

Food and drink workforce – a quiet crisis building?

*Workforce stresses in the
UK food & drink system*

February 2026

IGD



In this report

Food and drink businesses in the UK are facing persistent workforce challenges. Despite sustained efforts to resolve them - by both businesses and government - these issues show little sign of improvement.

So far, the impact on consumers has been limited. The industry has largely managed to maintain service levels, meaning the problem has remained a “quiet crisis” - serious, but not immediately visible to those outside the sector, or even to some within it.

However, this situation is unlikely to remain hidden for much longer. Pressures are intensifying and, without a meaningful shift in approach, the consequences of ongoing labour shortages may soon become more obvious – affecting service, operations, and potentially wider social outcomes.

This report provides an up-to-date analysis of the labour market, including the challenges and opportunities facing food and drink.

In this report:

01	Five key findings
02	UK labour market
03	Food system workforce
04	Future workforce

Five key findings



UK labour pressures

Rising unemployment, high economic inactivity and demographic pressures are weakening labour supply, exposing deep structural issues that will continue to affect workforce availability across the UK economy.



Workforce shortages

Food and drink remains one of the UK's largest employers, yet it relies heavily on entry-level roles. Recruitment is increasingly difficult, especially in retail and away from home, creating ongoing operational risk across the supply chain.



Grow entry talent

With large numbers of young adults unemployed or inactive, the sector has an opportunity to attract new talent by offering clearer routes into work, better conditions and more supportive early-career environments, helping to stabilise the system today.



Skilled, lean workforce

Rising labour costs and slow productivity growth mean the future food and drink workforce must be smaller but significantly more capable, combining higher skills, stronger progression and more inclusive cultures.



STEM skills focus

Automation, AI, sustainability goals and new production methods require step-change skills in engineering, data, science and advanced manufacturing.

“

To build the workforce our future demands, we must unlock new skills and new confidence to address the quiet crisis facing the UK food system.

Harshal Gore

Director of Economic and Workforce Programmes

The challenge for today

Despite labour issues, the food and drink sector has a strong base and real opportunity to build a skilled, future-ready workforce.

The UK economy is not performing well, and no significant upturn is in sight. The labour market has proven surprisingly resilient but, even so, demand for labour seems to be weakening.

Young adults are threatened by this, with large numbers either unemployed or economically-inactive.

Government policy supports young adults and other vulnerable people seeking to enter the workforce (e.g. the forthcoming [report into Young People and work](#)). The impact of these initiatives will become clearer over time.

The UK food and drink system is also struggling, with volume demand flat-lining in both retail and Away From Home (AFH).

However, food and drink businesses must still recruit constantly to maintain a very large combined workforce, which comprises 4.1m people, making food and drink a bigger employer than the NHS.

Recruitment is a constant challenge, despite a growing pool of unemployed people. Historically, food and drink has not been attractive to job seekers, due to lack of exposure and negative perceptions.

The **challenge for today** is to recruit and retain the people required for current food production and distribution, ensuring the system can operate effectively. This will become even more important as volume demand recovers and the UK's rapidly growing population increases future workforce needs.



The challenge for tomorrow

Develop a food and drink workforce with the capacity and capability to deliver a future-ready food system.

However, attracting new workers is not enough. They must be given competitive rewards, the opportunity to develop in-role and a work [culture](#) which values them.

The **challenge for tomorrow** is to develop a food and drink workforce with the capacity and capability to deliver a future-ready food system.

The system must evolve to meet a wide range of goals - stronger resilience, improved health outcomes, reduced climate impact, better labour productivity, and long-term sustainability.

Achieving this requires a more capable workforce. Businesses will need to attract and retain people with the right skills, while also developing and upskilling their current employees.

If this transition is not managed well, the food system may struggle to meet the needs of society or to perform effectively in a changing environment.

The business case for investing in the UK food and drink workforce is clear: workforce capability is as critical to resilience as the supply of materials or energy.



Actions for government

Government can unlock workforce resilience and strengthen the UK food and drink system by addressing deep-rooted labour-market constraints and enabling long-term capability growth across the sector

Actions for government include:

- **Create a national workforce strategy for food and drink.** These businesses account for 1-in-8 UK jobs and also deliver food security for the nation. Government must include food and drink in sector-specific workforce policy.
- **Focus on implementing the recommendations of the Mayfield review** (Keep Britain Working), with a particular emphasis on unlocking employment growth in sectors facing acute labour shortages, including food and farming. Act on the recommendation from the Young People and Work review to ensure pathways into the food industry are clearly embedded in its recommendations, supporting young people to access, sustain and progress in food system roles.
- **Maximise performance of Job Centres** by providing more coaching to job seekers, ensuring they are work ready when they attend job interviews
- **Provide long-term certainty on labour supply by extending the Seasonal Agricultural Worker (SAW) scheme** in line with the recommendations of the Shropshire Review. While the scheme has been extended to 2029, this timeframe may not be sufficient for businesses to invest confidently in automation, skills development and domestic recruitment. A longer-term commitment would give the food supply chain the certainty it needs to plan, invest and transition without risking a future capacity gap
- **Ensure the new Growth and Skills Levy is accessible and sufficiently flexible.** Levy funds need to be available for high quality, accredited entry level courses including pre-employment training and shorter courses.
- **Refocus the school curriculum** to provide wider access to food education. Offer food GCSEs more widely, reinstate food A levels.



