



# A CHANCE FOR **CHANGE**

2024 request for a skills system reset to power jobs and growth in Food & Drink Manufacturing in England

# ABOUT THE NATIONAL SKILLS ACADEMY FOR FOOD & DRINK

The National Skills Academy for Food & Drink is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to elevating workforce skills across the UK's biggest manufacturing sector - advancing the competitive position of the UK's food and drink manufacturing industry and the career opportunities of its workforce.

Led by the sector and acting for the sector, the NSAFD provides trusted, impartial expertise in skills and champions collaborative, industry-led development of relevant standards and the provision and delivery of high-quality, skills-related training.

For businesses whose primary focus is on the day job of producing safe, tasty meals for the nation, we play a highly valued role in helping them navigate the complexity of the education and skills system supporting both existing staff and the sector's talent pipeline. We talk their language, help 'hide the wiring' and address the immediate and longer-term issues at hand.

At the same time, our deep insight into the sector's existing and emerging skill needs, together with strong relationships with manufacturers of all sizes, means we are trusted to act as the sector's voice on skills - accurately reflecting strategic skill issues and shaping solutions.

Our experience in collaboration and facilitation supports strategic change, making us an informed bridge between food and drink manufacturers, leading training providers, and other key skills stakeholders.

## WE:

- Develop unique skills solutions based on the very best intelligence and insight into the skill needs of the food and drink manufacturing sector.
- Develop apprenticeship standards reflecting industry needs while helping employers maximise the value of the apprenticeship system.
- Understand, contribute to and help shape sector policy and funding approaches.
- Identify, accredit and develop training provision specifically for the food and drink manufacturing sector.
- Manage complex delivery projects for both employers and government administrations across the UK.

## OUR TRADEMARKS



## FOREWORD

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**Food and Drink Manufacturing and Processing is a British success story. It's the UK's biggest manufacturing sector. Bigger than automotive and aerospace combined.**

We feed the nation, employ 500,000 people, and consist of 12,500 businesses. We are home to some of Britain's best-known brands, we contribute over £35 billion to the UK economy and generate £24.8 billion in exports.

We are vital. Both to the UK economy and the lives of everyone living here. However, Food and Drink Manufacturing is often confused and is frequently grouped with hospitality, food retail, or agriculture.

This confusion is especially evident in the skills system supporting apprenticeships and learning in our sector. The foundation for the recruitment pipelines our industry relies on and the forward-looking skills needed by new entrants and seasoned professionals in a fast-changing world.

Here, training pathways are frequently combined with a myriad of other industry sectors. There is simply no dedicated educational route into Food and Drink Manufacturing. Its distinct needs are often complex and difficult to navigate in many aspects of education, careers and learning policy.

This document has been produced by The National Skills Academy for Food & Drink. A not-for-profit organisation dedicated to skills at every level of UK Food & Drink Manufacturing and Processing. Our members include some of the UK's biggest food producers and training providers as well as SME food and drink companies and specialist educators. We are the Standard setting organisation for the sector, meaning skills are at the heart of everything we do.

The food and drink sector has galvanised around the employer led system and developed very high quality, occupationally relevant apprenticeship standards. With a new government in place we have a fantastic opportunity to improve the skills system. We have identified five areas we believe are ripe for positive change. Change that supports productivity growth, new opportunity and a better future for our people, our sector and our contribution to the UK economy.

We're ready to play our part. To contribute, collaborate and champion.

So, let's get started. Let's think differently. Let's continue to work together to strengthen our skills system.



Louise Cairns, Chief Executive.  
The National Skills Academy for Food & Drink



# OUR FIVE ASKS

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## 1. Keep Employers at the heart of Apprenticeships and the Skills Landscape while reducing bureaucracy.

### How?

Remove bureaucratic barriers to allow and encourage greater active employer involvement in apprenticeship design by employers.

### Why?

Following stakeholder research, IFATE has committed to raising awareness, trust, and confidence in apprenticeships and technical qualifications. They plan to achieve this by effectively communicating how employers are involved in the design and approval of these programs. However, the challenge lies not just in conveying employer involvement but also in making it easier for employers to participate in the design and approval process.

While employers place the highest priority on business involvement in apprenticeship design, standards and content, the NSAFD has noted growing levels of frustration and apathy among employers due to rising levels of bureaucracy associated with business involvement in the design and approval process.

### What employers and skills experts say:

“The more involved you get, the more bureaucracy there is. There is too much emphasis on process, language and methods rather than the occupational competence required for the sector.

There are so many hoops you have to go through to get certain things into a qualification. We see more and more barriers to employers getting the apprenticeship standards they want and need.”

