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Hospitality reiterates calls for Government to ease Brexit visa regulations as vacancies continue to grow

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20-Jul-2022 - Last updated on 20-Jul-2022 at 10:06 GMT

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Hospitality leaders have reiterated calls to ease Brexit visa rules to stem the escalating jobs crisis hitting the hospitality sector.



Sacha Lord, one of the UK's four Night Time Economy Advisers, has called for a relaxation to current visa rules to allow international entry-level hospitality staff to enter the workforce.

It comes as new figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) revealed that accommodation and food service activities showed the largest increase in vacancies between April and June this year, with the number of available jobs rising a further 10,200 to top 175,000 in total.

Additionally, in March, the ONS revealed in March that almost 100,000 EU nationals had left accommodation and food services in the two years to June 2021 — the highest of any industry.

The exodus is a result of the Covid pandemic, which prompted many foreign staff to return to their families; and difficulties meeting the criteria needed in the EU Settlement Scheme introduced during Brexit.

As a result, the proportion of EU workers in the UK hospitality industry has dropped to its lowest level since 2019, and now accounts for just 28% of the hospitality workforce, down from 42% before the pandemic.

Those looking to work in the UK from the EU now require a skilled work visa. As set by the Home Office, in addition to minimum qualifications, workers must also meet a general minimum salary threshold of £25,600 per year as well as secure a full time placement, a considerable challenge for

the hospitality sector due to the significant number of low-skilled roles and part time positions that need to be filled.

Lord, the Night Time Economy Adviser for Greater Manchester, is seeking support from the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to help place entry-level hospitality roles, including waiters, line cooks, and hotel receptionists onto the Government's Shortage Occupation list, which offers lower barriers of entry and reduced visa fees for certain professions.

“The right to work and live in the UK is now considerably more restricted for EU citizens,” he says.

“This is a challenge that is significantly impacting employers and creating a relentless employment gap in a sector already ravaged by debt burdens and weakened consumer spending.

“We have not yet seen a realistic or pragmatic approach to stemming this recruitment crisis despite countless warnings from the hospitality sector that this crisis would not only come to fruition, but escalate post-Covid.

“We were promised that bilateral relations with countries such as Australia will ease the difficulties, but two years on from our official exit from the European Union, and we still do not have any immediate, credible policies in place to aid businesses in their time of need.

“We require an urgent review of the visa restrictions and a greater level of hospitality roles placed onto the Shortage Occupation list, in order to stave off further irreparable damage to a sector that brings £66bn per year into the UK economy.”

Vacancies force West End hospitality to cut trading hours

Lord's comments come as almost half (49%) of hospitality business in the West End said they were having to reduce trading hours due to a lack of staff, according to the Heart of London Business Alliance.

A survey conducted by the Alliance revealed an average loss of 20% in sales due to staff shortages, with an average of 19% across West End hospitality venues of jobs currently unfilled. Principle reasons cited were simply a lack of applicants (86%), from both the UK and internationally, as well as jobs not meeting pay expectations (65%) and the cost of living in London (67%).

Asked what the most meaningful help would be in filling vacant positions, the most common answer was the introduction of a visa not covered by the points-based system, as well as the expansion of the Youth Mobility Scheme to more countries and amending the points-based immigration system to consider sectors with acute shortages, such as hospitality.

Employers also called for a national marketing campaign to promote the sector and opportunities within it, and for greater support for transport to and from work, including a roadmap for further extensions to the Night Tube and rationalising transport fares for workers in hospitality.

“Recruitment has become an existential issue facing the West End’s hospitality sector,” says Ros Morgan, chief executive of the Heart of London Business Alliance.

“We are seeing businesses unable to open their doors, not because of a lack of demand but because of a lack of staff. It’s like another lockdown for businesses, but this time without support from government.

“The hospitality sector is making huge efforts to attract domestic workers, including through higher wages, but there is a real fear that the numbers just will not be enough. That’s why action is urgently needed from government, through reforms to boost the number of overseas as well as domestic applicants.”

Charity drive to tackle the staffing crisis

Only A Pavement Away, the hospitality sector charity aiding prison leavers, veterans and those facing homelessness back into employment, has laid out plans to assist the hospitality industry in tackling the staffing crisis.

Calling for vital funds, the industry charity says it can place hundreds more people facing homelessness back into employment every year with increased funding from the sector.

It believes it can be an invaluable resource in going some way to address the stark vacancy figures, with a cost effective and compassionate approach.

Only A Pavement Away's employment programme works in partnership with hospitality employers, referral charity partners and individuals who have experienced or are facing homelessness, prison leavers and vulnerable veterans.

“After two years of disrupted trading it is so frustrating to witness the staffing crisis now constraining the recovery of the industry I have dedicated most of my working life to,” says Greg Mangham, CEO of Only A Pavement Away.

“Meanwhile, the number of people facing homelessness in the UK has risen by 50% over the last five years. Both of these issues are unacceptable and Only A Pavement Away is determined to help.

“We work with people facing homelessness, prison leavers and veterans to facilitate training and development, as well as offering additional financial support to those who need it to overcome any barriers to employment so that every candidate is ‘job ready.’

“These people represent an untapped talent pool, and have already proven impactful for employers with 50% of candidates still in the role we placed them in.”

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