



Workforce at a Crossroads: The Future of Hospitality and Healthcare in 2025/26

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Introduction from Joss Lowery, Managing Director at Bar2

The hospitality and healthcare sectors have long relied on resilience, but 2025 is testing that resilience harder than ever. With vacancies at record highs, labour models under strain, and regulatory pressures growing, it's time to ask whether the old ways of working are still fit for purpose.

At Bar2, we work closely with recruitment agencies and end hirers across both sectors. We observe alarming trends: rising churn, lengthening vacancy rates, a struggle to meet wage expectations, and the increasing complexity of payroll and compliance.

In the hospitality industry, younger workers are leaving quickly — or never entering the field at all — while employers turn to older generations to fill gaps. Equally, increased tightening of immigration policy has severely impacted supply. In healthcare, vacancies persist despite record levels of overseas recruitment, raising both ethical and operational risks. In both sectors, tech is helping, but it's no silver bullet. We must treat workforce planning, onboarding, and compliance as business-critical systems, not back-office admin.

That means shared responsibility. Recruiters, employers, agencies and umbrella companies must act together. We need better onboarding journeys, faster and more ethical placements, and compliance strategies that not only protect the business but also enhance it.

Innovation in these sectors isn't just about automation or AI. It's about how we employ, engage, and support people. Self-serve systems, transparent pay, and fairer contracts are not "nice to haves"; they're prerequisites for a resilient, scalable workforce.

At Bar2, we're building a model that supports these shifts. Because if we get this right, hospitality and healthcare can show other sectors what transformation looks like when it's driven by purpose, not just pressure.



The Hospitality Sector

Labour shortages

From March to May 2025, a whopping 79,000 vacancies were reported in the hospitality industry in the UK ¹, impacting service quality, operational stability and guest satisfaction.

The Office for National Statistics' (ONS) Business Insights and Conditions survey reported that rising labour and material costs were the primary factors affecting hospitality businesses' turnover in June 2025, among several other factors. ²

National Minimum Wage

In April 2025, the National Minimum Wage (NMW) increased from £11.44 to £12.21 per hour for employees aged 21 and older, following its largest-ever rise the year before (from £10.42 to £11.44). ³ This was introduced to boost earnings, particularly relevant since 21.6% of hospitality workers in 2023/24 were paid at or near the minimum wage. ⁴

While higher pay benefits workers, it raises costs for employers. Rising minimum wage is inflating labour costs, leading to reduced hiring and placements and tighter margins for end users and recruitment agencies. As a result, businesses have cut worker hours, and delayed workforce expansion to manage rising labour expenses. Each year, the rise in NMW intensifies pressure, driving up churn rates and creating further admin burden, which comes alongside managing pay rates and compliance. For hospitality businesses that typically rely heavily on part-time and younger workers, National Insurance Contributions (NIC) and minimum wage increases raise employment costs by 7.7%, above the 6.4% economy-wide average. ⁵

On the other hand, the annual rise in NMW is narrowing pay inequality, and lifting a significant portion of workers out of low pay.

Employer National Insurance Contributions

In the Autumn Budget 2024, the Chancellor increased the employer NIC rate from 13.8% to 15.0% and lowered the threshold from £9,100 to £5,000, though the Employment Allowance was raised from £5,000 to £10,500. ⁶

These changes were designed to boost government revenue, however heavily impacted large employers with low-paid workers by increasing payroll costs. Higher NICs make hiring more expensive, discouraging workforce growth. Additionally, employers limit wage increases, leading to higher staff turnover. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, small employers are hit the least, while large hospitality businesses are hit hardest. ⁷

Inflation

As of May 2025, annual inflation stood at 3.4%, with food and non-alcoholic beverage inflation at 4.4%. ⁸ By July 2025, 11% of hospitality businesses cited inflation as their main concern, compared to 8% of all businesses. ⁹ **The impact?** Rising inflation increases operating costs and reduces the real value of wages, making hospitality roles less attractive to workers. Recruitment and retention are worsening, with workers leaving for sectors that offer better pay or more stable working conditions.

30% of workers leave within the first 90 days because the job doesn't match their initial expectations. ¹⁰

21.6% of hospitality workers in 2023/24 were paid at or near the minimum wage. ¹¹

20% of UK adults consider hospitality an unappealing sector to work in. ¹²

Labour shortages

Other factors

Additional factors are worsening recruitment difficulties in the sector:

- **Flexible work arrangements:** Since COVID-19, many workers have left hospitality for more secure and flexible roles. Younger generations favour adaptable work, yet hospitality's long hours, irregular shifts, and poor work-life balance deter candidates. Physically demanding and understaffed, high-stress environments also drive burnout.
- **Seasonal demand:** Peak periods such as Christmas, intensify labour shortages and require the rapid recruitment and onboarding of staff. Seasonal roles are often temporary, low-benefit, and rushed in training, leading to high turnover and service inconsistencies.
- **Brexit:** The UK's departure from the EU reduced the availability of workers. Many EU nationals who had previously filled a significant portion of hospitality roles faced new immigration barriers, prompting many to leave the UK.

These pressures compound the effects of rising costs, leaving businesses short-staffed, facing persistent churn, and struggling to meet customer demand.

Impact

"Staff shortages have led to longer waiting times and a decline in service quality, with 50% of UK hospitality managers reporting that customer experience is deteriorating as a result."¹³

Impact

"Operational strain is significant: many venues are cutting weekend opening hours or closing on certain days due to staffing gaps. In one study, 61% of hospitality businesses reported shortages, and 42% reduced weekend openings."¹²



Rising Engagement of Older Workers

Employers are increasingly turning to baby boomers to fill roles within the industry.

Data from HR software provider Employment Hero indicates that almost 10% more baby boomers are stepping back into casual hospitality jobs, often to boost their income while remaining socially and physically active. Among all industries, hospitality now ranks as the second-biggest source of employment growth for this age group, just behind finance and insurance.¹⁴

Further analysis from Caterer.com, shows that workers over 50 already account for more than one-third of the hospitality workforce, with 165,000 joining the sector since 2022.¹⁴

