

The recent study from the University of Nottingham looked at the working conditions of fishers who commercially fish in UK waters, and/or on UK flagged vessels. The research engaged fishers in different parts of the UK and included findings from 108 worker surveys and 16 in-depth interviews. The majority of those included were migrant fishers.

A separate briefing from the International Transport Workers Federation, focused on the use of transit visas by the UK fishing industry to recruit migrant fishers. The briefing advocates that transit visas need to be replaced by a new way of recruiting migrant fishers, which better protects their welfare and human rights, and ensures compliance with C.188.

This bite-size meeting presented the key findings from both publications. It was followed by a discussion involving a diverse panel of experts.

[Letting exploitation off the hook? Evidencing labour abuses in UK fishing.](#) Jessica Sparks, University of Nottingham Rights Lab.

The report focuses on all crew working in the UK fishing fleet, including the local workforce and those from overseas, share fishers, and contracted employees. Key findings include:

- 35% of fishers reported experiencing regular physical violence – with some workers recounting being racially abused or experiencing extreme sexual violence.
- The average salary for migrant fishers working in the UK was £3.51 per hour – well below the National Minimum Wage in the UK at £9.50 an hour.
- One participant, a UK national, told researchers: *“I heard a vessel owner say. No – he proudly declared: I can get 2-3 foreign crew for the price of one of you local lads.”*
- 19% of participants reported conditions comparable to forced labour with an additional 48% reporting potential cases.
- Due to legal loopholes, non-European migrants with transit visas have no legal authority to “enter” the UK without permission when returning to port and are forced to live on board the vessels.
- Vessel owners and recruitment agencies are issuing work agreements that are non-compliant with UK regulation, causing migrant fishers to be unduly treated as violators of UK immigration law even when other parties are responsible for the illegal nature of their work.
- More than 60% of fishers (including UK nationals) said they would never report a grievance out of fear of blacklisting - the practice of restricting re-employment opportunities for fishers.

Further information

- **[Letting exploitation off the hook? Evidencing labour abuses in UK fishing](#)**
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[A One Way Ticket to Labour Exploitation.](#) Chris Williams, International Transport Workers Federation (ITF).

This report focusses on the use of the transit visa system for recruiting foreign fishers. It is aimed at immigration and fisheries policymakers. Seafarers’ Transit Visas are intended to allow seafarers to join ships leaving UK ports for international waters. International waters begin 22.2km (12 nautical miles) off the UK’s shoreline. Fishing boat owners are allowed to use transit visas to employ non-EEA European Economic Area crew. The report argues that transit visas are the starting point for a cycle of abuse, and that the system needs to be changed to close, what is seen as a loophole. Several recommendations were made.

Further information

- **[A One Way Ticket to Labour Exploitation](#)**
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Panel session

- Jessica Sparks, University of Nottingham Rights Lab.
- Chris Williams, International Transport Workers Federation (ITF).
- Mike Park, Chief Executive Officer, Scottish White Fish Producers Association.
- Amy Morris, Ethics and Sustainability Manager, John Lewis Partnership.
- Julie Carlton, Seafarer Safety and Health Manager, Maritime and Coastguard Agency.
- Martin Foley, Chief Executive Officer/European Regional Coordinator, Stella Maris.
- Rosey Hurst, Director, Impactt Limited

Questions to panel

Q. What is your reaction to the serious allegations contained in this report (the actual findings rather than on the methodology and the sample size)?

- These are very serious allegations – they confirm that the Transit Visa is not fit for purpose and needs to be replaced by a transparent visa scheme. The lack of data creates ‘blind spots’.
- The fishing industry does not recognise this as the general situation across the industry, but there are clearly issues and these need to be addressed. 1400 of 4500 employed on Scottish vessels are non-UK crew. The industry has come a long way but there is clearly work to be done. The industry does have a zero-tolerance policy in this arena. Certainly, in some situations the cost of employing someone through a Transit Visa is more expensive than employing share fishermen.
- The supply chain must take worker welfare very seriously. Collaborative opportunities to move forward are needed.

