in a variety of different jobs: as pickers, packers, washers or cashiers. At the height of the season, it can reach 200 workers.

A typical working day for Sameera at the farm starts at 7am and finishes at 3pm. Sameera usually works for two hours outside picking fruit, then for the rest of the shift washes and packs it into punnets for customers to purchase.

Sameera enjoys working on the farm and prefers it to her previous role at the optician's, partly because she no longer has to deal directly with complaining customers, nor does she have daily sales targets to meet. She has made several close friends, who return every season with her. She prefers

the outside tasks as she can pick and chat with her friends, which means the shift passes much quicker. There are also other perks to the job: on Saturdays, her daughter can come to visit her on the farm, and they can take home some free fruit and vegetables.

Her only complaints about the work are minor: she does not like working outside when it rains or is muddy and generally does not enjoy tasks which require her to be on her feet for long periods of time, such as being in the farm shop. She tries wherever possible to put herself forward for other tasks.

The management at the farm are understanding of the fact that the work might not suit everyone, and do not encourage people to return after their first shift if they do not feel they are suited to the work.

“Not everyone is cut out for this kind of work, trust me. There are people who come in expecting that they won’t need to use their hands, but we are on our knees all day... it can ruin your clothes.”

Overall, Sameera feels that workers are treated fairly by management on the farm. She heard some grumbles amongst other staff not getting the type of work they wanted; however, she personally did not feel these complaints were justified as workers do have some flexibility to volunteer for their preferred tasks. She feels that the management on the farm promote a relaxed and friendly working culture and that they are open to listening to the workers.

“The atmosphere is jolly. We all have team leaders and we can talk to them and they will talk to the owner, he asks us at the end of the day how much we picked.”

She feels safe at work: there are always lots of people around and there is not any machinery to operate.

“There are so many people around, there is no machinery or tractors or anything, the worst thing can happen is me tripping over a wheelbarrow.”

Employment status, pay and conditions

Sameera works between 30 to 40 hours a week on a zero hours contract. Generally, she works 7am until 3pm, but this does occasionally differ each week. She is happy with her contract as she feels she has control over her hours and the hours fit well around her caring responsibilities. She chooses to ‘save up’ her holiday days and instead to be paid for these at the end of the season; an arrangement which works well for her. She was clear on the rate at which she accrues these holiday days: 1.5 per month.

Before starting employment, she received clear information from the recruitment agency of her hourly rate of £9 per hour (to be paid by the agency rather than the farm), which is above the National Living Wage of £8.21 to which she is entitled.¹⁰ They pay her promptly and in full, via bank transfer every

¹⁰ National Living Wage for 2019/2020.

week. She also has access to a pension contribution scheme, which is deducted from her pay by the agency, along with tax and National Insurance. She receives a payslip itemising these deductions.

Sameera felt pretty sure that all workers on the farm were being paid minimum wage. All workers have access to toilets, a canteen, a room for their break, and personal protective equipment.

Sameera was familiar with the term the National Living Wage. However, once this was discussed it appeared that she may have been confusing the National Living Wage and the living wage (outlined by the Living Wage Foundation),¹¹ as she appeared to think that her pay was close to (but not at) the National Living Wage.

Although her experience has largely been positive, she had heard from other workers that some of them had encountered issues with not being paid the correct amount, but that the management had explained that this was down to workers not signing in properly. She has also occasionally missed her break before, as each farm worker is assigned a break time at the start of the shift but management does not remind them to take it or allow them to move the time if they miss it. This has meant working long shifts without a break on occasion, but she didn't seem particularly concerned about this.

Sameera had not heard of the GLAA, she felt if she had problems she needed to raise, she would raise these with a supervisor, if this was brushed off, she anticipated she would go to the agency that recruited her.

The future

Sameera sees her future in this line of work: the flexibility of it fits well with her caring responsibilities and she finds the nature of the work enjoyable day to day.

"It's the most convenient work for me... I work for a couple of months a year, it doesn't add any stress, so why not!"

¹¹ The living wage is a voluntary minimum pay per hour that is based on the cost of living. Calculated by the Living Wage Foundation, the living wage is currently £9.30 across the UK and £10.75 in London. Please see <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>



Bogdan – Picker

Age: 33

Nationality: EU Citizen

Time working in sector: 6-9 months a year since 2015

Status: seasonal worker recruited overseas

Background

Bogdan grew up in Romania where he finished high school but didn't go on to higher education. He does not live in the UK full time but has been working here for between 6 and 9 months a year since 2015. He first came to pick with his wife but now does so alone as she cares for their son back home. Bogdan is the household's primary source of income.

