

Impact of labour shortages: Summary of casual determinants of labour shortages in UK food systems

4.1 Butchers

System causal factors:

- immigration policies in response to COVID-19 and EU exit.
- strict qualification requirements for butchers through the CoC (Certificate of Competence) and WATOK (Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing) requirements ([footnote 1](#)).
- wages, working conditions, incentives, and workers welfare.
- low attraction of local labour pool due to image factors (rural based, outdoors and involves physical work at unsociable hours).
- complex sponsor registration system and immigration charges for direct recruitment by processors ([footnote 2](#)).

Impact:

- slaughter backlogs leading to potential animal welfare concerns and batch traceability issues due to overstocking of farms.
- supply uncertainties increases vulnerability to fraud and illegal production at unapproved premises (accounts for over 43% of fraud in beef and rising) ([footnote 3](#)).
- parallel supply chains of illegitimate producers, processors and traders, and shortages in local authority staff capacity ([footnote 4](#)).
- processing carcasses destined for domestic consumption in the EU (Ireland) where plants are approved for local supply.

Type of labour shortage:

Pre-lockdown:

- incentive driven labour shortage.

Post lockdown:

- weak labour shortage.

Related risks to the FSA:

- food chain information verification risks at ante-mortem inspections ([footnote 5](#)).
- food safety risks (biological, physical, chemical, allergenic and cross-contamination) ([footnote 6](#)).
- food adulteration, substitution and misrepresentation risks ([footnote 7](#)).
- potential safety, provenance and traceability risks ([footnote 8](#)).
- potential increase in product misrepresentation and document fraud risks ([footnote 9](#)).
- potential risk of unlawful processing, and the diversion of food meant for disposal into the chain.

Locality:

- external to the FSA but internal to the food network (Defra, FSA, local authorities, Department for Business and Trade).

Quantification: Foreseen.

4.2 Heavy Good Vehicles

System causal factors:

- HGV driver testing backlogs.
- bureaucracy in HGV licencing procedures.
- policies on compulsory ongoing training for existing and returning drivers.
- ageing workforce and a lack of diversity.
- reluctance to hire newly trained drivers.
- cost of HGV training.
- dependence on overseas labour.
- welfare, compensation and amenities.
- increased job mobility.
- fewer owner-operators.
- aging workforce.
- increased online shopping and home deliveries following lockdown resulting in increased demand for drivers.

Impact:

- dual delays in cold chain and fresh fruit and vegetable delivery lead times from abattoirs or processors to supermarkets, and from supermarket warehouses to the final customers ([footnote 10](#)).
- more incidents of improper holding practices for food products awaiting shipment or inspection, including unattended products, delayed holding of perishable products, shipping of products while in quarantine.

Type of labour shortage:**Pre-lockdown:**

- incentive-driven shortage.

Post-lockdown:

- skills underutilisation shortage.

Related risks to the FSA:

- potential safety risks due to microbiological growth, and contamination due to delayed transport of meat that has not been fully chilled, partially chilled carcasses or meat intended for further processing ([footnote 11](#)).
- food withdrawal and recall risks from safety, and quality hazards ([footnote 12](#)).

Locality:

- external to the network.

Quantification: Foreseen.

4.3 Packers and Pickers

System causal factors:

- decreasing numbers of seasonal workers from the EU.
wages, working conditions, incentives, and workers' welfare.
low rate of returnees with UK-settled or pre-settled status.
increased competition from countries such as Germany and the Netherlands.
new wave of workers on visa scheme that are far less experienced than returnees who dominated labour pool prior to EU exit, COVID-19 and Ukraine.
challenges in recruiting local workers.
slow tender process for licensed operators to who recruit workers and arrange permits.
broader UK labour crisis increased labour mobility to trucking to hospitality.

Impact:

- short to mid-term reduction in production of food products including fruit and vegetables.
year-on-year rise in imports of fruit and vegetables with domestic production having decreased by 48% between 1987 and 2013.
international trade has increased the diversity of available fruit and vegetable supply.
changing supply chains of producers due to inflexible retail price contracts to cover the cost of labour shortfalls ([footnote 13](#)).
divestment from food production ([footnote 14](#)).

Type of labour shortage:

Pre-lockdown:

- incentive-driven shortage.

Post-lockdown:

- weak labour shortage.

Related risks to the FSA:

- availability, assortment and price inflation risks (eggs bread, fruit and vegetables) ([footnote 15](#))
- potential long-term food security risks
- potential food fraud, recall and withdrawal risks ([footnote 16](#))
- higher provenance and traceability risks associated with harmonizing national regulatory standards with new regional trade and bi-lateral food safety requirements for imports from new locations.

Locality:

- external to the FSA but internal to the food network (Defra, FSA, local authorities, Department for Business and Trade).

