

# Kent & Medway LSIP

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## Trailblazer Employer focus group notes

C-1: Construction and Built Environment (physical workshop)

Construction / Built Environment Sector Focus Group, Constructing Excellence Event, Bearsted, Kent, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2022

*F&G*

*Crofton Consulting Engineers*

*Clague Architects*

*B&M Construction Consultancy*

*Hub Engineering Services*

*Ash Contracting*

*Baxall Construction*

*Facilitated by Steve Matthews Research and Consultancy.*

Recruitment Challenges

All areas are a challenge, made more difficult by the pandemic and Brexit, and the associated labour shortages.

A more general challenge is finding people with the right attitude. Specifically, some don't have the right attitude, willing to learn, try hard, willing to learn and develop, not expect everything immediately. Some young people are great; others just don't have the right attitude.

You also need people who are ready to learn new things and adapt to change (see below about onsite workers, for example), lifelong learners who can cope with change. This includes people from a range of backgrounds who could be suited to develop into being a QS, for example.

Many companies recruit on attitude and 'cultural fit', people with a 'can do' attitude, who want to develop. Some recruits are very poor - some haven't even read the job description.

There is a lack of awareness of the different roles in construction. Some companies will recruit people and then rotate them around different roles to see all the options and find what is right for them. Parents and families supporting young people also lack an understanding of the industry and how it has changed – not so 'dirty' anymore, for example.

Specific significant skills shortages for:

- Quantity surveyors: one firm has recruited people with accountancy knowledge and training them up in QS-ing, building on their maths skills. This is far more cost-effective than using recruitment agencies, who will later poach your people for other companies. No one really 'wants' to be a QS – it doesn't really resonate at 16, but you can bring people in from other disciplines and degree subjects.

- Recruiting good Level 3 Apprentices in professional services is a challenge. They come out of school at 16 and are not really ready to engage in the workplace. It's basics like turning up on Monday after a heavy weekend, turning up on time, being willing to engage during the day in the workplace. They often drop out because they didn't have the right attitudes and behaviours. It's much better when people join at 18 and do a Level 6 Apprenticeship (sponsored degree). By 18, people are much better motivated and want the degree through an Apprenticeship route.
- Architectural technologists: you can recruit people and train them up but there is only one course in Kent that is suitable (at MidKent College HNC in construction, architectural technology). The quality of the course could be better too – assessment tasks do not always reflect actual industry practice by focusing too much on structural engineering and quantity surveying, rather than more focus on construction.
- South East Thames College are more appropriate to industry in Building Services Engineering Level 3 and LSBU for Level 6 Civil Engineering than what is on offer in Kent. The Kent offer is too generic because they can't source the tutors they need, e.g. HNC in Construction. A bigger and more diverse tutor base is needed.
- Changes in industry practice around digital need to be reflected more in curriculum. Giving tutors more placements in industry would help with this. Everything is going more digital, and this affects staff at all levels. It cuts across everything.

Employers as partners with FE in delivering training could be part of the solution to people leaving college with not quite the right skills mix: one employer had a conversation with South Thames College about how some construction programme units could be delivered by the employer in the workplace, tapping into the company's expertise and freeing up space in what is taught in college (the qualification curriculum was very cluttered). One area that was identified as one where the employer could teach in the workplace was Health and Safety, but this was never implemented in the end.

What you want is younger company staff to get involved in teaching, not 'old school' staff looking for a second career. Older people might be better at more foundational skills, while young staff could perhaps teach more modern skills. Getting staff involved in teaching is also a development opportunity for them and might help fire up 'the frozen middle' (see below).

#### Workforce Development Needs

There is a growing need for development of people who work on site. This already tends to happen for office-based professional staff, who will tend to take a keen interest in their CPD (but not in all cases), but onsite developing more of a culture of continual learning is needed, especially in respect of the use of technology. People need to be OK with change and engage with that change. You want to recruit lifelong learners. Specifically:

- Mechanical and electrical installations of heat pumps, which need to be connected to the internet and the network set up in the right way. This is a big learning curve for people who have usually worked with gas boilers for many years, for example.
- In professional services you need options to fire up and develop the 'frozen middle' – people who have 10 – 15 years of experience, usually qualified, but unwilling to engage with rapid change. Middle managers can be nervous around change, especially digitisation. (The pandemic has speeded up the growth of digital in construction.) Applies to many middle managers, aged 35-45. Good at their job but need to adopt new working practices and are

reluctant to do so. It can feel threatening. They often leave to go to less up to date companies to avoid the change. Can apply to some younger and older staff too. When staff retention is not a problem, companies often need ways of keeping staff excited about their work.

