

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Meeting Notes: Temporary and Tied Visa Workers

This meeting was convened at the request of representatives from the Worker Support Centre (WSC), who sought to facilitate an informal session between Members of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, and workers on temporary and tied contracts in the social care sector, as well as seasonal agricultural workers.

The purpose of the meeting was to hear directly from workers supported by the WSC about the issues and challenges they face. The session aimed to:

- Raise understanding of the psychological impact of the situation of temporary and tied workers in Scotland, with a focus on seasonal agriculture and social care.
- Ensure that Members were informed about actions that could be taken to mitigate the issues faced by these workers.

This was an informal and private session. All participants chose to remain anonymous, and their names were anonymised during the meeting.

A summary of the key themes from the discussion is outlined below.

Session One: Agricultural Workers

Eight workers, employed across several different farms, attended and contributed to this session. A two-minute video was shown at the outset, illustrating a typical example of the accommodation provided to seasonal agricultural workers. The footage highlighted conditions that fall below basic health and safety standards: a dead rodent in the living space, broken doors, widespread damp and mould, and cramped living quarters. This visual account was used to frame the discussion that followed.

Theme 1: Accommodation and Living Conditions

- Overcrowding and Unsuitable Housing
 - Workers highlighted that caravans provided by farmers were designed for 3–4 people but often housed 5–6, creating cramped and stressful conditions.
 - Workers described having no personal space to change clothes, store belongings, or rest after long shifts: “There is no space between the beds. You cannot move freely. It is impossible to feel comfortable.”
 - Shared facilities (particularly in the showering and kitchen areas) led to long queues after exhausting workdays, leaving little time for rest.

- Poor Facilities and Hygiene
 - o Workers described how particularly small fridges (often one for four people) made it difficult to store food from weekly shopping trips.
 - o Mould and damp were widespread due to frequent rain and lack of heating, with clothes often having to be dried on heaters, creating fire risks: “It is always wet, always damp. We pile clothes on the heater, but it is dangerous. The houses smell of mould.”
- Cost vs. Quality
 - o Workers pay approximately £75 per week for accommodation, plus additional charges for gas and electricity.
 - o Many felt the rent was exploitative given the poor conditions: “For what we’re paying, we could rent a flat in town and live like normal people.”
 - o Some avoided using gas to save money, leaving caravans freezing in winter.
- Isolation and Social Exclusion
 - o Caravans are located far from shops, towns, and train stations. With no cars, workers relied on walking or taxis to get to the nearest urban centre.
 - o The lack of communal space means there is little to no opportunities for social gatherings, celebrations, or relaxation: “It’s hard not to feel like outsiders [...] even though we are doing the work which puts food on people’s plates.”
 - o Internet access is either not provided or does not work reliably.
- Health and Safety Failures
 - o Workers described accommodation that would not pass health and safety checks.
 - o WSC highlighted that they have supported six workers in the past year to obtain legal support for injuries sustained at work, some with lifelong consequences.
 - o An overriding fear of retaliation prevents workers from raising concerns or reporting their living/working conditions: “If you complain, you will not be invited back next year.”

Theme 2: Treatment and Discrimination

- Unequal Treatment Compared to Local Workers
 - o Workers describe being denied essential protective clothing, such as winter boots, which local workers received or being provided with clothing of a lesser quality, which was inadequate: “I had to buy my own boots. Local workers were given them for free.”

- o Some reported being shouted at, insulted, or treated as inferior by local workers and farmers.
- o Many of the workers in attendance highlighted that they did not drink alcohol and felt unsafe around colleagues who drank during working hours and carried knives: “We do not drink. We do not want to work with people who drink and carry knives. But nothing is done.”

Theme 3: Access to Support and Healthcare

- Lack of Information and Induction Support
 - o Some of the workers noted that they had health insurance but did not know how to contact a doctor. They tend to buy medication themselves.
 - o Some of the workers said that when they reported injuries or health concerns they were simply provided with paracetamol irrespective of the complaint.
 - o They also indicated that they frequently didn’t report health conditions for fear of losing work or not being invited back and simply worked through the pain.
 - o Minimal information was left in caravans upon arrival, with no proper induction material provided: “We are told nothing. We do not know how to see a doctor, how to get medicine, or who to ask.”
- Scottish Government Health Cards
 - o SG health cards were being distributed by WSC to help workers access free healthcare.
 - o Many workers only learned about access to healthcare late into their stay.
- Fear of Retaliation
 - o Workers avoided raising health or welfare concerns with managers: “We try not to bother them. If you complain, you will not be back.”