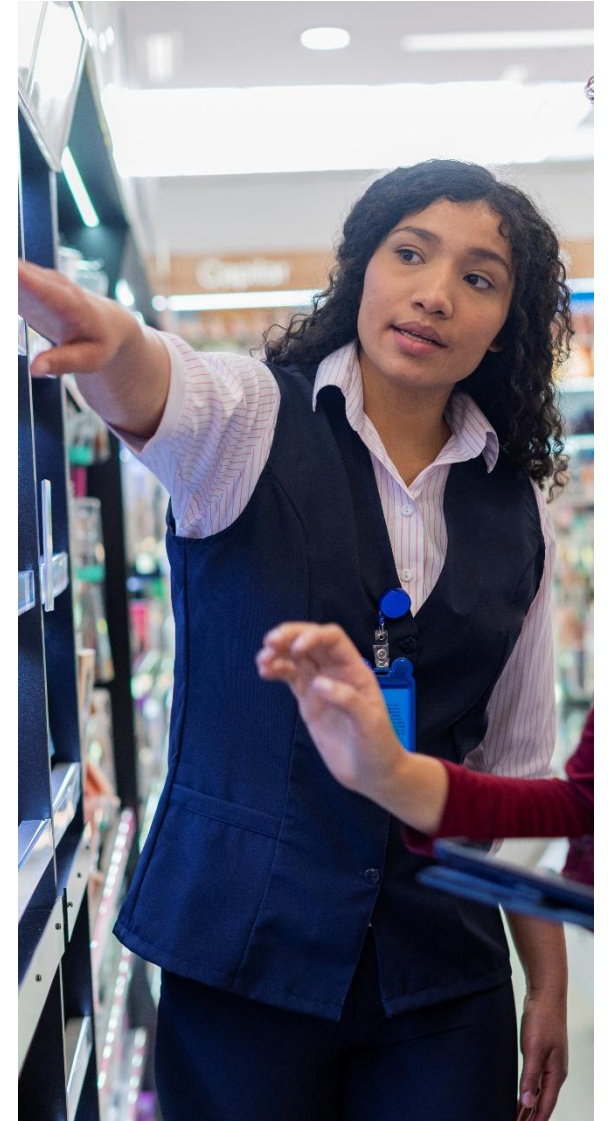
Actions for businesses

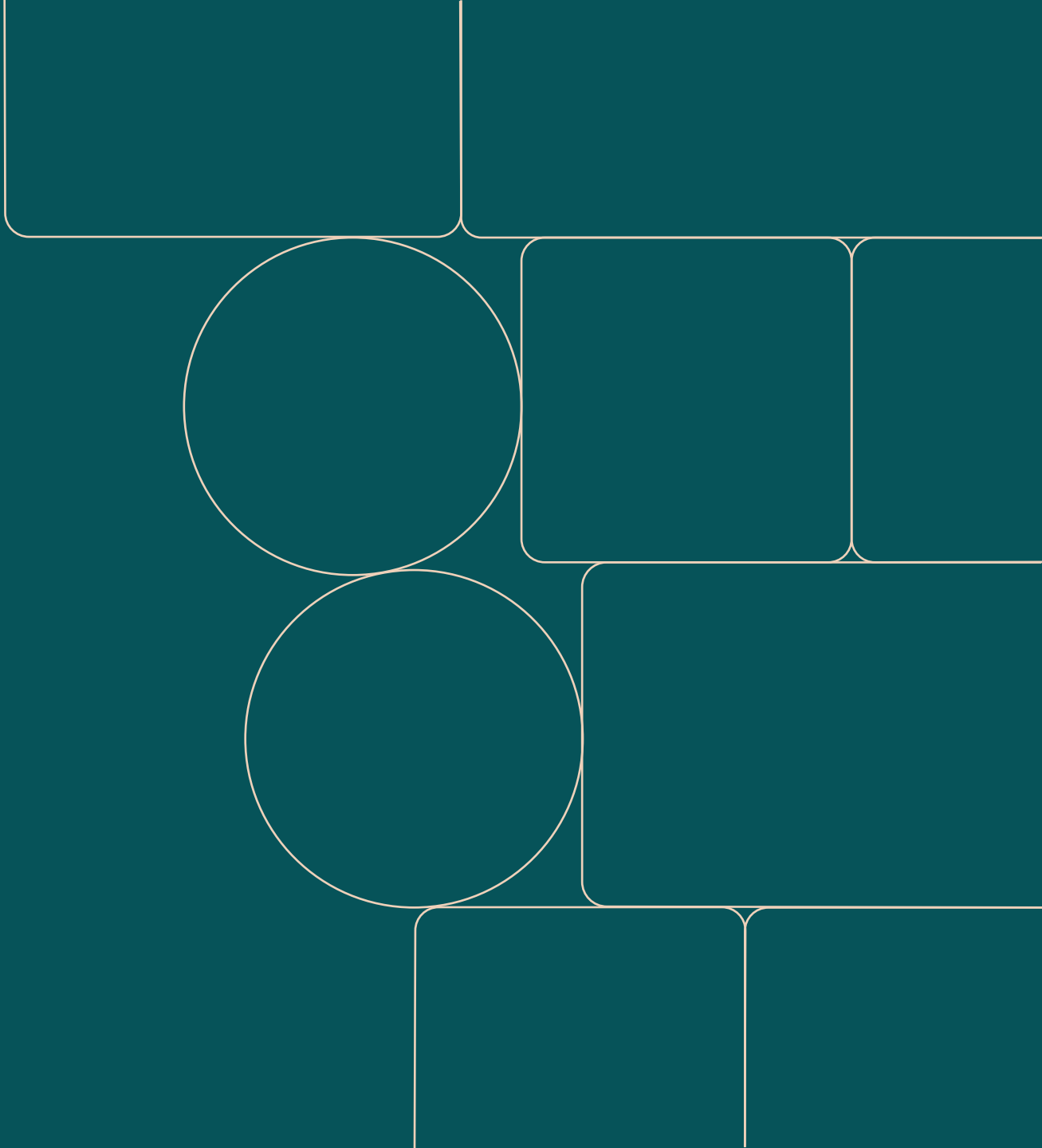
Action by government may be decisive, but it will take time to implement.

In the short term, businesses must be proactive and move to shape their own futures.

Actions for businesses include:

- **Focus on workforce strategy.** Businesses need a clear view of how they will evolve and the skills and number of people needed. See the chapter on “Future Workforce” for IGD’s thinking on this.
- **Focus on automation and AI** to boost productivity.
- **Focus on pay and conditions.** Many roles in food and drink are low paid, especially in away-from-home. The flexibility and availability of these roles may balance this disadvantage but pay must be part of any solution to recruitment shortfalls.
- **Focus on building domestic talent,** weaning off reliance on migrant workers.
- **Support collective action on workforce,** focusing especially on young adults. IGD has established initiatives, which include:
 - [Mmmake Your Mark](#), showcasing jobs in the food system to those that might not have considered it
 - Schools Workshops, helping school pupils to transition into the workplace





UK labour market

UK labour market

What's happening

The UK economy has been weak performer for some years, and this is reflected in fitful labour demand.

Weak economy means weak labour market

The UK labour market is sending mixed signals. Employment is at a record high, yet employment growth is shifting to the public sector rather than the private sector - meaning headline job growth is no longer a reliable indicator of overall economic health.

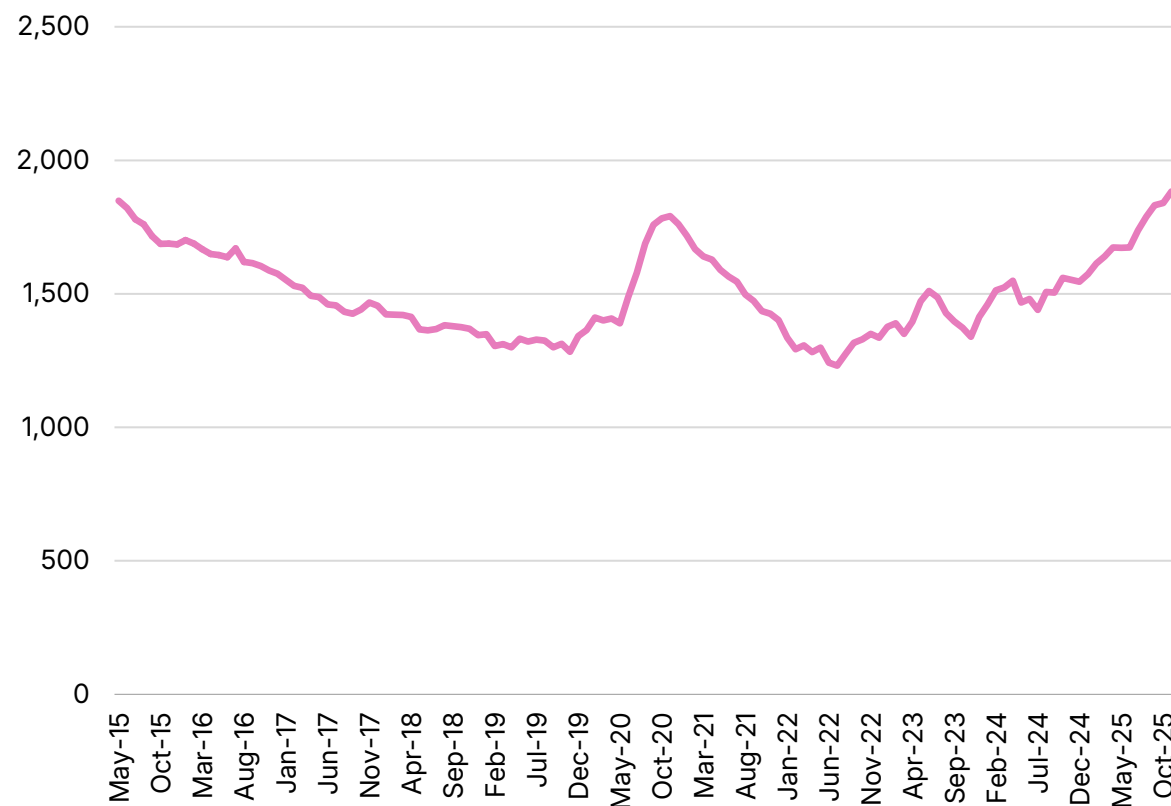
At the same time, unemployment is rising and now stands at 5.2%. While this rate is low by historic standards, it still represents a significant number of people out of work.

Since July 2022, unemployment has increased by 652,000, bringing the total to 1.9 million. This shift suggests that pressure is building beneath the surface of an otherwise resilient labour market.

There is some reassurance: most people who become unemployed do not remain so for long. Around three-quarters find work again within a year, indicating that job matching remains active even as conditions soften. However, this does not mean that job seekers find something ideal or something that makes best use of their talents.

UK unemployment, number

Unemployment (000's)



UK labour market

What's happening

High inactivity and softening demand highlight structural weaknesses in UK labour supply.

Increasing inactivity

Alongside rising unemployment, the UK is also grappling with a high level of economic inactivity (i.e. not in work and not looking for work), now standing at over 9.0 million. Compared with similar economies, the UK's inactivity rate is unusually high, signalling a structural weakness in labour supply rather than a short-term fluctuation.