- Retention of project managers and QS's is a challenge, once people are qualified. General feelings about work are changing since COVID – people want more work-life balance, and are less inclined to stay with a company and 'work your way up'.
- People want to make a contribution to society too. Better training programmes within construction companies might help with this, focused on the future Built Environment, tapping into their 'bigger picture' interests, like sustainability. The training should fire them up and feed their passions. Professional training can perhaps be too narrow and miss this 'bigger picture'.
- Leadership and management: once professional staff have qualified, they then need skills which give them business acumen in terms of running the business, dealing with staff, see the bigger picture of where the industry is going and drive the business forward, become the leaders of the future.

FE colleges could potentially help more with these issues but can be perceived as being for the very young only, with shorter, 'top up courses', workshops, online, etc. in subjects like management, digital and sustainability needed. This could include CPD, where more than the professional bodies' offer could be required. They may want something broader than RICS CPD offers, for example. The gap could be more for a substantial offer in areas like sustainability. The offer should 'fire people up' and get them enthused, to help inspire the 'frozen middle'.

There may also be an appetite for colleges to engage with businesses in other ways, such as making business videos or helping with staff recruitment.

FE is perhaps a bit low profile and could be marketed more to businesses. They could also look at engaging alumni in businesses more and there may be scope for staff in businesses to help with teaching.

#### Final Word: Key Points from the Discussion for Each Participant

- Essential to develop digital skills – they apply to all disciplines.
- Develop people's attitude – you can develop people's skills once they're recruited.
- Instill the right culture in people – people need to want to innovate and learn constantly across all trades.
- Address the needs of the employed 'frozen middle' with bite-sized, inspiring, and flexible opportunities.
- Improve learning opportunities and the quality thereof, generally.
- Develop digital skills, especially in the 'frozen middle'.
- Help to address the bigger picture – help people make the kind of impact they want to make in their working lives.

## C-2: Construction and Built Environment (online workshop)

Construction / Built Environment Sector Focus Group, Construction, Zoom, 20 January 2022

*Construction skills training provider*

*Masonry Frame Systems*

*OSG Architecture*

*DCB Kent*

*Eco Electrical Contractors*

*Base Quantum*

*O'Keefe Group*

*Considine, KMEP and Construction Guild, Enterprise Adviser*

*Baxall Construction*

*B&M*

*Views of Roe Timberframe Limited added after separate conversation on 20/01/2022*

*Facilitated by Steve Matthews Research and Consultancy and Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce.*

### Recruitment Challenges

The main challenges that companies face in terms of recruitment are as follows:

- Public perceptions and understanding of the sector: there is a fundamental lack of interest in construction and perceptions are still rooted back in the 70s. Parents and carers (especially) do not understand the variety of opportunities available and how it has modernised. It is more diverse now than before too, but the 'message' is not getting out to young people. Many careers resources target 14-16, but there is a lack of resources for primary school students and parents / carers. The sector needs to market itself better (perhaps through company staff (especially young staff) engaging with school students or even a paid 'ambassador' to communicate the opportunities in construction) and there are also existing ways of companies doing this, such as the Enterprise Advisers network and the Careers and Enterprise Company, who are in schools regularly – there is a need for more involvement of construction here. 'Give an hour' is another way that construction companies can support careers information in schools and schools are crying out for this ('meaningful engagement with the world of work'), through the Gatsby Benchmarks. There is a lot of really interesting technology and construction methods used in the sector now and this could be communicated better – make it seem exciting and challenging.
- A general recruitment challenge is the lack of essential STEM skills, plus English. People joining the industry with these essential STEM skills can then be developed into a wide range of roles and careers.
- Employability and work readiness can be a challenge for less entry-level recruits who are trained up into operative roles in activities like timber-frame.
- Labour shortages: especially at site level large numbers of European workers have been lost due to Brexit and the pandemic. This is a significant and acute challenge now, and there is a large pipeline of construction work in the region. Training provision can play an important role in responding to this. Skills shortages apply across the piece, from professionals (e.g., surveyors, design managers, contract managers, site managers), technical staff and trades.