Theme 4: Employment Conditions and Pay

- Precarious and Uncertain Work
 - o Workers often did not know if they would be invited back the following year, making it impossible to plan, while this also had a negative financial impact on workers.
 - o Transfers and transfer requests between farms were inconsistent, with some workers forced to pay their own costs to move to another farm which had more work.
 - o The lack of certainty regarding a placement the following year was highlighted as a significant concern: “By the time you get used to the weather and life here, it is time to go home. And you don’t know if you will return.”

- o It was highlighted that return tickets for these workers can cost approximately £1,000, with visas costing between £300-400.
- Pay and Hours Manipulation
 - o Travel time between fields during the working day (sometimes 50–60 minutes) was unpaid, with the clock only starting once the last worker had entered the field.
 - o Workers reported punctuality was enforced when moving between fields during the working day, but delays were common when returning home on organised transport.
 - o Some workers reported being sent on “holiday” without any prior consultation or discussion, raising concerns about manipulation of hours.
 - The legal requirement of 32 hours per week minimum pay was not always met. The workers said that in relation to this legal requirement “Someone should check it is being met and tell them what their legal obligations are”.
 - o Workers also highlighted that they receive one rest day per week.
- Record-Keeping and Accountability
 - o Workers used time books (developed via a partnership between the University of Glasgow and Worker Support Centre) to track hours, with farm management keeping separate records.
 - o Plans were discussed to compare worker and employer records at the end of the season: “We write everything down. But they have their own figures. Who will believe us?”

Theme 5: Power Imbalances and Fear

- Dependence on Employers
 - o Workers feared losing future opportunities if they complained about conditions, pay, or safety.
 - o Even small daily choices caused anxiety: one worker said they were “scared to take a shower” in case running out of the gas they had been provided would lead to being dismissed “three warnings and you’re out” and to exclusion the following year.
- Lack of Accountability
 - o It was highlighted that no clear overall body or individual has responsibility for facilitating transfers, fair pay, or safe accommodation for workers.
 - o Workers also questioned why more people were being recruited to certain farms, when it was clear that these farms could not provide enough work for the people already contracted to them.

Theme 6: Community and Integration

- Isolation from Local Communities
 - Workers expressed frustration and disappointment at being cut off from Scottish society: “We want to work and make money, but we also want to feel part of the community.”
 - Opportunities to engage with local people were limited, reinforcing feelings of exclusion.

A letter was also read aloud by one of the workers, who conveyed both pride in the essential nature of their work and frustration that the value of their contribution is not reflected in how they are treated. The accommodation provided was described as isolating and inadequate: caravans were located far from shops, towns, and train stations, with no space for social gatherings, celebrations, or even a place to sit and relax. Living in such close proximity created tension. Many felt the rent was disproportionately high, noting that for the same cost they could rent an apartment in town and enjoy a better quality of life and social connection.

As part of this letter, it was suggested that caravans should be free or at least reduced in cost, but even then, the conditions remained unsuitable. Beds were crammed together with no room to move, and the small fridge-freezers made it difficult to store food from weekly shopping. These problems were not confined to one farm but were echoed by friends working elsewhere. The sense of isolation was both physical and social, leaving workers feeling like outsiders despite the fact that they were the ones “putting food on people’s plates.” Some workers acknowledged that there were “good people” who tried to help, noting that when they first arrived in Scotland they were provided with uniforms. However, they stressed that the clothing was inadequate for the conditions leaving them with very cold feet and hands: “The weather is rainy, snowy and windy. If the farmers wanted to, they could provide us with better clothing.”

What they wanted, he said, was simple: to be respected and treated the same as local workers, not shouted at or called names. As one worker put it, “I understand we are not citizens of this country, but we should be treated the same on the farm. We come here legally through visas – we deserve equal treatment. We do not come here on holidays, we come here to work.” The letter closed with gratitude for the opportunity to be heard.

Reflections and Next Steps

- Committee Action
 - Members from both Committees agreed to report back the findings from the session to their colleagues in order to discuss potential future actions.

- o It was noted by the Members that ensuring laws are followed and workers' rights are upheld is a number one priority.
- o It was agreed between Members that there is a strong need to identify who holds overall responsibility for migrant workers welfare and safety in Scotland.