Q. Can you please explain why the Transit Visa scheme has been in place for so long?

- As far back as 22 years ago the fishing industry approached Government to bring about change. We do now have the opportunity to use a skilled worker visa route, but the English language requirement is a barrier (passing a written English exam is a requirement). This is considered to be beyond any health and safety considerations. To date only one person has successfully applied using this route. The transit visa route does preclude industry making some changes to living conditions. This is a case of practice overtaking policy, and as a consequence the Transit Visa situation has not been reviewed and addressed properly.
- There can also be a charge from a recruitment consultant which is added on to help in the whole visa application process (an unintended consequence). The big issue is the lack of vetting of in country recruitment agencies abroad. We need unscrupulous agencies to be removed and for Government to take a much more active role in vetting these agents.

Q. If we are serious about change, what do we want to see next following the publication of these two reports?

- We can all benefit from sitting round a table.
- Baseline census - so we know exact numbers and nationalities. Clarify how many are here on transit visas.
- There appears to be a preference for shorter contracts which makes the UK an attractive choice for migrant fishers in particular. We don't want to diminish that interest.
- Review and change the Transit Visa system. Government should not be tolerating such a system.
- Better oversight of unscrupulous recruitment agents abroad.
- Better understanding to help prepare workers of their rights and what to expect when they come to the UK.
- We need to improve the general understanding of fishers about their rights and conditions of work.

- Get people together - time-bound action plan – federated approach. We need a collaborative approach and not work in silos.
- There are short-term and longer-term objectives.
- More countries to ratify ILO C. 188. This would help the manning agency issue as well.
- A collaboratively developed action plan led by the fishing industry, but with a diverse range of stakeholders (inc. workers organisations, NGOs, seafood businesses) involved in the development and ongoing progress monitoring. Smaller working groups looking at practical solutions i.e., a group of people looking at Grievance Mechanisms; a different group looking at another topic all independently convened and well facilitated to ensure it is a safe space and productive.
- A sustainable future for the fishing industry where worker welfare is central. We must be transparent about what the issues are.
- As an industry we need to make the changes necessary to ensure there is no bonding, and fishers feel that they have a voice, can complain, and suggest changes. We need to create a collegiate environment and ensure measure are put in place to ensure fishers are welcome and respected.

Q. What learnings can we take from other sectors?

- In other industries with a similar footprint, we have seen where the US Customs system has stepped in and has resulted in trade sanctions. As a result, industry has had to take note and the pace and impetus for change has increased. In particular recruitment fees have been reformed. We need to hear these things first as an industry, not from media reports. We need to prompt social dialogue directly to stop discrimination at route. We could also look to worker-driven social responsibility

Q&A and commentary from the audience

- **Q. Can someone from the fishing industry talk about windfarm duty please (and their understanding of whether non-EEA crew can work on guard duty - inside 12 miles)?**
A. When employing a migrant worker in the UK, or even on an offshore installation located close to the UK, the individual must usually have permission to undertake the job offered to them in the form of a work visa. However, a concession is currently in place, outside of the UK's Immigration Rules, to allow the employment of foreign workers who are joining vessels engaged in either the construction or maintenance of offshore wind projects in UK territorial waters. This concession is, however, time-limited and leave to enter under the terms of the concession has been extended to 1 July 2022. See: <https://www.davidsonmorris.com/uk-offshore-wind-workers-concession/> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/offshore-wind-workers-immigration-rules-concession-2017/offshore-wind-workers-immigration-rules-concession-2017-july-2021-update>
- **16 interviews across the whole of the fishing industry that work outside of twelve miles is a very tiny proportion of the workforce.** Even if the survey sample is tiny, the vulnerability of non- host speaking migrant workers, working in a hidden environment at sea, with a semi-illegal status created by transit visas is going to be exploited by some. This has been proven in so many industries and countries that have legal visa status working on shore.
- We do not know how many migrant workers are employed within the UK fishing workforce, or how many transit visas have been issued specifically to UK fishing vessels. There is no official record of this. UK fishing vessels are required to have a crew list, which is held ashore in case of an accident, but not by the authorities.
- There is no vetting of overseas agents built into the UK visa system other than in the GLAA sector. Vetting labour providers in sending countries and ensuring the supply chain incentivises responsible recruitment practices is key.