- Working with FE: companies would like to engage more with colleges to recruit people into a range of roles from low skilled to more highly qualified, but sometimes find that colleges cannot respond. The paperwork and processes associated with Apprenticeships and initiatives like KickStart make it hard for small companies to engage. More college-based provision local to employers would also help (given travel time and cost).
- New technology: skills needs are changing across the piece with more technical staff who can operate robots; assemblers rather than trades for MMC; low carbon construction; renewable energy installations (like photovoltaics). This will all help attract people into the sector too.
- A general shortage of training provision: in the past every college had trades and civil engineering programmes, now these have gone and there is less for young people to go onto after school. The sector needs to ask for more funded construction courses in trades, BTEC in Construction and the Built Environment (ideally part time with people also working in the industry), civil engineering and construction management (especially in East Kent). There needs to be help for companies to take people on as trainees on this basis and employers need to commit to this. There are now fewer HNC Civil Engineering and pre-HNC level courses.
- Curriculum and tutors' expertise: there are concerns that the curriculum taught in FE is not up to date in terms of modern methods of construction (MMR) and tutor expertise is not always recent and based on actual industry practice. There's one course in the whole country for timber erectors, for example. The situation is similar for steel frame and other modular construction. The requirement could be addressed in short courses (e.g., intensive three months or two-year day release) that explain the theory of timber / steel / masonry frame versus traditional build. Colleges would need to work with industry bodies like the Structural Timber Association. Hard to assess numbers, but there should be demand, given the level of house building and the growth of timber frame. Everyone in the industry will have existing skills; the need is essentially for accredited CPD - to update people's skills in MMR, like timber, steel and masonry frame. In taught courses MMR could be built into the existing curriculum. Most demand by volume is at Category 2 and 3<sup>1</sup> and modules could be developed that allow people to progress up different levels.
- Digital skills: new recruits don't really understand what building information modelling (BIM) and information management mean and how they are aligned to actual industry standards. People might have done a short AutoCAD or Revit course, for example, but that doesn't equip them with the BIM skills set that they need. More emphasis is needed on digital operations throughout the life cycle of a building – from early concept design through to actual operation. This applies to all construction related courses, not specific digital roles. It's a data driven future. It's not about BIM packages *per se*, it's more about understanding the types of information that are going into systems and how that can then be used for different purposes. Different roles would need to know different aspects: for example, a QS needs to understand how to access quantifiable information from a data set.
- Qualified engineers are very hard to recruit: qualified engineers will travel to London and it's hard to find them locally. Training from within is hard given that there isn't enough of an offer in Level 3 apprenticeship and HNC training. Some of the short courses are not sufficient (not enough site experience) and the curriculum doesn't quite match industry practice and the

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<sup>1</sup> MMR exists in different forms, from totally modular, off-site made, at one extreme (Category 1) to all done on site (Category 6). See: [https://www.buildoffsite.com/content/uploads/2019/04/MMC-I-Pad-base\\_GOVUK-FINAL\\_SECURE-1.pdf](https://www.buildoffsite.com/content/uploads/2019/04/MMC-I-Pad-base_GOVUK-FINAL_SECURE-1.pdf)

latest technologies. Businesses themselves need more time and assistance to support staff development and training.

- Newly recruited QS's lack understanding of modern measurement software (e.g., CostX) and need to be trained up – QS courses are not up to speed. Much more time needs to be spent on modern measurement approaches.

Some colleges and universities are more flexible now. CCCU for example is trying to do this and offering new construction courses. This takes time and the industry needs to support this. The industry needs to adopt fully the new technologies and modern method of construction. There's much more overlap now between construction and production engineering, for example.

If government increased funding to colleges in the skills shortage areas, colleges would find it easier to respond and deal with the additional costs of facilities and space that construction courses require – capital and revenue.

Other providers, though, are less flexible and can only offer what is needed when student numbers and funding allow. There is scope for shorter, e.g. 12-week courses to get more people site ready. CITB are not enthusiastic about this either. We need more training for future need, not historical need. The LSIP could try to encourage shorter classroom- and workplace-based courses (e.g., in masonry frame systems).

Some courses seem to be too broad, as so are less useful for the actual world of work. A better approach might be to get the foundational knowledge and skills in place first through a foundation programme and then allow more specialisation aligned to the world of work. This could be an opportunity in terms of new Higher Technical Education developments.

It's important to note that people need to accumulate transferable skills that may be relevant to a range of jobs and careers over their whole working life, and construction needs to be presented as an opportunity to develop such skills and as a place where people's transferable skills can be applied and developed further. People might start off doing what they think they want to do and then go into something else.

Another problem is that many schools over-emphasise university as a destination to their students, when there are good jobs and careers available without going to university in construction. They get forced into a pathway very early on.

#### Workforce Development Needs

The main workforce development challenges are:

- Updating of staff skills in all of the areas listed under recruitment above – the existing workforce also needs to develop these skills. Once in, people will have opportunities in many other areas to go into and will need training to do so.
- Leadership and management skills: people in the industry may progress into supervisory and management roles, and need the skills to do so, especially in smaller companies. Accredited programmes focused on the construction sector could be very attractive and include a focus on how construction companies manage their operations in practice (in areas like contract management and operations management), making use of, for example, industry paperwork requirements (reporting) and Building Management Systems (BMS).

- Professional skills: companies often recruit graduates with a degree in a completely different subject who then train up to become Qs, for example (people 'fall into' being a Qs). So, an in-work offer for such people is needed, but it also highlights the importance of communicating all the opportunities to attract people into the right professional training earlier.

#### Final Word: Key Points from the Discussion for Each Participant

- Improve local provision and map it more accurately to what employers and young people want and getting the funding right to stimulate the provision of the right courses.
- College provision is very focused historical needs, and the world is changing very quickly, and this needs to be grasped, and provision modernised.
- More on electronic measurement packages in QS training.
- Re-open the courses that were previously available and update the syllabus.
- Get the word out to young children. Map out new roles and pump prime colleges to offer relevant courses.
- Start early – in schools. Help colleges source the lecturing skills they need to deliver a modern curriculum.
- Engage young people early on and reach out more to schools.
- Open up a conduit between companies and education so they can work together on syllabus and delivery.
- Modernise all courses and syllabuses, especially in areas like data and information management.
- More shorter courses with the foundations are needed, with work-based shorter, more specialised modules 'top up' to follow.
- Early engagement of schools, get the courses right.

Agreed that the group is happy to be contacted again to work with colleges and universities on developing the offer, subject to time constraints.

### C-3: Food and Land-based

Food and Landbased Sector, Fresh Food Production/Horticulture Task Force Meeting, MS Teams, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2022

*56 members of the group, including public sector and support agencies. Discussion involved primarily companies involved in fresh food growing, packing, and processing, some agriculture, plus viticulture. Facilitated by Steve Matthews Research and Consultancy and Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce.*

#### Recruitment Challenges

A packhouse company is constantly looking for line packers, LSOs, and line leaders and packhouse operatives. There are also vacancies in accounts and a new procurement director, but the hardest-to-recruit roles are in IT. IT is getting harder and agencies are putting up their rates in response to labour shortages. The IT skills required is analytical in nature and specific to the sector.

A fully integrated fresh produce company is struggling with transport jobs - coach drivers, as well as lower skilled operative roles. Skilled tractor drivers and farm operatives with specific skills like irrigation are also hard to find: 'the well has dried up'. The farm-specific skills tend to be trained up on the job, but returnees (from overseas) are less likely to come back and immigration controls make it harder to bring in people which already have such skills. Bus driving roles tend to be longer than the six months allowed, which is a further complication. The company does contact agricultural colleges to recruit people and through MDS<sup>2</sup> and in-house training schemes and graduate training schemes, but the gap is in 'the middle bit' between high level roles and basic production / operative level, and it's not clear why – it might be salary or conditions, for example. These 'middle' roles do not rely on people having specific qualifications, it's more about people having the relevant experience.