He and his wife have made friends in the past few years while working in the UK agriculture sector, and they have all tended to report very similar experiences.

Bogdan lives in a caravan that is conveniently located only five minutes' walk from the farm. The caravan is provided by the employer and Bogdan shares it with three others. Each worker has their own bedroom. They share a toilet and shower and have a shared kitchen with a hob, oven and microwave and there is hot water. Bogdan paid a £60 deposit that was deducted over his first two weeks of salary and then pays a further £53 a week (in rent that is again taken out of his pay). He foresees no issue in getting his deposit back when he leaves.

"The accommodation is ok... For this price, what can I say?... I also get my own little room, hot water, a cooker, fridge, washing machine... The only bad thing is that the shops are far away, so we have to pay for a car to go buy food."

In previous jobs, Bogdan has been housed in a caravan which he found to be better, but it was more expensive, so he has no complaints overall. The only inconvenience is the distance from shops, but he is able to share lifts with a friend.

Getting into the sector

Bogdan found this job the same way that he found his first UK job: through an organisation that visited a local college in his hometown where he was doing a course in agriculture. They were advertising jobs in the UK, so Bogdan contacted them. It sounded like the salary was higher than working in agriculture where he was, and the work conditions seemed to be better.

Bogdan has a contract directly with the farm on which he works. An organisation put him in touch with the farm, but he did not have to pay any sort of finder's fee. Bogdan was unsure whether the organisation was an agency or gangmaster but thinks it's possible that it's the latter. They take care of all the paperwork and take a sum of money from the employer as a fee. Bogdan also thinks that they have sorted out some form of insurance for him, but he is unclear on what this covers. His employment contract, however, is with the farm.

Working in agriculture

Bogdan's role is that of a 'general operative' with tasks that include, planting, picking, clearing weeds and dead plants. His contract runs for another six months which has been a typical term for all his agriculture jobs in the UK.

Around 100 people work on the farm currently and around ten of those are general operatives like Bogdan. The shift starts at 7.30am and finishes at 4.25pm with a fifteen-minute break at 10.15am and an hour for lunch at 12.30pm. Each half of the day is typically spent on one task. The work is in a greenhouse, which Bogdan likes because it's a controlled environment where it doesn't rain, and they don't get too hot or cold. He also likes that the hours are consistent, and the work doesn't trouble his back.

"I like that we don't have to work in the rain because it's all greenhouses. When I worked in other farms and worked on the fields, we would work in the rain all the time. We got boots and raincoats, but we would still get wet or sweaty."

Compared with farm work back in Romania, it is better organised and safer, with better wages. Bogdan doesn't feel that there are any risks working on farms in the UK like those he's seen in Romania. He also enjoys the fact that people are nice to him; everyone is polite, and he doesn't get ordered around but instead asked and thanked. Generally, Bogdan feels that it is an open environment where anyone can talk to supervisors or managers if they have any issues or concerns.

"They were always open. I never had issues of that kind."

Bogdan and his wife did encounter some problems in 2015 on the first farm that they worked at. His wife was bullied by a fellow co-worker in the same role. She would tell Bogdan's wife where to go and what to do, not through any authority as they were working at the same level but through a sense of entitlement at having worked on the farm for longer. Bogdan and his wife spoke to their supervisor, but the behaviour didn't change, and this information did not appear to have been communicated to management at the farm. At this point, they decided the work wasn't worth the stress so cut their contracts short and flew home. They later heard from colleagues that the bully in question was deducted some pay for her anti-social behaviour.

"It's a shame because we would have like to stay there for longer. At that farm we actually had to option to extend the contract for another few months, which we did."

Employment status, pay and conditions

Bogdan typically works around 38 or 39 hours but never more than 48. It would suit him to work more because his primary interest is earning as much as possible. He once worked at a farm in Boston where he was permitted to work 60 hours a week (10 hours Monday to Saturday) with the consent of the worker.

“So far I’ve only worked between 32 and 39 hours. And after you take away the food shopping, the rent and the deposit for the caravan in the first two weeks, there really isn’t that much money left over.”

Pay is received directly into a bank account with the cost of rent already deducted. The hourly rate, number of hours worked and rent to be deducted is all very clear and fair. Holiday is accrued at two days a month and paid at the end of the contract if not taken.

“The pay is better [than back home]. That’s why I put up with being so far away from my family, whom I miss.”

There was one occasion when Bogdan knew of some employees who didn’t receive pay for all the hours that they had worked but once this was raised, it was resolved within the next one or two days. Bogdan himself only once had an issue, in a previous job, when he didn’t receive some holiday pay that he was due. At the time he was working for a salad packing company and didn’t receive pay for the holiday days he had accrued. He contacted managers who said they would resolve the issue but a couple of months later, Bogdan still hadn’t received the money. At this point, he emailed the GLAA (Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority) and they were able to resolve the issue within two weeks, which Bogdan found to be highly satisfactory.

