



# The chef shortage: A solvable crisis?

Understanding why we have a chef shortage and how it can be addressed

Executive summary

November 2017

## Foreword



The chef shortage continues to create much debate in the sector. It is a major headache for many businesses and something that employers commonly feel they have little control over.

This latest research shows that the chef shortage is a result of many of the same external factors we identified in our report – **The Performance and Talent Management Revolution**. Yet, as we highlighted in that research, there are many things the sector can do to alleviate the shortage and we are seeing increasing numbers of businesses taking fresh approaches to do just that.

We have plenty of valuable initiatives to call on, such as Springboard's Future Chef, the Royal Academy of Culinary Art's Adopt a School and the Saturday Morning Chef Academy sponsored by the Geoffrey Harrison Foundation; to name but a few. Yet we could achieve so much more if we took a joined up approach across the sector as a whole, avoided duplication and maximised the impact from these fantastic initiatives.

We can also harness the new apprenticeships, which sector employers have developed to reflect their skills needs and raise professionalism. Here we have a real opportunity to grow and support the emerging talent.

We hope this research provides the essential evidence base to stimulate debate and collective action. Join us on this critical journey by visiting: [www.people1st.co.uk/chef-shortage](http://www.people1st.co.uk/chef-shortage)

### Simon Tarr

Chief Executive, People 1st

**This research was undertaken by Martin-Christian Kent, Executive Director of People 1st, and is based on interviews with 48 businesses, including:**

Adhams, Amaris, Artillery Tower, Balloo Inns, Blue Arrow, Bourne Leisure, Browns Hotel, Café Spice Namaste, Casual Dining Group, Caterer.com, Celtic Manor Hotel, Chef Jobs UK, Compass Group, D&D Restaurants, Doncaster College, Drake and Morgan, Ei Group, Handmade Burger Company, Harbour and Jones, Harrison Catering, Hilton, Kew Green Hotels, HIT Training, James Street South, IHG, Kendal College, Jamie Oliver Restaurants, JD Wetherspoon, Marriott, Merlin, Orcinus Recruitment, Peter Backman, Q Hotels, Quo Vadis, RAC Club, Red Carnation Hotels, The Restaurant Group, Royal Academy of Culinary Arts, Recruitment and Employment Confederation, SA Brain & Co Ltd, Sheraton Hotels & Resorts, South Downs College, TGI Fridays, Thornyhill Restaurant, Trinity Restaurant, University College Birmingham, Wahaca and Why Recruitment.

## Introduction

Few hospitality businesses have been untouched by the difficulties of finding the right staff, and nowhere are these problems more visible than in kitchens up and down the country.

The chef shortage is a fundamental challenge for many hospitality businesses and is the highest profile symptom of the broader people-related challenges facing the sector. It is often seen as a problem of insufficient supply to meet a growing demand, but the reality is more complex and is largely a symptom of the wider HR-related challenges that many hospitality operators are grappling with and which we highlighted in our research – **The Performance and Talent Management Revolution**.

Some businesses are reported to have scaled down growth plans due to the shortage. Others are struggling to operate effectively without sufficient numbers of chefs. The chef shortage also risks spiralling into an increasingly vicious circle - unfilled chef vacancies mean that existing chefs are working longer hours, which is further fuelling labour turnover. Moreover, this is not just a British issue and can be found in North America, Australasia and much of Europe, including France.

We believe that the chef shortage can be effectively tackled, building on a wide range of existing best practice. There are no silver bullets, it requires a fresh approach and collective action from employers, sector bodies, providers and government. Can it be achieved? We believe so, and if the passion with which everyone interviewed has spoken about the chef profession can be channelled positively, then there is no reason to think it can't.

Our research brings together a range of new and existing data, together with the views of head chefs and key businesses across the sector, industry commentators, students, learning providers and recruitment agencies to answer four key questions:

1. **What is the extent of the chef shortage?**
2. **What is causing the shortage?**
3. **What's the impact of the shortage?**
4. **What needs to be done to address the shortage?**

We hope that the evidence in this report helps to stimulate debate and galvanise collective action.

