



Commission for
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

**Rural Migrant
Worker Projects:**

Wychavon

District Council



Wychavon District Council: Establishing the contribution of migrant workers to a successful local economy

Introduction

For many centuries, the district covered by Wychavon and the Vale of Evesham in Worcester has been associated with food and farming, especially horticultural products such as fruit and vegetables (particularly asparagus). Indeed, this is one of the most prolific fruit and vegetable growing areas in the country, producing tens of thousands of tonnes of apples and plums each year.

Recently, the food processing and distribution sector has experienced significant growth, with food not only grown but imported into the area for processing and distribution. The need for a supply of casual workers at short notice is now an all-year round requirement.

Many of these jobs are filled by international short-term contract workers. Some of these workers are 'bussed in' each day from larger conurbations, particularly Birmingham and Leicester. An increasing number are Eastern Europeans from the accession states who have been coming to the area since May 2004.

Wychavon District Council, which encompasses the Vale of Evesham, recognises that the large numbers of migrant workers employed by local food and farming businesses are essential to economic success. Indeed, without this supply of casual workers, it is unlikely that businesses and the regular jobs they support would survive. With partners, the district council has conducted detailed research to understand more about the nature of the migrant workforce, and is leading on other initiatives to support migrant workers and their employers.

The need for research

In July 2003, there was a fatal accident in which three people died on the railway line near Evesham. The driver of a minibus containing migrant workers employed by a local grower, who was unable to read English, failed to read the warning signs at a level crossing. Peter Luff MP and the Bishop of Hereford were both on the train. The accident raised the profile of the health and safety issues in relation to migrant workers.

The district council's Agriculture and Food Distribution Panel was already looking at a range of issues associated with the agricultural and horticultural sector, such as lorry movements, the role of supermarkets and the use of gang labour. The accident sharpened the need for this work. It was clear that, before any specific policies could be defined, a better picture was needed as to how many people were working in the Vale of Evesham and what the key issues for them were. The district council commissioned detailed research, in partnership with the Diocese of Worcestershire and the Primary Care Trust, into the size and characteristics of the migrant labour workforce¹. The findings were published in 2006.

Research findings

The research provided hard evidence about the actual numbers of migrant workers:

- It found that there were up to 2,400 migrants in the Vale of Evesham engaged in horticultural work. These were predominantly from the accession countries, mainly Polish.
- There were about 500 daily migrants – predominantly British Asian – coming into the area on a daily basis.

It also revealed interesting – and, for some perhaps, surprising – findings.

Unquestionably, migrant workers are good for the economy. For some time, local growers had not been able to recruit enough people. There is very low unemployment (1.6%) across the district and the sector could not manage without this reliable workforce. Indeed, growers are now securing new contracts with the wholesale market on the strength of their ability to deliver the goods. As an example, last summer for the first time local producers supplied asparagus to Waitrose nationally. (A welcome added benefit of this is that local food is being sold, as opposed to food imported over long distances.)

The research also highlighted the hard and unglamorous nature of the work. These are 'hard to fill' jobs, and growers and farmers despaired of getting local people to do the work.

¹ The Extent, Size and Characteristics of the Migrant Workforce in the Vale of Evesham, 2006, www.wychavon.gov.uk.

No evidence was found of illegality – either in employment practice or in the presence of ‘asylum seekers’ or anyone else with doubtful status.

The research confirmed the importance of the workforce for local employers but also highlighted particular gaps in support provision for both employers and migrants. This included training, risk assessment, health and safety, ESOL (English as a Second Language) provision, and a lack of understanding amongst workers about whether services, particularly healthcare, are available to them.

Initiatives with employers and migrant workers

The district council already has a good track record for working with employers. For example, its ADAPT programme (which ran from 1999-2002) helped many rural businesses branch out into new business opportunities in the face of changing markets. It is now building on these links and, under its ‘Ethical Labour’ project, has:

- established an employers group where employers find out about business support available to them and hear from a range of public agencies such as the LSC and the Police;
- held a one-day information and advice session, attended by 13 of the key employers (many of whom incorporate a number of farms so represent a significant proportion of growers in the area) – amongst other things this session covered the SEDEX ethical data exchange web-based system, where to get training for migrant workers (LANTRA, ‘Train to Gain’) etc;
- provided five one-to-one consultations with individual businesses on ethical labour and how to comply with the Gangmasters’ Licensing Authority (GLA);
- held a one-day awareness raising public sector conference, which was well-attended by a wide range of agencies.

