

INDUSTRY BENCHMARK REPORT

The UK chef hire rate benchmark 2026.

Agency rates, salaries, and on-cost benchmarks across UK kitchens. Published by Chefs Bay, updated annually.

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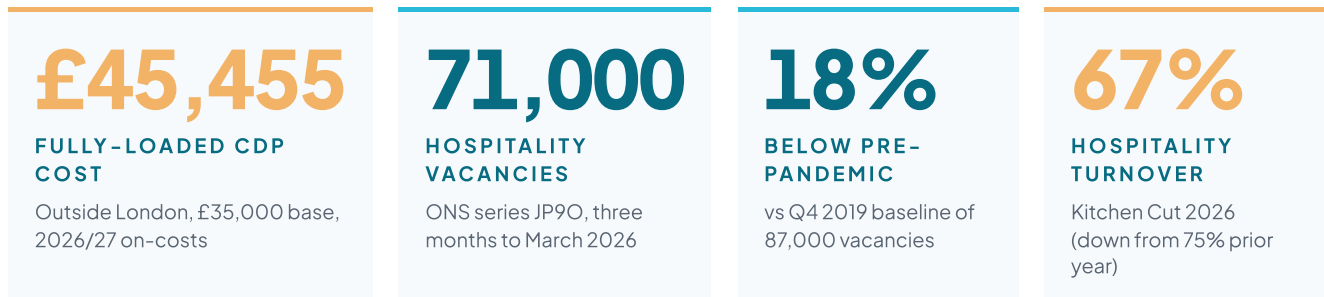
Chefs Bay Hospitality Limited

FORMAT

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If your chef cover budget is built on the same numbers it was 18 months ago, you are short. The April 2026 statutory floor lifted employer NI to 15% on earnings above £5,000, brought day-1 SSP into force at £123.25 a week, and held the National Living Wage at £12.71 an hour for over-21s.



Hospitality medians moved with it: Caterer.com puts the all-sector median at £27,100, up 4.5% year on year. Outside London, a Chef de Partie sits at £29,000 median, with premium agency-grade chefs at the 75th percentile around £32,000 plus. London Head Chef medians sit at £46,500, with the London Living Wage of £14.80 binding for kitchen porter, kitchen assistant and serving roles. Vacancies in hospitality stand at roughly 71,000 in the three months to March 2026 (ONS series JP90), 18% below the Q4 2019 pre-pandemic level. Wage inflation, time-to-fill on chef-specific roles, and the post-22 July 2025 sponsorship restrictions that have closed the international pipeline for entry and mid-level chefs now matter more than the headline vacancy count.

SECTION 01

Methodology

This benchmark is a working document, not an academic study. The agency hourly estimates draw on Chefs Bay's 2026/27 rate card across London and Outside London, anonymised and presented as industry estimates rather than Chefs Bay-specific prices. Direct-hire salary ranges blend the ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, the Caterer.com 2025 salary survey (median £27,100 across hospitality, +4.5% year on year), Indeed UK, Glassdoor, and the Living Wage Foundation 2025/26 wage floors. On-cost composition uses HMRC's 2026/27 employer rates, The Pensions Regulator's 2026/27 thresholds, and the Employment Rights Act 2025 reforms that took effect from 6 April 2026.

Recruitment fee tiers are different. REC publishes a disclosure obligation, not fee percentages. The tiers in this report draw on industry convention from hospitality recruiters and from Chefs Bay's own placement experience. Treat them as industry convention, not authoritative benchmark.

Every operator's quoted rate flexes by notice period, shift length, postcode, framework volume, and venue type. A single number would be wrong half the time. The tables below give ranges.

The 2026 edition is dated 6 May 2026. The next refresh is committed for Q4 2026, when anonymised aggregated Chefs Bay placement data from across 2026 will be added to the methodology footer.

SECTION 02

Agency rate tables

Hourly industry estimates by role and region for the 2026/27 financial year. Standard daytime rates, Monday to Friday, six-hour minimum booking. Premium multipliers covered further down.

