



**NUI Galway**  
**OÉ Gaillimh**

## **OIREACTAS BRIEFING DOCUMENT – Dr Deirdre Curran, NUI Galway**

### **Context and Motives for the Research**

Recent media coverage of the labour shortages in hospitality have contributed to a narrative that puts blame on workers. They are unavailable for work due to an ‘overly generous’ PUP, or they migrated back home.

I would like to propose an alternative narrative that put the responsibility for labour shortages back on the sector itself. The foundation of this alternative narrative comes from research I conducted on the lived experience of hospitality workers towards the end of 2019. Shockingly for me, this is the 1<sup>st</sup> research of its kind in Ireland.

My motives for conducting the research were simple. Having two decades of anecdotal evidence of employment relations issues in hospitality, through my work, I wanted to gather empirical evidence in order to, (a) give hospitality workers a voice and (b), provoke a long overdue debate on sector reform.

I don’t need to make a case to you about the importance of this sector to the economy. Suffice to say that at the time of research the sector employed over 200,000 and contributed an estimated €5billion to the economy. (ITIC and Hospitality Skills Oversight Group figures)

Hospitality work is best delivered face-to-face by humans. It is not a service that can be easily replaced by AI or easily pivoted on-line.

In evaluating the lived experience of hospitality workers here I drew on the ILO and EU Commission elements of ‘decent work’.

- 1. Opportunities for Work**
- 2. Work in conditions of freedom**
- 3. Productive work**
- 4. Equity in work**
- 5. Security at work**
- 6. Dignity at work [ILO]**

I would argue that there are unique features of hospitality work that make the employment relationship more challenging. Many establishments are small and owner-managed by people with a passion for craft and service but not necessarily trained in people management.

The sector is very competitive, often offering low margins for profit, and the work itself can switch quickly from slow to very intense. It is typically hierarchical in terms of job roles and often involves a two-tier workforce of transient student labour alongside workers who want and need to stay.

The work itself is physically demanding and, in my opinion, skilled.

### **The research**

The research I conducted drew on three methods. A comprehensive on-line survey covering all aspects of workers’ lived experience from employment rights to treatment at work. The survey sought both

quantitative and qualitative data and 257 hospitality workers to an average of 18.5 minutes to complete the survey.

Secondly, I interviewed in-depth 5 workers who had up to four decades of experience in the sector.

Thirdly, I invited workers to submit audio files answering three simple questions:

1. What do like about working in hospitality
2. What do you not like about working in hospitality
3. Tell me about an incident where you felt unfairly/badly treated
  - a. **What happened?**
  - b. **What action did you take?**
  - c. **What was the outcome?**
  - d. **How did it make you feel?**

This research method proved exceptionally powerful as you could hear the hurt, disappointment, depression, humiliation etc. in the person’s voice.

The table below presents a summary of the key findings.

70% did not get a Sunday premium	63% witnessed or experienced bullying	55% witnessed or experienced harassment
43% did not have a proper contract of employment	77% experienced verbal abuse sometime/often	64% experienced psychological abuse sometimes/often
52% did not get their entitlement of rest breaks	16% experience physical abuse sometimes/often	Perpetrator of ill treatment in a position of power
12% were paid below the minimum wage	Tips often withheld in whole/part	48% No voice 47% no supportive feedback
20% did not get holiday pay	‘Mature’ employee reflections	Excellent suggestions for change

I have never argued that the data represents all employers. I have come to know that there are many exemplary employers who genuinely care for their staff. Highlighting good practice is one of the many recommendations I would offer. Others are outlined below.

### Recommendations

There is a need for better governance from ministerial level downwards. Today I am presenting to the Oireactas committee of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sports and Media. I don’t need to tell you that that represents an incredible workload. The DETE also has a brief in this area.

The sector to promote a basic set of standards and those standards need to be regulated, monitored, and enforced where necessary. The WRC offers an excellent inspection service. However, the brief for inspections is limited, inspectors are limited, and employers are sometimes pre-warned of an inspection. A targeted sector campaign would highlight the need for compliance.

According to the WRC Annual report 2020 regarding inspections:

24% of hotels, 27% of Beverage Service Activities, and 32% of Food Service Activities were found to be in breach of employment rights. Almost half a million euro of unpaid wages was recovered for these three categories.

As well as the 'stick' approach of inspection and enforcement, good behaviour/practice needs to be incentivised. Customers should be made aware that the establishment they patronise adopts a set of standards in how they treat their staff.

Ethical leadership of the sector is lacking, in my opinion. The RAI in particular has served the sector badly in terms of encouraging workers back.

Hospitality workers want and need a stronger voice. My research shows that they have lots of excellent suggestions on how the sector could improve and yet, they are never asked. Frontline workers know best what's wrong and how to make it right. Putting aside the ethical and moral case for voice, it makes absolute business sense.

The provision of apprenticeships, with on-going training, will contribute to hospitality being seen as a viable career path. The content of such schemes should include training on employment rights, how to use your voice, how to deal with bullying and harassment etc etc.

Supervisors/managers need to be trained in people management. In NZ for example you cannot work as a hospitality manager without having 'made the grade' through structured training.

Pay is an issue. My view is that the minimum wage may be acceptable for young workers who are living at home, but living independently requires a living wage. Workers also need to see that if they start at the lower levels of pay there is a path to pay progression.

Legal protection around tips needs to be progressed because there is evidence that they are kept in whole/part by some employers. The UK have recently legislated for tip theft.

### **Reactions to the Research**

Since publishing the research report I have had many wonderful conversations with workers and employers. My intention was never to 'bad mouth' the sector and while some in the sector found it difficult to read, most acknowledge that there is much scope for improvement, as there is in all sectors.

Other research avenues that need to be explored are cross-national comparisons, the return to work (or not) experience of workers, the lived experience of migrant workers, and case studies of excellence. While I cannot wait to contribute more to the research agenda, I am hoping others will be inspired to join in.

### **Requests to the Committee**

I would ask each of you, as public representatives with power and influence, to share with us what you will do to contribute to the efforts of hospitality reform.

Please consider producing a report on the issues raised today.

A joint committee hearing with DETE committee would also be useful.

Finally, please find a way for the worker voice to be heard in debates on how the sector can recover from C19, and thrive, for the benefit of workers, employers, customers, and broader society.



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