Chris Brooks is the Regeneration Manager at Wychavon District Council and is leading on this project. He says: “Businesses are well aware of the need to know what is on offer and get support from the agencies that exist. Bringing agencies and employers together has been extremely fruitful.”

The research indicated a need for more information for migrant workers about their rights and responsibilities. With partners such as the TUC, the NHS, Worcestershire County Council and the Police, the district council is assessing how best to meet this need, and has planned focus groups to establish what would be most helpful. This may well be through a ‘welcome pack’ and a website, distributed via libraries, contact centres, workplaces, even pubs. It is also looking into translating CD ROMs into relevant languages. Chris adds:

“We want to look at the scope for trans-national work too, whereby workers are given knowledge before they set off – this would explain the realities of working in this country and provide information about our culture so that people can make an informed choice.”

At the time of the report, no evidence was found of pressure on housing stock caused by the migrant workers. Most migrants who work in the agricultural and horticultural sector live on site in caravan-type accommodation or in purpose-built hostels. However, the number of Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) is increasing. It is thought that these HMOs are occupied by workers in other sectors, such as catering, leisure and construction. The district council acknowledges that its research did not encompass these sectors, which are actually less well regulated as they fall outside the GLA's remit – and so more open to abuse. The district council is contributing to regional research which will engage with some of these issues. The research includes 700 face-to-face interviews with migrant workers, and will provide a more complete picture of the situation across the West Midlands.

The lessons learned

The district council is taking pains to accommodate the way local businesses operate. For example it holds breakfast meetings because this is more convenient for farmers and growers. It has learned that there are certain times of the year when the sector is simply too busy to take time for meetings or training. Businesses enjoy the opportunities for networking provided by the district council's activities. They also like to raise issues beyond the agenda – such as planning and environmental health. Chris Brooks adds: “You have to be flexible and be prepared to talk to employers about issues that concern them.”

Chris would like to see national coordination of work with migrant workers – in terms both of the information provided to them and local authority activity across the country. He says: “There are numerous websites run by different authorities. It would be simpler and much more effective to just have one with relevant links. There should also be a central hub of research, projects to support migrant workers and activity by agencies and voluntary organisations.”

The district council sees the benefits accruing from working as a partnership across the county. By pooling money and information more progress will be made. Many agencies are facing the same issues – such as the need to translate information. Chris adds: “It makes sense to take a Local Area Agreement approach to English language tuition, so that we avoid a culture of dependency and reduce the resources that are being spent on providing information in languages other than English.”

Summary

The Vale of Evesham is a brand in itself. As well as being a significant employer, it generates 10% of the local economy. Clearly the encouragement of good local food depends on a reliable workforce and here we have growers reaching new markets for the first time. Not only that, but the wider economy is benefiting from a thriving agricultural and horticultural sector.

The district council now has a strong evidence base and is working with employers to raise awareness of the support mechanisms available to them and their responsibilities as ethical labour providers. It is also in a much better position to encourage community cohesion and, wherever possible, to counter any misconceived notions about the contribution of migrant workers.

To find out more about Wychavon District Council's work with migrant workers contact:

Chris Brooks
Regeneration Manager
Wychavon District Council
Queen Elizabeth Drive
Pershore
WR10 1PT

Tel: 01386 565343
chris.brooks@wychavon.gov.uk
www.wychavon.gov.uk

**Commission for
Rural Communities**

Head Office

John Dower House Crescent Place
Cheltenham Glos. GL50 3RA

Telephone 01242 521381

Facsimile 01242 584270

London Office

20th Floor Portland House
Stag Place London SW1E 5RS

Telephone 0207 932 5800

Facsimile 0207 932 5811

Email info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk

www www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk