

Business in Parliament 2025

Panel 5 - Looking to the Future: Skills in the Food and Drink Industry

Host

- Joe Hind - Scotland Food & Drink, Head of Programmes and Policy

Panellists

- Lawrence Durden – Skills Development Scotland, Sector Manager (Tourism)
- Sharon Blyfield OBE - Coca Cola Euro Pacific Partners, Head of Early Careers and Apprenticeships
- Victor West - Associated Seafoods Ltd, Managing Director
- Moira Stalker - Skills Manager, Food and Drink Federation Scotland

Scottish Government representative

- Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands.

Summary

- Joe Hind welcomed attendees to the panel discussion and invited panel members to introduce themselves.
- The Cabinet Secretary provided opening remarks highlighting the importance of the food and drink sector to the Scottish economy, in particular our rural and island communities. She noted the forthcoming Good Food Nation Plan and related ongoing work will provide an opportunity to make improvements to the food system in Scotland, to encourage pride in Scottish food culture and produce which could, in turn, help to promote the food and drink sector as an exciting, progressive and interesting career of choice.
- Joe Hind introduced and led the discussion, encouraging participants to ask questions and participate throughout the session. Questions were pre-arranged and posed to the panellists.
 1. Does the current apprenticeship and upskilling funding model meet the needs of industry?
 2. What needs to be done to increase the pipeline of skilled workers entering the industry?
 3. What role does technology play in shaping and supporting industry skills needs and adapt to emerging skills demands?
 4. How can we make the food and drink industry a career of choice and ensure industry voice is heard in a competitive employment landscape?

1. Challenges in Apprenticeship and Upskilling Funding

- Participants noted the complexity of the different funding landscape across the UK, particularly in Scotland. Many attendees noted the English system has more generous rates and is simpler for businesses to work with.
- Calls were made for a revamp of the skills funding model, framework and rates to better support businesses and individuals, with recognition some of this work is already underway through the Scottish Government's Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill. Attendees were encouraged to engage with Parliament as it undertakes scrutiny of the Bill.
- Concerns were raised that vocational courses / apprenticeships are no longer a focus for schools, with the priority appearing to be getting young people into university places, and about the decline in training facilities in Scotland, especially for engineering apprenticeships.
- The importance of apprenticeships as a way to enable continuous professional development and reskilling of existing employees was highlighted. The loss of the Flexible Workforce Development Fund was noted as particularly challenging.
- Participants recognised the importance of apprenticeships, and associated funding, for small businesses.

2. Increasing the Pipeline of Skilled Workers

- The panel and participants were in agreement that industry itself has a role to play in promoting itself as a career destination of choice by targeting underrepresented groups in the labour market and promoting the wide range of roles required by the sector.
- The importance of working with schools and educational establishments to promote and encourage vocational courses and STEM skills was raised, with participants sharing some positive examples.
- The need to address negative perceptions of roles within the F&D sector was discussed, with an emphasis on how to change the negative perceptions of those influencing young people's career choices whilst at school.
- Structural barriers, such as immigration policy and education provision (i.e. food and drink within the curriculum), were also recognised as areas that require addressing to help bring skilled people into the industry.

3. Role of Technology in Industry Skills

- Discussions focused on the advancing role technology will have for improving inclusion and efficiency in the industry. It was noted that, while many businesses now have access to data, the value lies in the ability to interpret it – skilled analysts are needed to turn data into insights and action.

- There was concern some smaller businesses may be behind the curve in identifying and communicating future skills needs, particularly in AI and digital literacy and data analysis – often due to capacity constraints.
- It was recognised that human skills – such as analytical thinking, emotional intelligence, and problem solving – will be even more critical as automation grows. Equipping young people with these skills alongside technological literacy is essential.

4. Making the Industry a Career of Choice

- The importance of fair work and conditions was noted by the panel as essential to attract young people into the sector, as well as the need to provide continuous professional education and training opportunities for existing employees. The importance of educating communities, schools and parents/carers about the diversity of roles and long-term career paths available in the F&D industry, to challenge negative perceptions, was again recognised as essential. The work of the Food and Drink ambassadors scheme and toolkits which supports industry representatives when engaging with schools were highlighted as doing excellent work in this area.
- Interactions with schools and young people directly, through careers fairs etc, was seen as important to increase messaging about the range of roles in the sector, particularly to promote more technologically advanced roles.

Closing Remarks

- Joe Hind thanked the panel and participants, noting the importance of the discussions for future actions and upcoming work.
- The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands acknowledged the valuable insights from the sector and acknowledged the ongoing work already underway within the Scottish Government to address some of the challenges raised in the discussion.