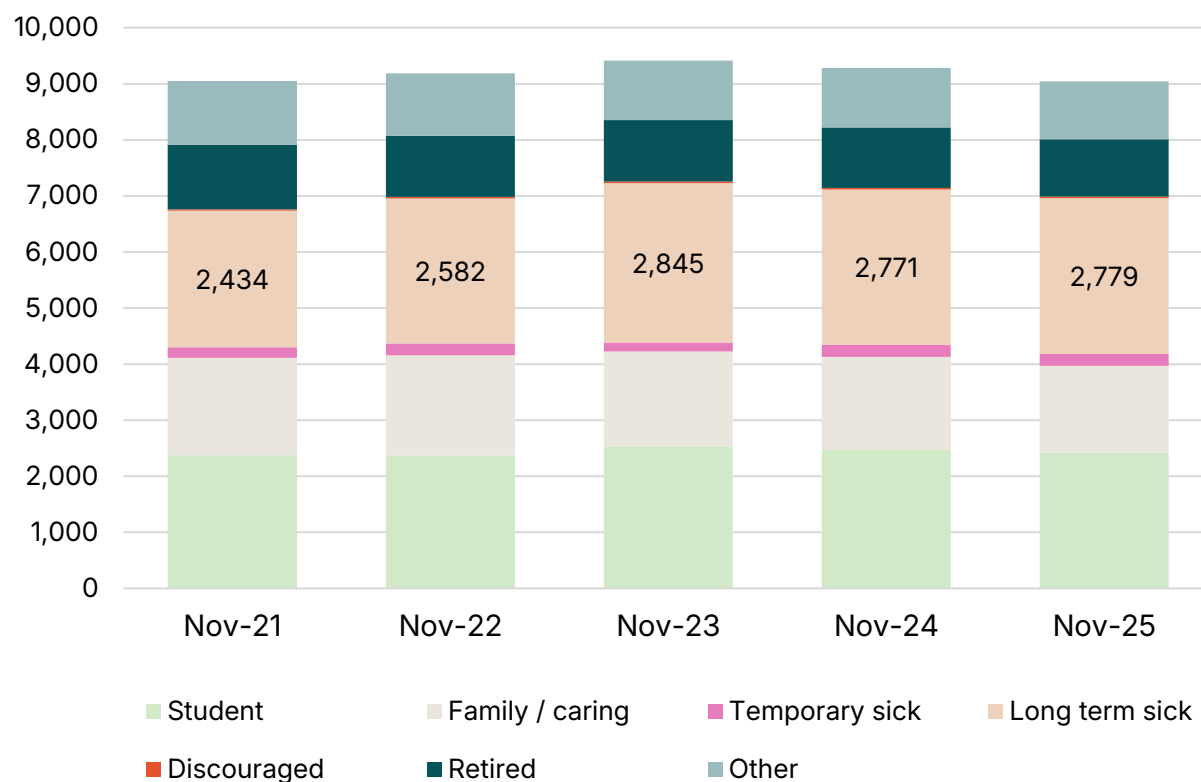
This inactive population is far from homogeneous. The largest groups, students, carers, and the long-term sick, are all unlikely to re-enter the workforce quickly. As the population continues to age, the number of people who are long-term sick but below retirement age is likely to grow further unless there is effective intervention.

Vacancies have eased back from their post-pandemic peak, and businesses are becoming more cautious about future hiring, as highlighted in [Bank of England research](#). This reinforces the view that overall demand for labour is cooling, even if aggregate conditions still appear relatively tight.

However, labour shortages have not disappeared. [CIPD](#) and [ONS](#) data show that certain roles remain persistently hard to fill, indicating continued mismatches between the skills that employers need and those available in the market.

Economic inactivity in the UK, by reason

Number (000's)



UK labour market

What's happening

Powerful external factors are impacting the UK labour market.

The labour market is being shaped not only by economic forces of supply and demand but also by powerful external pressures that sit outside traditional economic cycles.

These non-economic shifts are increasingly influencing how people work, who is available to work, and the roles employers can fill. Key external factors include:

Education and training

The UK education and training system does not consistently deliver candidates who are fully work-ready. Employers often report gaps in basic skills and workplace culture.

While initiatives such as T Levels and apprenticeship reforms are promising, it will take time for these changes to translate into a larger, better-prepared talent pipeline for food and drink businesses.

Migration policy

Migration policy now prioritises high-skill, high-pay roles, reducing access to the types of workers that many food and drink businesses have historically relied on, particularly those from the EU.

With the UK now outside the EU, this constraint has become more pronounced. As a result, businesses increasingly need to develop domestic talent or redesign roles to attract workers who are already in the UK.



UK labour market

What's happening

Changing labour market regulation reshapes employer obligations, adding both challenges and opportunities

Ageing population

The UK population is ageing steadily. As older workers exit the labour market and fewer younger workers enter, the overall labour supply shrinks and the age profile of workers changes.

IGD contacts have expressed concern that personnel in specific roles (e.g. HGV drivers) are ageing and likely to retire soon, with no clear pipeline of talent to replace them.

Long-term illness among people below retirement age is also increasing, further reducing participation. These demographic pressures unfold slowly but are difficult to reverse, making them a long-term structural challenge for employers.

Population growth

Although the UK population is growing, this growth is largely driven by immigration rather than domestic birth rates.

The composition of population growth, age, skills and participation levels, matters more than the headline number.

Much of recent immigration has been targeted towards health and social care roles, reflecting policy priorities rather than wider labour market shortages.

As a result, immigration policy itself has become a significant constraint, limiting the extent to which population growth can ease workforce pressures in sectors such as food and drink, where many roles fall outside current visa pathways or salary thresholds.

Regulation

Government intervention in the labour market is increasing. Measures such as the Employment Rights Act and other regulatory reforms change the obligations employers must meet and influence how work is structured.

These measures are intended to create social benefit, but they may have unintended consequences, potentially disincentivising businesses from hiring young adults or casual workers.

Some changes can be made rapidly but may be politically sensitive. For businesses, regulatory shifts can create both additional burdens and opportunities to improve workforce practices.

Social and cultural change

As younger generations enter the workforce, expectations around flexibility, career development, workplace purpose and employer behaviour are evolving.

These shifts influence attraction, retention and engagement. IGD has been supporting positive adaptation through initiatives such as [reverse mentoring](#), helping leaders understand and respond to new workforce norms.

UK labour market

What's happening

High inactivity and softening demand highlight structural weaknesses in UK labour supply.

Increasing inactivity

Young adults remain the group most exposed to labour-market weakness, with unemployment rates far higher than for older workers. This vulnerability is structural, persistent, and evident across multiple economic downturns.

In addition to the 366,000 young adults unemployed, a further 580,000 are economically inactive, not in work and not seeking work. Taken together, 946,000 young adults are not in education, employment or training (NEET), accounting for around 13% of the age group. This represents a large cohort whose skills and potential are not being utilised.

Evidence shows that employment among under-35s fell faster after Covid and has been slower to recover, echoing patterns seen after the Credit Crunch, when younger workers also suffered prolonged “scarring” effects.

Governments have repeatedly tried to boost youth participation in the workforce, with mixed success. The drivers go well beyond benefit costs or lost tax income. A sustained group of young adults out of work represents a major opportunity cost, with productive capacity left unused and long-term economic progress held back.

For individuals, the effects are profound. Failure to establish stable early-career employment leads to lower lifetime earnings, reduced progression, and weaker pension accumulation - disadvantages that compound over time.

Unemployment, young adults versus total population

Unemployment rate (%)