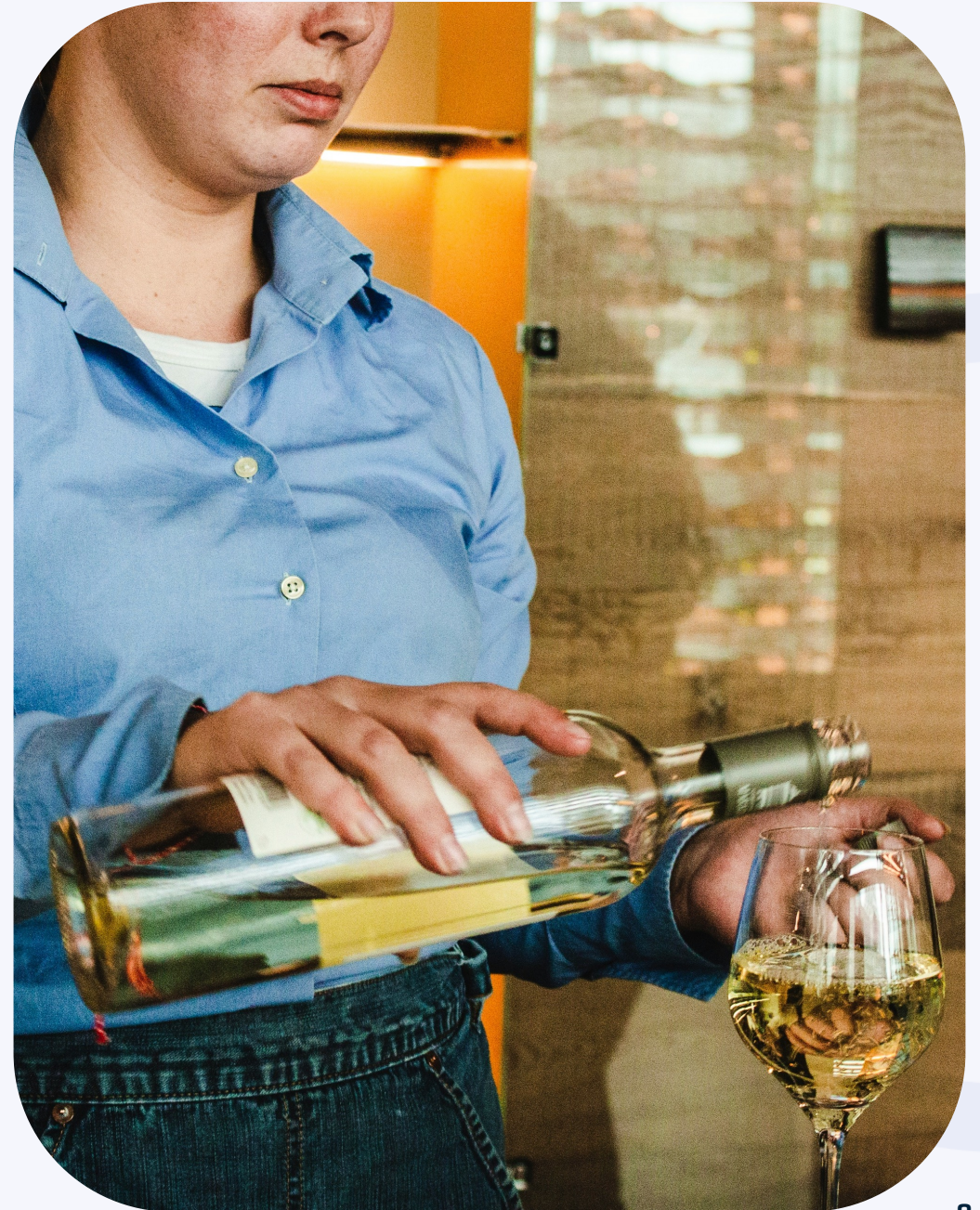
This trend runs counter to the early pandemic years, when large numbers of over-50s chose early retirement and exited the labour market due to punishing hours.

In contrast, today's hospitality industry, offers more flexible working patterns that better suit older employees in comparison to younger generations. In addition, older hires tend to have a longer tenure, helping improve retention and reduce onboarding and payroll admin cost, in comparison to younger workers, such as students who are looking for more temporary roles.¹⁴

Agency workers fail to view Hospitality as a long-term career

A significant proportion of agency workers do not view hospitality as a long-term career due to low pay, poor treatment and limited professional development.¹⁵

Only 1 in 10 people say they would consider a career in the sector, with nearly a third stating low pay as the main deterrent.¹⁶ Hospitality roles often fail to match the wages offered by retail competitors such as Aldi, where staff in London can earn between £13-14 per hour with more predictable, social hours. This gap makes hospitality positions less attractive, particularly for younger workers.¹⁵



Rising Engagement of Older Workers

The solution?

To enhance the recruitment and retention of younger workers in the sector, employers need to consider ways in which hospitality can become a more attractive career path:

Recruitment approaches

- **Competitive pay and benefits:** Promote transparent pay structures, bonus schemes, staff discounts, healthcare benefits, and access to employee wellbeing platforms such as Perkbox to attract staff.
- **Technology in recruitment:** Utilise social media, apps and digital onboarding platforms to connect with candidates via familiar platforms.

Culture

- **Provide incentives:** Recognising and rewarding effort goes a long way, especially for younger audiences. Create employee of the month schemes and rewards or peer-to-peer recognition processes and systems.

Career development

- **Offer clear progression pathways:** Map out opportunities for promotions or skill development. Offer mentorship and apprenticeship programmes and professional development to retain talent.

In a bid to attract and retain skilled professionals, over 29% of UK hospitality employers are offering competitive rewards and benefits such as pensions, enhanced annual leave, mental health and wellbeing days, health insurance and more.¹⁷

In July 2025, the UK hospitality sector lost more than 124,000 staff in just one year, and holds a vacancy rate of 5.1%, compared to just 3.2% for the wider job market.¹⁸ A recent Hospitality Action survey reveals staggering retention issues: around 30% of hospitality workers leave within their first 90 days.¹⁹



Technological advancements

The UK hospitality market is increasingly turning to technology-driven solutions such as digital ordering, online bookings and artificial intelligence (AI) and automation.

Digital ordering

Digital ordering, in particular, simplifies the customer journey by reducing errors, speeding up service, and elevating the guest experience. Much like the self-service kiosks now common in retail parks, where customers can quickly return parcels or collect items without waiting in long queues, digital ordering offers customers speed and ease. Instead of relying solely on traditional service channels, digital systems offer a faster, more convenient alternative that aligns with modern consumer expectations.

By embracing these technologies, businesses can manage orders more efficiently, deliver quicker and smoother service, and build stronger reputations for convenience and customer care.

Online bookings

The way people secure hotel bookings has changed.

More than ever, people are turning to their mobile devices to compare prices dependant on days, and secure bookings.

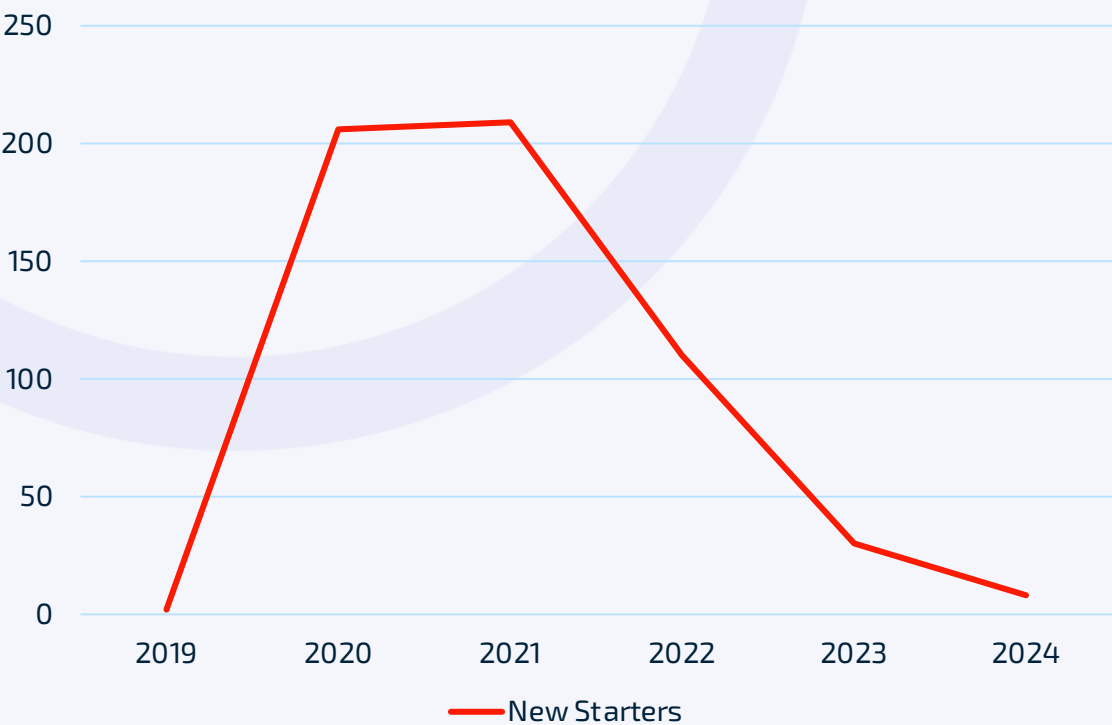
According to GuestCentric, more than 50% of hotel bookings are now completed via mobile devices. A figure that grows by the day as consumers lean more towards convenience and easy access.²⁰

