



STAKEHOLDER BRIEFING

Labour, Skills & Employment

June 2026

Introduction to UK environmental horticulture and landscaping

The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) represents around 1400 UK businesses, including growers, retailers, suppliers, and landscapers who collectively deliver the gardens, green spaces, and green infrastructure that delivers for the economy, environment, climate change adaptation, flood resilience and our health and wellbeing. Each year, the environmental horticulture sector delivers £38bn to GDP and supports 722,000 jobs.

The cost of employment

The HTA's latest quarterly Business Barometer shows significantly more businesses are behind their profit targets than ahead, with a net balance of -36% at the end of Q1 2026. This compares with -13% for sales, highlighting a widening gap between trading and profitability and the scale of the margin pressure businesses are now facing.

National Living Wage (NLW) increases in recent years, coupled with National Insurance Contribution (NIC) rises have added costs and pressure to businesses. The HTA estimates a £134 million additional bill on the industry because of these increases. As a result, 70% of HTA member businesses have had no choice but to increase prices, over 50% have frozen recruitment and just under half have reduced or postponed capital investment¹.

While we support fair wages, increasing NLW doesn't just increase salaries for one group, as wage increases must then be awarded to other roles throughout the workforce to maintain differentials. According to one HTA member, who reviewed the cumulative impacts of wages and employer NI increases from April 2025, they experienced an increased overall cost of £700k, with an additional £200k on wages and NI costs predicted if wages rise as anticipated. The top living wage rate has increased by more than 42% in the last 5 years, while the age range has come down, decreasing from 23 years old to 21 adding an even greater cost for businesses.

It is also important to maintain wage differentiation between skilled and unskilled labour, as these increases often have the largest impact on profitability and the businesses' ability to employ the necessary volume of skilled workers. In addition, expanded statutory rights for employees because of the Employment Rights Act (ERA) will



Key asks for Policy Makers

- **Recognise environmental horticulture, landscaping and arboriculture jobs and roles in the government's green jobs and skills definitions**, and recognise the value of sector careers and opportunities from early curriculum to apprenticeships and degree-level, including an improved national careers service that promotes environmental horticulture opportunities
- **Inspire and educate young people through ensuring plants are grown and studied throughout all stages of and across the curriculum** – give every child in the UK the skills to grow plants
- **Ensure that the sector is consulted on any proposed changes to the Seasonal Worker Visa**, including requirements for employers to pay for accommodation, visa and travel costs (Employer Pays Principle). This must be accompanied by an impact assessment.
- **To improve communication and collaboration between Defra and the Home Office**. A clear, formal definition of roles and responsibilities within each department relating to labour and immigration matters is crucial.
- **To extend the length of visas for SAWS workers to 9 months** to maximise worker's earning potential and ensure that they are of maximum value to the horticulture sector.
- **Ensure the Growth and Skills Levy delivers for SMEs in the horticulture industry** and that the sector is consulted in any future defunding of units that might impact horticultural businesses.
- **Ensure continued funding for land based colleges** which remain vulnerable to funding changes.



increase HR and compliance costs. According to the Government's own estimates, the ERA will add another £5 billion to companies' costs. SMEs will be disproportionately affected as they have fewer HR resources and less capacity to absorb the additional administrative burden. We have also been made aware that there are two different Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) calculators on the government website which is creating further confusion for businesses. Anecdotal evidence from our members indicates that SSP costs between April 2025 and April 2026 have increased, which is a direct result of ERA.

Apprenticeships & youth employment

We welcome the flexible Growth and Skills Levy; however, due to the timelines for apprenticeship modules to be rolled out, we are yet to feel the benefit of this. The defunding of certain management standard apprenticeship units is also causing concern for our members. It is vital that funds can be accessed by a wider cohort of businesses and that apprenticeships are a viable training option for SMEs in the sector.

The government's prioritisation of sectors in the Industrial Strategy represents a missed opportunity to deliver green growth in primary production sectors such as horticulture. A narrow focus on priority sectors, alongside further devolution of skills provision, risks undermining skills development in nationally significant but non-priority sectors, including environmental horticulture.

Apprenticeships provide a valuable opportunity, but are currently underutilised. They need to be more accessible to businesses. The government's renewed focus on youth employment and support for those not in education, employment or training (NEET) could present some opportunities for the sector, given the wide range of roles available, and the recently announced financial incentives for SME's who take on an apprentice aged 16-24 should go some way in easing the pressure put on employers. But with a workforce that also relies on career changers as a high proportion of new entrants, the age limitations will exclude a significant chunk of those undertaking apprenticeships in the sector.

We consistently hear from our garden centre members that, although there are currently horticulture and retail offerings, there is no single apprenticeship that caters to both. We would urge this to be taken forward as a priority.

Education and careers advice

Engagement with horticulture can begin in childhood, providing health and wellbeing benefits for children and helping them build an understanding of science and the natural world. Introducing a Statutory Requirement to 'Grow Plants' into the curriculum at levels 1 and 2 will ensure that all children get this opportunity.

"Exposure to the benefits of gardening and green spaces in early development in children can have real influence on their physical and mental wellbeing. Almost two thirds of primary school head and deputy headteachers agreed that school gardening benefitted pupils' physical health and mental wellbeing; meanwhile 74% saw benefits to social skills, and 61% recognised benefit to behaviour"

– HTA [Value of Plants Report](#)

The Department for Education should partner with businesses to promote gardening in schools, inspiring the next generation of horticulturalists. There must also be collaboration with the industry to ensure teachers and career advisors are aware of horticultural careers and their links to academic subjects.