**Trailblazer Participant,  
Food and Drink**

“Employers play a crucial role in shaping the apprenticeship system and the broader skills landscape. To maximise their impact, it is essential to reduce bureaucratic barriers and streamline processes, making it easier for businesses to participate and invest in workforce development.”

**Trailblazer Participant, Food and Drink**

“Employers have to be central as only we know the direction we’re heading in as a sector. Businesses have to be agile and government departments don’t necessarily move quickly, so it’s about keeping them as agile as the businesses are.”

**Early Careers Manager, Large Food and Drink Manufacturer**

### How?

By aligning information and functionality within the online Apprenticeship Service, with the real-world information and analysis needs of businesses to create an employer-focussed, one-stop-shop for all relevant documentation and information.

## Why?

The current Apprenticeship Service portal does not provide for relevant document and data storage associated with the digital account of individual learners - such as apprenticeship agreements, compliance checks and learning plans. Nor does it have the manipulation functionality to enable spending visuals, forecasts and data analysis. The whole amount of funds committed should be ringfenced at the point of commencement, therefore allowing employers to accurately manage their account.

As a result, employers are currently forced to download source content from the portal and then manually re-format and manipulate the data, add relevant documentation, create checklists and re-save locally in a variety of different versions to monitor and administer individual learner progress and share Key Performance Indicators informing key apprenticeship management and learning support decisions at business-wide or site level.

Having everything easily available in one place, facilitating a simple dashboard and improving functionality around employer needs will greatly reduce both the reality and negative perception of the administrative burden of apprenticeships on businesses - particularly SMEs.

## What employers and skills experts say:

“Enhancing the Apprenticeship Service portal to include integrated document and data storage, advanced data manipulation tools, a user-friendly dashboard, and automated account management will significantly reduce the administrative burden on employers.”

**Head of Apprenticeships, Large Food Business**

“As a small food business, we have found the Apprenticeship Service quite difficult to navigate, we have relied on support from the NSAFD to help us set it up, understand it and coordinate levy transfers.”

**MD, Small Food Business**

## Summary

Food and Drink Manufacturing businesses of all sizes recognise the value of Apprenticeship Standards and the skills, capability and consistency that Standards provide in the workplace. Employers want to be in the room when apprenticeships are designed. Only formal representation in all strategic decision-making and policy review will ensure Standards remain employer-led and continue to meet and be adaptable to changing sector needs. Policymakers and other stakeholders should ensure it is as easy as possible for businesses to participate and reduce the time and bureaucracy burden of employer involvement - particularly among smaller enterprises that may not have a dedicated HR or training function.

To reduce the administrative burden on businesses it is essential to enhance the Apprenticeship Service portal. This will involve integrating relevant document and data storage, improving data manipulation functionalities, and creating a user-friendly dashboard. These improvements will help employers manage apprenticeship accounts more efficiently and effectively.

## 2. Provide greater flexibility & agility in the use of the Apprenticeship Levy around the real-world needs of workforce learners and businesses.

### How?

Allow Apprenticeship Levy funds to support short, quality-assured, modular topic-specific upskill training.

### Why?

The increasing demands of automation, IT control and sustainable use of energy and water resources are rapidly changing the levels of engineering, technical and digital skills required in modern food manufacturing, along with greater demand for wider leadership, management and supervisory skills. Skills like these drive increased productivity and growth.

Apprenticeships for upskilling staff require significant periods of time away from the production line and may be too extensive for specific skills development. Modular short courses should offer both learners and businesses a more accessible way to learn minimising the impact on operational requirements. Adapting elements from well-developed apprenticeship standards and turning them into shorter qualifications could deliver huge benefits to our sector and employees.

However, it is critical that any policy changes do not impact one of the key reform areas that apprenticeships are available for all people, at all ages, at all levels and can still be used for new and current staff from level 2 to level 7.

### What employers and skills experts say:

“I’m a great believer in Levy flexibilities. I don’t think it’s about giving us the option to use the Levy to pay for things that we should be paying for as a matter of course — but I don’t see why we couldn’t use that for upskilling staff through modular courses. I think there’s so much more we could spend the Levy on for the benefit of the workforce.”

**Group Early Careers Manager,  
Large Food and Drink Manufacturer**

“The Apprenticeship Levy needs greater flexibility and agility to better meet the real-world needs of workforce learners and businesses. This requires adjustments to the existing framework to allow for a broader range of training opportunities, easier access to funds, and more responsive support for employers and learners.”

**Head of HR, Large Food Group**

### How?

Remove functional skills from apprenticeships as they are not fit for purpose in terms of achieving or measuring occupational competence.