Outside London (industry estimate, per hour)

ROLE	MIN	MEDIAN	MAX
Head Chef	£27.50	£29.95	£34.00
Sous Chef / Lead Chef	£25.50	£27.95	£31.00
Chef de Partie	£23.50	£25.50	£28.50
Junior / Retail Chef	£21.00	£22.95	£25.00
Kitchen Assistant	£19.50	£20.95	£22.50
Kitchen Porter	£17.50	£18.95	£20.50
Serving and Catering (18+)	£17.50	£18.95	£20.50

London (industry estimate, per hour)

ROLE	MIN	MEDIAN	MAX
Head Chef	£30.00	£32.95	£37.50
Sous Chef / Lead Chef	£27.50	£29.95	£33.50
Chef de Partie	£24.50	£26.95	£30.00
Junior / Retail Chef	£22.00	£23.95	£26.50
Kitchen Assistant	£21.50	£22.95	£24.50
Kitchen Porter	£21.50	£22.95	£24.00
Serving and Catering (18+)	£21.50	£22.95	£24.00

Footnote on the tables: every quote flexes by notice period, shift length, postcode, framework volume, and venue type. Same-day urgency premiums on top of these standard rates typically run 20% to 40% in our placement data and that of comparable agencies. A Chef de Partie booked at 09:00 for an 18:00 service is not the same economic proposition as a Chef de Partie booked seven days out. The 2026 temp chef rates guide covers the full sector breakdown.

SECTION 03

Salary benchmarks by role and region

Direct-hire salary ranges for the 2026/27 financial year, full-time equivalent. Each row is a market median, with a 25th-to-75th percentile range showing how premium roles cluster. The tooltip rule: Chefs Bay-grade premium chefs typically sit at the 75th percentile, around 10 to 15% above the median.

Outside London (annual salary, full-time)

ROLE	MEDIAN	25TH-75TH PERCENTILE
Head Chef	£ 40,000	£ 34,000-£ 48,000
Sous Chef	£ 35,000	£ 32,000-£ 38,000
Chef de Partie	£ 29,000	£ 26,000-£ 32,000
Junior / Commis	£ 27,000	£ 26,500-£ 29,500
Kitchen Assistant	£ 27,000	£ 26,500-£ 28,500
Kitchen Porter	£ 26,500	£ 26,500-£ 27,500

London (annual salary, full-time)

ROLE	MEDIAN	25TH-75TH PERCENTILE
Head Chef	£ 46,500	£ 40,000-£ 56,000
Sous Chef	£ 37,500	£ 34,000-£ 42,000
Chef de Partie	£ 33,000	£ 30,800-£ 36,000
Junior / Commis	£ 30,800	£ 30,800-£ 32,000
Kitchen Assistant	£ 30,800	£ 30,800-£ 31,500
Kitchen Porter	£ 30,800	£ 30,800-£ 31,000

Note: in London, the National Living Wage and London Living Wage create a binding £30,784/year floor (£14.80/hr x 40 hrs x 52 wks). Aggregator data shows lower medians for incumbent staff in these roles, but new hires sit at or above this floor. The medians shown above reflect that effective floor.

The Outside London Chef de Partie figure is worth a paragraph on its own. ASHE all-chef median UK 2024 revised was £30,960. CDPs sit below the all-chef median because head, sous and executive roles pull the average up. Outside London is typically 3 to 5% below the UK average. Aggregator data points cluster lower still: Indeed UK at £28,115, Glassdoor at £24,771, PayScale near £22,500. Live job adverts cluster at £28,000 to £32,000. The £29,000 default is a median for incumbent CDPs on direct-hire contracts. Premium agency placements sit at £32,000 plus. The Skilled Worker Visa £33,400 going rate for SOC

5434 only affects sponsored chefs, who form a small fraction of the workforce outside London, and does not pull the all-CDP median to that figure.

Salary citations: ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Caterer.com 2025 salary survey, Indeed UK, Glassdoor, Living Wage Foundation 2025/26.

SECTION 04

On-cost composition

Direct-hire base salary is roughly two thirds of the fully-loaded annual cost. The rest is statutory, contractual or operational on-cost. Each line is cited in the further reading at the foot of the page.