A family-run fruit grower and haulage company agree that 'the well has dried up'. Skills shortages are across the board – on the farm, in the packhouse. You can't find people wanting to do the work, because people don't think it's a career, even though there are excellent opportunities. When the company has been able to recruit local people, it's gone well. Overall, there is a huge shortage of management in the industry at the moment in particular. You have to promote the industry better as a career opportunity. It requires a lot of ongoing work to find people who are interested in working in the sector. Career prospects are now much better, in many directions. This needs to be communicated to schools and colleges and through a fit-for-purpose apprenticeship scheme. The issue is a) lack of understanding and b) people actually wanting to do it – careers teachers don't push the fresh food and farming sector. On management skills, you tend to try to recruit from within and support people to progress, but for senior farm management roles you want someone who has been through a relevant farm management degree programme – you need high-calibre individuals.

The Task Force Chair reinforced the point about apprenticeships and programmes like KickStart: as they currently stand, they don't fit and work within the sector. The need is to re-design them, so they are fit for the sector, as seen from within the sector. For example, how do you make such programmes work for people who may only initially be employed for 6 or 9 months (but then could go on to work full time)? You can't shoe in the 9-5 type of approach that works in other sectors. Many horticulture apprentices work in activities like green keeping (which is fine), but this does not

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mds-ltd.co.uk/>



fit the needs of the food industry. 'Horticulture', as in growing food, as a term is not really understood outside the sector.

A berry farmer used to have a business model of getting people in at entry-level roles, then in-house trained and on into supervisory and management roles. Changes to the immigration regime mean this will no longer work – you can no longer offer such progression opportunities to migrant workers: you can't train them up because they can't stay long enough. However, local people with degrees do not want to come in at entry level – and so get experience on the job, come up through the business and acquire specific skills. The new approach is hard and probably involves someone coming in at a lower skilled role and then being developed up into junior and middle managers / supervisors. People need to be willing to do this and happy to work in a non-9-5 way, which brings you back to the need to attract people into the sector.

Hadlow are reviewing their farm management degree programme to make it more relevant to the needs of the sector, working with the Task Force and the wider sector.

There may be relevant learning from construction, where businesses in the sector are taking action to make people aware of the different opportunities that can open up to them once they are recruited. You need to make college and university teachers aware of what the industry is actually like too. A deck of cards called, 'Top Jobs' was created (like top trumps) to show the range of jobs in the construction industry, with salary levels. This might be appropriate to food and landbased.

#### [Workforce Development Needs](#)

Larger companies have quite sophisticated in-house training and career paths for staff, and also make use of external companies. A packhouse company, for example, has internal training programmes for junior, middle, and senior managers, and have recently created a new training programme to train up line packers to become LSO and line leaders. Smaller companies may find it harder to commit the time and money this requires. The training providers who can help with this are already in place. No major gaps.

Smaller growers and landbased businesses will do a number of things to retain staff – not just paying good wages, but also offering training and support to develop in the business. A smaller mixed farm in North Kent with fruit, livestock, arable and property activities, for example, has just recruited from within to a management role and supporting him with training through ADHB and other sources. There's a 22-year-old tractor driver who's moved from arable into fruit and will use precision mobile equipment. There will also be a need to develop staff into autonomous equipment and go much more into data (weather) driven activities. There are limits as to the development opportunities you can offer to younger people. A very promising 17-year-old, for example, is too young to be allowed on high-powered plant. A particular challenge in recruiting people is that landbased college courses are very 'channelled' and singular in their focus. Plumpton, for example, is very arable focused, including quality control and crop quality, plus some controlled-environment agriculture (that not many growers have made a start on this yet). The emerging skills needs – where the industry is heading *do* matter, but the industry as a whole hasn't quite caught up yet, and people still do need to do the basics, the nuts and bolts, before they can progress. You need to know the job from the bottom up, and there needs to be a recognition of that process. There is a huge opportunity in fruit growing, especially in Kent, and this will become increasingly technical and indoors, so this is an opportunity to promote and support in future.

In viticulture, a growing sector in horticulture in Kent and Medway, there is an increasing need for people to multi-task, even though it can be hard to persuade people to do this. We need to cultivate people who can multi-task. Migrant labour tends to be very comfortable with this. There is increasing pressure across the sector to diversify into a range of activities, which requires people with a range of skills and willing to learn new ones.

