

# Migrant workers in the UK after Brexit: labour shortages in the context of the hostile environment

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# Key points

Migration policy impacts on employment relations, on the number of vacancies, on labour availability, and it contributes to a sense of temporariness/volatility or stability

Immigration policy tries to address existing tension between need for labour mobility and the need to control it, but frequent changes of policy mean that migration categories are unstable and fluid.

The hostile environment policies and changes to migration categories over time created differentiated forms of precariousness for migrants, and uncertainty for employers

# Labour Mobility in Transition project

Three-year ESRC funded project 'Labour Mobility in Transition: a sectoral and multi-scalar approach to changing migration regulation, impact on labour processes and social dialogue'

Examines employer responses, worker strategies, and changing employment relations after Brexit and the pandemic

Migrant and UK workers experiences of the transition

Four sectors labelled as "low-skilled"+ relying on migrants: adult social care, hospitality, food and drink manufacture, warehousing and logistics.

"...the reality is that Britain ticks by with millions and millions of people doing ordinary important jobs. And they need recognition and they need support."

Interview 1, sectoral representative

# Literature and theoretical background - 1

## Migration policy as a technique of labour management

The global economic system has become increasingly reliant on movement, and economic systems of many states have become 'exceedingly dependent on the movement of people, goods, capital and information.' (Xiang 2020)

Migration policy cannot be analysed as separate from *employment policies and conditions and welfare institutions* (Ruhs and Anderson 2010)

Labour shortage 'is that demand for labour exceeds supply at the prevailing wages and employment conditions.' (Anderson et al 2020)

**Tension between the states' need for immigration control and the need for some labour mobility by capital/employers.**

# Literature and theoretical background – 2

## Hospitality or hostility through policy

The act of **hospitality creates a relationship of inequality** between the host and the guest (Derrida 2000, 2005)

Ethnographic studies discuss hospitality as a way of establishing social relations of **reciprocity** between social actors (eg in Alkan 2021). But this reciprocity is unrecognised by the state and state-like actors.

**Policy and categories produce hostility and un/welcome and these are closely linked to the differentiation between those seen as “deserving” and “undeserving”**

# Entry routes post-Brexit after Jan 2021

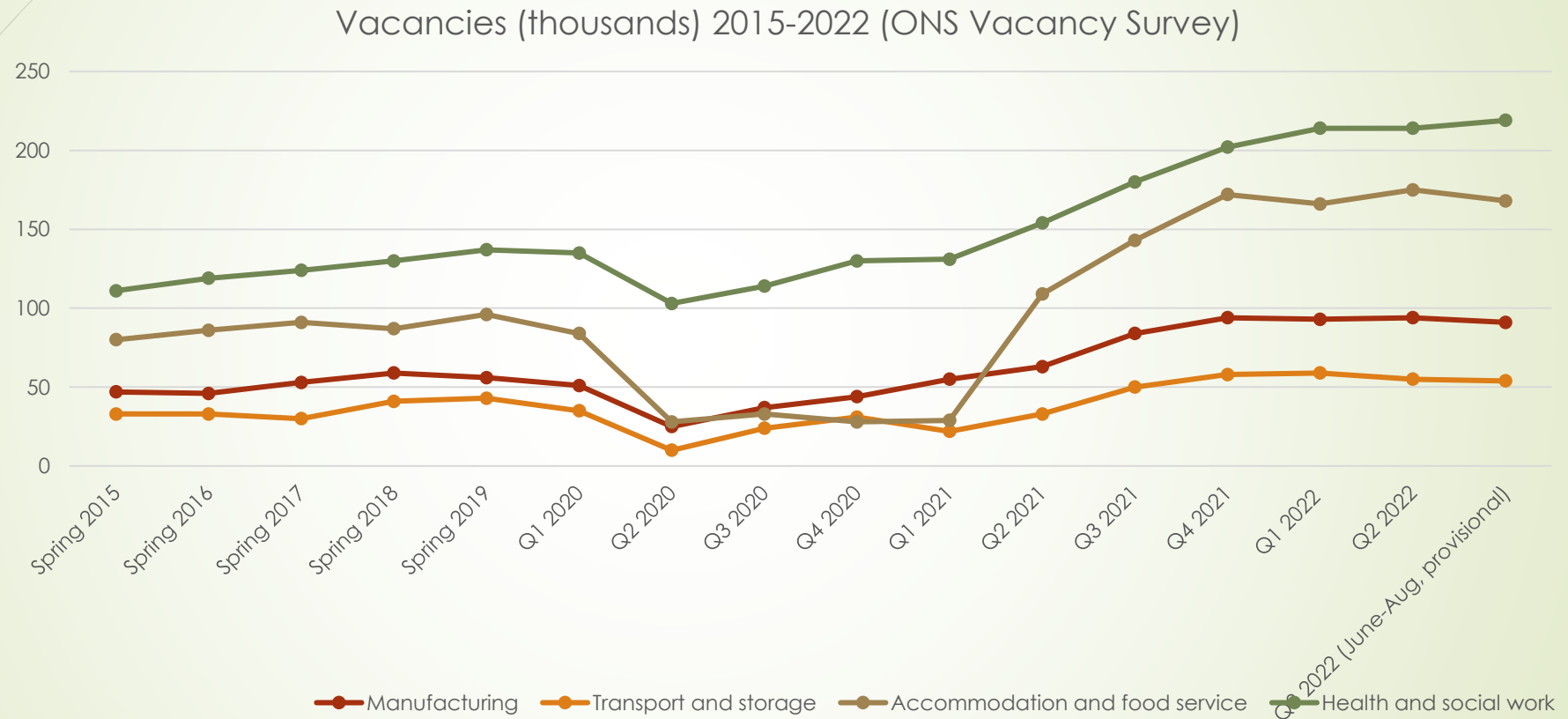
## EU nationals in the UK on or before 31 Dec 2020