Personal protective equipment is provided and there is no cost to the worker for this. There are also stools or chairs available, but these are rarely needed. Bogdan doesn’t know if insurance is provided, but knows he has some coverage from the company that recruited him (though doesn’t know the details). Bogdan is paid £8.21 per hour, and therefore paid at the National Living Wage, the minimum wage he is entitled to.¹²

However, Bogdan is not clear on the finer details of minimum wage entitlements. He had heard of the National Minimum Wage (the minimum wage rate for those under 25 years old) but he had not heard of the National Living Wage (the minimum rate for those who are 25 or over).

Health and safety training was provided by the employer and they recently received extra training in light of the COVID-19 outbreak and what precautions to take.

Since the bullying incident with his wife, he has not experienced any issues but if he did, would feel comfortable speaking with a colleague, manager or the GLAA again. He’s not aware of any union representation but feels looked after in his current set up.

The future

Bogdan currently doesn’t haven’t any concrete plans for his longer-term future but for now is happy to work again for the same employer. He likes the sector and feels that it works for him.

¹² National Living Wage for 2019/2020.

"It's ok. I'm used to it and this kind of work. It's what I know."



Simona – Picker

Age: 55

Nationality: EU Citizen

Time working in sector: Two picking seasons (2018 & 2019)

Status: temporary worker recruited overseas

Background

Simona, aged 55, has always kept the home while her husband worked. They have a daughter who has now grown up and has a child of her own. Simona grew up in Romania and finished the ten compulsory years of school but did not go on to higher education.

Her husband needed to stop working for reasons that Simona would rather not discuss, and as a result she went into work 18 months ago in the UK agricultural sector. Their permanent residence is still back in Romania and they stay in the UK to allow her to work seasonally for 3 or 6 months at a time.

Getting into the sector

Simona encountered a worker from the same recruiter as Bogdan and they found her work on the farm in the UK. Having neither worked before nor been to the UK, Simona did not know what to expect. She had nothing to compare this job against either in the UK or back in Romania.

Like Bogdan, Simona has a contract directly with the farm employer, having been put in touch by the recruiter in Romania. While the contract is with the farm employer, Simona is aware that she has some personal insurance through the recruiter but is unsure of the details.

Working in agriculture

Simona is a 'general operative' so she plants crops, picks fruit and vegetables, and clears weeds and dead plants. She lives in a caravan near to the farm that has a shower, toilet, hot water, washing machine, oven, hob and microwave. She shares a room with her husband, and another worker also lives in the caravan in his own room. Simona is happy with the accommodation and comfortable in it but laments being so far from shops and reliant on lifts from other workers.

Simona likes that the work is easy, and she doesn't find it too tiring. She's also pleased that it's not bad for her back because as a 55-year old, she can't bend over or crouch for long.

"I can't think of anything (I dislike)."

She hasn't experienced any negative treatment and has found the farm to be a pleasant place to work. The supervisors and staff have been kind to her, and Simona has not at all felt unsafe.

“Yes, I feel safe. The supervisors and managers are understanding, they don’t stress us out, don’t force us to do more work than we’re able to or are currently doing. We can work at our own pace.”

Although Simona has never had any negative experiences, she has heard stories of workers having some issues, but these have been arguments among peers rather than mistreatment from management or employers.

“I’ve heard of people who had issues, but that was all over: In Germany, in Spain, some in UK as well. But it was just arguments with their colleagues. Nothing about management.”

Simona hasn’t experienced (nor been aware of) any issues pertaining to not being paid correctly, not getting the minimum wage, not given holidays, being unsafe at work, harassment from managers or any other work-related problems. She wasn’t aware of the GLAA as an external agency she could raise issues with, however felt if she did have problems, she would be well-supported by colleagues, management and the recruiter.

“Well, I would talk to the managers first. I’ve got colleagues who can translate for me so I could talk to them despite the language barrier. They’re nice and understanding people so there’s no need to anonymise anything. Then I’d call [recruiter] if I need to. They’d know how to help.”

Employment status, pay and conditions

Simona feels that the employees are treated well and with respect. She sees no differences between UK nationals and foreign workers in terms of their rights and treatment.

“I feel like we’re treated with respect. There’s no difference made between us and other (British) workers. We are all treated the same way, work for the same amount of time and get paid the same.”

Simona was paid at £8.21 per hour, and is therefore paid at the National Living Wage, and she thinks the rest of the workers are also being paid the same rate per hour.¹³

Simona knew there was a minimum wage, and she thought she was being paid the minimum wage. However, she was not clear on the difference between the National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage.