A key take-away action for the LSIP is for FE to look at the sector as it is from the inside – not 9-to-5 and including a lot of seasonal work – across the whole supply chain and reflect this reality on what is on offer. This applies to apprenticeships and education and training more generally. Shorter courses linked to picking, for example, could be beneficial. A further priority is to engage young people in the sector and build their understanding of the opportunities on offer.

## C-4: Professional Services

Professional Services / Mixed Industries, Zoom, 20 January 2022

*Can-Do Academy (training company)*

*Your Start Up Partner (business support)*

*Practice Labs (Ed Tech company, part of ACI Learning)*

*Plumwood Transport Consultants*

*Facilitated by Steve Matthews Research and Consultancy and Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce.*

### Recruitment Challenges

The main challenges are as follows:

- **Project management skills** are hard to find in technology-related activities, including aspects such as working to deadlines.
- **General business digital skills** such as MS Office, use of MS Teams. People might have basic Word and Excel skills but lack Teams and Sharepoint expertise, which are so commonly used in Government and legal these days. New recruits also lack **citizen developer skills**, which are now very current in industry.
- **Sales skills** in a technical environment.
- **Communication skills and emotional intelligence**, which is becoming more important with remote working. People can lack self-awareness and the skill of reading other people's tone and emotions. The issue applies to in-person as well as online interactions. This can lead to dysfunctionality in work teams.
- **Basic Business Operations**, how businesses work.
- **Creative thinking and holistic thinking** (how activities in one place impact on those elsewhere). The education system seems to discourage freedom of thought and tends to expect only one 'right' answer. People need the write mindset to work effectively in professional services.
- **Professional services work experience** is very important, as those without experience tend not to be valued or taken seriously when applying for job (not just looking after the social media account!) even if they are graduates or post-graduates.

Funding seems to drive a lot of education provider activities, making it difficult to offer the kind of 'short and sharp' interventions that adults in work looking to upskill need.

Sourcing placements for T Levels appears to be a challenge for employers. The many different calls on employer time are complex, and the requirement needs to be more coherent. Employers can be bombarded with requests for KickStart roles, T Level placements, work experience placements, etc. **Employers need more simple and clearer information and a more coherent and coordinated interaction with all the different providers and brokers.** Government is offering free digital skills, but it is not really marketed.

Work experience should be part of a transition into work. It is very important to young people and can give them important experiences that make them work ready. People need to go into it ready to listen and learn. This makes it more attractive to businesses. They also need better engagement with

employers in college and school to understand what career options may be open to them. Teachers would benefit from more industry placements.

There is scope for schools to have more input on entrepreneurship and leadership, and build young people's appreciation of their strengths and self-confidence. (The Education People have supported this kind of activity through the Can-Do Academy.)

### **Workforce Development Needs**

The key requirements in terms of developing the current workforce include:

- People in work need to focus more on their **transferable skills** – skills for one role can often readily be applied to another, and this is important for people to adapt and develop once they are in work. People need to know how to use their existing skills in different contexts. More could be made of the transferable nature of skills in FE – many people train for one thing, but then do something different. They should be made more aware of the core skills they have developed that will be relevant elsewhere. (The GCSE mindset is, 'There's only one right answer.')
- **Openness to change:** many businesses struggle with employees who are unable to think and work differently in the face of change. Flexibility is required in the face of change. Managers and leaders need to be open and flexible in working with their staff, and listen to employees in how they adapt to change.
- **Being more collaborative** – working remotely has put pressure on people's communication skills and needing not to take negative feedback personally and deal with change. **Leadership and management skills** need to focus more on coaching skills and getting people to work better together.

### Final Word: Key Points from the Discussion for Each Participant

- **Soft skills** are so important, and there's nothing soft about them! Young people need to develop these.
- **Engage more clearly with employers** – be more solution focused and don't bombard employers with lots of competing offers, and have more flexibility on what is offered, e.g. make work experience more like what work is really like.
- Promote the **Baccalaureate** more – it develops very rounded and open-minded individuals. Much better than GCSEs and A Levels.
- Professional services especially need **soft skills**, and these need to be embedded more in Further Education and young people engaging more with business owners to understand better what real work is like. It's not just about passing exams.

