

To: Home Secretary, UK Government
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, UK
Government
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands

Recruitment Crisis in the food and drink sector in Scotland

We are writing collectively to highlight the recruitment crisis in the food and drink sector in Scotland.

Both Brexit and the pandemic have accelerated existing pressures on labour availability. We have now reached crisis point putting the growth, viability and security of many Scottish businesses in jeopardy, with knock on impacts for consumers. We need action now to save Christmas.

We ask and advise that the UK Government and Scottish Government play their own parts to support recruitment in the sector.

FDF Scotland and our industry partners in the Scotland Food & Drink Partnership and beyond have consulted widely with Scottish businesses on the issues. In our recent survey of 88 Scottish businesses 93% of them currently had job vacancies, 90% of them described their job vacancies as hard to fill, and 97% of them felt that they would struggle to fill vacancies in the future. The reported jobs that were hard to fill cover all parts of the business and all wage ranges, with particularly difficult areas being in engineering and production operation. The geography affected covers the whole of Scotland.

These grim statistics back up the many reports across the Scottish food and drink industry, which tell of reduced production, reduced growth and ambition and failure to fulfil orders for customers and consumers.

The food and drink industry in Scotland is committed to sustainable growth but to do so we need the right people, skills and commitment. Many of us are members of the Scotland Food & Drink Partnership where we have a long history of supporting careers advice, education and industry partnership as part of our 'Future in Food programme'. Recently this partnership published advice to food and drink employers on recruitment and retention. Businesses are looking at all the options they have at their disposal to retain and recruit.

It's not working, and we are now rapidly approaching a crisis. It is now clear that many people who would traditionally have been attracted to work in the food industry from abroad can no longer do so. Online and delivery companies have also recruited workers during the pandemic and there is no sign of people returning to the industry.

As an industry we are determined to do what we can to tackle this issue and will continue to progress initiatives and support businesses, but it is very clear that we need immediate help in order to do so.

We call on the UK Government to:

- Introduce a 12 month covid recovery visa for the food and drink supply chain – to deal with immediate pressures on the industry and allow employers to expand recruitment to EU and other overseas workers
- Commission an urgent review by the Migration Advisory Committee of the needs of the food and drink sector
- Waive the fees to employment visas for the food and drink supply chain until 2022

We advise the Scottish Government to:

- Ensure support for automation is embedded in Scottish Government funding programmes where it supports productivity and the development of higher quality jobs
- Work with the Scotland Food & Drink Partnership to continue to promote the industry as a great career destination, and to provide opportunities through apprenticeships and other schemes

These are unprecedented and turbulent times and, until stability returns for businesses, we would ask the UK and Scottish Governments to support the industry and implement these measures. Without these, we strongly believe the current supply chain disruption will only worsen as we enter the peak trading period in the run-up to Christmas.

SIGNED

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