They typically work for 40-48 hours a week and sometimes 6 days a week, but this is only if the worker wishes to – there is no pressure. Holiday is accrued at two and a half days a month and if any of that isn’t used is paid at the end of the season.

¹³ National Living Wage for 2019/2020.

The future

Simona is happy in her work and content to stay in the agricultural sector but hopes she doesn't need to work for too much longer.

"I'm just doing this for some extra money. Hoping not to have to do it for too many years, but yes, happy to stay in agriculture."



Adam – Picker, tomato nursery

Age: 19

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: One picking season (2019)

Status: temporary worker engaged via an agency

Getting into the sector

Adam grew up on farmland in Kent before moving into the village business that his parents run. He is currently studying for a diploma whilst keeping active playing rugby. Alongside working shifts at his parents' business, Adam also takes on seasonal work in other sectors at venues elsewhere. Outside of seasonal periods he works between 12 to 20 hours a week at various nearby venues, which he found through a recruitment agency. Last summer Adam worked for 6 months as a worker for a large tomato nursery.

Adam found out about the job in at the tomato nursey through a family friend who had been working there full-time for 15 to 20 years. His friend had been promoted to another nursery within the company by the time he was employed, but Adam felt that it had really been his friend who had *"got him the job"*.

Before taking on the role, Adam didn't really know what the job would entail, and didn't see it as an industry that he wanted to work in long term.

"Don't really know what I was expecting really. It was something I'd never done before. I just needed some money and some work for the summer."

Working in agriculture

Adam initially began working as a tomato picker at the tomato nursery for two days a week for two months, whilst he was studying at college. When his studies finished for the summer, he was able to dedicate more time to work and so took on working 4 days a week as a tomato plant trimmer – taking off the shoots and trimming the plant heads.

For the first few weeks, Adam found that the early mornings difficult (5.30am or 6am start dependent upon the time of year) but settled into the role quickly and really enjoyed working in an outside environment. He enjoyed the working hours, and felt that he was able to get the most out of the day as he finished work at 2pm or 3pm (again dependent on how hot it became in the greenhouse), and

could use the afternoons and evenings as he wished. He found his colleagues to be friendly and good to talk to when he felt a bit 'fed up' with the repetition of his tasks.

Adam generally enjoyed the work, describing them as “*really happy days*”, but he felt that the way in which pay was structured to the amount of tomatoes picked was unfair. Whilst he was given a standard rate, employees could receive a higher rate of pay if they picked at a rate 20% higher than the average set by the company. Adam felt that the averages were set too high given the heat in the greenhouse, and that staff shouldn't be expected to work at such a pace for their own safety.

“Their use of computers – and you had to log on and put in how many tomatoes - trays you picked – and for how long....and it gives you an average. I felt like some of the averages were set too high for some of the work standards and some of the heat conditions in there.”

He did not raise this issue with his employers as he was generally happy to receive the (lower) standard rate, although he felt it could be more of an issue for full time workers who had families to look after.

Although it does not affect his situation too much, as he felt the pay was adequate for what he needed over the summer, Adam felt that:

“It can be annoying to see the amount of tomatoes you are producing and seeing what the company is getting for them and what you earn”.

Adam feels he was treated very well in the job and that encouragement was shown by management in promoting him to be a trimmer. He also was told by fellow workers, who mainly came from Eastern European backgrounds, that they felt the work was safer than previous work they had done, where they had experienced racism.

Adam felt that his managers were open to suggestions on how to improve the work environment, and openly encouraged them with a suggestion box. He felt that the company actually took account of these suggestions: he gave an example of when he had reported a problem with the coffee machine, which was then replaced with a new one a couple of weeks later.

If there was a problem, such as the temperature in the greenhouse becoming too hot or humid, Adam felt he would go to his boss who he expected would be understanding. However, Adam also noted that workers were usually not allowed to take time out if temperatures got too hot and could not work with their t-shirts off because of hygiene reasons. Rather, in some instances, his boss would end the working day earlier if the heat became too intense to continue picking. Adam indicated that if there was a problem with his boss he'd have “*no idea what I'd do!*”. Adam was not aware of the GLAA or whether his employer was registered with them.

Facilities at his workplace included toilets, a vending machine, and two canteens / break rooms with tables on-site where you could bring your own food and eat it. Staff were not allowed outside on their lunch breaks as there was risk of spreading plant viruses, and so would have to stay on-site for the rest of their shift. There were also “*plenty of different soaps and creams available*” in case of skin allergies for the workers.