Quantification: Foreseen.

4.4 Meat Hygiene Inspectors

System causal factors:

- recruitment process complexity.
low post-recruitment retention rate.

aging workforce and retirement rate.
dependence on overseas labour.
high Internal job migration of inspectors.
high ratio of contracted versus FSA inspectors.
high turnover rate of contracted inspectors.
decade gap in recruitment and training of internal FSA inspectors.
image factors.

Impact:

- potential loss of inspection expertise, knowledge of abattoir risk profile, and niche capabilities due to high retirement rate and high attrition rate of contract staff
- potential loss of FSA in-house MHI training and upskilling capacity.

Type of labour shortage:

Pre-lockdown:

- skill underutilisation

Post-lockdown:

- weak labour shortage.

Related risks to the FSA:

- biosecurity risks ([footnote 17](#))
- potential increase in public health, food safety and animal health and welfare monitoring risks ([footnote 18](#)).

Locality:

- external to the FSA but internal to the food network

Quantification: Perceived.

4.5 Official Veterinarians

System causal factors:

- 95% of OVs registered to work in UK abattoirs each year qualified elsewhere in the EEA and there has been a significant downturn in registrations due to COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 ([footnote 19](#)).
RCVS training and English language requirements.
balancing labour requirement for statutory disease control work (such as TB testing) with increasing requirements for post EU exit export health certifications.
retained Export Health Certificate (EHC) clauses in the EU listing for audits that are unnecessary for animal health resulting in stretched veterinary capacity (for example, requirement for 40-day standstill in last holding before slaughter for bovine and sheep, audit of negative bovine Tuberculosis test, and systematic trichinella testing of pigs) ([footnote 20](#)).
aging workforce.
dependence on overseas labour.
OVs working in abattoirs are employed by a single Service Delivery Partner.

Impact:

- insufficient contingencies to manage additional pressures to inspect live animal movement and international food trade.
reliance on limited state veterinary capacity as contingency for OV shortages could strain research and testing capacity for animal health and animal welfare monitoring ([footnote 21](#)).
delays in full import inspections for other food categories ([footnote 22](#)).

Type of labour shortage:

Pre-lockdown:

- incentive-driven shortage.

Post-lockdown:

- weak labour shortage.

Related risks to the FSA:

- potential increase in the risk of food documentation fraud, animal welfare breaches, and public health reassurance to consumers ([footnote 23](#)).
impeded knowledge transfer of subjective scoring criteria for risk-based inspections from retiring workforce.

Locality:

- external to the FSA but internal to the food network

Quantification: Perceived.

4.6 Retail, food services and warehouse operatives

System causal factors:

- reliance on EU labour for temporary warehouse, retail and food service staffing during peak trading periods.
- high number of part-time workers as a proportion of total employment in retail.
- increased demand for warehouse staff following boom in online shopping ([footnote 24](#)).
- increased rate of job migration of retail operatives as many were without jobs through multiple lockdowns.
- multi-skilled sector but perceived as low skilled ([footnote 25](#)).

Impact:

- changes in retail and food service business models post-lockdown.
- changes in consumer preferences.
- unanticipated peaks in demand increasing need for temporary workers and higher need for job security reducing applicant pool.
- returnees from furlough required re-skilling to re-join same or other sectors ([footnote 26](#)).

Type of labour shortage:

Pre-lockdown:

- incentive-driven shortage.

Post-lockdown:

- skills underutilisation shortage.

Related risks to the FSA:

- food availability risks
- long-term food security risks

Locality:

- external to the FSA but internal to the food network

Quantification: Perceived.

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7. [The Guardian: Meat carcasses sent to EU for butchering amid UK worker shortage](#)
8. [Andover Advertiser: 2.4 tonnes of meat removed from car wash in Ludgershall](#), [Falmouth Packet: 2.4 tonnes of meat removed from car wash in Ludgershall](#)
9. [The Guardian: The invisible migrant workers propping up Ireland's €4bn meat industry](#)
10. [Which?: Should we be worried about food shortages?](#)
11. [BBC: Hauliers want priority for perishable goods at Dover](#)
12. [Which?: Should we be worried about food shortages?](#)
13. [The Poultry Site: UK farmers warn of egg shortages](#), [The Independent: UK tomato and cucumber farmers shut down production over energy crisis and labour shortages](#)
14. [Manchester Evening News: Shoppers warned of egg shortages in supermarkets amid 'mass exodus' of farmers](#)
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18. [Food Manufacture: Government U-turn on border strategy: Industry reaction](#)
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22. [Financial Times: UK explores fourth delay to imposing checks on EU imports](#)
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24. [Fresh Produce Journal: Warehouse shortages add to food sector woes](#)
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