

Government accused of ignoring one of the UK's ten biggest industries

4 years ago



Frustrated business leaders have accused the Government of ignoring and overlooking one of the top ten biggest industries in the UK.

Over two years, leaders of the £58.9bn cleaning, hygiene and waste industry have repeatedly asked for Government help on key issues including recognition for staff and severe staff shortages.

The British Cleaning Council (BCC), which represents 21 organisations across the industry, along with sector businesses and their 1.47 million staff, has repeatedly written and contacted the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Home Office to attempt to raise their concerns but to no avail.

The BCC led the drive to set up the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the UK Cleaning and Hygiene Industry early in 2021 and is its secretariat, but despite this no genuine progress has been made towards APPG aims in a number of key areas.

The BCC is demanding a high-level meeting with Government to discuss:

- A short-term strategy to immediately alleviate the current highly significant staff shortages, including a review of Immigration Act requirements as with other industries, to allow non-UK based workers to join the sector.
- A long-term strategy, to make the cleaning and hygiene industry a career of choice for young people to enable succession planning with a clear career-long development process.

The BCC is warning that unless action is taken to help the industry deal with the unparalleled staff shortages now affecting it, jobs will be lost and sector businesses may suffer irreparable damage.

The industry has also launched a new campaign, named 'We Clean, We Care', to highlight the vital contribution the industry and staff make.

British Cleaning Council Chairman Jim Melvin said: "Our proud and professional industry is one of the biggest and most important in the UK but it has been overlooked and, frankly, forgotten by the Government.

"We feel very let down and the results are causing major issues within the industry which could result in significant hygiene concerns.

"The role of cleaning and hygiene personnel is frontline and essential to keeping the public healthy, safe and well. The cleaning and hygiene sector is one of the ten biggest industries in the UK with skilled, professional and trained staff.

"The industry was a key component and absolutely vital during the fight against the Covid pandemic and is vital to returning to normality safely and hygienically, as well as being prepared for and helping to stop any future variant or pandemic

"During the pandemic, the sector's staff bravely put themselves on the line, going out to work to keep others safe and well, though many were never recognised as key and essential workers.

"Despite this role, government policy including the Immigration Act now brands our industry as 'low-skilled' which is, unsurprisingly, incorrect and the wrong narrative.

"As a result, parts of the sector are suffering severe staff shortages and while other industries are listened to and appear to have access to assistance, this proud industry is simply ignored.

"Colleagues in healthcare, hospitality, contract cleaning and other areas have been stretched to breaking point for months. Jobs will be lost and businesses will go under.

"We have spent years trying to talk to the Government about these issues without any genuine attempt at assistance.

"Plenty of platitudes and the occasional meeting about what the government wants without any true engagement.

"I am still awaiting a promised response letter from BEIS from Christmas. It is completely unacceptable and it's therefore time to look at all other options "

The BCC first raised concerns about the impact planned changes to immigration rules would have on the industry, which has traditionally relied on higher numbers of overseas workers than other sectors, in February 2020.

Nevertheless, new immigration rules in 2021 labelled cleaning and hygiene as a low-skilled occupation, making it much harder for overseas staff to enter the country and join the industry.

In the ensuing recruitment crisis, some vacancy rates increased by over 200 per cent in six months in some businesses. There are estimates of tens of thousands of vacancies across the sector.

While the Government amended the rules to help industries such as HGV drivers, fruit pickers and poultry workers, calls for help for the cleaning and hygiene sector continue to be ignored.

This comes after only health sector cleaning staff were given key worker status as 'support staff' during the Covid-19 pandemic

During the pandemic, the BCC and industry bodies campaigned for all frontline cleaning and hygiene staff to be given key worker status.

But despite both Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the then Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn praising the work of cleaning staff in Parliament, nothing changed.

The BCC is an association of 21 member organisations from all across the cleaning, hygiene and waste industry, representing sectors including healthcare, hospitality, public toilet, domestic, windows and contract cleaning, along with product and machinery manufacturing, waste management, environmental health, pest control and litter.