### Why?

Functional literacy and numeracy skills should be addressed within the mainstream education system and not through occupational programmes such as apprenticeships. Apprenticeships and qualifications should be focused entirely on occupational competence clearly applicable to the apprentice’s role and their individual contribution to the business.

## What employers and skills experts say:

“In the food sector, functional skills are the number one barrier to apprenticeships. For many roles, these do not deliver occupational competence for our employees. progression is hindered and individuals become demoralised by the element. We would see a significant increase in apprenticeship numbers if this was removed.”

**Head of HR, Global Food Business**

“Functional skills are a massive blocker for social mobility. It kills the joy of being an apprentice. People who start an apprenticeship and can contribute to society and earn money, despite 11 years of failing at their school, are being told that, no, no, no, you’ve got to go back to that horrible experience just to be a continuing apprentice.”

**Ben Rowland, CEO,  
Association of Learning Providers (AELP) to House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee**

**Inquiry on Skills for the Future: Apprenticeships and Training. May 2024**

## Summary

Food and Drink Manufacturers want to invest in their people and their future. The recent changes to Levy use to support SMEs in offering Apprenticeships for new entrants under 22 years old are welcomed and as a sector, we have facilitated over £4 million pounds of levy transfers to support other organisations. However, the pace of technical, IT and engineering change in Food and Drink Manufacturing is such that, existing staff need greater ability to upskill through short, topic-specific, modular learning, ensuring their jobs are protected in the future. We have already created a number of technical modules that are required by the sector to upskill engineers and technicians by utilising elements of our excellent apprenticeship standards, where the whole apprenticeship is not relevant.

While supporting transparency and auditability, Levy funding policy needs to be more flexible in it’s application if it is to deliver more immediate recognisable value in terms of required operational and commercial agility. The requirement of functional skills is a huge barrier to the sector and consideration should be given to remove them.

The provider market, particularly Further Education, needs significant investment to raise the bar and ensure apprentices gain good quality, relevant knowledge and skills delivered by high-quality tutors who are paid well. The FE sector needs more support to deliver the next generation of experienced quality tutors will come from. The funding bands allocated to apprenticeships have not increased for over nine years contributing to the decline in providers being able to offer high-quality programmes. The Department for Education (DfE) have recently stated that 4-in-10 apprentices who failed to complete their apprenticeship, said that the apprenticeships were badly run, they were not given enough time for training, or that it did not meet their expectations.

### 3. Align apprenticeship learning, content and funding approaches across all four nations.

#### How?

Employers paying the Apprenticeship Levy want to be able to spend the money on the programmes and providers, that they chose across all four nations.

#### Why?

Government regulation of apprenticeships has increased in recent years with tangible variations in approach, funding, terminology, bureaucracy and process in each of the UK's four nations.

Large Food Manufacturing businesses frequently operate plants in more than one nation. As a company, they need to take a business-wide approach which requires either greater coordination and harmonisation between nations on apprenticeships or greater support for employer choice in selecting the learning programmes that best meet the needs of their business irrespective of national administrative boundaries.

#### What employers and skills experts say:

“Tearing down the borders would be great because as an employer, we have sites all over the UK. The fact that I can't put my apprentices in Scotland on the same programme that all of our apprentices in England are doing is such a shame. We want all of our employees to do exactly the same programme of study no matter where they are based. It's not about us doing it our way. It is very much about taking the good practice from all the different areas and having one body that oversees it all and can then steer us.”

**Group Early Careers Manager,  
Large Food and Drink Manufacturer**

“To ensure consistency, quality, and efficiency in apprenticeship programs across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, it is crucial to align learning content, delivery methods, and funding approaches. This alignment will foster a cohesive skills development system that benefits apprentices, employers, and the wider economy.”

**Senior Leader, Skills Body**

#### Summary

Many Food Manufacturers have production facilities in more than one UK nation. Yet apprenticeship administration processes, learning, content and funding approaches vary under different administrations. Lack of congruence causes confusion and places an undue burden on employers who have to negotiate different systems, programmes and funding.

Multi-nation employers want their apprentices to have had the same learning and be supported by common funding avenues wherever they work — not least to provide apprentices with the opportunity to open up longer-term career options through easy transfer to other production plants around the UK backed by common skill, knowledge and attainment levels.

Employers should have the choice to spend Levy funds across the nations, choosing the programmes best suited to their needs and with all employees.

#### 4. Provide a dedicated qualification route into Food and Drink Manufacturing including foundation learning and job opportunity awareness before and after GCSE level.

