

MIGRATION PATHWAYS

Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme (SAWS)

Overview

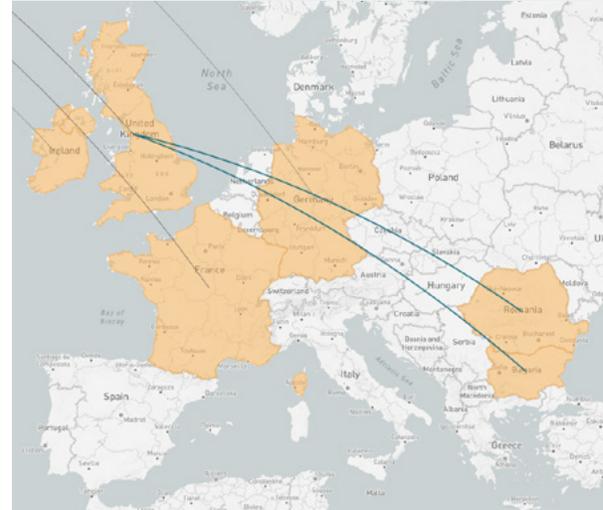
Since 1945, tens of thousands of seasonal agricultural workers, most of them from Eastern Europe, especially Bulgaria and Romania, have worked in the United Kingdom. The scheme was suspended in 2013 and restarted in 2019.

Why was it started?

The United Kingdom's agricultural industry struggles to find qualified, reliable, cost-effective workers. The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme (SAWS) was established as a cultural exchange program to encourage young students from Europe to come to the United Kingdom and work in agriculture during peak seasons. Over time, it evolved as a way to meet labor demands in the agricultural sector.

How does it work?

SAWS began operating in its current form in 1990, with an annual quota of 5,500 work permits valid for six months. The quota was increased and reduced over time (peaking at 25,000 in 2004), and the source countries were eventually narrowed to just Bulgaria and Romania. Workers lived on farms, mainly in the southeast and the West Midlands, and were not able to change employers unilaterally. They received the minimum wage, paid holidays, and sick pay, along with other benefits, including accommodations and transport. After six months, they were required to return home.



Country of Destination
UNITED KINGDOM

Country of Origin
PREDOMINANTLY EASTERN EUROPE, ESPECIALLY BULGARIA AND ROMANIA

Skill
AGRICULTURE 

Skill Level
LOW

Timeline
1945–2013 (NEW PILOT COMMENCED IN 2019)

Beneficiaries
30,000 A YEAR

Countries all around the world utilize migration pathways to train and bring over workers with needed skills. The CGD Migration Pathways database documents these pathways to promote innovation in this space. To explore the database, visit GSP.cgdev.org.

What impact has it had?

The scheme provided the sector with a flexible, reliable, and high-performing workforce. Workers were usually young, motivated, and able to meet demands within tight timeframes. Workers typically earned more than three times what they would have earned at home.

Workers were tied to their employers, and the quota was too low. When Bulgaria and Romania were granted free movement rights in 2013, the scheme was disbanded.

In early 2019, given expected worker shortages as a result of Brexit, a new pilot was launched. Two contractors, Concordia and Pro-Force Ltd., were selected to place 2,500 workers a year. The pilot was expanded to 10,000 workers a year in 2020 and 30,000 a year in 2021.

The Home Office continues to manage the program, which covers only seasonal edible horticulture (vegetables, fruit, vines, and mushrooms). Workers have been sourced predominantly from Ukraine and Moldova, with planned expansion to Barbados, Belarus Morocco, Romania, and Russia.

Further readings

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UK Government. 2018. “Seasonal Workers Pilot: Request for information.” September 19. www.gov.uk/government/publications/seasonal-workers-pilot-request-for-information

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