## What is the extent of the chef shortage?

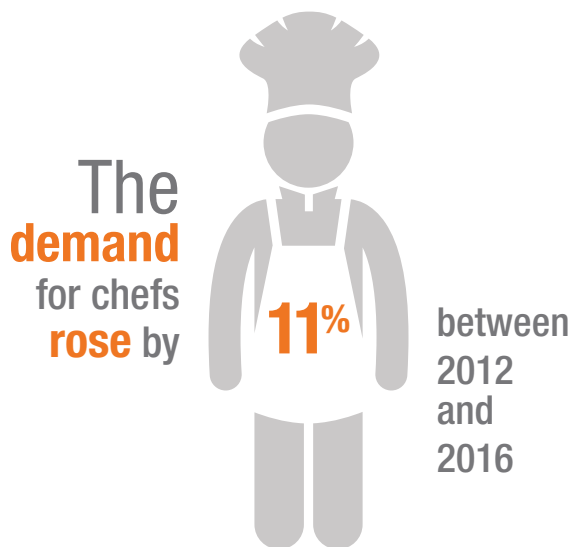
Chefs continue to be the most challenging role for which to recruit. Figures from the 2015 Employer Skill Survey (the most recent available) found that a quarter of hospitality businesses in the UK had vacancies, **22%** of which were for chefs, ranging from classical chefs to production chefs and canteen cooks. When it comes to reasons for hard-to-fill vacancies, **64%** report that they can't find applicants with the required skills, which means we are not just dealing with a labour shortage, but a skill shortage.



of which were  
for chefs

An analysis of posted job vacancies suggest that demand for chefs increased by about **11%** between 2012 and 2016, with an overall increase in the number of posted job vacancies of **8,313**. The number of vacancies also appears to have surged in the first half of 2017. These trends can also be seen in data from a variety of recruitment agencies that have seen job vacancies increase, but the number of applicants fall, particularly for higher level chefs.

Projections suggest that at least **11,000** additional chefs will be needed over the next five years to meet growing demand and to replace existing chefs.<sup>1</sup>



## What is causing the shortage?

Although simple supply and demand plays a big part in the shortage of chefs, the fact that we are losing chefs from the sector is also a significant problem. We can identify six major factors contributing to the shortage:

### 1. Increased demand for chefs

The sector's on-going growth, in particular within the restaurant industry, and a significant increase in pubs serving food, has led to a greater demand for chefs. Today, there are **325,483** chefs working across the UK economy as a whole. Between 2011 and 2016, the number of chefs and cooks working in the hospitality sector alone increased by **51,919**.<sup>2</sup> To fully illustrate the growth of demand, in 1971, there were only approximately **54,000** chefs, cooks and butchers working in Great Britain.



<sup>1</sup> Given the growth and turnover of chefs we believe that this figure is an underestimation of the numbers required.

<sup>2</sup> Official figures distinguish between 'chefs' and 'cooks'. This distinction does not directly reflect the distinction between 'classical chefs' and 'production chefs', nor does it reflect the way the terms are used interchangeably in the sector. For the purposes of this research we have combined the two categories.



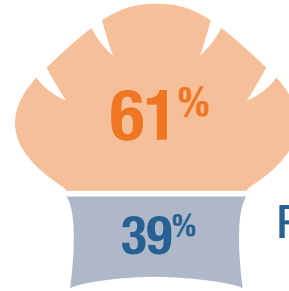
## 2. The changing nature of chef roles

The breadth and variety of food outlets in the sector has meant the emergence of two very different types of chef. The distinction between classical chefs and production chefs is important.

The former require a broad range of skills to prepare and cook from scratch. The latter tend to work with pre-prepared food and need much more limited culinary skills. Across the industry, we estimate that about **61%** of chefs are classical chefs and **39%** production chefs. Both are critically important to the sector, but we often fail to highlight the distinctive career pathways that both roles offer.