- **Employer NI:** 15% on earnings above the £5,000 secondary threshold a year (HMRC, in force from 6 April 2026).
- **Employer pension:** 3% minimum on qualifying earnings between £6,240 and £50,270 a year (TPR, thresholds frozen at 2025/26 levels).
- **Working Time Directive holiday pay:** 5.6 statutory weeks. For irregular hours and part-year workers, the lawful uplift is 12.07% on hourly pay. Salaried staff have leave embedded in the salary already.
- **SSP reserve:** £123.25 a week, day-1 entitlement from 6 April 2026 under the Employment Rights Act 2025 reforms. Default reserve of two weeks a year is conservative.
- **Apprenticeship Levy:** 0.5% of pay bill above £3M a year, with a £15,000 allowance. Most independent operators sit below the threshold.
- **Recruitment fee, amortised:** industry-convention percentages of starting salary, spread across expected tenure. UK hospitality turnover sits at about 67% per Kitchen Cut 2026, an improvement on 75% the previous year. Eighteen months of average tenure is a working assumption for amortisation.
- **Onboarding ramp:** a four-week reserve at 50% productivity for skilled chefs, two weeks for kitchen porter and kitchen assistant roles. Convention, not law.

SECTION 05

Premium multipliers

Standard daytime hourly rates apply Monday to Friday across daytime service. Premium multipliers apply outside that window.

1.5x BANK HOLIDAYS Also Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve	2.0x CHRISTMAS DAY & EASTER SUNDAY Standard daytime rate, doubled	6 hr MINIMUM BOOKING Per shift, across roles and regions
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- **Bank Holidays:** 1.5x the standard rate.
- **Christmas Day and Easter Sunday:** 2x the standard rate.
- **Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve:** 1.5x the standard rate.
- **Minimum booking:** 6 hours per shift across roles and regions.
- **Volume discounts:** available at 200+ hours a week Outside London or 100+ hours a week in London.

Match-day rates at stadia and unsocial-hour shifts at airports, rail catering and 24-hour B&I sites typically attract a similar 1.5x multiplier. The cash difference between a midweek lunchtime CDP shift and a Saturday Bank Holiday dinner shift decides whether a venue runs the booking or shortens the menu.

SECTION 06

Regional variation

London is the dominant variable. The London Living Wage of £14.80 an hour is binding for accredited employers and shapes statutory comparators in practice. Kitchen porter, kitchen assistant and serving roles in London cannot be quoted below the £30,784 a year LLW floor without breaking the accreditation, which means the gap between a London KP and an Outside London KP is roughly £4,000 a year on base pay alone before on-costs.

Outside London, regional variation is narrower than the London-versus-rest-of-UK split. Manchester and Liverpool sit close to the UK average for chef salaries by role. Birmingham sits slightly below. Gemini's regional data points: Birmingham Head Chef £37,524, Liverpool Head Chef £36,904. Both below the £40,000 Outside London median, both inside the 25th-to-75th percentile range. Manchester hotel and restaurant chef rates and Liverpool chef placements cover the city-specific patterns.

For chef agency rates, the urban-rural split matters more than the city-versus-city split. A relief Chef de Partie in central Liverpool at £25.50 an hour is one logistics problem; the same chef driving 40 miles for a single shift in rural Cheshire is a different problem with different mileage and hour costs.

Chef de Partie, Outside London, £35,000 base

A Chef de Partie hired Outside London on £35,000 base salary, full-time, 40 hours a week, 52 weeks. Note that £35,000 sits above the median (£29,000) and below the 75th percentile (£32,000 plus), representing a credible direct-hire rate at a quality independent restaurant or hotel.

COST LINE	CALCULATION	ANNUAL
Base salary	Input	£ 35,000.00
Employer NI	15% on (£35,000 - £5,000)	£ 4,500.00
Employer pension	3% on (£35,000 - £6,240)	£ 862.80
WTD holiday pay	Salaried, leave embedded	£ 0.00
SSP reserve	2 weeks at £123.25	£ 246.50
Apprenticeship Levy	Below £3M pay bill	£ 0.00
Recruitment fee, amortised	£35,000 x 15% x (12 / 18)	£ 3,500.00
Onboarding ramp	£35,000 x (2 / 52)	£ 1,346.15
Fully-loaded total		£ 45,455.45

DIRECT HIRE, FULLY LOADED

£45,455

Annual, salaried CDP at £35,000 base with 2026/27 statutory and operational on-costs.

CONTINUOUS AGENCY COVER

£53,040 ex VAT

40 hrs x 52 wks at £25.50 industry-estimate median; £63,648 inc VAT.

Crossover: direct hire becomes cheaper than continuous agency cover above roughly 44.6 weeks of utilisation a year if VAT is recoverable, or 37.1 weeks a year if VAT is not recoverable. Care homes, schools and non-VAT-registered operators feel the agency VAT as a real cost; VAT-registered hotels and restaurants reclaim it under usual HMRC conditions.