AI and Automation

AI and automation are transforming the hospitality sector, with tools increasingly being used for candidate sourcing, applicant assessments, and other recruitment processes. By adopting automated online systems, employers and agencies can shorten time-to-hire, improve accuracy, and boost operational efficiency, freeing up people to focus on higher-value tasks. This shift not only streamlines business and recruiter operations but also enhances the candidate journey, making the application process faster, smoother, and more reliable, boosting overall candidate satisfaction.²¹

Bar2 Data - Labour shortages

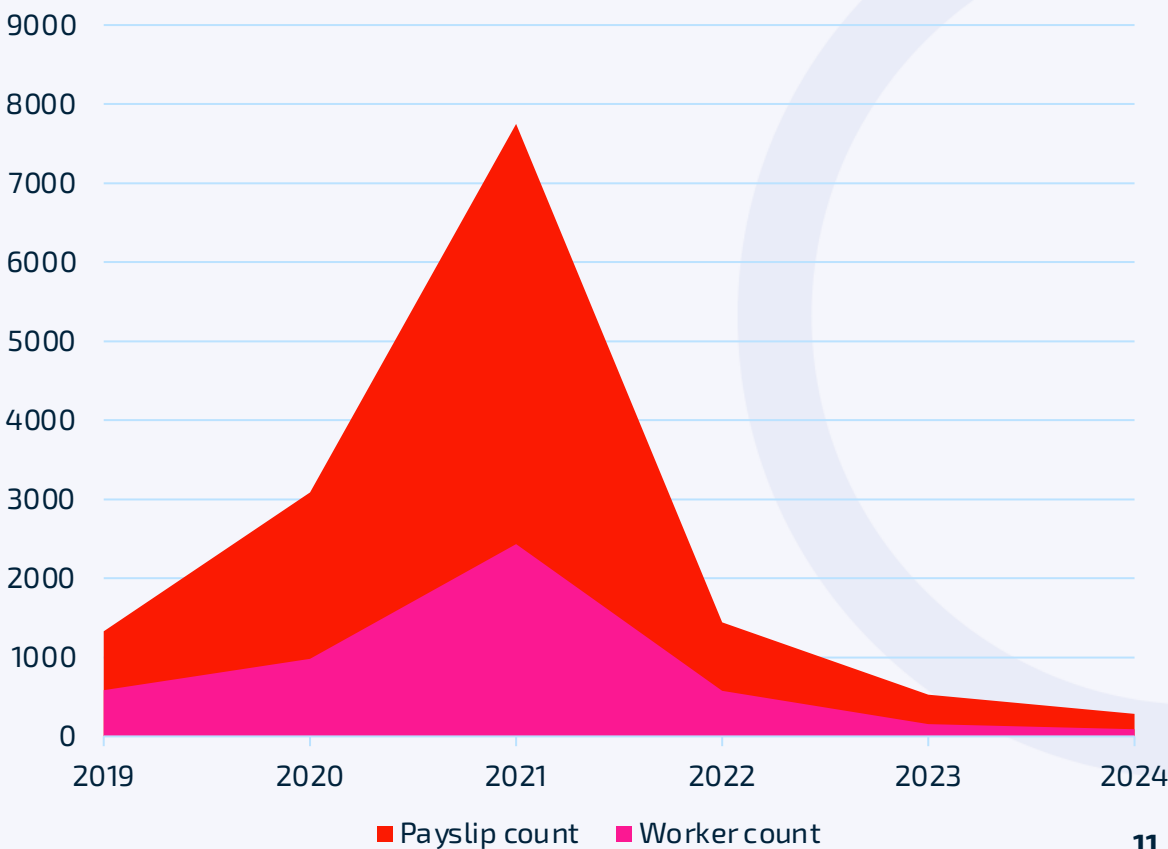
Hospitality New Starters 2019-2024



Rising employer NICs and continuous increases in the NMW are causing significant cost pressures, leading many employers to scale back hiring. Our data shows a sharp decline in recruitment activity from 2021 onwards, alongside NICs rising to 15% and the NLW reaching £12.21 per hour in April 2025.²²

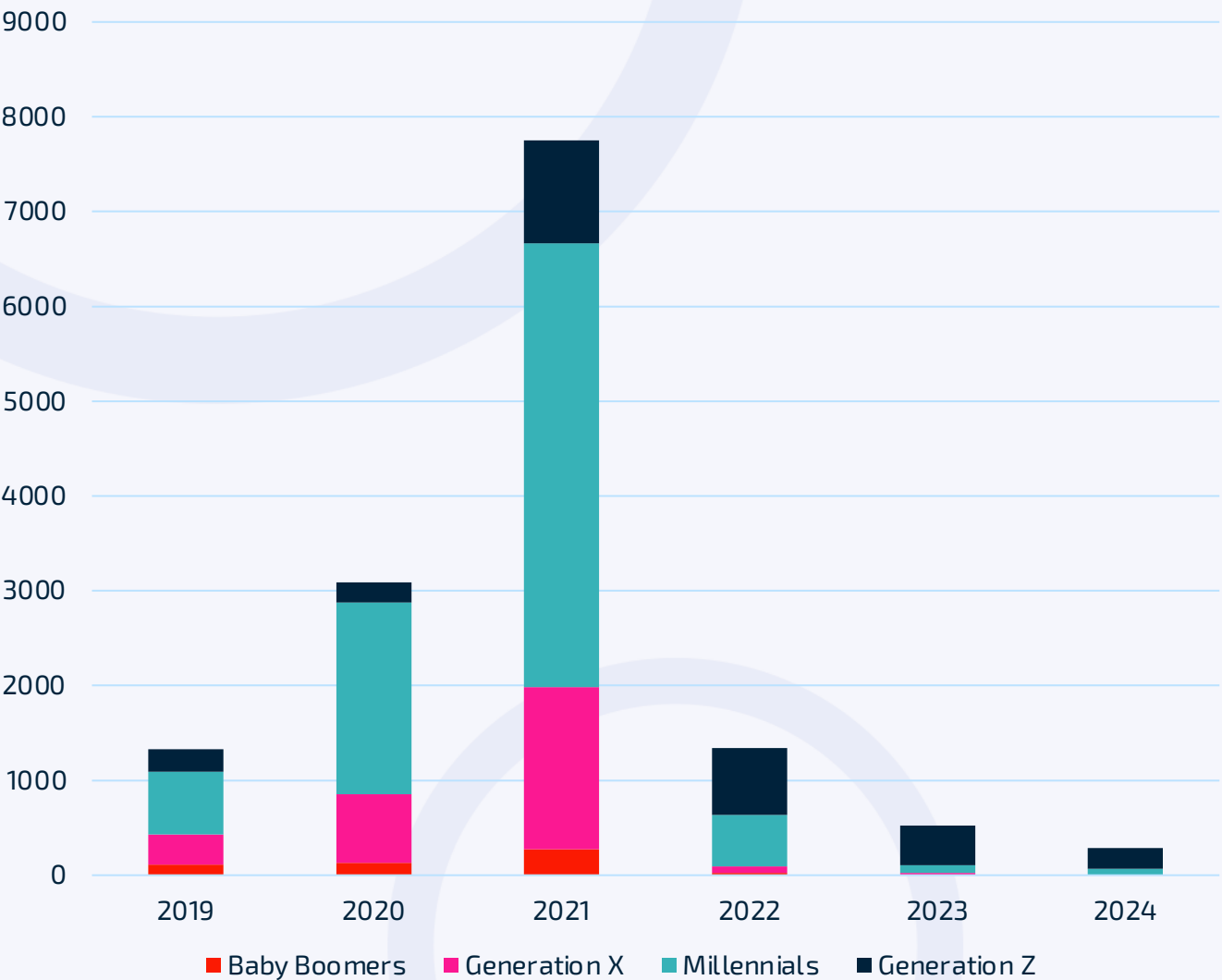
Our data reveals a sharp increase in hospitality workers and payslips between 2019 and 2021, with activity peaking in 2021 before dropping steeply in 2022 and continuing to decline thereafter. Several factors may explain this trend, including cost pressures from rising wages and employer contributions, shifting consumer demand, and ongoing workforce shortages.