Industry chefs can be classed as:

Classical chefs

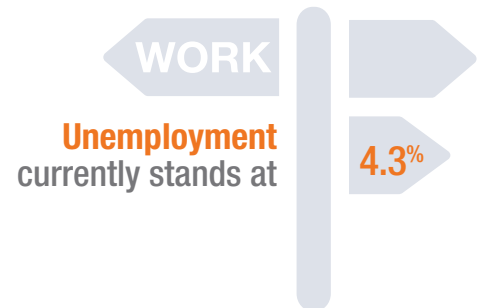


Production chefs



## 3. A shrinking labour pool

At **4.3%**, unemployment in the UK is at its lowest level in recent decades. Moreover, the workforce as a whole is getting older. By 2022, there will be **700,000** fewer 16-25 year olds and **3.7m** more over 50s. Given that the hospitality sector has traditionally recruited young people – **a third** of the workforce are under 25 (twice the proportion across the economy as a whole), this is likely to have an impact on recruitment.



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**3.7 million**  
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**A third** of the workforce is **under 25** (two times the proportion across the economy as a whole)

Recent figures suggest that the number of chefs declines from the age of 35, as they continue to balance hours and family life. And, whilst the number of women chefs in the public eye is increasing, and the number of female chefs continues to grow, they only make up **24%** of the chef workforce, so there is a long way to go before we see anything like gender parity.

Between 2011 and 2016 the overall percentage of **women** in the **chef workforce** has **remained the same**





## 4. Too few chef apprentices in the sector

In 2015/16, **6,643** people completed a chef apprenticeship of which half were underpinning the development of classical chefs and half production chefs. Our projections suggest that there will be an additional **6,400** chef apprentices completing their programmes in the next three years. Given the current shortage and the effectiveness of apprenticeships as a solution for many businesses we estimate that the sector could benefit from twice this number.



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## 5. Too few full-time chef students entering and staying in the sector

Compared to the relative stability of chef education in mainland Europe, the UK's skills system has undergone constant change, leaving many employers confused and disengaged. Figures suggest that there are almost three times as many chef students as are needed to meet the current projections of **11,000** chefs needed by 2022. So, if we have so many students studying on full-time chef programmes, why do we still have such a chronic chef shortage?

There were **28,390** chef students in 2015/16.

This is nearly **three times** as many chef students as are needed to meet the current projections of **11,000 chefs** needed by 2022.



One reason is that too many students are on the wrong course and fail to complete their studies. "Most people give up halfway," one student told us. "I think, on our course, there's only two of us that are still in from level 1. The others dropped out. They couldn't take it – and this is just the beginning."

Others quit when they see the reality of working as a chef or are put off entering the industry through a poor work placement or work experience. Some do enter the industry, but leave within the first year. Addressing these issues are absolutely fundamental to solving the chef shortage.

*"In college I am being taught different skills and I go into the workplace and have yet to be asked to use any of them. I also notice the difference in what I'm taught and then what I'm expected to know, or what I should know."* – Chef student

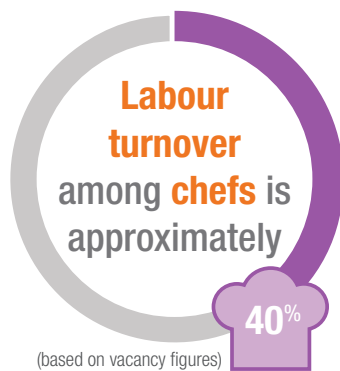


## 6. The changing nature of chef turnover and chefs leaving the profession

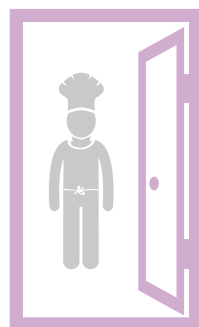
Employers have traditionally encouraged the managed turnover of chefs to help them expand their skills and experience. However, the drivers of labour turnover have changed. The high rate of chef turnover boils down to three main factors: hours, conditions and money. Chefs are often typically working **60** or **70** hour weeks, sometimes with no paid overtime for less money than they could earn in a similar skilled roles such as a plumber or electrician.



