

Furious business leader slams speech by Suella Braverman

2 years ago



The leader of the organisation representing one of the UK's biggest industrial sectors has slammed Monday's speech by Home Secretary Suella Braverman for 'once again ignoring' a £59 billion pound industry, ignoring her own Government's facts that there are over 1m vacancies that currently cannot be filled nationwide and being 'completely divorced from reality'.

The cleaning, hygiene and waste industry, which employs 1.47m people, has been struggling with severe staff shortages since 2020, when a tightening of immigration rules incorrectly labelled cleaning staff as unskilled and made it more difficult for overseas workers to join the industry.

In her speech, the Home Secretary argued that there should be training for British fruit pickers, lorry drivers and butchers in a bid to bring down the reliance on migrant workers – but singularly failed to acknowledge the challenges facing the cleaning and hygiene sector.

BCC Chairman Jim Melvin said: "I am appalled and infuriated that once again the severe staff shortages in the cleaning and hygiene sector have been completely ignored by Home Secretary Suella Braverman.

"By focusing solely on HGV drivers, butchers and fruit pickers in her recent speech, she is completely divorced from the reality that our industry faces with its huge recruitment problems, or perhaps she is simply choosing to ignore the facts.

"Despite being one of the biggest industries in the UK, and with a vital, frontline role in keeping people healthy, safe and well, our calls for help have been totally overlooked by the Government.

"The simple fact is that this industry has been seeking to gain the Apprenticeship Levy accreditation for a

number of years and, if it had been or was to be awarded, we would have already answered Mrs Braverman's argument! Instead, we have effectively paid a stealth tax to the Government for little in return.

"The cleaning and hygiene industry demands the same kind of assistance that other sectors have received but this Government simply refuses to listen. Cleaning staff were correctly lauded as heroes during the Covid pandemic, but their brave actions have simply been ignored once again by the Government as it doesn't suit the narrative.

"There already aren't anywhere near enough UK nationals coming forward to fill the mass vacancies in our sector. I remain unsurprised by the lack of detail in the statement, but would welcome the opportunity to examine any facts behind Mrs Braverman's plans, especially when the country does not have sufficient resource to fill the current level of over 1 million national vacancies? I firmly believe this is unlikely to change unless the Government is prepared to discuss and fully assist."

The cleaning and hygiene industry has traditionally depended on employees of all nationalities, with Labour Force Survey figures from 2019 showing that 37 per cent of the nationwide workforce were from overseas. This figure has recently dropped to 20 per cent of the workforce.

Following the new rules brought in by the Immigration Act in 2021 and Brexit, many foreign nationals working in the industry left the country and have not been allowed to return.

UK nationals have traditionally not joined the industry, and so vacant positions are proving difficult to fill.

The BCC has been calling for help, such as upskilling staff and being accredited with an Apprenticeship Levy-funded Apprenticeship Standard, in order to allow a relaxation in immigration rules for overseas staff coming to work in the cleaning and hygiene sector.

But while visa rules have been relaxed or adjusted in some sectors in recent years to tackle worker shortages, this Government simply has not changed or discussed changing them for the cleaning and hygiene sector.

The ONS Labour market overview for May 2023 recorded that In February to April 2023, the estimated number of total national vacancies was 1,083,000.