- Have to apply to the **EU Settlement Scheme**
- Two-tier system: **pre-settled** (=limited leave to remain)  
**vs settled status** (=indefinite leave to remain)

## All new arrivals from January 2021

- End of free movement: '**Point Based System**' for everyone coming to work (including EU nationals)
- All need an **employer sponsor**
- **English** language at required level
- Job at required **skill level**; with focus on 'highly skilled' workers and 'global talent'
- **Salary threshold** £25, 599 or in designated shortage occupation £20,480
- **Temporary visa schemes (occupation based)**: butchers, poultry workers and HGV drivers
- Existing **temporary visa scheme for seasonal agricultural workers**
- **Care workers** added to Shortage Occupation List in February 2022
- New "**scale up visa**" for exceptional talent - August 2022

# Vacancies in the sectors under study



# Immigration policy after Brexit

'The post-Brexit immigration system for migrant workers is simultaneously liberal and restrictive compared to the one that preceded it.'

(Migration Observatory and ReWage report 2022)

**More liberal for non-EU citizens** – there are more routes open


**More restrictive for EU citizens** – freedom of movement ended, and entry for work is only possible with visa

**Uncertainty of status** for some may increase **informalisation of employment relations** (Alberti and Cutter 2022)

'the UK wanted to get rid of illegal migrants but they are going to actually multiply a lot of illegal immigration to the UK. Not because people do it on purpose, but people [will] find themselves illegally in the UK. **People who fail to upgrade from pre settled to settled, people who are refused status, people unaware of the rules** - it will be a challenge for everyone'

Advocacy worker, interview 39





# Welcome and unwelcome categories of migrants?

## WELCOME

contributing to the UK economy or welcome on humanitarian grounds:

**"The talented"**, eg exceptional talents in high growth businesses (scientists, engineers, architects....)

**Ukrainian refugees and Hong Kongers (BNO status)**-often young and highly educated – still face barriers to work

**Even these 'welcome' categories still suffer temporariness**

## UNWELCOME

**Illegalised migrants** crossing the channel with(out) papers

Racialised **asylum seekers**

**Overstayers and undocumented** (including EU homeless migrants/others without settled status)

**'Low-skilled'** more broadly?

**Ambiguous or in-limbo categories?**

# Temporariness of migration

- ▶ A person's position can shift from being 'welcome' to being 'unwelcome', with changes in policy, labour needs etc
- ▶ Temporariness of migration creates a sense of uncertainty and unwelcome, which impact on people's decisions
- ▶ Migrants leaving as a consequence of hostile environment / uncertainty has an impact on workforce availability
- ▶ Partly explain vacancies

'a lot of people are very torn - what am I going to do in the future? The future is uncertain, I don't think people see their future here, they have a lot of doubts,...., many people think the UK government will scrap the EU settlement scheme eventually... They think - what if I get to settled status and the government doesn't accept me for settled status. And what if I had to choose between being here and looking after my family - before they ... could come and go - now people have to make a choice, do I want to be here do I want to go back?'