Sector overlays

Generic chef rates flex by sector. The overlays below are the cost lines that change once a venue type is known.

Care homes

Enhanced DBS at £49.50 plus umbrella admin gives a typical total around £60 per chef. IDDSI training is free in resource form from IDDSI itself, but any chef working to texture-modified diets for residents needs documented competence. Allergen training Level 3 typically runs around £75 per chef. CQC Regulation 14 carries an overhead in handover time that does not feature in hospitality bookings. Adult social care lost roughly 30,000 British workers in a single cycle (Care Provider Alliance), and international recruitment into adult social care fell from 105,000 to 50,000 year on year (Skills for Care). The labour pool for care kitchens is smaller than the labour pool for hotel kitchens by a meaningful margin.

Education and schools

Enhanced DBS plus the Children's Barred List check is the floor for any chef in a school kitchen. Keeping Children Safe in Education training applies. Term-time-only contracts run on a 39/52 multiplier of full-year salary. Free School Meals funding is a structural pressure: the Department for Education's Universal Infant Free School Meals rate sits at £2.61 per meal in 2025/26 (KS1 only). LACA's 2025 Cost-of-Living Supply Chain Survey reports actual delivery cost at £3.00 to £3.20 a meal and formally calls for £3.45. The structural funding gap of £0.40 to £0.85 a meal compresses caterer margins and drives chef labour out of school catering and into hospitality. London KS2 children additionally receive £3.00 a meal under the GLA-funded London UFSM scheme, which softens the gap inside the capital but not elsewhere.

Hotel and restaurant

No overlays beyond statutory. The base of the rate card.

Contract catering

TUPE risk on framework moves means that incumbent labour transfers across contract boundaries. The Agency Workers Regulations 12-week parity right applies once an agency chef has been placed at the same hirer for 12 calendar weeks: pay, working time and rest break parity with comparable direct hires becomes a contractual requirement. Contract caterers building cover plans into a quarterly rota need to model the parity transition in advance, not retrospectively.

Events and banqueting

Around 592 UK music festivals took place in 2025 (AIF research), and the EIF UK Festivals Data Map recorded 850+ festivals across 2024. Festival catering operates on weekend rates, peak-season premiums, and an 8-to-12-week advance booking horizon for compliance paperwork. Single-shift event work attracts the 1.5x weekend multiplier; multi-day event teams of 10 chefs or more typically need 72 hours of dispatch time at minimum. The festival chef hire 2026 plan covers the operational detail.

The macro picture

Hospitality vacancies sit at roughly 71,000 in the three months to March 2026 (ONS series JP9O, bulletin released 21 April 2026). That is 18% below the Q4 2019 pre-pandemic level of 87,000. The trajectory: 132,000 in mid-2023, 108,000 in Q4 2023, 87,000 in Q4 2024, 75,000 in Q4 2025, around 71,000 in Q1 2026. Vacancies crossed below the pre-pandemic baseline during 2024.



That single fact reframes the labour-shortage narrative. Wage growth, time-to-fill, sector exit, and the closure of the international pipeline now drive the labour story more than headline vacancies do. Hospitality lost 59,000 employees in the 12 months to early 2026 (ONS). Median hospitality salary stands at £27,100, up 4.5% year on year and up 25% over five years (Caterer.com). Pay satisfaction sits at 56% in hospitality versus 63% across all sectors (Caterer.com). UK hospitality turnover is around 67%, an improvement from the 75% reading the previous year (Kitchen Cut). 53.1% of hospitality jobs paid below the Real Living Wage in 2025/26 (Living Wage Foundation). 1 in 5 hospitality businesses fear they may not survive the next 12 months (Guardian / UKHospitality, Q1 2026).

The international pipeline

The international pipeline is the most consequential change in this edition. The Skilled Worker Visa SOC 5434 chefs going rate is £33,400 a year, or £17.13 an hour at a 37.5-hour week (GOV.UK Appendix Skilled Occupations, last updated 5 March 2026). Since 22 July 2025, sponsorship for medium-skilled roles has been restricted: the role must be at RQF Level 6 or on the Immigration Salary List or the Temporary Shortage List. The practical floor for new sponsorship under the general Skilled Worker route is £38,700, not the SOC-specific £33,400. The £33,400 going rate exists; it is no longer a route most operators can use for entry or mid-level chefs. The international labour pipeline for kitchen porter, kitchen assistant, commis and Chef de Partie roles has effectively closed.