## C-5: Visitor and Experience Economy

Visitor / Experience Economy Sector Focus Group, Construction, Zoom, 25 January 2022

*Babrani Foods Ltd and trains college students in South Asian cuisine  
Chives Catering and Canterbury City Council Re-opening the High Street Initiative  
Kent and Sussex Railway Company  
Old Dairy Brewery  
Canterbury Cathedral*

*Facilitated by Steve Matthews Research and Consultancy and Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce.*

### Recruitment Challenges

The main recruit challenges are as follows:

- Chefs especially, and catering staff and hospitality staff more generally are in short supply. Many left in the pandemic and the work is relatively low paid, involves unsocial hours and can be quite stressful. The pool of people available has also shrunk, not just in hospitality, but more widely. Some restaurants have gone to take away only because they cannot find the staff they need and with repeated lockdowns. Recruiting and retaining chefs probably requires wages to be higher, and this will mean that the cost of eating out also needs to increase, the sector needs to go more 'up market' and 'up its game'. More young people need to be recruited onto hospitality courses.
- 'People skills' are often lacking in new young recruits – dealing with people is hard for them. Young people tend to have good digital skills, but poor people skills; for older staff it's the other way round. People skills are absolutely essential to a high-quality visitor experience, whether in hospitality, or at a location like the cathedral or the Kent and Sussex Railway.
- Communication skills are very lacking in young people, who can find it hard to engage with other people, even if they have the catering skills. The issue is a lack of willingness to talk or even make eye contact in some cases. The situation has got worse recently.
- Work ethic: some young people don't really commit to their work and can be unreliable, are unwilling to travel for work, for example.

Recruitment challenges have been tempered somewhat by reduced demand for services, given that there have been fewer visitors, lower levels of people eating out and going to pubs, due to COVID.

Canterbury Cathedral has also struggled to find masons to work on the cathedral itself. A new apprenticeship programme is being implemented with learning providers and other cathedrals to address this challenge through specialist provision.

Babrani Foods Ltd has been working with Canterbury College to development specialist training in South Asian cuisine. Specialist catering skills of this type are also in short supply.

Kent and Sussex Railway has both staff and volunteers. A specific skills need is engineering and practical skills like carpentry and welding. Many volunteers need to be customer facing, but many have been reluctant to this indoors during COVID. The rising National Living Wage is also putting pressure on company budgets.

Old Dairy Brewery has been getting through COVID with more direct sales. Brewery tours are now beginning to take place too.

### Workforce Development Needs

The main workforce development needs are:

- Digital skills, especially for older workers. This applies to digital skills generally and specific needs, such as using social media for promotional purposes.
- Catering apprenticeships aren't really fully suitable for the outside catering industry, being focused more on restaurants. Event catering is large in scale and tends to be much more ad hoc and bespoke to the needs of the client, and done more 'in the field' with fewer resources behind you.
- More workbased learning and apprenticeships tailored to the needs of the individual business are needed. Many people are recruited without qualifications and need to learn on the job, matching the actual type of work the employer actually does.

There may be scope for companies to take on a kind of specialist training role, when people are with them for a period of time and able to acquire specialist skills. Babrani Foods Ltd has found that many of the people who have learned about Indian food by working with him have gone on to start their own businesses or work elsewhere.

Volunteers are playing a more important role in organisations like the Kent and Sussex Railway.

### Final Word: Key Points from the Discussion for Each Participant

- People skills and communication skills are absolutely essential to work in the visitor / experience economy.
- Create a package to attract a wider demographic of people into hospitality – to 'earn and learn' – older people, different ethnic backgrounds, locally communities, etc. (Babrani Foods Ltd would be happy to help with this).
- Increase apprenticeship options for young people – many young people don't want to go to university, and prefer to learn while working. Instill a stronger work ethic in young people.
- Colleges need to develop a better understanding about what local businesses actually do – sometimes what is on offer does not match what businesses actually do in practice. More communication with colleges would be welcomed.
- Better communication between colleges and businesses, and more work to engage people in sector by getting restaurants and caterers themselves involved in open days – this will help to attract more young people into the industry, promote the different skills and business opportunities that are there.