Advocacy worker, interview 39

# Migration and the value of skills

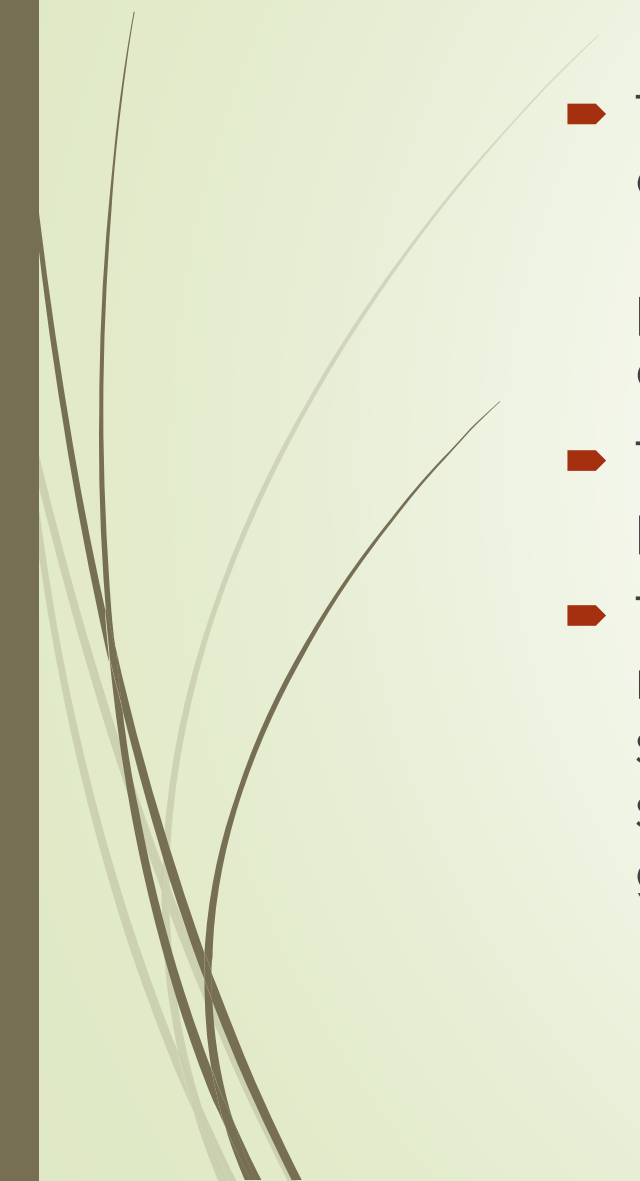
“and then you have bespoke stuff that sometimes comes up - like the health and care work visa. So political pressures form on the government, and the government needs to do something to respond to economic needs. And then what they end up doing it to try and tailor some of the existing visas to shoe-horn those types of people into it - so the health and care work visa is something that falls under the skilled work visa, the skilled worker visa has been tweaked to make it easier for health and care workers to come into the UK”

Immigration solicitor, EI40.

- ▶ Labour mobility from the back door?
- ▶ Shifting perceptions and categories of valued skills
- ▶ Shortages issues are related to poor quality of work in these sectors-migration policy as partial solution to these problems (ReWage Migration Observatory report 2022)



# Concluding remarks

- ▶ The UK's current migration policy is intentionally unstable, changeable and fluid and allows for the creation of new categories (including temporary visa schemes) and for the movement of people between categories, while being portrayed as fixed, stable and as a solution to a 'problem'.
  - ▶ The temporality and uncertainty of migrant categories produce the precarity of migrant workers in the labour market
  - ▶ The UK's migration policy appears to both serve the needs of the market but also reassure UK citizens that the borders of the nation states are still 'under control' by the reinvigorated 're-claimed sovereignty' of the British state in a highly uncertain and tense global context.
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Thank you.



Any questions and comments?