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At least 10% of the UK workforce is made up of overseas workers. The European Union (EU) expansion in 2004 and 2007 opened the labour market to a further 100 million citizens. More and more overseas workers are being employed in Britain in particular in facilities related industries like catering, cleaning, construction, portorage and grounds maintenance.

All of these sectors have higher than average health and safety risks and overseas workers may be more at risk. There are many reasons for this. For example, some stay for relatively short periods of employment in Britain and their motivation in coming to the country is to earn as much as possible, in as short a time as possible. Learning and embedding our safety requirements may be low on their agenda especially where they are supplied by recruitment agencies or labour providers or are self-employed.

Some migrant workers have limited access to health and safety training and find it difficult to understand what is being offered while their experiences of health and safety regimes in their own countries may differ greatly from that in the UK. Others have language challenges and are less able to communicate effectively with other workers and supervisors, particularly in relation to their understanding of risk.

Unfortunately, not all employers carry out sufficient checks on every staff members skills for work and their language skills especially when they are temporary staff or provided through an third party where employment relationships and responsibilities for health and safety may be unclear. Such workers are often unaware of their health and safety rights and responsibilities, including how they can get help.

It is a requirement that all businesses complete Risk Assessments for any significant risk identified in their business. These Risk assessments need to address the particular needs of migrant workers. Good communication, comprehensible information, instruction and training and access to supervisors with whom they can communicate are especially important. The duty on employers to provide information in a form that workers can understand regardless of their background is made clear in the Approved Code of Practice and guidance to the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations.

Health and safety advice is available in 20 languages at www.hse.gov.uk/migrantworkers/index.htm