Hospitality Worker and Payslip Count 2019-2024



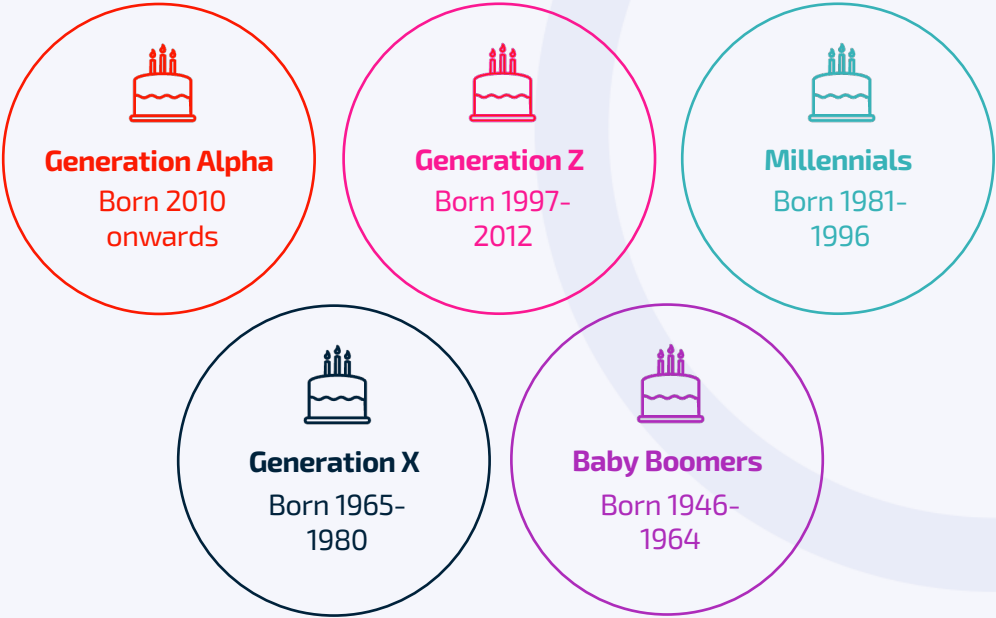
Bar2 Data – Rising Engagement of Older Workers

2019-2024 Hospitality Generation Worker Count

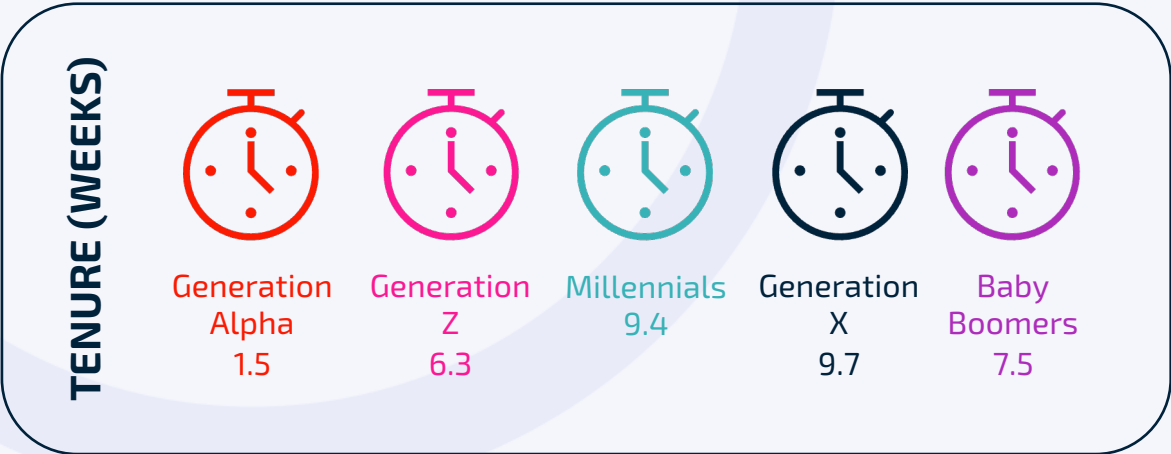


Rising engagement of older workers: Employers are increasingly drawing on baby boomers to fill labour gaps, with a sharp rise in hospitality roles taken up by over-50s. ¹⁴

Our data shows that positions filled by this group grew from 112 in 2019 to 130 in 2020, before more than doubling to 275 in 2021 — representing a **145% increase** over the period. Many in this demographic are motivated by the chance to supplement their income while remaining socially and physically active, making them an increasingly important part of the workforce.