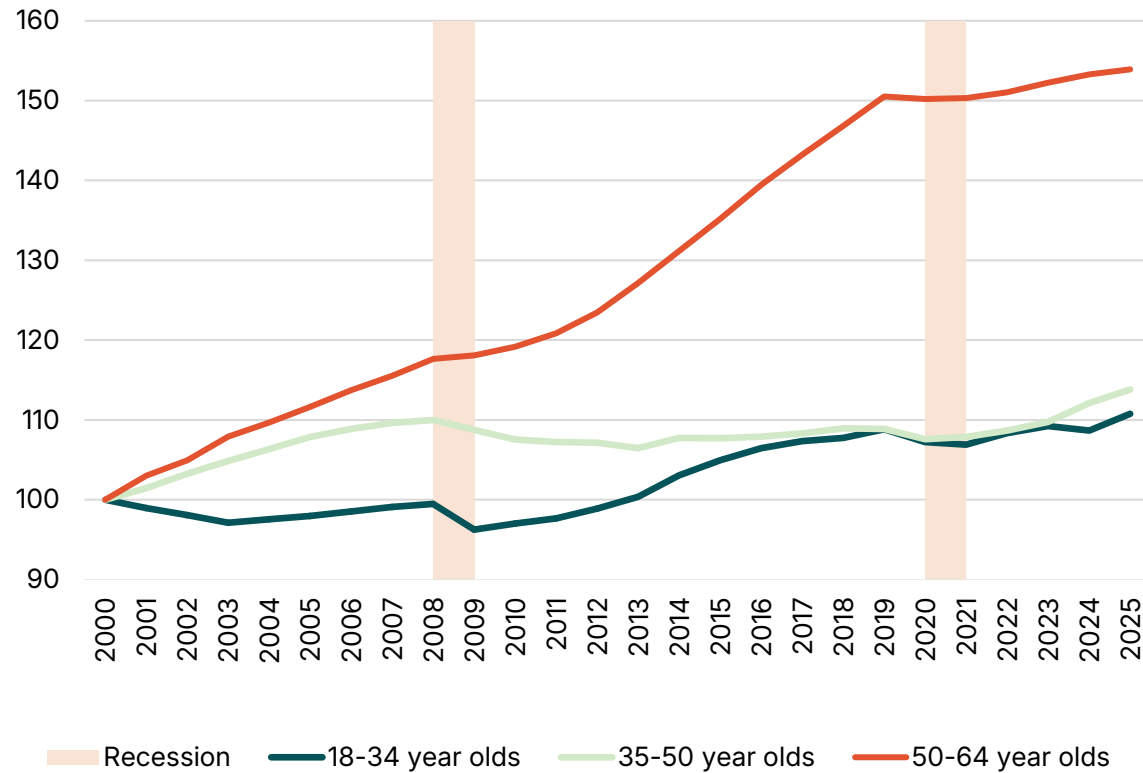


UK labour market

What's happening

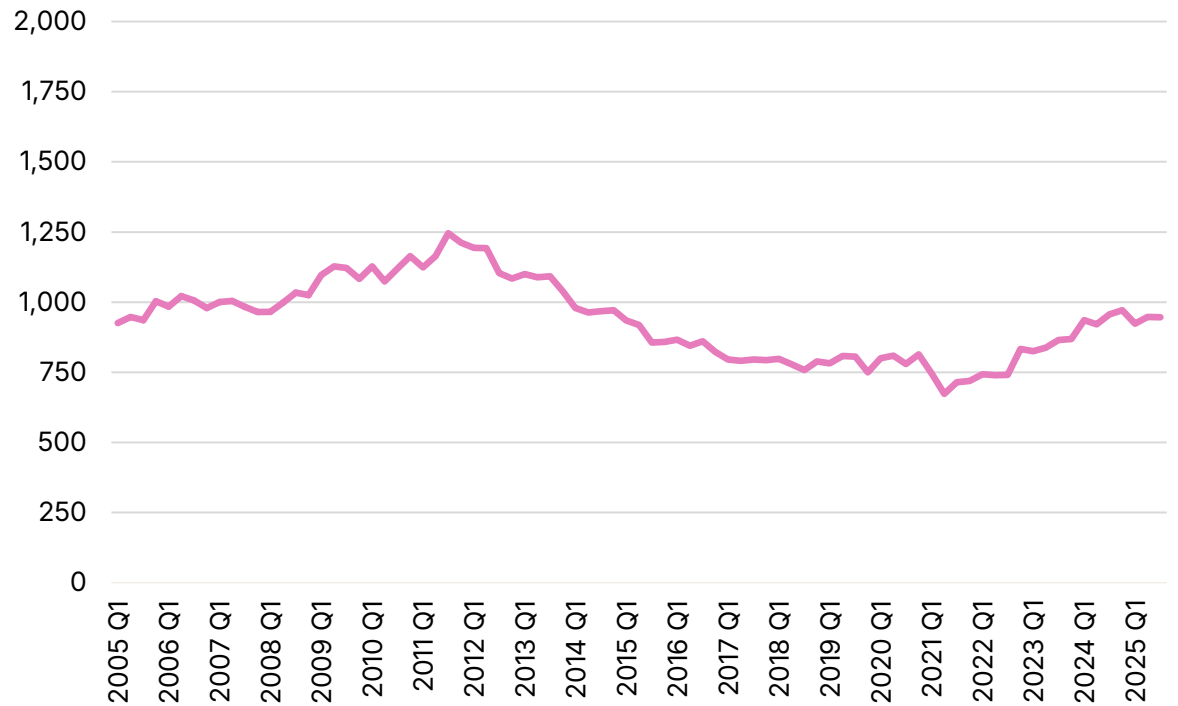
Employment by broad age group, young adult vs. older adults

Employment (Index, 2000 = 100)



NEETS aged 16-24, number

NEETs (000's)



UK labour market

What's happening

Ill-health, especially mental health, is pushing more young adults out of the labour market

Youth inactivity driven by ill-health

In November 2025, Sir Charlie Mayfield published his final [Keep Britain Working](#) report, highlighting a rapid expansion of economic inactivity among young adults linked to ill-health and disability.

[NHS data for England](#) reinforces this picture: in 2023, 22% of adults aged 20–25 were assessed as having a probable mental health disorder, including 30% of women and 13% of men.

Alongside ill-health, many young adults are trapped in a “no experience, no job” cycle, where employers expect prior work experience, but fewer young people are able to access it. This creates a barrier at the very point where early labour-market attachment is most important, reinforcing inactivity and increasing the risk of becoming NEET.

These rates are rising quickly, signalling a deepening public-health challenge with economic consequences. Recognising the seriousness of the issue, former Health Secretary Alan Milburn launched a further [review](#) in early 2026 to examine barriers keeping young adults out of work. His final recommendations are expected in Summer 2026.

Young adults hit hardest by low pay

Young adults have experienced the steepest long-term declines in real pay, leaving them at a structural disadvantage in the labour market. Their earnings have not kept pace with older workers, and the gap has widened over time.

Median pay for 18–24-year-olds is around £300 per week but once adjusted for inflation this represents a £100 real-terms fall over the past 20 years. This erosion has occurred despite major interventions such as the National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage, which have not prevented young workers’ pay from deteriorating relative to others.

All age groups have seen real-terms pay decline over the long run, but the largest relative losses have been borne by young adults. Low pay reduces the motivation to work for those who can rely on benefits or family support, effectively turning low wages into a barrier to employment.

Hard work with little near-term reward is an unattractive prospect, and as pay falls, the perceived penalty for not working decreases further.

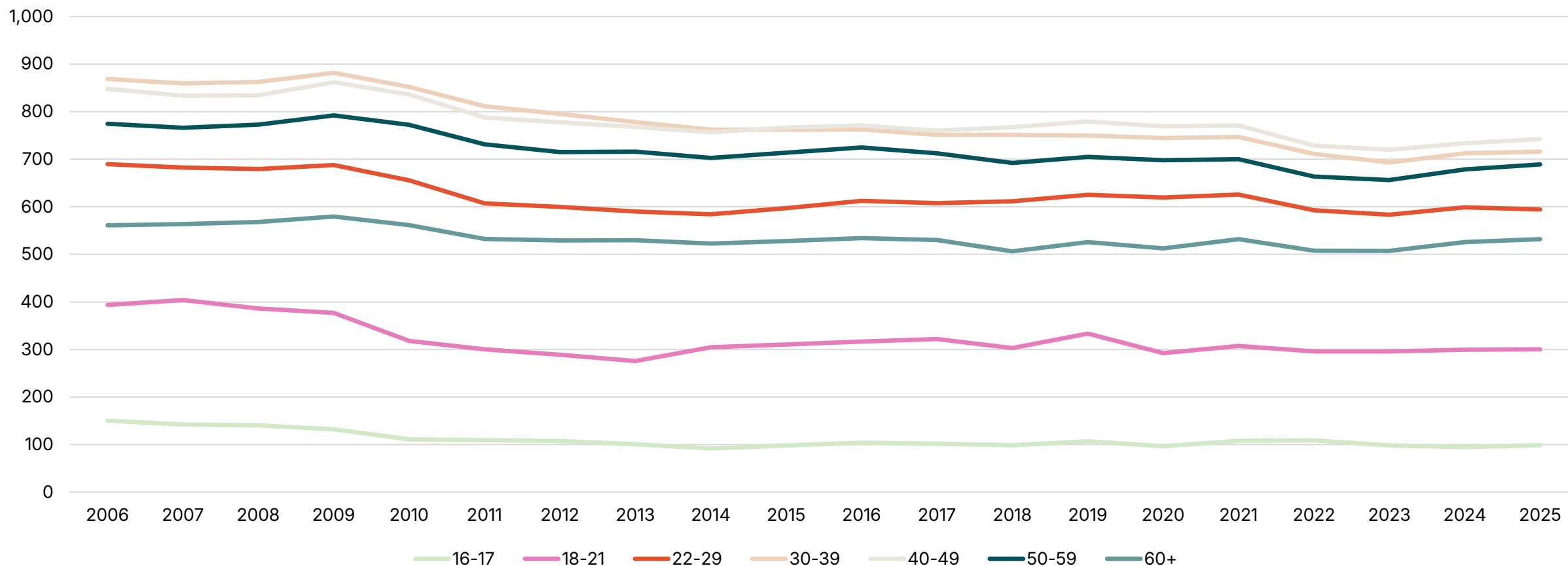
These pressures underline the importance of offering young adults not just jobs, but good jobs, roles that provide fair pay, genuine progression opportunities, and a pathway to long-term financial security and social mobility. This is key to retention.

UK labour market

What's happening

Median pay per week, 2025 values

Median pay (£ per week)





Food system workforce

Food system workforce

What's happening

Food and drink is the largest private sector employer in the UK.

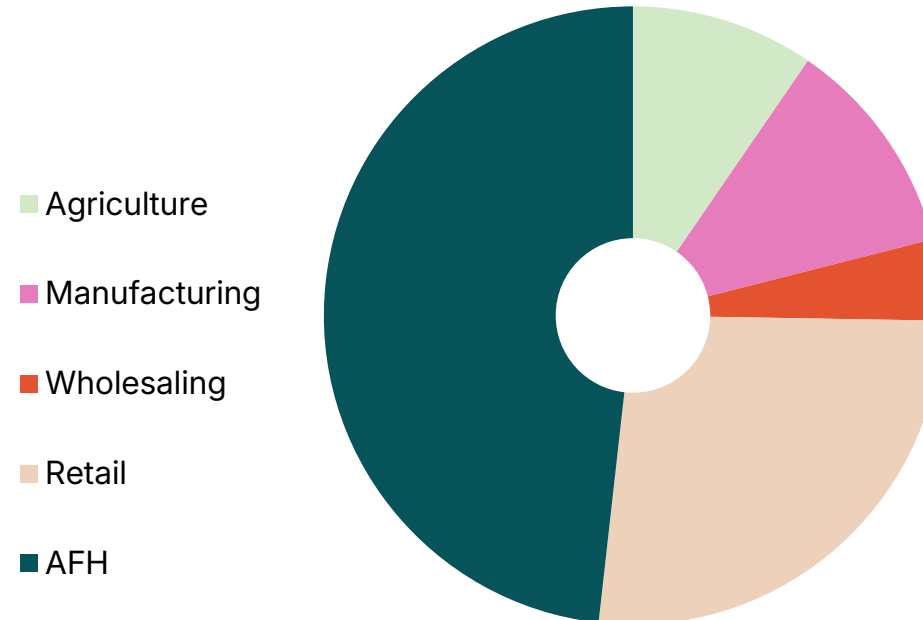
Employing one in eight workers

The food and drink system is one of the UK's largest employers. There are around 4.1 million people working directly across agriculture, manufacturing, wholesaling, retail and foodservice.

This represents about one in eight of all UK workers, making the workforce almost twice the size of NHS.

Beyond this core group, many more workers are employed in essential linked industries such as logistics, packaging and waste management, all of which depend on and reinforce the food supply chain.

UK food system jobs, 2025 - 4,112,000



Food system workforce

What's happening

There are divisions within the food and drink workforce

Structure of food and drink employment

The food and drink workforce is split into two different groups, and this structural divide shapes how employers experience rising wage costs.

The upper supply chain is largely made up of full-time roles and pay tends to be higher: only around 10% of jobs in agriculture, manufacturing and wholesaling sit at or near the National Living Wage (NLW).

In retail and Away-From-Home, the lower supply chain looks very different, with a much higher proportion of part-time roles and a significantly larger share of jobs sitting at or near the NLW.

Because retail and AFH employ such large numbers of people on NLW-linked rates, these sectors are far more exposed to increases in the NLW and to changes in associated National Insurance costs. Even small policy shifts can disproportionately raise labour costs for employers in these parts of the supply chain.

	Agri + fish	Manufacturing	Wholesaling	Retail	AFH
Share of all employees at or near NLW	10%	<10%	10%	10%	30-40%
Share of all employees that are women	42%	34%	31%	51%	52%
Share of all employees that are part time	30%	11%	18%	60%	62%

Food system workforce

What's happening

Vacancies are concentrated in retail and away from home.

Food and drink vacancies

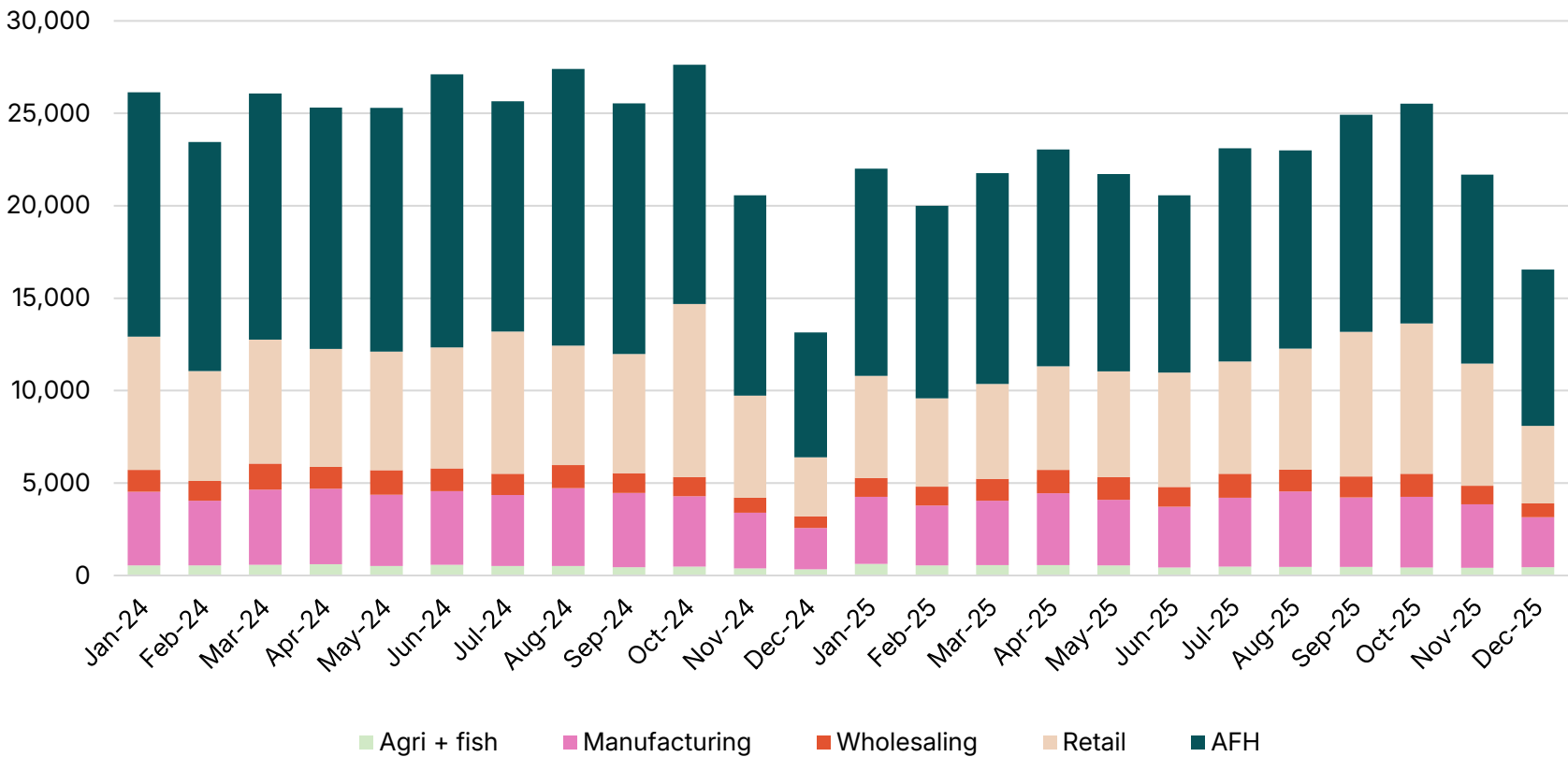
The food and drink system depends on continuous recruitment to replace those that retire or go to work elsewhere.

Each month, thousands of roles are advertised across the sector, with many more posted through non-digital channels. Demand is especially concentrated in retail and away from home, which together make up the bulk of employment and therefore the bulk of vacancies.

Maintaining capacity across the supply chain requires this constant flow of new entrants. Without it, labour shortages quickly emerge and operational resilience weakens.

Online job ads by food and drink employers

Online job ads (n)



Food system workforce

What's happening

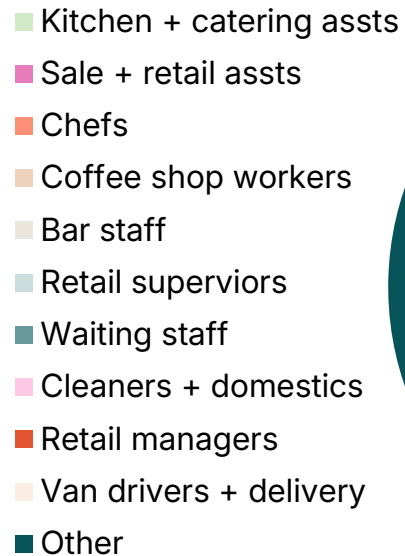
There is a reliance on lower skill roles.

Top roles required

The food and drink system's recruitment challenge stems from the concentration of roles at the low-skill, low-pay end of the labour market - jobs with few barriers to entry, but high rates of churn.

These roles often serve as early steps into employment, meaning many people move on quickly in search of higher pay or clearer progression. As a result, employers face a continual cycle of recruitment and backfilling, alongside the ongoing loss of skill, experience and productivity.

Online jobs ads, top 10 occupations



Food system workforce

What's happening

Soft skills drive hiring across food and drink roles.

Soft skills

While some positions require specialist knowledge or formal certification, such as food safety or forklift operation, these are a smaller share of total demand. In job ads, employers more often emphasise soft skills, such as reliability, communication, teamwork and customer service, which are essential across most front-line roles.

IGD's work with young adults has therefore focused on helping them build and demonstrate these soft skills, which provide a practical route into employment across retail, hospitality and other parts of the food and drink supply chain.

Soft skills specified in food and drink job ads					
Rank	Agri + fish	Manufacturing	Wholesaling	Retail	AFH
1	Communication	Communication	Communication	Customer service	Customer service
2	Detail orientation	Management	Sales	Sales	Communication
3	Management	Customer service	Customer service	Communication	Management
4	Customer service	Operations	Management	Management	Cleanliness
5	Operations	Sales	Detail orientation	Leadership	Operations
6	Sales	Detail orientation	Operations	Coaching	Sales
7	English language	Leadership	Time management	Operations	Energetic
8	Organisation	Cleanliness	Problem solving	Detail orientation	Verbal skills
9	Enthusiasm	Problem solving	Self motivation	Enthusiasm	Detail orientation
10	Planning	Planning	Leadership	Planning	Leadership

Food system workforce

What's happening

Hard skills are often learned on the job.

Hard skills

The core challenge is progression: while many hard skills can be learned on the job, others rely on formal certification. This means entry is straightforward, but advancement is often capped without further training or employer support, for example, roles in order picking or kitchen operations versus those requiring accredited qualifications.

Hard skills specified in food and drink job ads					
Rank	Agri + fish	Manufacturing	Wholesaling	Retail	AFH
1	Machinery	Food safety	Food safety	Warehousing	Restaurant operation
2	Forklift truck	Marketing	Warehousing	Food safety	Food safety
3	Food safety	Cont improvement	KPIs	Retail operations	Communication
4	Poultry	KPIs	Merchandising	Customer enquiries	Cooking
5	Housekeeping	Machinery	Marketing	Cash handling	Food prep
6	Animal husbandry	Auditing	Cont improvement	KPIs	Housekeeping
7	Cont. improvement	Warehousing	Restaurant operation	Order picking	Marketing
8	Agriculture	Food manufacturing	Auditing	Ledger / billing	Workplace safety
9	Auditing	Finance	Product knowledge	Stocking merch.	Cash handling
10	Irrigation	Supply chain	Invoicing	Stock keeping	Grilling

Food system workforce

What's happening

Young adults often overlook the food and drink industry as a career path.

The food and drink sector is frequently invisible to young adults and poorly understood. IGD research shows this lack of awareness is driven by five barriers:

Competition

Businesses outside the food and drink system offer strong competition for workers. The Times [Top 100 Graduate Employers](#) survey shows that some food businesses that were previously on the list have slipped off it in recent years.

Disjointed messaging

The food system is highly fragmented, spanning multiple stages and thousands of businesses.

As a result, it does not present a single, coherent story about the careers it offers, making the sector harder for young adults to recognise or navigate.

Lack of knowledge about available roles

Young people with specific ambitions (e.g., engineering, tech, digital, finance) often do not realise that these roles exist within food and drink businesses. Because they cannot see these opportunities, they exclude the sector entirely.

Unfavourable perceptions

As highlighted in the [Shropshire Review](#) and reinforced by IGD's 2025 survey, many young adults hold negative perceptions of food and drink work.

This is sometimes based on outdated or incomplete impressions.

In some cases, however, these concerns are justified and reflect genuine issues around pay, conditions or progression in parts of the sector.

Lack of educational support

In recent years, participation in food and nutrition GCSEs has fallen and A levels in food technology and food & nutrition have been dropped from the syllabus.

Limited exposure to the real industry

Awareness of the food system is extremely narrow for many young adults. They interact only with frontline staff in shops or hospitality, while the major employers behind the scenes - manufacturing, logistics, wholesale and technical roles - are largely unseen.

The same is true for parents, career advisors and job-centre staff who influence early career decisions. With little personal exposure themselves, they rarely recommend the sector. In IGD's 2025 research, parents were even more reluctant than young adults to consider food and drink as a viable career route.

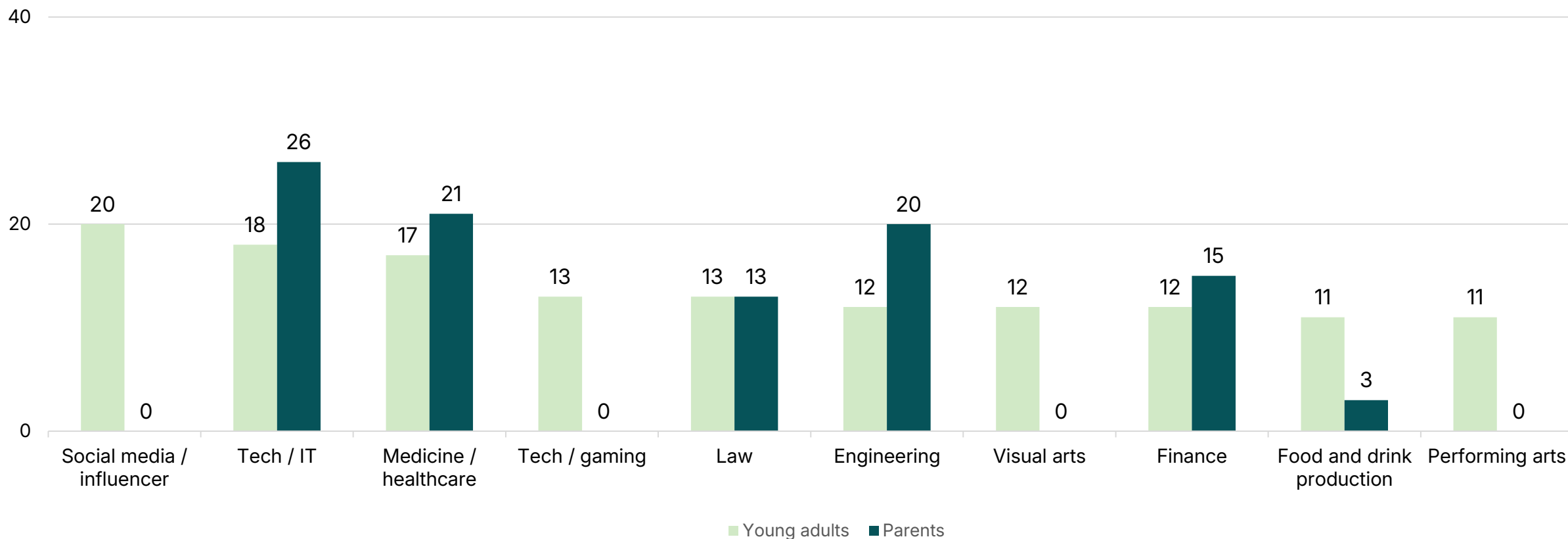
Lack of exposure to food industry roles is one reason why IGD expanded its workforce programme in 2024 to include [Mmmake Your Mark](#), which showcases food and drink as a career destination.

Food system workforce

What's happening

What industries, if any, would you be genuinely passionate about pursuing a career in?

Top answers for young adults, with data for parents (%)



Food system workforce

Why it matters

Labour risks to vital food systems.

Economic and social impact

Workforce pressures in food and drink carry greater economic and social consequences than in some other sectors because the system underpins a critical national function: feeding the population.

Although labour challenges are widespread across the UK economy, their impact is especially acute in food and drink, where any loss of productive capacity risks disrupting a sector that accounts for a significant share of national economic output and plays a foundational role in daily life.

With the wider UK economy struggling to generate growth, it is increasingly important to protect and maximise the food system's contribution to national GVA.

Persistent labour shortages, falling participation or skills gaps would weaken this contribution and place further strain on economic performance.

Beyond economics, the sector has a strategic responsibility: ensuring the reliable supply of safe, nutritious food to a population of 69 million in an increasingly uncertain global environment. Workforce instability therefore poses not only commercial risks but broader social risks.

Need for domestic production

Global volatility is increasing the strategic need for the UK to produce more food at home, reducing exposure to forces the country cannot control.

Workforce challenges are not unique to the UK. Ageing populations and shrinking labour pools affect many European nations, but the UK's heavy reliance on imported food and drink creates additional vulnerability. When labour disruptions occur abroad, for example, issues in cocoa-growing regions, UK supply chains feel the impact immediately.

With global trade under pressure from conflict, tariffs and geopolitical uncertainty, relying ever more heavily on imports is becoming riskier. Any interruption in overseas supply must be met by domestic production, not left to chance.

Boosting UK output therefore requires not only policy measures to strengthen national production capacity, but also a workforce strategy capable of supporting it. Without sufficient domestic labour and skills, the UK cannot build the resilient food system it needs in an unpredictable world.

Food system workforce

Why it matters

Mounting labour strain.

Labour challenges ahead

The food and drink supply chain is already moving toward a slow-burn workforce crisis, where pressures build gradually but relentlessly until they become far harder, and costlier, to resolve.

This is unlikely to erupt as a sudden system-wide collapse unless triggered by an external shock (such as a pandemic).

Instead, the more probable scenario is a long-term deterioration marked by compounding operational and organisational strain.

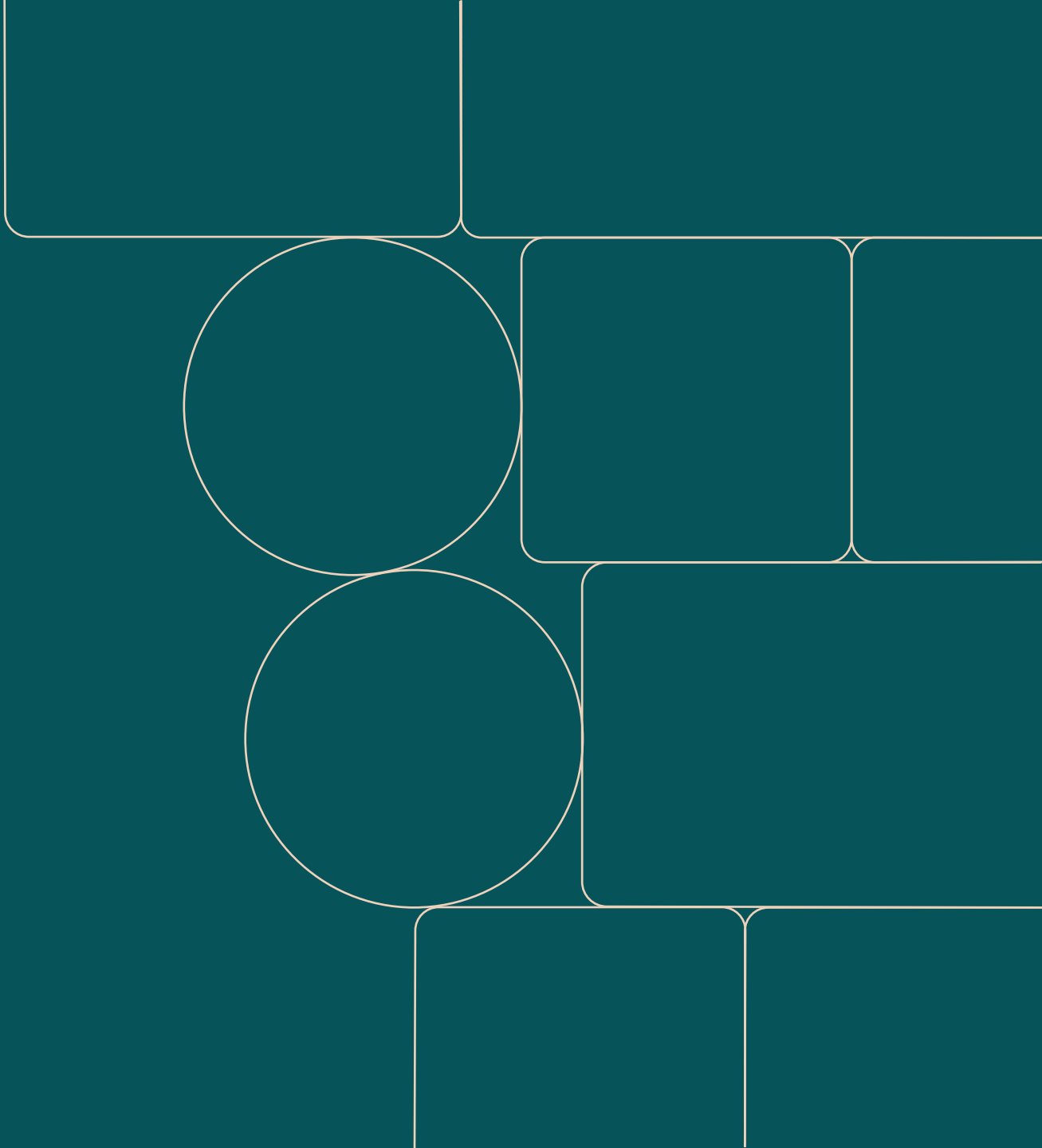
Key warning signs of this slow burn include:

- Business decisions increasingly dictated by staff shortages rather than commercial logic
- Recruitment becoming less effective, with greater effort needed for the same results
- Reduced ability to adapt to strategic shifts
- Falling service levels (e.g., more short orders, out-of-stocks)
- Rising trade-union activity and workplace tensions
- Growing key person risks as skills cluster in too few people
- Low retention and rising poaching between businesses
- Weaker resilience to shocks such as flu waves
- More overtime demands on existing staff
- Higher vacancy levels and vacancies taking longer to fill
- Rising employment costs
- Staff burnout and disengagement
- Succession challenges and accelerating skills loss as older workers retire
- A steadily ageing workforce

Crucially, slow burn does not mean low impact. The cumulative effect of these trends can be extremely damaging, eroding productivity, resilience, and customer experience.

The costs will be felt not only financially but also reputationally, at a time when the sector's resilience has already been tested.



An abstract graphic design featuring a solid teal background. On the right side, there is a pattern of white geometric lines forming various shapes: rounded rectangles, squares, and two circles. These shapes are arranged in a staggered, overlapping manner, creating a modern, architectural feel. The shapes are primarily located in the upper right and middle right sections of the image.

Future workforce

Future workforce

What needs to happen

The food and drink sector has a pivotal opportunity to shape a stronger, more resilient future workforce, one that meets immediate operational needs while also preparing for long-term transformation.

Opportunity for today - build a more effective, inclusive entry pipeline

Right now, the sector can strengthen performance by attracting and retaining more people, particularly young adults who are currently struggling to enter the labour market.

This means creating clear, supportive pathways into work, especially for those unemployed or inactive, and offering environments that help people succeed and stay.

This is not just recruitment; it is competitive talent attraction in a tight labour market where food and drink businesses must differentiate themselves through workplace culture, growth opportunities and fair conditions.



Future workforce

What needs to happen

Opportunity for tomorrow - develop the workforce needed for a changing food system

The long-term prize is even bigger. As the food system evolves, driven by technology, climate goals, health policy and new operating models, there is a major opportunity to build a future-ready workforce.

- Reducing resource use and embedding circularity
- Navigating digital commerce and retail media

This will include developing the right skills for:

- Boosting productivity as labour costs rise

- Regenerative and sustainable production
- Improving population health through food
- Adopting new technologies, including AI, robotics and novel food processes

Rather than simply maintaining today's workforce, the sector can intentionally design tomorrow's, creating new skills, new career paths and new opportunities for progression.

Unlocking both opportunities

Today's urgent recruitment pressures often dominate HR time, leaving little room for long-term planning. But both timelines are connected: tomorrow's skilled workforce will come from today's new entrants, if businesses invest early in training, development and supportive culture.

By broadening entry routes and aligning them with future skill needs, food and drink businesses can turn current labour challenges into a strategic workforce renewal opportunity.



Future workforce

What needs to happen

Building a leaner, more capable workforce.

The future food and drink workforce needs to be smaller, more productive, more diverse and significantly more skilled. That is the central shift the sector must prepare for.

With labour costs rising and policy unlikely to reverse this trend, the industry cannot rely on a larger workforce to meet growing demand. Instead, long-term success depends on getting more value from each hour worked, supported by investment in people, capability and technology.

Parts of the sector, particularly retail and away from home, are already shrinking, driven by business pressures rather than preference. This makes productivity growth essential. Yet the UK economy has struggled to improve productivity for two decades, and food and drink businesses have shared in that challenge, especially where roles are difficult to automate or spread across many sites.