Employment status, pay and conditions

As a seasonal worker, Adam worked 8-9 hours a day, for 4 days a week (32-36 hour week) at a rate of £8.21 an hour (or £8.71 an hour if his picking rate was 20% higher than average). This tended to amount to around £260 a week before National Insurance deductions and he did not pay any additional tax, as he was under the personal allowance threshold. He was paid directly by the company at the end of each week by bank transfer. At £8.21 per hour Adam is paid above the National Minimum Wage for his age (£6.15 in 2019/20 for 18-20-year olds).

Adam had heard of National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage; however, he did not know the finer details of each. He believed he was being paid the equivalent to National Living Wage. As the National Living Wage is not applicable at the age of 19, he was actually being paid above the National Minimum Wage for his age.

Adam received holiday days but couldn't remember exactly how many he was entitled to in his contract. He does remember taking "*a fair few paid days off*" however.

Adam thought he remembered receiving a talk about health and safety when first employed but was not given a full induction. He said he just "*signed the contract*".

The future

Adam viewed his time at the tomato nursery as "*quick and easy work*" and hopes to take on the work again from April when the tomatoes are in season. In the long term though, he wishes to pursue an alternative career.



Tommy – Leafer, tomato nursery

Age: 18

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: A few months (2019)

Status: temporary worker with a contract

Getting into the sector

Tommy grew up in Kent with his father. After finishing school, he was recommended work in a nearby tomato nursery by a friend and was employed there for a few months over the summer as his first job since leaving school. Following this role, Tommy worked in a factory in Kent for four months, before moving to the coast with a friend, after his father relocated to the North of England. He is currently looking for work.

Tommy's friend who worked for the tomato nursery was influential in getting Tommy the job and put in a "good word for him" with his employers.

Working in agriculture

During his time at the tomato nursery Tommy had three different jobs: leafing, which involves taking leaves off the tomato plants to thin them out; trimming which involves using a scissor lift to reach tops of plants and bending them down for the leafers, and picking. Whilst his main job was as a leafer, he was asked to take on the other roles at various points. Tommy estimated that there were about 60 to 120 workers between the 3 roles, working in separate teams.

Overall, Tommy liked the type of work and the general environment of working in a greenhouse, which he felt was more exciting than working in a shop or office:

"It was like being in a rainforest ... the outside feel of it."

He also enjoyed the hours of work, which allowed him to make the most of his afternoons and evening. The commute from his house was only a 15-minute walk, and sometimes he would manage to get a lift in to work from his father.

Although Tommy liked the work environment generally, he experienced a conflict with his leafing line manager, who questioned his work rate. Tommy felt that the manager wasn't understanding of the toll that the heat took on him and other workers, and at times made them work in unsafe conditions.

"There were times when I really hated it...the greenhouse in summer [was] so sweaty and humid".

His manager continued to ask his team to work on the hottest day of the year, which Tommy felt was unfair and dangerous, and he saw several workers walk out from work that day. Tommy stayed at home the next day as he felt it was inappropriate to be asked to work in that heat. He raised his concerns directly to the site manager and the executive manager about the way his line manager was

treating him and his fellow workers. After the two senior managers discussed his feelings with his line manager, the line manager then personally explained to Tommy that his job was to ensure that people were achieving a high work rate, and that *“he would get in to trouble”* if they didn’t. Whilst Tommy didn’t feel that his working conditions changed, he did sense that his relationship with the line manager was slightly better after the conversation. Tommy noted that quite a lot of his colleagues had a *“personality clash”* with this line manager, and also felt they were being asked to do more than they could in the conditions.

Except for this experience with his line manager, Tommy did not experience any other difficulties with management and felt that they were understanding when he raised concerns. He found them to be even handed with all workers, regardless of nationality (the workforce was predominantly Eastern European). There was a suggestion box if an employee wanted to make a complaint anonymously.

In one instance, Tommy was told that he could not take a day’s holiday because the work was behind schedule and it was a very busy time for the business. He was allowed to take the paid holiday at a later date, provided he requested it with plenty of advance notice.

He found facilities at his workplace to be very good with two canteens, toilets, benches for breaks and stocked vending machines.

Employment status, pay and conditions

Tommy worked full time for 40 hours a week, Monday to Friday, on a temporary seasonal contract. Usual working hours were between 6am to 2pm or 3pm but this did vary based on the time of year and the heat. Employees were not paid for any breaks they took so Tommy said he would be at work for 40 hours but he was only undertaking work for 35 hours.

He was paid at an hourly rate of £8.21, which is above the National Minimum Wage for 18-20-year olds in 2019/20 (set at £6.15). This was paid weekly on Fridays and included National Insurance deductions of about £30 to £40. The timely payment via bank transfer was welcomed as, in his only previous role in food production, he once had to wait 4 weeks for payment. Tommy felt that all information about how he would be paid was explained to him very carefully and he was clear that he would receive one day’s paid holiday (that can be taken as an additional day’s pay if preferred) for every 10 days he worked.

Tommy had heard of the National Minimum Wage and the National Living Wage, although it appeared that he was not clear on the details as he thought both would apply to him. He thought he was being paid the National Minimum Wage, however, given his age, his pay was technically above the minimum wage to which he was entitled.

Tommy also felt he received enough information and protective equipment (such as arm protectors) to ensure that he was safe at work. He was given a thorough briefing on health and safety protocols when he started work. Tommy was also given full training on using the ‘scissor picker’ and felt that his manager was *“quite health and safety conscious.”*

Tommy was not aware of the GLAA or whether his employer was registered with them, and if had a problem he wouldn’t expect to go externally unless it was a really major issue.

The future

Although Tommy did not want to pursue a career long-term in the agriculture sector, he would apply for the same role at the tomato nursery next year if he moves back to the area.



Janet – Turkey plucker

Age: 56

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: Over 35 years (intermittently)

Status: seasonal worker with no written contract

Getting into the sector

Janet is from the UK and is in her mid-50s, she lives alone, and has grown-up children. Janet has worked in the agricultural industry on and off, for over 35 years. Prior to working in agriculture, she worked in a shoe shop, then got married and started a family.

Janet grew up in the English countryside and found agricultural work “*easy to come by*”, the work was relatively easy, and she appreciated being paid cash in hand. It was also a familiar line of work as she knew many people who were working in the industry. Agricultural work suited her when she was a young single mother as she could take her young children to the field where she was working.

Over the years, Janet has worked a range of agricultural jobs, including as a picker on various farms such as strawberry, potato, apple, and pear. Her most recent role was plucking turkeys on a farm in the run up to the Christmas season.

“I was living in the country and field work was easy to come by and everyone did it.”

“It was something you could do to take children along, paid cash, something you could do that was easy to do.”

Working in agriculture

Janet’s most recent work as a turkey plucker is something that she has done in previous years in the run up to the Christmas season. Janet took on this role to bring in some extra money to spend on Christmas gifts for family and friends. She found out about the most recent opportunity through her friend David, they agreed that Janet would travel down to stay with David, and they would work as a team. Janet started work in November and finished just before Christmas.

The role involves removing (‘plucking’) the quills from turkeys, so that they can be sold for consumption. Some of the turkeys are still alive and may kick and bite. The quills are sharp and can sometimes prick workers’ skin, which Janet tries her hardest to avoid as this can spoil the turkey for sale. The quills are more difficult to pull from turkeys that have been dead for some time, compared to those that have died more recently.

Janet and David would pluck at least four turkeys per hour between them, this would make it financially viable for the both of them. There were some points where they were plucking up to 10 turkeys per hour, depending on how long it had been since the turkeys were killed.

A typical day would be a start time of 9.00am and a finish time around 2pm or 3pm. Janet would choose not to take breaks, so that she could finish earlier. Janet said that she could stop working for

the day when she had “*had enough*”. The working pattern would typically be Monday to Friday, although she had the option to work weekends if she wanted to.

There were basic facilities at the turkey farm, including a portacabin with toilet, washing facilities, and tea-making facilities. There were also first aid kits with plasters and wipes.

“Friends did that job with me, and we are all in the same boat in that we do it for some money over Christmas. One friend was a baker and did it to top up his earnings so he could have more cash for presents over Christmas.”

There were about 8-10 people working at any one time. Janet mentioned that most of the other staff working at the farm were from Eastern Europe and they tended to arrive in groups on a minibus. The other staff generally spoke little or no English, and due to the language barriers, Janet did not interact much with them. Janet feels there is less opportunity for her to do this type of work as the workforce is now generally sourced from Eastern Europe.

Janet also noted that there was a high turnover of staff, as many people find it difficult to be around the turkeys, not all of which are dead.

“You get quite a turnover of people as a lot of people don’t like it, a lot of Eastern European go in there on a mini bus, often nowadays you can’t get the field work like you used to because of the Eastern Europeans that are brought in, so there is less opportunity for me to do it now.”

Employment status, pay and conditions

On her first day at the turkey farm, Janet received a brief health and safety introduction, covering what to do in case of fire, as well as a tour of the barn. Janet felt this was sufficient given the barn was relatively small and she has shown everything she needed to carry out her job.

Janet did not have a written contract. She was paid weekly in cash by a supervisor, in relation to how many turkeys were plucked that week. At the end of each day, she would keep a tally of how many turkeys were plucked and compare this against her pay at the end of the week. It was rare that there was a mistake in her payment, and on the occasion this did happen, it was because the supervisor had read one of her numbers incorrectly. Once Janet notified the supervisor, her correct pay was given quickly.

Janet says this is normal practice for field work in the agricultural sector and is comparable to other jobs she has done. Janet was always paid on time for the birds she had plucked. Janet and David got paid separately each week, but they decided to pool what they earned together as they worked as a team, and then split it between them.

Janet would say that her pay at the turkey farm was above the minimum wage. Janet noted that some colleagues’ pay may have been less than the minimum wage, as it depended on how many turkeys they plucked each day.

Janet had heard of the National Minimum Wage but not the National Living Wage.

Janet always felt safe working at the turkey farm and felt that she, her friend David and the other staff were all treated fairly while on the farm. She said she was not sure where the Eastern European staff were taken to on the minibuses, but has heard through word of mouth that their treatment can be *“quite brutal”*, and their accommodation and living conditions can be crowded. She noted that she has not seen or heard any of this first-hand from the Eastern European workers.

She found her supervisor to be motivational and would feel comfortable going to him if she encountered any issues at work. Janet had heard of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and did not know whether the employer is registered with them. She felt it was not applicable to her as she did not encounter any issues at work and she *“would only ask questions when things arise but if there is no issues then I don’t make them.”*

Ultimately, Janet felt in control of the work she was doing and that she could stop any time.

“No contract, you turn up, you do what you want to do, leave when you want to, it’s not stringent, it’s quite easy because of the way they are employing us.”

“I feel in control of my work, it’s my choice to go, can set the hours and the times I want to work”

The future

At the time of the interview, Janet said she may travel to Italy later in the year to work on an olive picking farm with some friends.

3 Summary

This final section summarises the key points that emerged from the interviews undertaken. The stories presented in the previous chapter captured different worker experiences in the agriculture sector and are illustrative of the range of experiences workers have had getting into the sector, the type of work they undertake and their working conditions. The research was not intended to be representative of the sector and therefore should not be treated as such. The workers we interviewed may have had different experiences to others who work in the sector – for example, those who work in agriculture all year round, or who move around different agricultural sectors, or between different European countries through the year.

Getting into the sector

Word of mouth was a common way of finding out about the sector – often workers are told about an opportunity by a friend or family member – as well as via recruitment agencies (both UK-based and abroad).

As work tends not to be available year-round, workers tended to fall into a variety of different groups. For some, travelling to the UK for work, agriculture was their main source of income even though the work is seasonal. Others, based in the UK, choose this work because it fits in with other work and/or their lifestyle and allows them to make additional money – these workers may work in agriculture for a season, and then move to work in a different sector or take on other responsibilities (such as caring for family members) for the rest of the year. A further group of UK workers we spoke to were those who have recently finished education, these individuals take on this work either part-time or for a season to bridge the gap between further education or a more permanent position elsewhere.

For those workers, where the flexibility of the work, or being able to work for a short period of time to earn some additional cash were reasons for undertaking seasonal agricultural work, experiences of the sector tended to be more positive.

Experience of working in the sector

The work can be very physical, with workers outside picking fruit or vegetables for many hours. Most workers had gone into the role expecting this to be the case. The work is generally expected to take place in all types of weather. While being outside in nice weather was something that had attracted several workers to the job in the first place, some workers spoke of the downsides to carrying out the work in difficult conditions, such as when it was muddy and wet or when temperatures were very high. In general – among workers who felt they were treated fairly by management and who were satisfied with their working conditions – this trade off was perceived as ‘worth it’.

Those who had more realistic expectations of what the conditions would be like, such as workers employed by a reputable agency or who had been told about the job by a friend or family member working in the sector, were more positive: for example, one worker was grateful for her recruitment agency telling her to bring a warm layer of clothing, sunscreen, and waterproof boots.

Reflecting the seasonal nature of the work, where timing of crops being ready to pick is largely driven by weather conditions that year, workers reported that the timing of the season and availability of the work would vary. There was sometimes a very casual approach to scheduling, with farms or recruitment agencies getting in touch with workers over email to let them know when there was work available, and workers could then choose whether or not to take up the opportunity. Where this was

the case, some workers tended to enjoy having the flexibility to choose. Other workers had more fixed and regular hours in place for the season they were working, and one non-UK worker who had travelled to the UK solely to work suggested that he would have preferred to have worked more hours per week than he was allowed.

The working day typically starts and finishes relatively early (a 7am start is typical, with workers usually finished by around 3pm); this was seen by some as a benefit to working in the sector, and some workers noted they enjoy having the afternoons to occupy themselves as they would like.