Bar2 Data – Rising Engagement of Older Workers



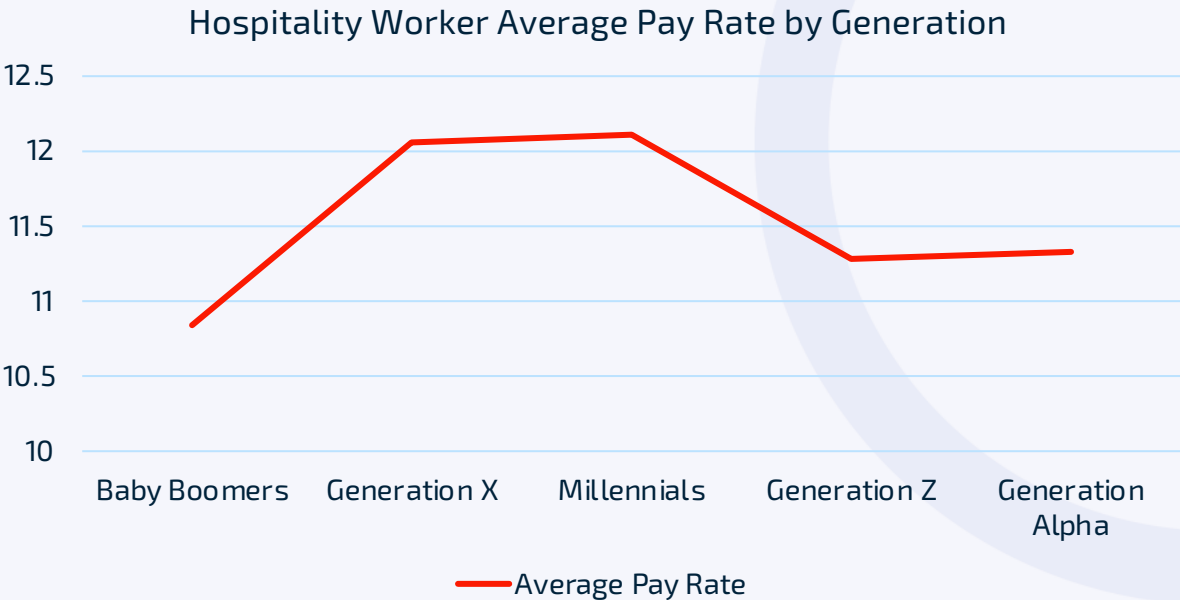
Our findings reinforce industry statistics suggesting that around 30% of hospitality workers leave within their first 90 days.¹⁰ In fact, our data shows even higher levels, with no worker remaining in their role beyond 12 weeks, meaning turnover reaches 100% within this period.

Tenure varies noticeably by generation. While churn is high across all groups, older hires generally demonstrate longer tenure than younger ones. This highlights a potential opportunity: by engaging more experienced, older workers, agencies and employers could improve retention, reduce onboarding and administrative costs, and counterbalance the high churn associated with younger demographics.

The data shows that average pay rates vary only slightly across generations, but remain consistently low overall, sitting around £11–£12 per hour.

Baby Boomers earn the least, while Generation X and Millennials receive slightly higher pay, before rates dip again for Gen Z and Gen Alpha. This pattern supports wider research highlighting low pay as a key barrier to retention and long-term commitment in the hospitality sector.

Even though pay differs slightly by generation, the small gap shows the problem is industry-wide, not age-related, reinforcing why many workers view hospitality as a short-term option rather than long-term career.



The Medical Sector

Labour shortages

Rising demand for temporary healthcare workers

According to the British Medical Association (BMA), the NHS faced a shocking 124,000 staff vacancies in 2024, highlighting the urgent requirement for temporary workers to fill gaps fast. ²³

Why?

- **Ageing population:** The UK's population is living longer, with life expectancy now at 78.8 years for men and 82.8 years for women ([ONS data](#), 2021–2023), up from 48.4 years and 54 years in 1911. ²⁴ This increase is driving greater demand for NHS services, as chronic illnesses and long-term conditions rise with age, making it increasingly challenging for the health service to meet these needs.
- **COVID-19:** The 2020 pandemic sharply increased sickness rates and demand for healthcare professionals as COVID-19 spread rapidly across the UK. Large numbers of staff were absent due to illness or forced self-isolation, creating critical workforce gaps at a time when NHS demand was at its peak. In addition, lockdown restrictions disrupted medical education and delayed training for new doctors and nurses, creating a pipeline gap in fresh talent entering the workforce.
- **Pay disputes and industrial action:** This has further driven healthcare workers to exit the industry, and seek alternative roles in the private sector or overseas.

The average annual salary of a UK NHS care worker is £24,758. Entry level positions for care workers start at £18,000 per year ²⁵ and between £38,000 and £44,000 per year for nurses. ²⁶

This compares to £19,760 to £21,840 per year for care workers, ²⁷ and an average of £54,500 per year for nurses in the private sector. ²⁸

Overseas, healthcare worker salaries are highest in Luxembourg and the United States of America. In Luxembourg, nurses earn over £73,000 per year, ²⁹ and in the USA, approximately \$86,070 (£68,000) per year. ³⁰





The sharp rise in NHS vacancies has intensified demand for agency-supplied healthcare professionals, often at very short notice. Agencies are under mounting pressure to secure qualified candidates in an increasingly competitive market, while also navigating rising pay rates and stricter compliance requirements. This can especially impact smaller agencies that find themselves competing with larger businesses that have more resources and deeper or wider client relations.³¹

NHS Trusts and care providers continue to face persistent staffing gaps that threaten patient safety, service quality and rising patient volumes. This heavy reliance on temporary staff places additional financial pressure on already stretched budgets, as agency costs climb.

What is the government doing to bridge this gap?

In August 2020, the government introduced a Health and Care worker visa to attract skilled medical professionals to work in the UK. This enables qualified medical professionals to stay in the UK under approved NHS or care roles. In addition, the minimum salary for Health and Care Visas increased from £23,200 to £25,000 per year from April 2025, in the hope of boosting workers within these roles.³²

Furthermore, the UK government have pledged their commitment of over 16 billion pounds towards workforce development by 2030.³³ This will be injected into three key areas; workforce expansion, technology and skills development.

Workforce expansion

The government are investing £2.4billion to fund a 27% uplift in clinical training places by 2028/29, helping alleviate the shortage crisis and attract younger workers into the sector.³⁴

Technology and skills development

£187 million has been injected into the TechFirst programme, with the aim of weaving digital skills and AI learning into classrooms. Launched in June 2025, this programme aims to equip people of all ages with the knowledge and skills required for the tech careers of the future.³⁵ The government also plans to partner with major tech companies including Google and Microsoft to reach its goal of equipping 7.5 million workers in the UK with essential AI skills by 2030.³⁵

Overseas Recruitment

Brexit, which occurred in 2020, caused a mass amount of workers to flee the country due to new immigration barriers as part of the UK's departure from the EU.

As of late 2024, 65,610 staff from these countries were employed.³⁶

2020

2021

2022

2023

2024

2025

Since then, the NHS has been increasingly relying on overseas staff from World Health Organisation (WHO) 'red list' countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Zimbabwe. **Since 2018, 46% of additional UK nurses have come from Nigeria, 21% from Ghana and 16% from Zimbabwe.**³⁶

Although this undoubtedly supports the NHS, critics have raised concerns over this practice being "unethical" and "immoral" and claim it will damage these countries' health systems. The

WHO has raised several concerns about recruiting from these countries as they "face the most pressing health workforce challenges related to universal health coverage" and are already struggling themselves with headcount to manage their own countries.³⁶

The proportion of healthcare staff from red list countries has risen sharply, with one in eleven (9%) medics in England now originating from these countries. Additionally, **nearly two-thirds (46,890) of nurses who started working in the UK between January 2021 and September 2024 received their training outside the UK or the European Economic Area.**³⁶

To boost UK based training and number of British citizens entering the sector, the NHS and UK Government created a Long-Term Workforce Plan in 2023. This plan involves a 15-year strategy which heavily focuses on the training and retention of the workforce, with a target of doubling medical school places by 2031.³⁷

Environmental Initiatives

The UK NHS aims to be the world's first net-zero service by 2040, by implementing a range of short-term and long-term initiatives that aim to cut emissions directly controlled by the NHS.

Since launching the initiative in July 2022, the NHS has already made steps, creating the world's first net-zero surgery and zero-emission ambulance.