Labour turnover among chefs can be conservatively estimated at **40%** and is probably considerably higher. However, even at **40%**, this means that nearly **94,000** chefs are changing employment each year with approximately **20%** leaving the profession entirely. The sector therefore loses nearly **19,000** chefs a year and churns the remaining **75,000**.



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Approximately **20%\*** of chefs are **leaving** the profession, which means that the sector loses nearly **19,000** chefs a year and churns the remaining **75,000**

(\*based on the interviews for this research)

A critical component of chef turnover is the working conditions in some kitchens and poor people management plays an important role. Management styles can be authoritative and not effective in motivating and engaging a different generation of workers who expect to interact with their place of work in ways unimagined previously. Some senior chefs see it as a rite of passage, but for many junior chefs the passion that drove them to become a chef can't overcome the daily working conditions and hours worked, so they leave.

Those participating in the research suggest that restaurants need to rethink and modernise their working environments and management practices. Many kitchens have done so, but there still remains some kitchens that have a toxic environment, with a culture of bullying and intimidation. When coupled with low pay and lack of flexibility in the hours on offer, all have to be addressed if this vicious cycle is to be broken in order to attract and retain talented chefs.

**“Employers and head chefs continue to work the youngsters coming into our industry into the ground. Whilst, things have moved on and there are some enlightened employers out there, it's also true that there are employers who still exploit their employees and ‘use and abuse’, because they had to do it when they trained. They see it as a rite of passage.” – Current chef**

# What is the impact of the shortage?

Without the right number and quality of staff, a business can't operate successfully. The chef shortage is therefore having a significant negative impact on many hospitality businesses and is a central concern for senior managers.



## Impact on business strategy

Some businesses are rethinking the way they operate in order to cope with the shortage. Responses include reduced working hours, the increased use of centralised production kitchens and de-skilling operations - simplifying menus or relying on sous-vide food.<sup>3</sup>

For Michelin starred chef-proprietor, Sat Bains, the response has been to move to a four-day week. But while this might work for some restaurants, it is not an option for many businesses – particularly for kitchens in hotels – and few others have been able to follow his lead.



## Re-engineering and de-skilling operations

Some restaurants are re-engineering or de-skilling their operations, to rely on fewer staff or to enable them to recruit chefs with more limited culinary skills and experience. De-skilling comes in many forms, with some kitchens simplifying their menus, whilst others are placing more emphasis on sous-vide food. Larger restaurant and contract food service management operators are also expanding the use of centralised production kitchens.



## Vicious circle of longer hours

Whilst positions remain unfilled, existing chefs are working longer hours. This leads to higher levels of turnover which, in turn, results in the remaining chefs working even longer hours. For many businesses, the chef shortage means that this vicious circle is perpetuating.

A number of businesses have started to pay chefs for overtime which removes some of the negativity around working conditions, but the need for staff to have a better work-life balance means that this is not a long-term strategy on its own.



## Reliance on agency workers and the attraction of becoming a temporary agency chef

Some businesses are choosing to back-fill vacancies with temporary agency chefs. This is a costly option, but one that provides an essential lifeline to keep many businesses operating.



## Chefs being over-promoted

An increasing problem (observed by both head chefs and recruitment agencies), is the number of chefs being taken on to fill vacant positions when they lack the required skills and experience. This happens when a business takes a view that it is better to have someone who does not meet the criteria than no one at all. This is creating a bubble of unskilled chefs progressing their careers.