It is important to champion careers in horticulture as vital green growth jobs and green skills that can inspire future

generations to pursue rewarding, diverse careers. Gardening and green space engagement in



schools should be recognised as STEM subjects and integrated into compulsory education. To increase awareness of careers in environmental horticulture amongst secondary school pupils, there is a need to strengthen links between academic subjects and their applications in environmental horticulture. In order to facilitate this, government should work with industry to ensure that teachers are aware of careers in horticulture and how academic subjects are linked with a variety of roles within the sector. Improving interest in working in the sector is crucial to driving interest.

Careers in horticulture can offer a wide range of opportunities for young people and career changers. To help drive interest in the sector improved careers advice that covers the breadth of the roles in the sector is needed. Awareness of the value of a career in the environmental horticulture sector should be raised by increased government recognition for its green credentials and environmental, social and health contributions. Despite being the original green industry, environmental horticulture roles are not included in ONS 'green jobs' definitions, we are keen to see this updated to reflect the inherently green nature of what the sector does.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is also being prioritised by many employers. "Access all Areas" is the EDI initiative for the horticulture, arboriculture, landscaping, and garden media professions. The industry bodies have come together to commit to better EDI outcomes in the landscape, horticulture, and arboriculture sectors.

Seasonal workers

Seasonal workers make up around one third of the total environmental horticulture FTE Labour input. Businesses will prioritise domestic recruitment to meet seasonal labour needs but for many of our growers, it is impossible to recruit the required number of seasonal workers domestically to meet demands. The Seasonal Workers Visa route is a common mechanism that businesses use to source overseas seasonal labour.

While advancements in automation are promising, current technology is not yet sufficient to replace seasonal labour entirely. Long-term certainty in the SWS would help stabilise workforce pressures and encourage investment in automation technology. The sector would benefit from a rolling five-year scheme to allow growers to evaluate labour needs more accurately over time.

On 25 February 2025, the government announced a 5-year continuation of the Seasonal Worker route, which was welcomed. The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) recommended that the government provide five years' notice of any closure of this route; however, the government have confirmed they will provide two years' notice. This is not long enough for businesses to be able to fulfil the labour demand that would be generated, should the scheme close. It is crucial that businesses are consulted on any changes, and that a full impact assessment of any scheme closure or changes is carried out to protect UK plant production.

One of our grower members in the South East said:

"Access to the seasonal worker visa route is vital for us. We benefit from around 40 staff from the seasonal worker scheme each year, who work alongside locally recruited staff, and staff from the prison population. The government's commitment to give 2 years' notice of the scheme's closure will not work for the sector. We are based in a cluster of other horticultural businesses who all use the scheme; it would be impossible to recruit the 100's of people we would collectively need between us from the local population, the pool of people is limited, they would then become in demand which would further drive wage inflation locally, making them unobtainable for low margin businesses such as us."



“It is vital that we have a 5-year rolling scheme to allow businesses to plan effectively. Although automation may offer some support in the coming years, the range of plants we produce means that the current automation technology is not suited to our business and will offer little in the way of reducing our reliance on seasonal labour.”

Whilst the cooling off period has been reduced from 6 months to 4 months, allowing workers to return sooner, extending the visa period to nine months would maximise the value of seasonal workers to the horticulture sector and maximise their earning potential. It would allow for cross-training and movement between departments and businesses, providing greater stability and efficiency across the growing season.

The Employer Pays Principle (EPP), would put responsibility on businesses to pay for flights, visa and accommodation costs of overseas workers. We welcome the governments' recognition that EPP could add significant costs to the supply chain and may impact food prices. Businesses must be consulted on any changes in this area.

HTA member insights

An **HTA grower member** based in the South East said:

“The biggest costs to most businesses in our sector are people and logistics – both of which are consistently rising. At the time of writing this, as a sector, we are facing fuel surcharges we have never seen before, not just on the cost of sending our product to customers, but also on the cost of inbound materials.”

“The costs of employing people are as high as ever, and the increase in day one rights, puts an additional financial pressure on employers. Having said that we are firmly behind protecting employees, and is the right thing to do without question, and something that is ingrained in our business DNA. Absorbing the cost of wage increases across the workforce has been a challenge. It's important for politicians to understand that this is just one of the various cost increases being put on businesses. This does, however, bring its challenges, especially in a low-margin sector, which is highly seasonal. We need people when the products are in demand, which makes mitigations like adjusting shift patterns unsuitable due to the ‘just in time’ nature of working with live products.”

“We are very proud of the community of staff that we have. We have built a diverse profile mix for seasonal labour to ensure resilience, diversity in thinking and actions, as well as a stronger staff community. Our workforce comprises permanent staff, apprentices, domestic seasonal workers, workers on seasonal worker visas, workers released from the local prison on temporary license, and those on placements from DWP and the Management Development Scheme.”

“We also have a mixture of ages, from apprenticeships to career changers. To support all of our team to develop, we would like to see more funded or part funded courses for practical skills training, both industry specific as well as generic skills for business – the flexible growth and skills levy need to work for SMEs and greater engagement with businesses is needed to understand the skills gap, as well as the predicted future skills requirements.”

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