Short-term commitments include:

- **Reducing emissions from hospitals and primary care estates.** For example, via retrofitting, energy efficient practices and low-carbon building techniques.
- **Reducing travel and transport emissions.** Travel and transport make up 14% of the NHS' emissions. This is broken down into 4% for business and fleet travel, 5% patient travel, 4% for staff commutes and 1% for visitor travel. A number of initiatives could be implemented to help reduce this number including; electrifying fleet such as the rollout of more zero-emission ambulances, introducing cycle-to-work schemes for employees and car sharing. However, for these initiatives to work, a number of infrastructure developments must first take place such as the creation of cycle parking facilities and electric charging vehicle and bike points.³⁸
- **Implementing a net-zero supplier roadmap** outlining:

From April 2023, suppliers bidding for contracts over £5million per year must publish a Carbon Reduction plan (CRP) that covers all UK scopes of emissions.³⁹

From April 2024, the CRP requirement expands to cover all procurements, not just the above.³⁹

From April 2027, suppliers must publicly report targets, emissions and publish CRP for global scopes of emissions.⁴⁰

From April 2028, product-level carbon footprinting shall come into place and be defined.

⁴⁰

Long-term commitments include:

- Achieve net-zero by 2040 for direct NHS emissions
- Achieve net-zero by 2045 for supply chain and influenced emissions
- Ongoing adaptive implementation and continuous monitoring



"The NHS has said that **come 2033, staff travel emissions will be reduced by 50%** through shifts to more sustainable forms of travel and electrification of personal vehicles. From 2030, all new ambulances will be zero emission vehicles. From 2040, all owned, leased and commissioned vehicles will be zero emission."³⁸

Technological Initiatives

The medical industry in 2025/26 is undergoing technological transformation, driven by advances in AI, robotics, cloud infrastructure, and emerging tools.

AI-Powered Diagnostics & Clinical Tools

GPs are under growing pressure as rising patient demand and administrative workload take up significant time.

Ambient AI offers a potential solution by automating tasks such as note-taking, data capture, and documentation. This enables GPs to allocate time more effectively, improving workflow efficiency and the quality of patient interactions.⁴¹

The 2024 Philips Future Health Index report showed that 92% of surveyed healthcare leaders think automation is critical for addressing staff shortages by relieving them of repetitive tasks and processes. 92% also believe it will save healthcare professionals time by reducing administrative work, allowing them to spend more time with patients.⁴²

Virtual assistants can significantly reduce administrative burden by organising clinical notes and streamlining how patient information is shared across teams. They also have the potential to accelerate reporting and translate complex medical terminology into plain simple language, supporting clearer communication and encouraging patients to take a more active role in their own care.⁴³

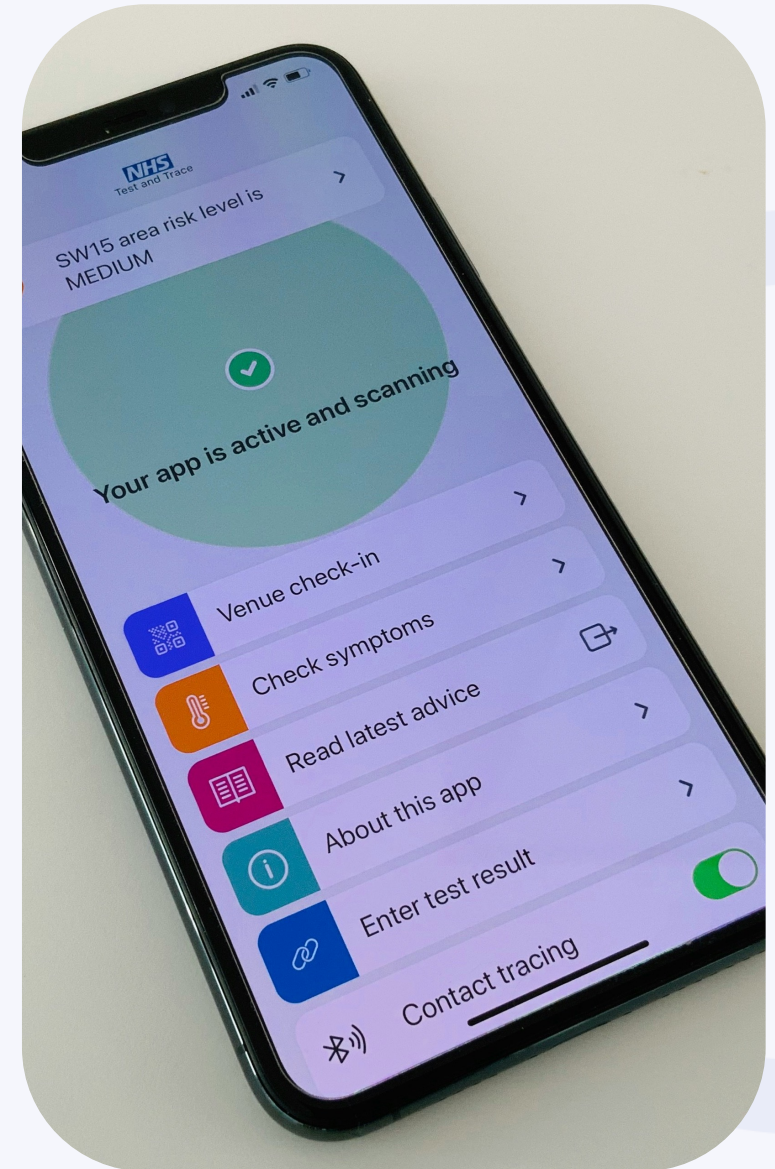
Robotics

The NHS has set out plans for robot-assisted procedures, including hip and knee replacements, and cancer operations, to become standard practice. By 2035, the NHS aim to deliver 500,000 operations annually, with the hope to achieve better surgical precision, and support staff shortages.⁴⁴

Virtual Care

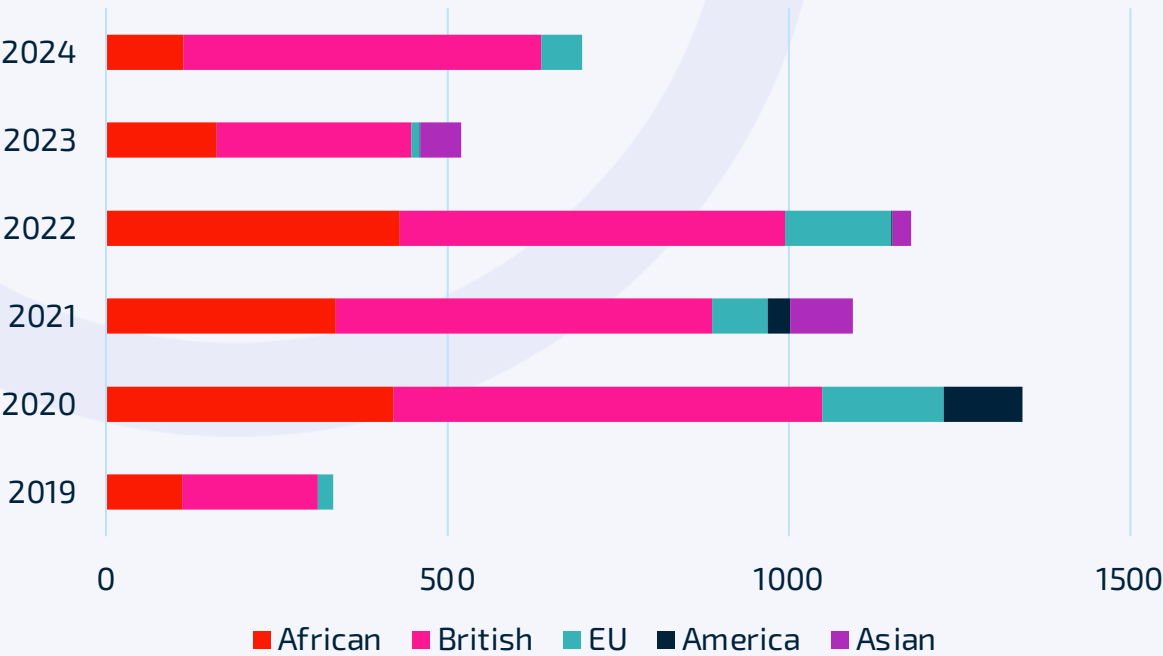
In July 2025, the government launched its Fit for the Future 10-year health plan, placing strong emphasis on digital tools and processes, with the NHS App at the centre of this strategy. By 2025, the app enables patients to book appointments, manage repeat prescriptions, access test results, and communicate directly with NHS professionals. Adoption has been widespread, with over 13 million monthly logins recorded in January 2025. Beyond improving patient access, the app also alleviates pressure on practices by streamlining routine interactions.