<sup>3</sup> Sous-vide is method of cooking in which food is vacuum-sealed in a plastic pouch and then placed in a water bath or steam environment for longer than normal cooking times





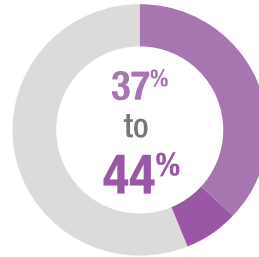
## Reliance on migrant workers

The number of chefs from other EU countries has increased as UK unemployment has continued to fall, but Brexit could pose significant challenges to this after March 2019. The restrictive nature of the current points-based system for recruiting staff from outside the European Economic Area highlights the potential challenges, given that so few chefs have entered since its introduction.

The proportion of chefs and cooks born outside of the UK increased from **37%** to **44%** between 2011-2016. In relation to chefs specifically, we can see that the number of migrant workers increased **ten percent** in the same five-year period. The biggest increase has come from other EU nations.



The percentage of chefs and cooks born **outside of the UK** increased from:

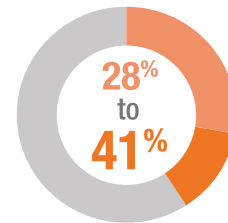


between 2011 and 2016

In this same period, the percentage of migrant workers from EU nations working as chefs and cooks increased from **28%** to **41%**. There are already reports that Brexit and the drop in the value of Sterling following the EU referendum are making it more difficult to recruit chefs.



Between 2011 and 2016, the percentage of **migrant workers** from **EU nations** working as chefs and cooks **increased** from:



*“ We’re actually already seeing Brexit impacting our ability to recruit and refresh. Chefs have a very high turnover, particularly international chefs, because it is quite a transient population. Historically, the chefs would be recruited as teams, usually from the same town or location, and when they’re brought in, they come mob-handed and now they are leaving mob-handed.” – Casual dining operator*



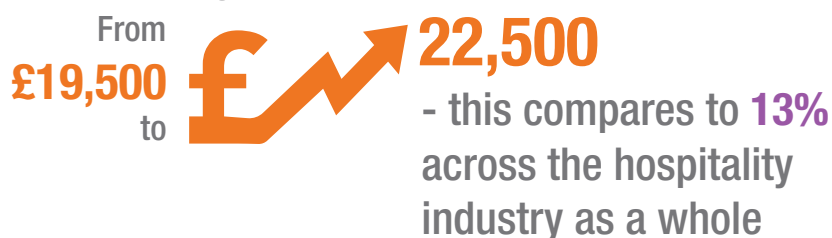
## Wage inflation

Between 2011 and 2015, the average median chef salary increased by **£3,000**, or **15%**, from **£19,500** to **£22,500**. This compares to an increase of **£1,370**, or **13%**, across the hospitality industry as a whole.

Increasingly, chefs are moving employer not to gain experience, but instead to earn more at another establishment. Chefs tend to leave after 12 months, which reduces the return on investment for the business and means that many brigades are constantly understaffed. And such is the shortage that they can be guaranteed another job, normally with better pay.

*“ The amount of headhunting and poaching in the industry now because people are so desperate for chefs, that’s something I’ve never seen before. Loyalty is just not there now.” – Hotel operator*

Between 2011 and 2015,  
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**increased** by **15%**



## What needs to be done to address the shortage?

The chef shortage is neither inevitable nor unsolvable. But it is complex, and there is no simple, single remedy, nor will change come about if hospitality businesses and the sector as a whole do not alter some practices and thinking, start to build on the wealth of best practice out there and remove barriers that have prevented a joined up approach across the sector.

The old ways of thinking will not successfully tackle the multifaceted issues driving the shortage. It requires action at a business level, across the sector as a whole and by government. It also needs a holistic approach that does not just focus on careers, but also on why we continue to lose talented chefs.



### Careers campaign

As a starting point, there is a critical need for a cross-sector careers campaign that brings together all interested organisations (trade associations, chef associations, learning providers, careers organisations and, importantly, employers), puts competing agendas aside and unites around a central message and campaign.