Bottom line. Domestic wage inflation is the operative pressure on chef hire budgets in 2026. It is set to continue while the workforce shrinks, turnover stays elevated, and sponsorship for entry and mid-level chef roles remains unavailable. Budgets built on 2024 numbers will under-forecast 2026 cost.

SECTION 10

How to use this benchmark

First, budgeting for the 2026/27 year. Take the median salary for your role and region from the table, add the on-cost composition lines (employer NI, pension, WTD where applicable, SSP reserve, recruitment fee amortised over 18 months, onboarding ramp), and treat the 75th percentile as the realistic ceiling for premium hires.

Second, tender response for contract catering and B&I framework bids. Use the agency rate tables as the industry estimate floor for cover provision, with the 1.5x and 2x multipliers explicit in the schedule of rates. Buyers comparing tenders against an inflated baseline will discount unrealistic bids.

Third, negotiating with agencies. A quoted Chef de Partie hourly rate in London below £24.50 or above £30.00 is outside the standard band. Below the band suggests on-cost compression that may not be sustainable. Above the band suggests specialist or premium positioning that the operator should price into the venue's covers. Either way, the band gives the negotiation a reference point.

For specific scenarios, the calculator at chefsbay.co.uk/chef-cost-calculator models true-cost-of-direct-hire against agency cover with all the on-cost lines itemised. For temp cover today, call 0151 440 2249.

SECTION 11

Calculator and further reading

Use the calculator to model your specific scenario. Inputs cover role, region, salary or hourly basis, hours per week, weeks per year, pension status, apprenticeship levy, SSP reserve, recruitment fee assumption, and the optional cost-of-vacancy framework. Output gives weekly and annual fully-loaded direct-hire cost alongside the agency comparison.

The 2026 temp chef rates guide covers the agency-side detail, including premium multipliers, sector pricing and 2026 vs 2025 changes.

SECTION 12

About Chefs Bay

Chefs Bay is a temp and agency cover specialist. We do not handle permanent recruitment. The bench covers Head Chef, Sous Chef, Chef de Partie, Junior Chef, Kitchen Assistant, Kitchen Porter and Catering Assistant roles across hotels, restaurants, contract catering, B&I, care homes, schools and event sites. Central London, Manchester and Liverpool postcodes carry a 2-hour confirmation window on emergency cover at a 90–95% hit rate; Outside London the realistic window is 4 to 24 hours by sector and postcode. If we cannot place, you do not pay.

Annual update commitment: this benchmark refreshes in Q4 2026 with anonymised aggregated Chefs Bay placement data from across 2026 added to the methodology. Subscribe to the Chefs Bay blog or call 0151 440 2249 for a tailored breakdown.

Author: Michael Szalaty, Managing Director, Chefs Bay

SECTION 13

Frequently asked questions

How are these chef hire rates calculated?

Agency hourly estimates draw on Chefs Bay's 2026/27 rate card across London and Outside London, presented anonymously as industry estimates. Salaries draw on the ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, the Caterer.com 2025 salary report, Indeed UK, Glassdoor, and the Living Wage Foundation 2025/26 floors. On-cost composition uses HMRC 2026/27 thresholds, The Pensions Regulator 2026/27 schedule, and the Employment Rights Act 2025 reforms in force from April 2026. Recruitment fee tiers reflect industry convention from REC, hospitality recruiters, and Chefs Bay placement experience, not statutory benchmarks.

When are these figures updated?

Annually. The 2026 edition is dated 6 May 2026 and reflects the April 2026 statutory floor (NLW £12.71, Real Living Wage £13.45 outside London, London Living Wage £14.80) along with the 6 April 2026 changes to employer NI, day-1 SSP, and pension thresholds. The next refresh is committed for Q4 2026 with anonymised aggregated Chefs Bay placement data added to the methodology.

Why does the SOC 5434 visa rate matter for chef hire?

It used to be a salary anchor. It is now a non-route for most chef hires. The published going rate is £33,400 a year (£17.13 an hour at 37.5 hours), per GOV.UK Appendix Skilled Occupations updated 5 March 2026. Since 22 July 2025, sponsorship for medium-skilled roles requires RQF Level 6 or inclusion on the Immigration Salary List or Temporary Shortage List, and the practical floor for a new sponsorship under the general Skilled Worker route is £38,700. The international labour pipeline for entry and mid-level chefs has effectively closed.

