The end of EU migration will reshape the UK economy

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Opinion UK employment

The era of free movement transformed everything from the security and location of work to the prices in shops

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In meat processing, where EU workers account for more than 60 per cent of staff, employers are complaining of acute labour shortages © Richard J Greenman/Alamy

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Last week, the deadline passed for EU citizens living in the UK to apply for the right to stay, prompting concern about what will happen to people who didn't apply in time. But the more extraordinary story is about the numbers who did apply. By March, there had been 5.3m applications from almost 5m individuals for "settled" or "pre-settled" status (some people applied twice). By all accounts, there has been a last-minute rush since then.

Yet in 2019, the Home Office estimated the total pool of people eligible to apply for the scheme was only between 3.5m and 4.1m. Applications by people from Romania and Bulgaria had reached about 918,000 and 284,000 respectively by March, while the latest official estimates of their resident populations were 370,000 and 122,000 respectively. Some applications will be from eligible family members or from people who have left the UK. Even so, it seems clear the UK's population and migration estimates have been "wholly inadequate since at least the mid-2010s", as economist Jonathan Portes has written.

It is ironic that we are only learning just how big a deal European migration was for the UK at the moment we are confronted by life without it. For an insight into how the era of EU free movement transformed some corners of the economy, you could do worse than to study the factories that process our food.

This sector, heavily reliant on workers from the EU, was always going to face a reckoning, since the government's new post-Brexit immigration regime has put a stop to most low-paid migration. But the pandemic has hastened the crunch by prompting many EU workers with settled status to go home (no one knows how many). In meat processing, where EU workers account for more than 60 per cent of staff, employers are complaining of acute labour shortages.

Employers often lament that Britons just don't apply for these jobs. But a look at current job adverts offers an insight into why. Twelve-hour shifts in food factories are common, often in patterns of "four on, four off", with workers expected to do a mixture of day and night shifts. One for a bakery worker states: "You will work days or nights including weekends for 12 hours [sic] shift as follows: 6am to 6pm; 6pm to 6am." Another warns applicants for its 12-hour night shifts (paid £9.12 per hour) that "you will be working on your feet for the duration of the shift". Many state: "You will be required to be flexible to meet the demands of the business."

It's hard to see how you could manage a job with long and variable hours like this if you had to arrange childcare in advance, or indeed had any responsibilities outside work. Even if you could, there are less demanding jobs with steadier shifts that pay a similar wage. Yet the food factory jobs have been manageable for a certain group of migrant workers who came without dependants and lived in shared accommodation. Nick Allen, chief executive of the British Meat Processors Association, says that is why the jobs

developed this way. “If we’re honest, the working patterns have evolved around having non-UK labour, their prime reason is to stay for three years, earn a lot of money and go home again.”

He says the location of workplaces has changed too, from smaller abattoirs spread around the country to a much-reduced group of large ones in rural areas (because it’s easier to get the animals there). “The whole structure of the industry has altered” over the decades, Allen says. “It’s ended up in a particular pattern and it’s probably got to change.”

Allen says pay for new hires is already up: “I’m seeing starting-level jobs advertised now at £22,000, whereas two years ago it would have been £18,000”. He is talking to members about changing their working patterns, but warns it won’t be easy. Eamon O’Hearn, a national officer at the GMB union, says he has “some sympathy” for the sector’s employers, since they are low-margin, high-volume businesses, relentlessly squeezed by the powerful supermarkets. Meat in the UK is among the cheapest in western Europe. “I think we can’t have a debate or review of what work-life balance means in our communities without addressing the market power of the retailers,” he says.

It is disingenuous for employers to say that Britons won’t ever do these jobs. Yet it is also naive to believe their problems would melt away overnight if they just raised pay and made less profit. In this sector, the era of free movement affected everything from the rhythm, security and location of work to the prices we have grown used to in the shops.

Workers from the EU shaped the UK profoundly. If they don’t come back, learning to live without them will reshape us yet again.

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Event details and information