



> Chief executive of ftc Christine Walsh

# The latest update

**New chief executive of the Food and Drink Training and Education Council (ftc), Christine Walsh, spoke to FMT about her objectives for the future and how the trade body is 'future-proofing' essential food production skills.**

**Q Tell us about how you started out in the food industry.**

So, I've been working with food and drink companies for the last 30 years. I started as a consultant, delivering process improvement and lean manufacturing analysis and training with some of the largest organisations in the UK. About 15 years ago, I migrated to the Red Meat Industry Forum, and that was a precursor to AHDB,

where I initially worked in coordinating the Young Leaders' Meat Business Development Programme.

This was a training and development programme based at Cranfield and Cambridge Universities, and also at Roskilde in Denmark. It took graduates who had no meat training experience, and team leaders and managers who had no formal management experience, and brought them together as a group. It was about teaching them lean

production techniques and getting them to understand their strengths and weaknesses as managers. I was involved with work that taught people a lot about personal development, that involved conflict handling and a lot of problem solving.

We were also creating a programme that improved their understanding of the food supply chain overall. When we went out to Ross Gilder, it was all about animal welfare, understanding the best butchery techniques, the operations of a slaughterhouse and how to reduce waste, that sort of thing. They'd spent a week and a half in the butchery department, understanding the impact of making inaccurate cuts on muscles and how much you could lose by reducing the weight of higher value cuts. So as a coach, it was a very varied experience.

**Q What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing the food industry in terms of education and recruitment? How is ftc helping ease those difficulties for companies?**

I suppose one of the biggest challenges facing the food industry at the moment is in the way that the government seems to have taken its eye off the ball for Level Two skills qualifications. The Skills and Post-16 Education Act that was passed in Parliament last month excludes funding for Level Two qualifications and this action could be very damaging to the industry.

As with a lot of food jobs, people working in those jobs just don't see 'the big picture' until they've been there for quite some time. They want to take things in smaller steps. For instance, telling a trainee butcher that you want to take them from little to no experience to a master butcher will only turn them off. They need things to be delivered to them in manageable chunks; and that's what the Level Two was. It was a lovely door opener to get people used to the job, the workplace, all the health and safety requirements; used to all the things that they need to understand as part of their introduction to the workplace.

I was speaking to somebody about [the Skills Act] the other day, and they said



> Ftc role is to lobby government to ensure that funding is made available for training programmes tailored to many sectors of the UK food industry.

the same thing is happening across several different sectors. Hairdressers have also lost their Level Two funding; and now, basically, what they've been left with is a qualification for catwalk-level hairstyles and little funding for teaching a simple cut and blow dry.

This is also where I see some of the issues with the new T-Levels that the government are introducing, because T-Levels don't cover what specific sectors actually want. They're just not specific enough and there's not enough of them to meet the needs of particular sectors in our industry. For food, you've got a catering chef T-Level. In recent years, we've lost a bakery one. We've lost the butchery T-Level, and we've also lost the abattoir one.

The fundamentals are not going to be covered, and the funding that has been lost is going to have a knock-on effect on employment for a lot of food companies. Ftc's role in this is to lobby government, in conjunction with our organisations, to

ensure that it is aware that taking away this funding is going to be critical to the industry. It's going to be critical at a time when we've got such huge issues with recruitment and a labour shortage within many of the different parts of the food supply chain.

We also work to try and improve the landscape of the industry. It's our sister company Food and Drink Qualifications (FDQ), that works to improve the qualifications side of things. Ftc are currently working with the Trailblazer Group to refine some of the new apprenticeship schemes produced by FDQ.

Currently, we are looking at butchery skills, and we've also been working with dairy companies and with large bakeries to support them and understand what their industries' requirements are. From there, we work through FDQ to set up new qualifications for dairy, brewing, bakery, food engineering and other industries. →

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**Q Tell us a bit about the ftc's new butchery apprenticeship scheme. What is it about the programme that you believe makes it 'future-proof'?**

Currently, there are two main butchery apprenticeships available: the Level Two and the Level Three. The one we're revising is the Level Two. The old qualification was great because it gave the industry what they wanted; but if you think about where the industry is going regarding the labour shortages, as a lot more automation is going to be needed and, there, presents a skills gap.

Covid has also introduced far more online ordering and delivery, so we now have butcher shops working within the retail sector, needing further guidance on click and collection. When I've spoken to butchers in recent months, what they are asking for from apprentices is not only the knife skills, but also they want staff to become more involved with the digital business side of things. So, they want their young people trained in more skills that they will use every day in the butcher's shops, and that's what we've established in our new programme.

Also, we understand that different sectors within the food industry have different requirements. With this new qualification, for us, it's been about actually talking to these different sectors and understanding where or what they see their sector moving towards and what they need from staff next. The apprenticeships are going to be fit for the next decade, to ensure that training hits each of those requirements.

**Q What are your views on the Ukraine conflict's impact on the UK's food supply chain?**

The conflict is increasing the strain on our food supply chains and our food security. We're seeing the cost of raw materials increasing, while the industry continues to shrink, which will compromise Britain's food resilience.

I personally believe that we're sleepwalking into a disaster, and I would like to work with our government because I think that we



> Brewing apprentice, Caitlin McErlean, of Cloudwater Brewery.

can work together to continually improve the industry. They need to act on the clear warnings that they have been getting from many different sectors across the industry regarding labour shortages.

I think food security has always been at the forefront of people's minds; and now, it's more important than ever. Within the ftc and FDQ, we have the capacity to help mitigate some of the longer-term impacts on food production. We have a Level Two, Three and Four Food Manufacturing Excellence Qualification. This is all about improving efficiencies within companies, reducing waste and maximising yield. Now, the English government has done away with the funding for this in England, but it's still being funded and offered in Wales and Northern Ireland. Part of the challenge for us in the coming years will be to try to get some of these qualifications back on the table for the rest of the UK.

**Q What are your objectives for the future of the ftc?**

Ftc works closely with both the Institute of Meat and the FDQ, and I would like to build stronger partnerships and relationships between these sort of organisation moving forward. There is a real need at the moment to continue lobbying efforts to ensure that the industry gets what it needs; until the government recognises that, actually, there's a certain amount of mind-changing that may need to be done. If minds can't be changed, the government must at least work with the industry to understand what other options are available to them.

It has never been our intention to be a huge deliverer of training programmes for the industry, but it is our intention to increase our offering, based on our learning and on our interactions with our customers, to continue to deliver what they are asking for from the industry. **FMT**