

Abattoir and Local Meat Supply Chain Skilled Labour Shortage

17th October 2024

Introduction

A lack of skilled labour in the meat sector and the loss of heritage and artisan skills has implications for food security, is a barrier to reaching some environmental and sustainability goals, inhibits local food supply, and impacts rural economies. Staff shortages in abattoirs are disrupting operational capacity and contributing to closures. In addition, they are predicted to prevent or hinder new abattoirs from opening.

Background

The UK's food supply chain contributes over £128 billion to the UK economy every year and provides employment for over four million people.¹ The UK meat processing sector employs around 97,000 people and directly supports 50,000 farmers, with skilled butchers making up 40% of the workforce, according to the British Meat Processors Association (BMPA).²

However, according to the Food Standards Agency (FSA), systemic shocks such as Brexit and COVID-19 have affected labour demand and supply.³ The number of workers going into voluntary redundancy and early retirement doubled in recent years. Estimates suggest that one in four food and drink industry workers are due to retire within the next 10 years, which amounts to over one million people leaving the industry. In 2021 there were 953,000 vacancies across all sectors in the UK, over half of them are in the food and drink sector.⁴

The BMPA has highlighted that the rise in worker losses has mainly affected skilled worker roles such as veterinarians and butchers. These roles are also some of the hardest to recruit and take a long time to train.

National Craft Butchers' (NCB) 2023 survey found that 20% of respondents had changed their business hours in the previous 12 months, with 22% pointing to staffing issues.⁵

¹ Defra (2024) Independent review into labour shortage in the food supply chain: Government response. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-into-labour-shortages-in-the-food-supply-chain-government-response/independent-review-into-labour-shortages-in-the-food-supply-chain-government-response>

² BMPA. Meat industry workforce. <https://britishmeatindustry.org/industry/workforce/>

³ FSA (2024) Impact of labour shortages. <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/impact-of-labour-shortages-executive-summary>

⁴ Grant Thornton (2021) <https://britishmeatindustry.org/press-releases/government-says-uk-is-short-of-ballet-dancers-but-ignores-food-shortages-caused-by-chronic-lack-of-butchers/>

⁵ National Craft Butchers survey (2023) <https://nationalcraftbutchers.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Butchers-Survey-2023-Print-Ready.pdf>

The average age of small abattoir operators is between 60-70. The NCB survey from 2021 found that 56% of respondents do not have a succession plan.⁶ The 2023 NCB survey found 50% of surveyed business owners were aged 56 or above and 26% plan to retire in the next five years.

Despite a clear need for workers in the sector, uptake of abattoir and butchery apprenticeships is at an all-time low. Only 33% of respondents to the 2023 NCB survey were currently employing an apprentice, although 82% said they would welcome one.

Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy in 2019 recommended that government invest in training and education programmes to help develop skills, including through apprenticeships, vocational training and further education, as well as through working with the food industry to create clear career pathways and promote the benefits of working in the sector. This was followed by the Government's own Food Strategy in 2022 which recommended an independent review into labour shortages in the food supply chain. This review was published in June 2023.⁷

Key problems:

- Limited to no profit in small abattoirs combined with a challenging regulatory environment, means there is little incentive for the next generation to want to continue operating them. It also means abattoirs cannot afford to invest in training staff or increasing production.
- The younger generation are not attracted to a sector which gets little public acknowledgement and can have a negative public image.
- Young people are not sign-posted or educated about potential career pathways in the meat supply chain sector. The Food Technology A-Level was scrapped in 2016.
- Small abattoirs only tend to operate one or two days per week so can be challenging to keep staff or apprentices or find them other jobs to do.
- People who work for small and medium sized abattoirs can get poached by the larger operators who have streamlined processes with more profit opportunity and are therefore able to offer attractive packages.
- Most abattoirs tend to be in rural catchments and areas with limited accommodation and transport options. It is hard to find the workers and skills in these areas and not many people will relocate to work in a small abattoir unless there is affordable housing and other services.

⁶ National Craft Butchers survey (2021) <https://nationalcraftbutchers.co.uk/hello-world/>

⁷ Defra (2024) Independent review into labour shortage in the food supply chain: Government response.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-into-labour-shortages-in-the-food-supply-chain->

- There is currently only one training company operating for smaller abattoirs and the funding available for this is not enough to cover costs. For butchery, there is a Level 2, Level 3 and Master Butcher training, but for abattoirs there is only Level 2.⁸ Level 2 butchery apprenticeships receive £10k while Level 2 abattoir apprenticeships receive only £6k which is insufficient to cover cost of trainer travel and accommodation, particularly for the more remote abattoirs.
- Since 2019 only 22 abattoir apprentices undertook end point assessment and completed their apprenticeship, that works out at about 5 per year, an all-time low.
- The current slaughtering apprenticeship has not been reviewed for 10 years and is one size fits all, whether the person is working for a large or small abattoir, despite these being very different roles. For example, in a small abattoir cattle might go into a cradle and trolley and the dressing will then be done on the floor in one continuous operation, whereas a large abattoir will have the cattle hanging on a line where the process is broken down (one person performing one cut on each animal, for example). In respect to complexity, it is therefore easier for people to move from a small to a large abattoir than the other way around.

Education and Communication

There is a disconnect between education, careers advice and staffing needs.

AIMS reported recent conversations with a small group of young people under the age of 22 who are at the beginning of their further education and career paths. They highlighted how little the food sector is regarded as a viable 'job for life'; despite living in an area dominated by food manufacturers, including two local butchers (Uppingham). They said the food industry was never presented as a possible career pathway at school. There was also an attitude that butchery was male-dominated. Mechanics, social care, housekeeping and horticulture were all seen as preferred career pathways.

Relatively simple and low-cost solutions are available, for example, the Department for Education could review how they educate young people about future careers and ensure that a full range of possible career options are communicated and given equal weighting. Students could visit local farms, abattoirs and butchers in order to gain a full understanding of how meat is produced and the value of the jobs involved. The loss of the Food Technology A-Level highlights a lack of focus given to this hugely important sector. Case studies are also needed to show there is a good career for slaughter men - some

⁸ Abattoir Worker (Level 2) Apprenticeship.

<https://findapprenticeshiptraining.apprenticeships.education.gov.uk/courses/274>

earn £50-60k per year – there is a need to show that it is not a low paid manual job, but a highly skilled one.

The Government’s own review recommends implementing a comprehensive strategy to improve awareness of the opportunities in the food supply chain, to include a “communication campaign targeted at changing public perception about the sector to demonstrate that it is vital to the economy and national food security. Such a campaign must highlight the importance of sector jobs, at all levels, which promote and improve environmental sustainability and contribute to the Government’s Levelling Up and Green (Net Zero) agendas.”

It also recommends “collaboration between industry, government and education institutions to develop and monitor careers advice provided by schools and education/training providers. This should highlight and promote the range of skills and roles on offer in the food supply chain, with a focus on their links to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects to raise the aspirations of learners and create a resilient and future-proof domestic workforce. There should also be an opportunity to review the school curriculum to support skills development for the industry.”

And finally, it recommends “A review, led by industry and coordinated by the government, to identify methods through which pay, staff benefits and conditions in the sector can be improved for food supply chain workers, with an emphasis on the regulation and enforcement of migrant labour schemes to eliminate exploitation in the sector.”

Migrant Workers

The current Shortage Occupation List, which is used to vet skilled migrants, does not include butchers. The Migration Advisory Committee has called for evidence of skills shortages so they can decide which occupations should be added to the list. BMPA, on behalf of the meat industry, have been lobbying for butchers to be included.⁹ The Abattoir Sector Group’s position is that we currently need overseas butchers and Official Veterinarians (OV) due to a shortage in the industry, but we should be gradually replacing these with our own workforce over time. Addressing the sector challenges, reviewing the role of the OV and encouraging young people into the sector will all be part of achieving this longer-term ambition.

⁹ BMPA (2020) Government needs to act to fix the shortage of skilled butchers. <https://britishmeatindustry.org/industry-news/government-needs-to-act-to-fix-the-shortage-of-skilled-butchers/>

A major barrier is the skilled visa salary threshold which has now increased to £38,700, requiring a significant increase in wages of skilled workers coming to the UK. The salary threshold could make it more challenging to get lower paid roles such as MHIs.

Solutions to explore:

1. Small abattoirs need to be connected to associated businesses such as butchers and retailers to create a financially sustainable business model. The whole processing chain needs a level of integration to provide added value for all. Apprenticeships and training need to reflect this integration by offering joined up apprenticeships in both slaughtering and butchery that are tailored to small abattoirs. The right funding model is needed that allows for a joint slaughtering and butchery apprenticeship.
2. The types of apprenticeship being offered and the funding associated therefore need reviewing with government support – a training programme could be developed that is modular and includes elements such as knife skills, health and safety and food safety (these appear in the butchery training but not the abattoir training). It may be possible to offer two levels – abattoir only or joint abattoir and butchery training. The funding level for abattoir apprenticeships needs to be increased in line with the butchery apprenticeship (£10k rather than £6k).
3. Farmers could be encouraged to train as slaughtermen, particularly for remote or island locations. Funding may be needed to enable abattoirs to train them, and a publicity campaign could be launched through the farming press and organisations such as NFU.
4. A butchery or slaughtering introduction module could be added to agricultural courses to encourage take up of further education and qualifications and demonstrate a clear career pathway. Any agricultural college or University that runs livestock courses should be linking students and the abattoir together as it is hugely valuable for farmers to understand the full farm to fork chain as well as the impact of management practices on the quality of the meat.
5. Bristol and Nottingham Universities both have abattoirs and could be used as training sites, perhaps offering a 2-week intensive training course for small abattoir workers.
6. Government grants could be provided for more remote abattoirs in order to cover training costs.
7. Investment in upgrading abattoir equipment and technology would not only make abattoirs more efficient and save staff time but would make the jobs easier and more enjoyable. As an example, a small abattoir in the south of England estimate they could cut staff by 25% through upgrading their abattoir equipment, however they currently lack the money to invest their 50% component of the Smaller Abattoir Fund grants. Support and training could be offered to help abattoirs identify the right technology or equipment to invest in. This could be through a published list of equipment and technology that details the costs and benefits of each item.

8. Support for abattoir managers and supervisors to improve leadership and people management skills and improve understanding of diversity and generational differences (this was a recommendation in the Government Review). Existing leadership training is too generic and not focused enough for an abattoir manager.
9. Government could consider providing businesses with access to professional HR support, to help develop and deliver a relevant strategic plan to support their employees. This service could be accessed through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). For retention interventions to be successful they must be guided by greater engagement with workers. (this was a recommendation in the Government Review¹⁰). Providing apprentices with a career plan and regular career development discussions would help prevent trainees from leaving to join companies that better support progression.

Recommended Next Steps

1. **Reviewing training** – Government to convene a small group of experts and key stakeholders to review the types of training and apprenticeship currently available, and to consider other training opportunities (such as through agricultural college modules or intensive courses at Bristol or Nottingham University abattoirs). Christine Walsh at the Food and Drink Training and Education Council contributed to this paper and is keen to engage in further discussions. Joss Faulkner at Workforce Training and Development is also happy to be involved.
2. **Improving education, communication and sign-posting** – Identify key stakeholders, including within industry, government and education institutions, in order to review, develop and monitor how young people are educated about future careers in the sector.

¹⁰ Defra (2024) Independent review into labour shortage in the food supply chain: Government response. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-into-labour-shortages-in-the-food-supply-chain-government-response/independent-review-into-labour-shortages-in-the-food-supply-chain-government-response>