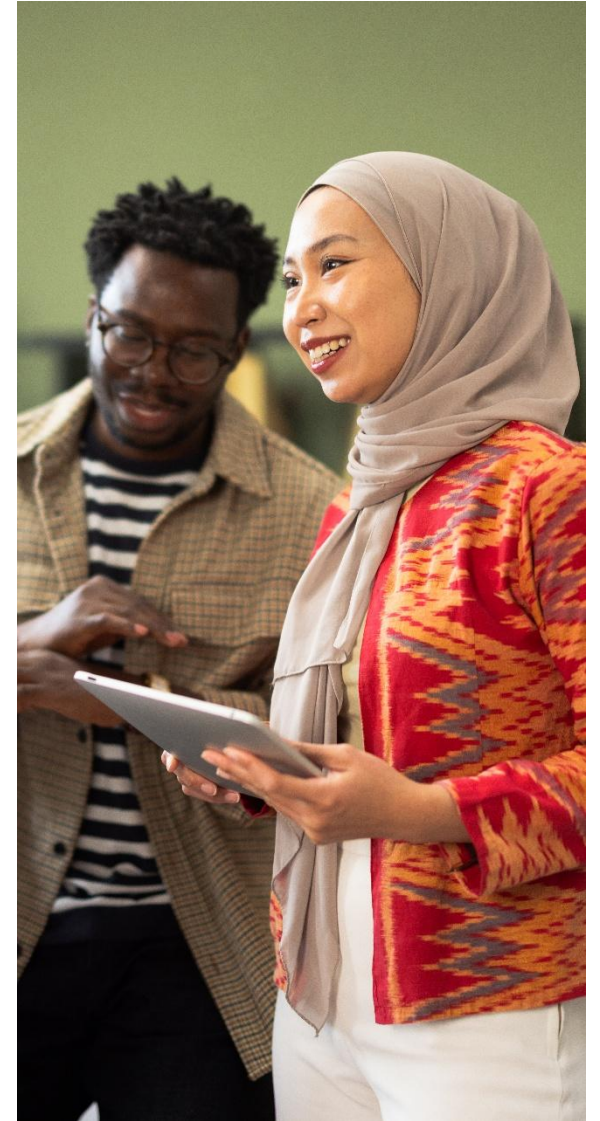
A future-ready workforce must therefore combine:

- **Higher skill levels**, including digital, technical and operational expertise
- **Greater diversity and inclusion**, enabling every employee to contribute fully
- **Stronger progression pathways**, so capability grows over time
- **Supportive cultures**, where barriers to participation and advancement are actively removed

Diversity is especially important: productivity improves when all employees can work at their full potential. Many barriers to participation are subtle rather than explicit, which is why programmes like IGD's reverse mentoring help leaders identify unseen obstacles and change behaviour.

Legal expectations around diversity reporting, particularly for gender and ethnicity, reinforce the need for a more representative workforce, especially in senior roles.

In short, the future food and drink workforce will not be bigger, but it must be better equipped, better supported, and better utilised to meet the demands of a more complex, more challenging operating environment.



Future workforce

What needs to happen

STEM skills are vital to future growth.

The future food workforce will need a step-change in technical and scientific capability, as the system becomes more automated, more data-driven and more sustainability-focused. Many of the skills required do not exist at scale today, making early investment essential.

To meet future strategic demands, the sector will need new and expanded skillsets, gained through both formal education and targeted on-the-job training. These include:

- **Aquaculture and novel production specialists** – supporting emerging food-production methods.
- **Digital and data capability**, especially in AI, analytics and automation.
- **Engineers**, particularly in robotics, machinery and advanced manufacturing.
- **Material-science expertise**, vital for packaging innovation and circular-economy systems.
- **Nutritionists and food scientists**, to support reformulation, healthier products and regulatory change.

IGD is already building capability in these areas, for example by supporting Summer Schools for aspiring food scientists and launching a 2026 engineering pilot to increase the supply of technical talent.

Although the number of highly specialised roles will be small compared to entry-level roles, the cost of not having these skills is high. From stalled innovation to regulatory non-compliance and missed sustainability targets.

Given the recruitment difficulties facing the sector, upskilling existing employees may be the most reliable and impactful route.

Enhancing current workers' skills not only fills critical gaps but also strengthens retention by offering meaningful paths for development.



Future workforce

Feeding Britain's Future

Launch in Summer 2026

The ambition

By 2030, to build a confident, skilled and future ready workforce positioning the sector as a modern, purpose driven career destination where young people can discover opportunity, develop skills and thrive.

Attract: Deliver meaningful career interventions for young people from schools, colleges and universities to increase awareness and attraction opportunities.

Develop: Focus on strengthening the learning culture within the food industry to improve the talent pipeline and support people to develop their skills.

Thrive: Creating workplaces where everyone thrives; ensuring all groups are represented in the food sector.

Why it matters

Many young people leave education without the knowledge, confidence or skills they need to take their first step into work and too few understand the breadth of career opportunities available across the sector. Added to this around one million young people are currently NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and at the same time, employers face shortages in the skills needed to transform and future proof the UK food system.

The food industry needs a collective effort to encourage and support young people to pursue opportunities in the sector.

Feeding Britain's Future is aims to tackle workforce challenges. It brings employers, educators and communities together to unlock confidence and aspiration for young people while strengthening the resilience of the UK food system. It is about creating opportunities that help young people build the essential confidence and employability skills and understanding of the industry, while helping employers to find and develop future talent.

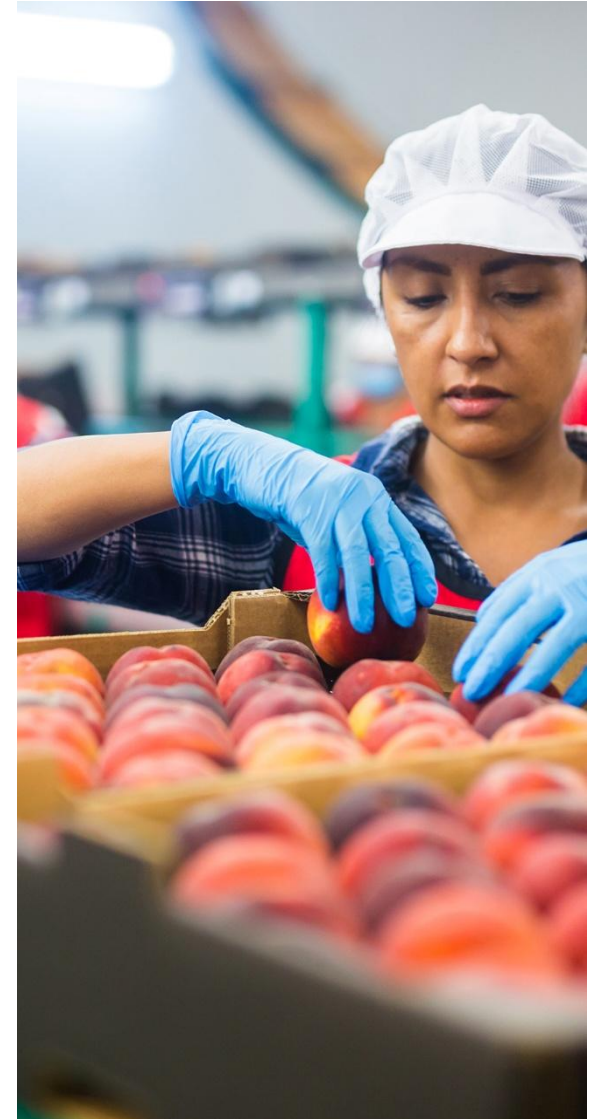
The call to industry

IGD's Feeding Britain's Future initiative will be launching in Summer 2026.

It invites organisations across the UK food system to join a coordinated, sector wide effort. By getting involved employers can help open doors for young people and build the resilient, future fit workforce the sector needs.

For more information or to understand how your organisation can get involved, please contact:

Harshal Gore, Director of Economic & Workforce Programmes
harshal.gore@igd.com



IGD programmes



Mmmake your mark

IGD’s cross-industry initiative that aims to attract talent by collaboratively raising awareness of the diverse career opportunities available across the food system.

[Find out more](#) —————>



Reverse mentoring

A free cross-company programme that fosters understanding of what great inclusion looks like.

[Take part](#) —————>



Virtual volunteering

Our schools’ programme is one of the largest industry-supported employability initiatives in the UK. Volunteering for a workshop has never been easier.

[Volunteer here](#) —————>



New starter skills

This online course combines industry knowledge and personal skills to give you the best start to your career in the food and grocery industry.

[Find out more](#) —————>