Looking ahead, the NHS aims for at least 70% of all elective care appointments to be accessible and manageable through the platform.⁴⁵



Bar2 Data – Overseas Recruitment

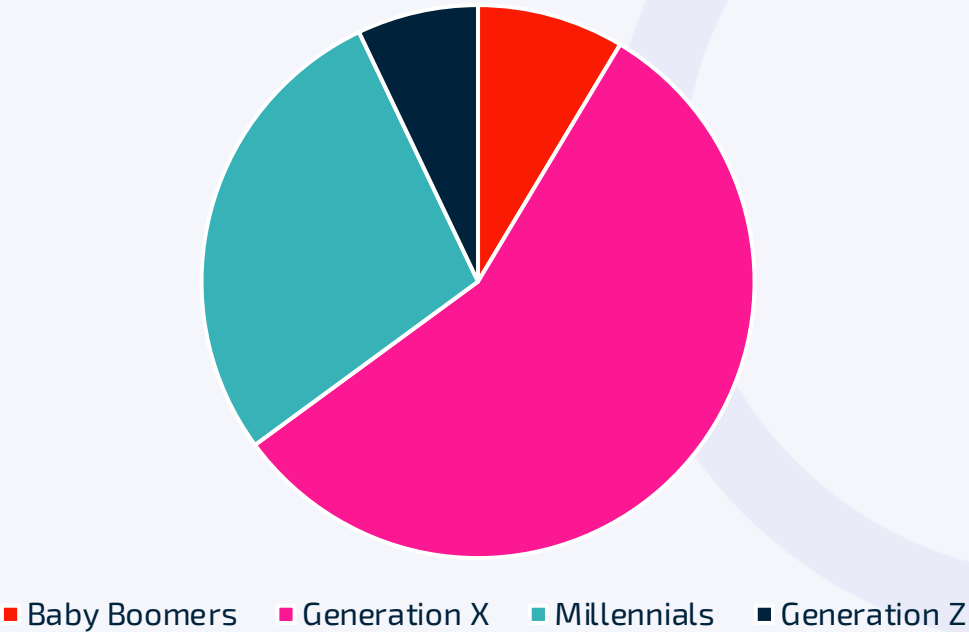
Medical Worker Nationalities 2019-2024



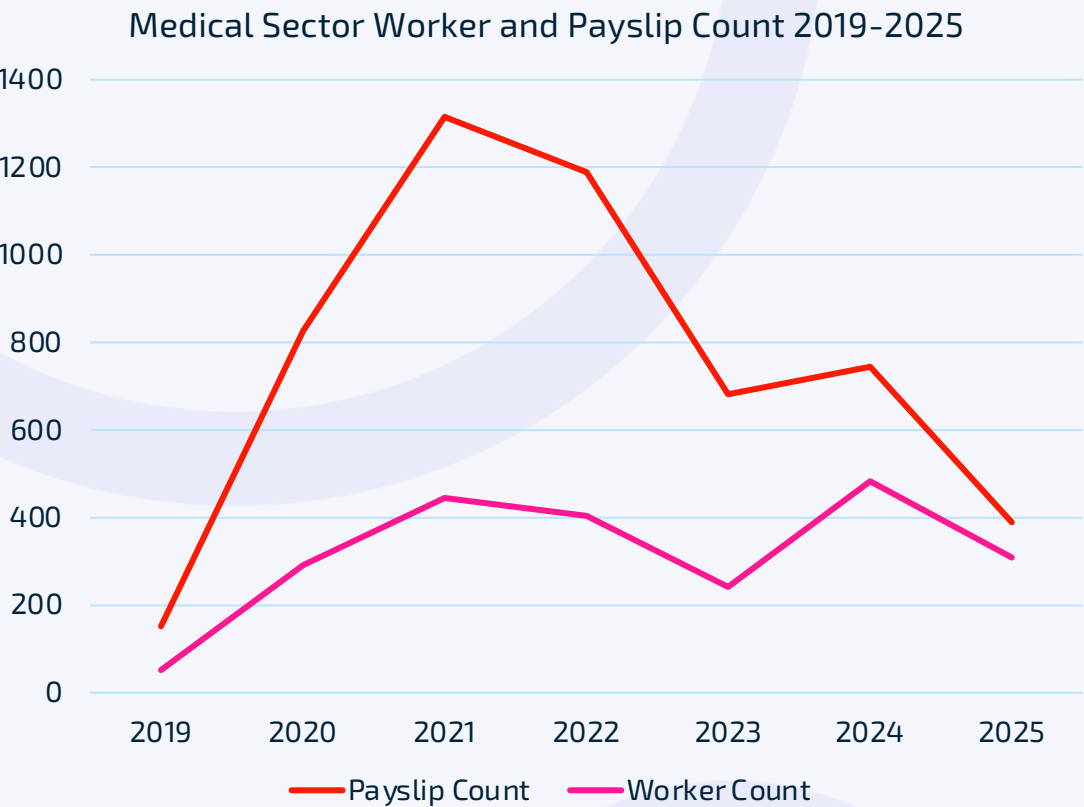
Our data highlights the growing ethical challenge around recruitment sources. Before 2020, only 111 NHS staff came from African countries; however, following Brexit, this number rose sharply to 421 in 2020 and remained high at 336 in 2021. This trend reflects the NHS's increasing reliance on clinicians and support staff from WHO “red list” countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Zimbabwe, raising important questions about sustainability and the impact on already stretched healthcare systems abroad.

Our data shows that Generation Z currently represents the lowest share of medical workers in the UK, and highlights the importance of government initiatives like the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan. Strengthening the amount of younger workers entering medical roles will require government investment into training initiatives, as well as positioning the sector as a more appealing career path for younger generations. Without seeing an increase in younger workers enter these roles over the coming years, the sector risks deeper shortages and instability for the future.