##### How?

As the UK's largest manufacturing sector, Food and Drink Manufacturing should be better recognised and supported by policymakers and educationalists through the creation of a dedicated qualification pathway into the industry similar to those supporting job and career opportunities in other major UK sectors.

Further, career pathways into UK's Food Manufacturing and a focus on basic Food knowledge more generally - should enjoy a far greater profile across all levels of education from primary and secondary schooling to Further and Higher Education.

##### Why?

There is no current dedicated qualification pathway into Food & Drink Manufacturing, therefore, Food Manufacturing lacks profile both among young people making key study choices and among careers and course advisors. Learning about food science and food preparation has been almost completely stripped from core curriculum at GCSE and above, creating a vacuum of opportunity for young people interested in studying food related subjects and hindering our talent pipeline into the sector.

##### What employers and skills experts say:

"There needs to be far more recognition of food manufacturing as the biggest and most valuable manufacturing industry in this country. The effect of not having a dedicated route is we don't have a joined-up way of selling our industry. Our Apprenticeships sit across 5 occupational routes, making it almost impossible for young people to see careers in the sector."

**Early Careers & Apprenticeships Manager,  
Large Food and Drink Manufacturer**

"To ensure a steady pipeline of skilled professionals into the Food and Drink Manufacturing sector, it is essential to establish a comprehensive qualification route. This route will provide clear entry points, foundational learning, and job opportunity awareness both before and after GCSE level."

**Head of Talent Acquisition,  
Global Food Business**

##### Summary

There is currently no dedicated qualification pathway into Food & Drink Manufacturing - despite it being the UK's biggest manufacturing sector providing extensive employment opportunities at all levels in every part of the UK.

Basic food knowledge and skills have been eroded as a priority within secondary education being subsumed into 'Design & Technology' while available post-16 learning paths into Food Manufacturing are one step removed and seldom overt - frequently hidden in aspects of learning routes into areas such as hospitality, general manufacturing, engineering and science. This has led to a lack of profile for the sector as a career destination among job hunters and students making key post-GCSE study and job choices. Food Manufacturing has slipped under the radar for young job hunters despite offering a wide range of high-skill roles. The situation has been compounded by misguided and repeatedly outdated perceptions of 'old-fashioned factory working conditions' and a consequent lack of either sector interest or sufficient skills within the domestic workforce to fulfil labour needs.

## 5. Simplify the skills system and link to a new UK Careers Strategy, as part of a wider, long-term, UK Industry & Growth Plan.

### How?

Create a streamlined and cohesive skills system in the UK that aligns with the national careers strategy, supporting long-term industry growth and economic resilience. This will involve simplifying current educational pathways, improving vocational training, and ensuring that skills development is responsive to industry needs and accessible by all everywhere.

An overarching skills strategy would involve a coordinated effort between government, industry, education, and training providers to develop a workforce that meets the needs of employers and supports economic growth in every region.

While recognising a desire to devolve many aspects of responsibility and funding decisions to nations and local communities, we believe this should be within the framework of an ambitious national Industrial Skills Strategy, fully informed by sector bodies, organisations and accepted across political boundaries and changing administrations.

### Why?

An effective national industrial skills strategy is essential to ensure that the UK's workforce is equipped with the necessary skills to drive economic growth and meet the specific needs of individual sectors. While acknowledging the principles of devolution, the strategy should provide a framework for coordinated action across government, industry, education, and training providers to align skills development with national and sectoral priorities.

### What employers and skills experts say:

“By implementing this Careers & Vocational Learning Strategy for the Food and Drink Manufacturing sector, we aim to create a sustainable and skilled workforce that drives innovation and growth. This strategy will not only benefit the sector but also contribute to the overall economic resilience and competitiveness of the UK.”

**Senior Leader, Skills Body**

“Devolution locally is showing real promise but needs to be supported with a National Strategy to create an equal playing field for sectors such as ours. As a business that covers many regions of England, we need to be able to work locally and nationally to fulfil our skills requirements across the organisation.”

**Senior Leader, Food and Drink Manufacturer**

### Summary

It is critical Government recognise the role of learning and skills in boosting the life chances of individuals and the fortunes of local, regional and national businesses and the economy as a whole.

By adopting an ambitious national industrial skills strategy, the UK can strengthen its workforce's skills base, enhance sectoral competitiveness, and drive economic growth across regions. This strategy should balance national coordination with devolved flexibility, ensuring that skills development efforts are responsive to local needs while aligning with overarching national priorities. Through collaboration between government, industry, education, and training providers, the UK can build a resilient and adaptive workforce capable of meeting the challenges and opportunities of the future industrial landscape.





The National Skills Academy

**FOOD & DRINK**

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