UK-born workers reported that they were typically in the minority among seasonal workers on the farm, most of whom were observed to be from Eastern Europe, thought to be in the UK for a season (usually over the summer) to work and earn more money than might be possible in their home country. Among the Romanian workers interviewed in this research, both were working here in order to send money back to families back home, and one of the workers reported that salaries were better in the UK. There was often a language barrier, with UK workers reporting that they tended to keep themselves to themselves and did not often interact with Eastern European workers due to the language barrier.

Those recruited from abroad were provided with accommodation by their employer at the farm. This was reported to be relatively small and basic, but adequate for their needs.

There were anecdotal reports of fights breaking out between workers, as well as some instances of bullying occurring (again, among workers). The workers interviewed reported that this tended to be dealt with promptly by management, sometimes resulting in dismissals.

Employment status, pay and conditions

All but two of the workers had a contract with their employers, including the two workers who had travelled from Romania to work in the UK. Those without a formal written contract from their employer appeared unaware of this employment right. While this was not seen by them as an issue, it could allow more informal employment practices, some of which may put vulnerable workers at risk of exploitation as workers have less recourse to object to changes in hours or pay.

Some workers interviewed reported observing other workers on the farm working seven days a week, even in challenging weather conditions, to earn as much as possible. This tended to be more commonly observed among the Eastern European workers. These workers appear to have entered into this arrangement voluntarily, to earn as much money as possible.

There were reports of workers being turned away or having work cancelled at short notice which can lead to decreased take-home pay, as payment is tied to hours worked. For example, some workers had had their shifts cut short when the temperature exceeded a certain limit in the greenhouses. On the other hand, other workers reported being made to continue work even when the weather was unpleasant or even dangerous. One worker discussed being forced to continue working despite the heat in the greenhouse becoming unbearable leading to concerns about worker safety.

Several workers also identified issues with being paid the right amount and on time – an issue which, anecdotally, was felt to be common in the sector. Some also reported hearing of issues of other (often Eastern European) workers not receiving payslips or being paid cash-in-hand for their work. One UK worker was being paid cash-in hand and so kept her own track of how much she was owed, she did not receive payslips, though did not raise this as an issue.

There was some awareness of minimum wage entitlements among workers, and most workers felt they were receiving pay at or above these rates. However there appeared to be confusion around the structure of minimum wage entitlements and a misunderstanding of the National Living Wage. Some workers (those over 25) who would be entitled to the National Living Wage were unaware of what it was or were unsure how it related to the National Minimum Wage. Workers aged under 25 were also unclear, for example one worker who was under 25 believed they were receiving the National Living Wage, though they were receiving a rate above the National Minimum Wage for their age.

Awareness and understanding around holiday entitlements was mixed. Some workers, including the two workers who had travelled to work in the UK, were clear of the rate at which they accrued holiday and able to cite this rate. Others had a much vaguer understanding, one worker was not aware of being entitled to any holiday (or sickness) pay at all, and others knew they were entitled to book or accrue holiday, but were not sure how much they were entitled to or clear on their holiday rights.

Most workers interviewed felt able to raise issues with their supervisor or 'gaffer'. For the most part, where workers had raised issues, often related to pay, they reported that issues tended to be resolved relatively promptly. One Romanian worker had struggled to resolve the issue with their employer and had ultimately escalated it to the GLAA who had helped to find a solution. However, only two of our interviewees (one UK and one non-UK worker) were aware of the GLAA, with the rest of the workers interviewed not aware of the existence of the GLAA or whether their employer was registered with them,¹⁴ potentially leaving them vulnerable to exploitative employment practices.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that not all of the employers mentioned here would be required to be registered with the GLAA as only those involved with labour provision in the sector require a GLAA license.

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IFF Research illuminates the world for organisations businesses and individuals helping them to make better-informed decisions.”

Our Values:

1. Being human first:

Whether employer or employee, client or collaborator, we are all humans first and foremost. Recognising this essential humanity is central to how we conduct our business, and how we lead our lives. We respect and accommodate each individual's way of thinking, working and communicating, mindful of the fact that each has their own story and means of telling it.

2. Impartiality and independence:

IFF is a research-led organisation which believes in letting the evidence do the talking. We don't undertake projects with a preconception of what "the answer" is, and we don't hide from the truths that research reveals. We are independent, in the research we conduct, of political flavour or dogma. We are open-minded, imaginative and intellectually rigorous.

3. Making a difference:

At IFF, we want to make a difference to the clients we work with, and we work with clients who share our ambition for positive change. We expect all IFF staff to take personal responsibility for everything they do at work, which should always be the best they can deliver.



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