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Travel industry calls for improved UK-EU employee mobility arrangements.

69% drop in UK travel staff working in the EU set to impact travel businesses' growth.

ABTA and Seasonal Businesses in Travel (SBiT) are calling on the UK and EU governments to work together to address challenges travel companies are facing employing staff in EU holiday destinations.

A new report, *Unlocking Travel's Potential*, finds the number of UK workers in holiday roles in the EU has decreased from 11,970 in 2017 to just 3,700 in 2023, a drop of 69%.

Employing UK workers in jobs such as chalet hosts, holiday reps and tour guides has been a fundamental part of UK holiday operations in popular EU summer and winter destinations including Spain, France, Greece, Italy and Austria. But companies' ability to have UK staff working in the EU is now much more limited following the UK's departure from the EU.

This is proving an enormous challenge for UK travel companies with 61% saying that problems with hiring UK seasonal staff could reduce their possibilities for growth over the next five years. It was the top ranked concern for UK travel businesses, above the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on consumer spending and other economic conditions.

As well as affecting growth, travel businesses are also seeing an increase in the time and cost of employing UK staff overseas – as they navigate the rules and regulations for each country in the EU. For example, it is estimated to cost an additional £880 to recruit each UK seasonal worker to work in France. Elsewhere the report notes that many EU countries do not have any applicable routes of entry for UK staff.

Labour mobility restrictions also present a serious threat for recruiting future talent into the industry. The report finds that 38% of staff working for businesses in the UK travel sector have conducted an overseas season in the tourism industry, rising to 49% of senior managers.

Young people are most likely to be significantly affected: 94% of businesses agreed barriers to mobility for workers between the UK and EU reduce opportunities for young people to develop a career in travel. The share of young workers in overseas roles in the industry declined from 62% of overseas staff in 2017 to 42% in 2023.

To ensure the future success of the industry, and to protect jobs and economic activity at home and in the EU, ABTA and SBiT are calling on the UK and EU Governments to:

1. Extend the Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS) to EU countries. This would allow young people to work in the UK and EU countries for up to two years, but without any automatic longer-term right to remain. The UK already has similar arrangements with Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

2. Seek an enhanced seasonal mobility agreement for tourism workers which goes beyond the current arrangements in the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement which only applies to certain roles and limits stays to 90 days in any 180-day period.
3. An agreement on mutual recognition of professional qualifications which would make it easier for tourism workers, including professionals providing guiding services (tour guides, ski guides etc.) to work in the EU/UK.

Mark Tanzer, Chief Executive of ABTA – The Travel Association said:

“It can’t be emphasised enough just how fundamental being able to work abroad is for the UK travel industry. Not only do people gain those important language and soft-skills, they’re also set on a path for a good career and many become leaders in the industry.

“With the UK outbound travel industry contributing £49bn a year to the UK economy, and a major driver of growth, not putting in the right mobility arrangements with the EU could come at a cost to UK plc. Yet there are simple and sensible solutions to overcome these barriers, and I’d urge ministers to make this a priority and take action urgently.”

Charles Owen, Managing Director of Seasonal Businesses in Travel said:

“It’s proving tremendously difficult to employ the UK staff we need to run our businesses in the EU. In some countries it’s a mountain of complex paperwork, delays and extra costs that need to be overcome, in others there isn’t really a workable route. As an industry we rely on UK staff being able to work in the EU to help our businesses grow and thrive. But without a sensible arrangement on labour mobility – growth in this industry will be unnecessarily held back.”

The report also points out that it is in both the UK and EU’s interest to provide a policy framework that enables travel and tourism between the UK and EU to thrive – given the €40bn contribution UK tourism makes to the EU each year. As well as the value of outbound travel to the UK economy, a labour agreement would also boost the UK’s inbound travel as EU nationals are important in delivering inbound tourism services in the UK.

For further information, contact:

press@abta.co.uk or 0203 117 0596

Out of Hours: contact the duty press officer 020 3693 0183

ABTA

Web: www.abta.com

Twitter: @ABTAtravel

SBIT

Web: www.sbit.org.uk

Twitter: @sbit_uk

Notes to editors

About ABTA

ABTA is a trade association for UK travel agents, tour operators and the wider travel industry. We’re the largest travel trade body, with over 3,900 travel brands in membership who have a combined pre-pandemic annual UK turnover of £40 billion. We work closely with our members to help raise and maintain standards and build a more sustainable travel industry, and provide travellers with advice, guidance and support.

Our members sign up to a code of conduct and commit to agreed service standards and fair trading. When you need clear travel information, and accurate and impartial advice relating to your trip, we're here for you. We'll help you understand your level of financial protection, and what to do next, in the unlikely event that an ABTA member goes out of business. So, whatever happens, when you book with an ABTA member, reliable advice comes as standard. This means that booking with our members brings peace of mind. Together with our members, we help you travel with confidence. www.abta.com

About SBIT

Founded in 2016, SBIT is the only trade organisation solely representing outbound seasonal travel businesses. We have over 100 UK corporate members, who are mainly seasonal outbound travel businesses who employ UK citizens to work in Europe for winter or summer seasons. Working with both the UK government as well as our EU partners, our aim is to help our member companies develop their businesses in compliance with local regulatory requirements - to the benefit of both. For more information please visit www.sbit.org.uk