How do you separate London from outside London?

London means the 32 London boroughs and the City. The London Living Wage of £14.80 an hour applies as a binding floor for accredited employers and shapes statutory comparators in practice for kitchen porter, kitchen assistant, and serving roles. Outside London uses the Real Living Wage of £13.45 an hour and the National Living Wage of £12.71 as the statutory minimum for over-21s. Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and other cities sit inside the Outside London band but are flagged where regional pay survey data is meaningful.

Where do salary figures come from for chefs by role and region?

ONS ASHE all-chef median was £30,960 in the latest revised release, used as the Home Office basis for the SOC 5434 going rate. We blend that with the Caterer.com 2025 salary survey median of £27,100 across hospitality, with role-level cuts from Indeed UK and Glassdoor, and with the Living Wage Foundation 2025/26 floors. Each role default is a median for direct-hire chefs at credible market rates. Premium and agency-grade chefs typically sit at the 75th percentile, around 10 to 15% above the median.

Does Chefs Bay handle permanent recruitment?

No. Chefs Bay is a temp and agency-cover specialist. The benchmark covers permanent salary ranges because operators who use temp cover also budget for direct hires alongside, but Chefs Bay does not place permanent chefs. For temp cover, relief, contract, and short-term cover ahead of a permanent search, call 0151 440 2249.

REFERENCES

Citations and further reading

- 01 **HMRC.** Rates and thresholds for employers 2026 to 2027.
gov.uk/government/publications/rates-and-thresholds-for-employers-2026-to-2027
- 02 **The Pensions Regulator.** Earnings thresholds for automatic enrolment 2026/27.
thepensionsregulator.gov.uk
- 03 **Living Wage Foundation.** Real Living Wage 2025/26 (£13.45 outside London, £14.80 in London).
livingwage.org.uk
- 04 **ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE):** all-chef median £30,960 (latest revised release).
- 05 **ONS Vacancies and jobs in the UK,** series JP9O: hospitality vacancies bulletin released 21 April 2026.
- 06 **Caterer.com 2025 Salary Report:** median hospitality salary £27,100, +4.5% year on year, pay satisfaction 56%.
- 07 **Indeed UK and Glassdoor UK:** role-level salary aggregates by region.
- 08 **Living Wage Foundation 2025/26:** 53.1% of hospitality jobs paid below the Real Living Wage.
- 09 **Kitchen Cut:** UK hospitality turnover benchmark, ~67% in 2026 (down from ~75% the prior year).
- 10 **UKHospitality and Guardian, Q1 2026:** 1 in 5 hospitality businesses fear they may not survive the next 12 months.
- 11 **GOV.UK Appendix Skilled Occupations** (last updated 5 March 2026): SOC 5434 going rate £33,400 a year, £17.13 an hour at 37.5 hours.
- 12 **Home Office:** post-22 July 2025 Skilled Worker route restrictions for medium-skilled roles, £38,700 general minimum.
- 13 **DBS GOV.UK:** Enhanced DBS fee £49.50 (free for volunteers), Basic DBS £21.50.
- 14 **Highfield:** Level 2 Food Safety pricing £14–£30 online, £110–£125 classroom.
- 15 **REC:** Disclosure obligation on recruitment fees (no published tier percentages).
- 16 **Skills for Care:** Adult social care international recruits, 105,000 to 50,000 year on year.
- 17 **Care Provider Alliance:** Adult social care lost 30,000 British workers in a single cycle.
- 18 **AIF (Association of Independent Festivals):** around 592 UK music festivals, 2025.
- 19 **EIF UK Festivals Data Map:** 850+ UK festivals, 2024.
- 20 **Department for Education:** Universal Infant Free School Meals funding rate £2.61 per meal, 2025/26 (KS1 only); GLA London UFSM £3.00 (KS2).
- 21 **LACA:** 2025 Cost-of-Living Supply Chain Survey, formal request for £3.45 a meal.
- 22 **Employment Rights Act 2025:** day-1 SSP, £123.25 a week, in force from 6 April 2026.



Chef specialists. Not a generic staffing agency.
One call, we handle it. 0151 440 2249

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