

Executive summary:

# From low-skilled to good work: a joint approach to migration policy

Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC) Leeds University Business School



**This briefing summarises the key findings and recommendations from the four-year study ESRC Labour Mobility in Transition (Limits) research project at Leeds University Business School (2021-25). The project explores labour and migration issues in four key sectors of the UK economy that have historically employed high proportions of migrant workers: Transport and Storage, Food Manufacturing, Hospitality, and Social Care.**

## The evidence base for the findings consists of:

- A UK wide Survey of 1651 employers on their workforce strategies post Brexit (July 2022-March 2023);
- 150 interviews with key informants (workers, employers, agencies, industry representatives, local and national government, trade unions, migrant advocacy groups) across the UK;
- 7 workplace case studies in the Yorkshire and Humber region;
- 4 stakeholder workshops.

The qualitative research was conducted between October 2021 and January 2025.

## Key findings

- Of those firms with vacancies:
  - 73% of firms across sectors reported hard to fill vacancies
  - 85% of hospitality employers reported hard to fill
  - 73% of Transport and storage employers had hard to fill vacancies
- Most cited reasons for vacancy levels were
  - not enough applicants (62%)
  - low number of applicants with required motivation and skills (62%)
  - low wages (61%)
- 49% of employers with hard to fill vacancies also indicated that a reduction in the supply of migrant workers (from inside or outside the EU) was a cause of labour shortages.
- Employers in hospitality, food and drink manufacturing and transport and storage have been de- facto excluded from recruiting internationally, as most job roles in these sectors do not meet salary and skills thresholds to be eligible for Skilled Worker Visas (beside e.g. temporary visas for truck drivers and highly skilled chefs).
- Among most cited strategies to overcome worker shortages were to increase pay (53%), although wages continue to be benchmarked around the national living wage
- Other common strategies included: increase opportunities to work flexibly (43%) and improve training (41%).

- 31% of firms with hard to fill vacancies had sought to employ more UK workers and 15% were looking to employ more migrant workers. These include the dependents of those on time-limited visas.
- 32% of firms reported using employment agencies, often in continuity with previous practice.
- Only 14% of employers across the sectors were looking to increased automation to tackle labour shortages.
- Employers (especially SMEs) reported reducing staffing levels, leading to work intensification and increased workload for existing employees.
- Hiring migrant workers was not used as alternative to training programmes. Fears of poaching staff by other firms, along with high levels of labour turnover in the sector had limited employer willingness to invest in training, particularly through apprenticeships.
- Both workers and employers lack security and stability and the ability to make longer term plans and investment in the face of constantly changing regulation and uncertain environments.
- Stakeholders emphasised the importance of improving working conditions to make jobs more attractive, improve retention and promote inclusive growth.
- Ad hoc sector and local level stakeholder collaborations seek to address workforce issues but they remain relatively disjointed and with partial effects.
- UK migration policy needs to take greater account of business and skills needs plus the viability of public services and critical sectors as well as migrant workers' security and right to family life.
- A shift in the policy discourse is urgently needed, away from de-valuing those sectors deemed as low skilled.

## Key recommendations for UK Government:

### Migration and employment:

- A cross-departmental, multi-agency and multi-level approach, shifting focus from controlling migration to improving work conditions in low paying, migrant-reliant sectors.
- A realistic, long-term migration plan that takes into account labour and skills needs, created in dialogue with industry, migrant rights advocacy groups and trade unions.
- Promote pathways to settlement rather than temporary migration.

- Expand the membership of the proposed Labour Market Evidence (LME) group to include HR experts, trade unions and mayoral combined authorities.
- Expand the LME group remit to better understand the root causes of shortages, poor investment in skills and inactivity among the UK workforce. Also, include foundational sectors of the UK economy in the LME remit.
- Streamline the process of changing employer sponsors for Care Worker visas.
- End restrictions on bringing dependants for those on the Skilled worker system.
- Myth-bust the 'migration versus training for UK workers' trade off.
- Give a stronger role for combined and local authorities in the migration and good work agenda.
- Close loopholes in employment status around dependent self-employment.
- Ban zero-hour contracts in care and all sectors where agency and temporary work are common
- Substantive public investment into the Care sector to make fair pay agreements viable.
- Enable migrant workers to transfer their qualifications into UK-recognised ones and accredit competencies to enable transition into jobs for which they are suitably qualified.

## Key recommendations for combined and local authorities

### Employment and skills:

- Turn voluntary schemes such as "fair work charters" into enforceable tools to improve employment, boost inclusivity, and make work pay for both locals and migrants.
- Consider the impact of digitalisation on skills, recognising different uses and effects of digitalisation across sectors in skills strategies and funding.
- Promote further collaboration between local colleges & employers, and where relevant, unions and migrant support groups.
- Commission additional English training to support migrants to gain specialist/technical language skills.

## Find out more

Further information and the full report available is on our Labour Mobility in Transition Research webpage. To discuss this report and findings, please contact Prof. Gabriella Alberti.

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 Visit our webpage: [tinyurl.com/LabourMobility](https://tinyurl.com/LabourMobility)