#### Key recommendations include:

- Distinguish between the different career pathways of classical and production chefs
- Link to existing apprenticeship and full-time college programmes
- Be delivered for a sustained period of time
- Target all age groups and women
- Integrate with the government's existing information, advice and guidance:
- Integrate, connect and upscale current initiatives
- Be completely employer-led



### Early age interventions

Almost all of the students on full-time chef programmes in further education were stimulated to cook at an early age. But many children do not have the chance to cook at home and so it is important that the initiatives that give young people the opportunity to experience food and cooking are encouraged and supported.



### Maximising the opportunities from colleges

Increasing the number of students who actually go on from college to work in the industry would have a significant impact on alleviating the chef shortage.

To help employers access the best aspiring talent, People 1st introduced an accreditation scheme, overseen by employers, that recognises college and training providers offering exceptional hospitality training. In People 1st accredited colleges, students have the opportunity to study in environments that offer them a variety of different experiences from contemporary fine dining, to coffee shops, brasseries, cafeterias, central kitchens and contract catering. Over 30 colleges have successfully gone through the accreditation scheme and these can be found at [www.people1st.co.uk/find-a-provider](http://www.people1st.co.uk/find-a-provider).

*“It's the restaurants that are the issue. They need to rethink and modernise their working environments or they are going to the kill the chance for future generations. The world has modernised, and our generation won't take it anymore and have more opportunities to reach greater heights in other professions.” – Current chef*

More employers need to establish links with their local colleges to ensure they are delivering relevant and quality hospitality provision. They can offer practical support such as:

- **Sponsoring the college restaurants, brasseries and coffee shops**
- **Helping to deliver master classes**
- **Providing quality work placements**

We have seen how students' initial experiences of the kitchen is one of the main factors in discouraging them from entering or staying in the industry. On the back of this research, we will be working with the chef and trade associations to explore the introduction of a voluntary code of practice drawn up by employers and colleges to provide a better transition for the students during their first 12 months in the sector. We hope that employers will sign up this voluntary code and work with those colleges that are providing a realistic and robust experience to prepare students for entry into the sector.

Whilst many of these changes are in the gift of employers, we also need the government to ensure that the transition to the new T levels is smooth, is available for chefs and that the content reflects the new apprenticeship standards, which have been developed by sector employers, as much as possible.

We also need the government to address the current incentive for schools to encourage students to continue into sixth forms, despite their career aspirations.



## Creating a quality workplace

The dilemma for many businesses is that they are operating on wafer thin margins, with rising food and staff costs and a highly competitive market. But without competitive salaries, realistic hours, tangible development and a good working environment, the shortage will only get worse.

The **Performance and Talent Management Revolution** report highlighted some practical steps that hospitality businesses are taking to improve retention, engagement and productivity. However, businesses are also undertaking specific activities to address the chef shortage.

*“The chef is a very, very important cog in the wheel. If you work them too hard and don't give them the working conditions, then yes, they will go off somewhere else.” – Casual dining operator*

- **Recruitment**

HR professionals and recruitment agencies consistently believe that the recruitment of chefs needs to change by moving away from short-term firefighting to building a longer-term approach which will enable them to develop their careers in a more sustainable way.

Many businesses are also reviewing their methods of recruitment to ensure that they are as effective as possible. They are professionalising the process by making the job offer more attractive, by highlighting development and progression opportunities and speeding up the process between an initial enquiry and an interview.

Recruiting full-time chef students when they have completed their course and offering chef apprenticeships are two practical steps that employers can take as part of this approach.

- **Maximising apprenticeships**

The changes to the apprenticeship system in England mean that employers have much greater flexibility in how they develop the skills and knowledge of apprenticeship chefs. For example, some are offering cohorts of chef apprenticeships periodically rather than recruiting just one or two each year. Others have created chef academies or schools to help market apprenticeship opportunities and built structured development programmes to meet their needs.

- **Retention and engagement**

Boosting retention is key to addressing the shortage. However in order to do this, businesses need to offer a holistic package of a competitive salary, realistic hours, tangible development and a good working environment - and many are operating with margins so slim that they may be unable to alter the pay, which makes the other components more important.

