



# OUT OF SERVICE WAIT STAFF SHORTAGE

Hospitality employers are struggling to find experienced staff as bars, restaurants and hotels reopen for summer



**Marie-Claire Digby**

**'B**ack in February, I was warning the team that this summer it's going to be a hotel school here." Fergus O'Halloran, managing director of The Twelve Hotel in Barna, Galway is, like many other hospitality providers and restaurateurs in Ireland, struggling to fill positions in almost every department of his business.

Hotels have reopened, outdoor dining and drinking is back, and in a matter of weeks indoor dining is set to return. Bookings are soaring as the home market flock to reserve hotel rooms and restaurant tables. But where are the staff to service what looks like a bumper summer season ahead?

"We will be hiring every kid in the neighbourhood," O'Halloran says. "We did four recruitment open days in May and the amazing thing was, they were all 18 years old or under, everyone that showed up for the open days. And that's what we have on board now. We've taken on 60 people in the last month and the mean age would be 17."

The hotel's management team has taken on additional responsibilities for training the new recruits. "It's been hard for them at first to realise this is the new reality - this

is what we have."

O'Halloran is seeing a major change in the response to his recruitment drive this year. "We were always able to get applicants, full-time people that would want to work for the whole year. Those are the applications that are not coming in now."

He puts this change down to workers from outside Ireland returning to their home countries during the pandemic, and to the continuing availability of the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). On Twitter this week, O'Halloran posted: "Hospitality industry will collapse in weeks unless #PUP is stopped now. As the most intensive labour industry, people are our resource and they are paid NOT to work."

O'Halloran would like to see hospitality jobs held in higher regard. "In Ireland, working in hospitality is looked down upon and Irish people do not necessarily want to work in it. I always struggle to get Irish people. We don't have a profession for waiters in Ireland; waiter seems to be a part-time job, which is so wrong."

Adrian Cummins, chief executive of the Restaurants Association of Ireland (RAI), says that staff shortages are one of the main issues facing restaurants that have just reopened, or are planning to do so next month. "We had a skills shortage prior to Covid, now it is compounded, and there is no emergency solution coming down the track for us," he says.

"We believe, from our internal research, that about 20-25 per cent of our industry is gone - gone home to their home country, or gone to other sectors. When you take 20-25 per cent out of 250,000 workers in



hospitality and tourism, it's a substantial amount of people."

Sarah Brewer, group marketing director with Saongroup, parent company of the online recruitment website Jobs.ie, confirms that there is strong demand for staff as businesses reopen.

"When we look at the total jobs posted on our platform currently, hospitality jobs (hotels and restaurants) are 23 per cent of all jobs posted. Jobs postings for hotel vacancies are up 70 per cent month on month, and up 63 per cent for restaurants in May, compared to the previous month."

### Multiple job offers

Cáit Noone, head of Galway International Hotel School, says that third-level hospitality students and graduates are feeding into the jobs market as normal. "Students are graduating this week from courses in Culinary Arts, International Hotel Management, Event Management and PR, Hospitality Studies, Pastry and Tourism Management. Many of them are considering multiple job offers at home and abroad." She adds that many are "choosing to return to their employer who supported them during lockdowns".

Denise McBrien, general manager of The Old Spot gastropub in Dublin 4, due to reopen on July 5th, is one of the many hospitality sector bosses currently searching for staff, and having to consider the possibility of curtailing opening hours if she cannot fill positions. She is currently looking for waiters, bartenders, kitchen porters and cleaners to fill 11 full time and six part-time positions in the busy restaurant and bar.

"We want to put out the positive message that we are still going to open seven days a week, but I have to be honest, I'm nervous about that. We have decided not to open Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday lunch and potentially not open Thursday lunch. I would be anxious about running a seven-day week operation based on the staff levels that we are potentially going back with."

Like Fergus O'Halloran, she believes the continuation of the PUP is behind the reluctance, in some cases, to return to work. "They haven't said it and they're not going to say it to me, but it is because they're earning pretty much the same amount. A student who worked one day a week, on Sundays, for example, between tips and wages they might get €200, and now they're getting €250 [Pandemic Unemployment Payment]."

A spokesperson for the Department of Social Protection which administers the PUP scheme, said that 180,000 people have closed their PUP claim and returned

to work in recent weeks and the Department "is continuing to engage with employer representatives, including the personal services, construction, and the hospitality industries, focusing on getting people back to work as the economy and businesses reopen, with a particular focus on workers in receipt of the PUP income support".

In relation to PUP claims, the DSP says it regularly contacts claimants, in line with all social welfare schemes, to ask them to confirm their employment status. This was done last month, and according to a DSP spokesperson, "the reviews were not focused on a particular industry or sector" and "further reviews will be carried out on an ongoing basis".

Employers whose staff may be reluctant to return to work have the option of initiating a review of their eligibility to receive the PUP. "The Department has an employer support line for employers having difficulties with staff not returning to work, who are receiving the PUP. Employers can email to [C19employerreports@welfare.ie](mailto:C19employerreports@welfare.ie),

details of any staff members who have been offered a return to work, and who have refused that offer. The Department will investigate each case fully to ensure that only those who meet the qualifying conditions for PUP remain in payment."

The final PUP payments for students returning to education for the 2021/2022 college year will be paid on September 7th, which may see an upturn then in the numbers of third-level students seeking work in bars, restaurants and hotels.

### Long-term hospitality

"Some might say students are not necessarily long-term hospitality people, but they are the backbone of the industry. We don't just employ students, we employ students that we can teach to be good waiters, good bartenders, and sometimes they leave what they're studying to study hospitality management and go on to have great careers," Denise McBrien says.

Having just come through his first full week back open to residents, including a traditionally busy bank holiday weekend, and with occupancy levels hovering between 90 and 100 per cent, hotelier Fergus O'Halloran is grateful to his team of young, inexperienced workers at The Twelve. "Thank God they're there and that they want to work. I haven't seen that amount of applications come in from that age group before, and if it wasn't happening we would be in trouble."

And what has been the reaction from guests, arriving for a much anticipated holiday break to find a cohort of inexperienced

but enthusiastic young people at the helm? “Guest feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. They are delighted to be able to go out again and to enjoy hospitality and when they see one of these young people and they have a good personality and they’re doing their best, and it’s obvious that they’re being trained, they are forgiving somewhat.”

There is one dark cloud on the horizon. “My biggest worry is about what’s going to happen in September because all my young team are going to go back to school in the last week of August,” O’Halloran says. He is also concerned about having sufficient staff for when indoor dining reopens next month. “It’s day-to-day, minute-to-minute, and I still see this thing looming and I don’t know how to solve it.”

“We need short, medium, and long term plans for growth of employment in our industry, and we definitely need an emergency plan for the next three to five months,” says Adrian Cummins of the RAI.



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– Denise  
McBrien





■ Research suggests that about 20-25 per cent of hospitality sector employees have been lost. Left: Denise McBrien of The Old Spot gastro-pub in Dublin 4. Below: Fergus O'Halloran of The Twelve hotel in Barna, Galway