Medical Worker Count by Generation 2019-2024



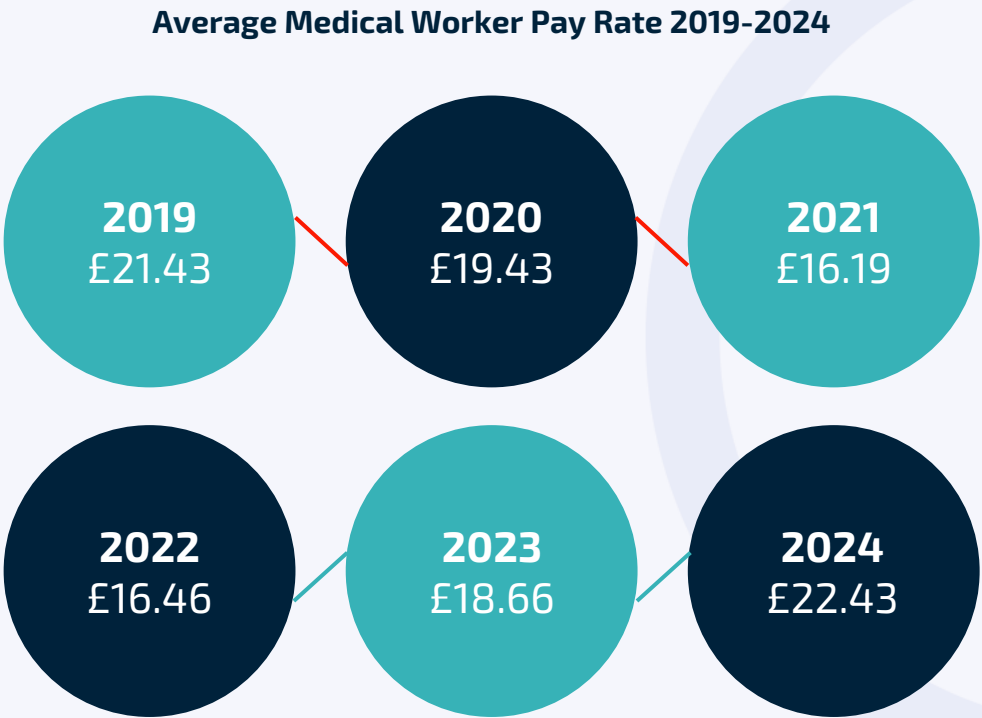
Bar2 Data – Labour Shortages



The data highlights the instability of the medical workforce over the past five years, with fluctuating worker numbers and a heavy reliance on temporary staffing. Periods of sharp growth are followed by steep declines, reflecting ongoing instability in recruitment and retention.

Our data supports claims about pay pressures contributing to workers exiting the industry, particularly between 2019 and 2022 when wages fell sharply.

However, the rebound in 2023–24 shows some recovery. While this indicates slight progress, these increases may not be enough to recover years of damage or compete with the higher salaries offered abroad.



Conclusion

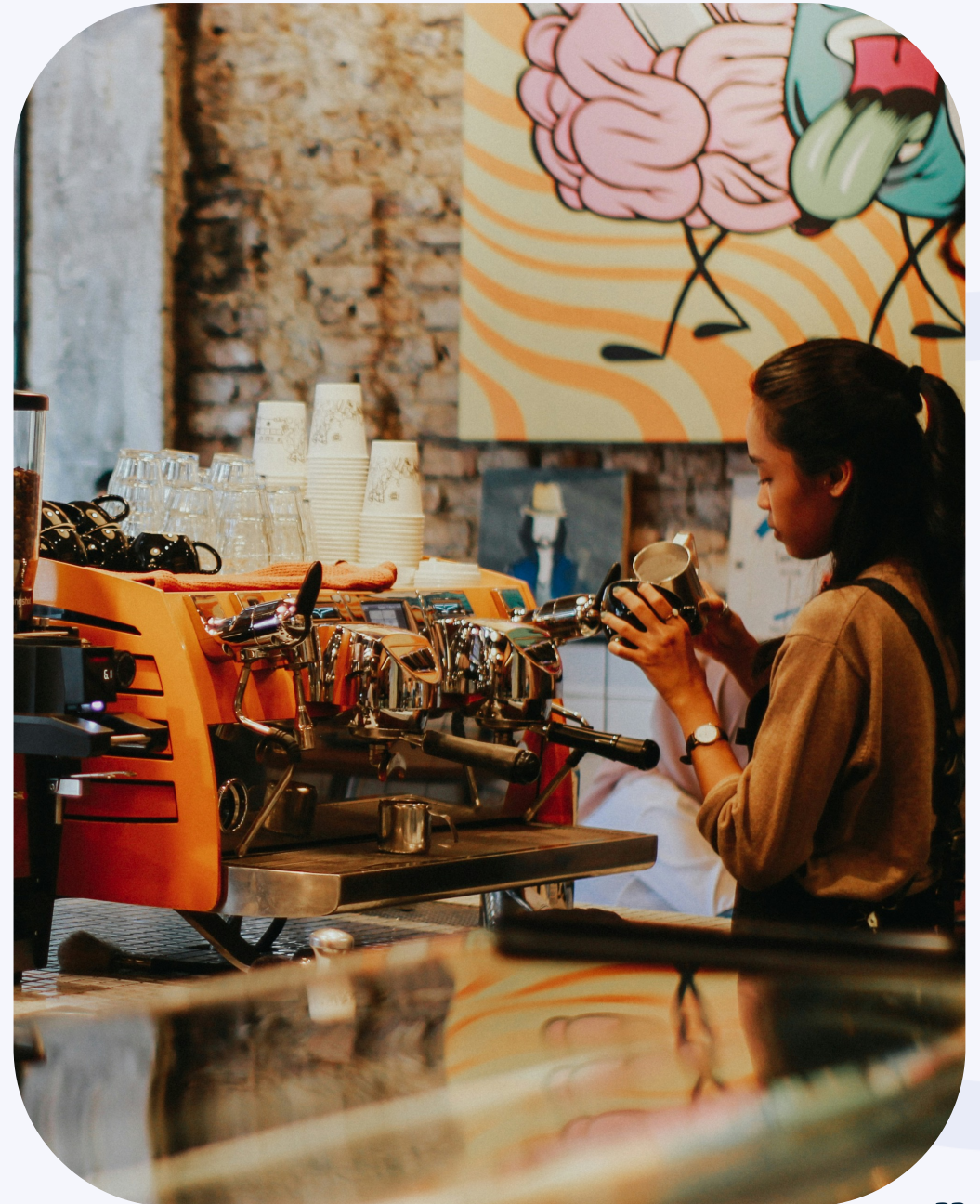
The findings in this whitepaper highlight how both the hospitality and medical sectors are navigating several challenges shaped by labour shortages, rising employment costs, and shifting workforce dynamics.

In hospitality, continuous increases in the NMW and employer NICs have inflated costs, limiting hiring and pushing businesses to adapt through automation, digital ordering, and new workforce strategies, including engaging older workers to offset high churn among younger staff. However, low pay and short tenures remain barriers to retention, making it difficult to build a stable workforce.

In healthcare, the challenges are even greater. With NHS vacancies topping 124,000 in 2024, staff shortages, industrial disputes, and higher overseas salaries have pushed reliance on temporary and international staff. At the same time, new technologies such as AI, robotics, and virtual care are helping ease the burden, but lasting change will also depend on training more UK workers and making healthcare careers more appealing to younger generations.

Across both sectors, the themes are consistent: cost pressures, workforce shortages, and retention challenges are creating unstable operating conditions.

In both hospitality and medical, one theme is clear: short-term fixes like temporary staffing can only go so far. Long-term success will rely on combining technology, better training, improved retention, and more attractive career pathways to create a workforce that is both resilient and sustainable.



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