

“BUREAUCRATIC” NEW IMMIGRATION SYSTEM MAY FAIL TO MEET NORTH SEA SKILLS NEEDS

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The UK Government must take action over the increasing red tape around work permits for key staff if it is to protect the North East's status as a global hub of oil and gas expertise, according to the Scottish Council for Development and Industry (SCDI).

The Fresh Talent scheme, which has helped Scottish businesses meet their skills needs, is currently being subsumed within the UK Government's new points based immigration system, and SCDI members in the North Sea are already finding that it is more bureaucratic and costly. They are concerned that the Border and Immigration Agency, which operates the system, does not understand the industry's technical skills challenges and requirements.

SCDI has written to the Secretary of State for Scotland Des Browne MP to highlight the emerging problem and ask him to intervene.

Ian Armstrong, SCDI North East Manager, said:

“The North Sea oil and gas industry already faces serious skills shortages. It competes for highly-mobile talent in an international labour market and needs people with specific technical skills in order to maximise UKCS output. Despite this, SCDI has been made aware of growing difficulties in converting work permits issues under the Fresh Talent scheme to full Work Permits. Applications are being refused for staff with equivalent or superior skills to staff accepted in previous years.

“Companies in the industry believe that these problems reflect a lack of understanding of the industry from the Borders and Immigration Agency. It does not appear to appreciate the very specific technical requirements for jobs which may make a particular individual the most or only suitable candidate.

“The overall impact is that companies are getting involved in time consuming and costly delays and appeals. The result will be that companies are less likely to invest in work permits for Fresh Talent and some will cease doing so altogether, despite their skills needs. These bureaucratic complications are contrary to the Government's stated objectives for the new system, will undermine the North East's plans to promote itself as a global hub of expertise and risk damaging the Scottish and UK energy sector at an important time for the economy.

“Des Browne has already made a welcome intervention to maintain a Scottish qualifications differential in the new system which reflects Scotland's specific economic and demographic challenges. We now ask him to take up these issues with Ministerial colleagues in the Home Office and ensure that the Borders and Immigration Agency demonstrates improved understanding of the skills requirements of the Scottish-based oil and gas industry.”

Another industry concern is that when Scottish businesses win overseas contracts there is quite often a contractual obligation to develop the indigenous workforce and this requires secondments to Scotland. If barriers are placed in the way of these well-established and mutually beneficial movements, it will be harder for the Scottish-based supply chain to compete in international markets and help to improve skills in what are often developing countries.

“SCDI accepts the need for a system of managed migration which seeks to match the UK skills demands with supply, but it says that, especially where there are specific technical requirements, businesses must be given flexibility to set their recruitment criteria without such burdensome and bureaucratic interference,” Ian concluded.

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