- **Culture and management**

One critical area for attention is examining the culture of the kitchens and the management skills of senior chefs. The issue of poor management, and intimidating, aggressive and sometimes sexist cultures comes up time and again and is one of the key reasons chefs leave a business. These must be addressed, which is why many businesses are striving to improve their chefs' people management skills and improve the physical environment in which they work.

*“ Like everywhere, we're still working to change the way our kitchens work and manage. We brought in something last year; we called it, 'Kitchen Charter'. It's a mind your p's and q's type charter that was about trying to re-educate some of these guys about what is appropriate banter. If you wouldn't say it to your mum or sister, don't say it in the kitchen.” – Hotel operator*

- **Hours and shift patterns**

Addressing the issue of long and anti-social hours is another key piece of the retention puzzle. Much of this can be addressed with some creative thinking. Business need to step back and think about how the brigade can be organised to reduce the number of hours chefs work, examine their shift patterns and analyse the way they work to identify areas where efficiencies can be made.

- **Pay and incentives**

Hours and pay go hand in hand, but there is a clear need for a sensible debate on pay for chefs and the pay rate for agency chefs needs to be included within that. Increasing costs will naturally eat into tight margins - but the dilemma businesses face is that not increasing pay comes with its own financial cost as it increases labour turnover and can increase the reliance on temporary agency staff. As a result, businesses are also looking at productivity gains to reduce other costs and increase outputs.

*“ I think hours, conditions, and money are now key issues for businesses to address. There's less need for a person to work potential difficulties because they know they can literally walk out and go somewhere else, nearly immediately.” – Recruitment agency*

- **Learning and development**

One result of the shortage is that too many chefs are in positions where they do not possess the required level of skills. There needs to be a renewed emphasis on learning and development in order to develop the culinary skills and knowledge of existing chefs, to develop softer skills and management skills. A solid learning and development programme can also act as a strong incentive to aid retention.



## **Job and operational re-engineering**

Many taking part in this research think that deskilling to reduce the need to recruit and retain classical chefs is an extreme response that will undermine quality and the reputation of a business. Some businesses have de-skilled more subtly by buying in more prepared items and some multi-site businesses are increasing the use of centralised production kitchens.



## Recruiting internationally

It is not yet clear what restrictions may be imposed on EU workers coming into the UK if the UK were indeed to leave the EU as a result of the 2016 referendum vote. But if restrictions were to be imposed, it would further reduce the pipeline of skilled chefs coming into the sector.

There are key interventions that hospitality businesses can adopt to help address the chef shortage, but some of this will take time and will never completely eradicate the need to bring in staff from outside the UK, not only to address a shortage, but also to bring new innovation and speciality skills. The sector therefore needs to work constructively with government to ensure that any restrictions are realistic and reflect its labour and skill needs.

## Conclusion

When you look at the number of chef students it's clear we shouldn't have a chef shortage at all. But as this report highlights, there are a number of factors that conspire to make a career in the kitchen unattractive for even the most dedicated chef and this means the issue is a complex one to solve.

So can the shortage be resolved? Yes, but it needs a fresh approach. The old ways of thinking will do nothing to address these multifaceted issues – indeed, they are what contributed to the problem in the first place.

The stakes are high. Disruptive propositions are sweeping other sectors and continuous change is now the norm. There is no room for complacency, and if the sector cannot transform this does not bode well.

We believe that the way forward requires a joined-up approach with action at a business level, across the sector as a whole and by government. It also demands a holistic approach that doesn't just focus on careers, but also on why we continue to lose talented chefs.

Can this be achieved? If the passion with which everyone interviewed has spoken about the chef profession can be channelled positively, then there is no reason to think it can't.



# About People 1st

People 1st is a unique, insight-driven performance and talent management expert.

We provide tailored solutions and advice that help our UK and global clients to:

- Grow performance and talent
- Drive customer excellence
- Maximise the value of apprenticeships

Our industry-led experts deliver highly successful results that reflect the needs of your business because we understand your culture, your environment and your budget.



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