

City St George's Food Policy Symposium 2025

Professional cookery – the missing ingredient for food systems transformation



**Centre for
Food Policy**

Policy and practice to
redesign food systems

Executive summary

Professional cooks and chefs are vital food systems actors, responsible for feeding people across society from schools and care homes to restaurants and festivals, as well as manufacturing and designing our everyday foods. Despite this, professional cookery has been largely overlooked within food systems transformation. Building the capacity of professional cooks and chefs to enact change is key to delivering a healthier, more sustainable, just and resilient food system.

This report summarises insights from the 2025 City St George's Food Policy Symposium which brought together over 200 attendees and explored the role of professional cookery in building food systems that are healthy, sustainable, resilient and equitable.

Key insights emerging from the discussions include:



Valuing the unique role of professional cooks in our food systems



Promoting the value of professional cookery in British food culture



Reimagining education and training pathways for professional cookery



Coordinating thinking and actions to boost professional cookery's role in food system change

Professional cooks and chefs hold a unique position within the food system and have the potential to enact change in multiple ways. They can influence the health, sustainability, and taste of food, promote community cohesion and inclusion, and support civil food resilience. Cooks and chefs are creative, making plant and seasonal ingredients taste delicious, and their passion for connecting people to good, freshly prepared food is a unique attribute in delivering change across the food system.

However, professional cookery is undervalued by British society. The workforce is shrinking as hospitality, public sector catering and manufacturing sectors consolidate due to rising financial pressures. Training pathways lack clarity and appeal, and continue to follow outdated meat-rich curricula. These factors are hindering the potential of cooks and chefs to be key actors in food systems change.

This report highlights the need to raise the profile of professional cooks and chefs as vital assets to society who nourish our people and can help to protect our planet. In combination with broader policies aimed at improving diets, we identify the role of professional cooks and chefs in shifting British food culture towards freshly prepared food, supported by public procurement and school food education policies that promote the value of professional cookery. We underscore the importance of building workforce capacity by streamlining training pathways and updating curricula to reflect modern food system needs. Finally, we emphasise the need to coordinate action by developing a community of practice and clear policy asks that can advance change in this underappreciated area of food system transformation.



Keynote speaker Thomasina Miers, Co-founder of Wahaca, Chef and Writer.

Introduction

Our current food systems are heavily commodified and cause many societal and environmental problems including environmental degradation, household food insecurity, diet-related illnesses, inequalities and excessive food waste. Workers in food systems can act to address these problems.

The food sector in the UK employs more than 13% of the country's workforce¹. This figure illustrates our reliance on an army of workers – from farmers and fishermen through to food technicians and chefs – to keep us nourished. Historically, professional cookery has been seen as an essential skill for society, with its form changing depending on societal needs and challenges.

Currently, the professional cookery sector is facing record staff shortages, leaving our food systems ever more vulnerable to unexpected shocks and long-term problems^{2,3}. Across society, professional cooks and chefs feed millions of people daily, yet their contribution as food system actors has been largely undervalued.

As Professor Christina Vogel, Director, Centre for Food Policy, City St George's, University of London, emphasised:

“Professional cookery doesn't seem to be celebrated in our society. We need to think more deeply about how cooking and food systems are fundamentally connected... Professional cooks and chefs are an essential tenet of society, yet, as a culture, we don't embrace or value professional cooking the way we should.”

Work by researchers at the Centre for Food Policy has shown there is a distinct lack of clarity in career pathway options for professional cooks across public food service and food manufacturing, as well as hospitality. Cookery careers receive a low profile in school curricula and by careers advisers, further hindering future workforce capacity.

Current professional cookery curriculum requirements cover core topics of food safety and hygiene, menu planning, food preparation and business skills. However, core curricula are also well placed to incorporate food systems subjects such as nutrition, environmental sustainability, sustainable food production and sourcing, supply chain disruptions and food waste. Incorporating these subjects in core and on-the-job training could broaden the skills of a significant number of actors in our everyday food settings.

Supported by joined-up policies that increase the value of professional cookery, this workforce has the potential to support wider activities that are addressing systemic food system problems. Professional cooks and chefs can increase societal capabilities to manage food supply shocks and help to reorientate our society to value freshly cooked, healthy, sustainable meals and snacks. To achieve these outcomes, coordinated thinking and action across the sector are required, bringing stakeholders together to



build a unified voice that clearly identifies the key policies needed to drive change.

The 2025 City St George's Food Policy Symposium invited collective debate on this novel food systems topic and explored how professional cookery can be prioritised and reimagined through food policy. Over 200 delegates from civil society organisations, local and national policy agencies, food industry, and academia met to share thought and activities, and identify opportunities for future action.

There are multiple and overlapping ways of referring to the professional cookery sector and roles within it. This report refers to 'professional cookery' as any sector where food is

cooked or prepared by a person who is paid to do so. This includes public sector catering, hospitality and food manufacturing. Within this, the report distinguishes between professional cooks, chefs and front of house staff. Based on discussions throughout the day, this differentiation was considered significant, as these roles encompass distinct skill sets and carry differing meanings and identities for those who occupy them.

This report provides a summary of the key insights that arose from the speakers and discussions across the day. It aims to capture key themes, lessons and recommendations shared by delegates, synthesised into four core themes. These are depicted in the image with the pot (theme one) representing the existing attributes

that professional cooks and chefs already possess, and the ingredients (themes two to four) as the changes needed. The soup bowls (theme five) represent the nourishment for people and planet that could follow. We anticipate that this report will be of interest to all food systems changemakers and that it will act as a starting point for further conversations and coordinated action on this important topic.

The Ingredients

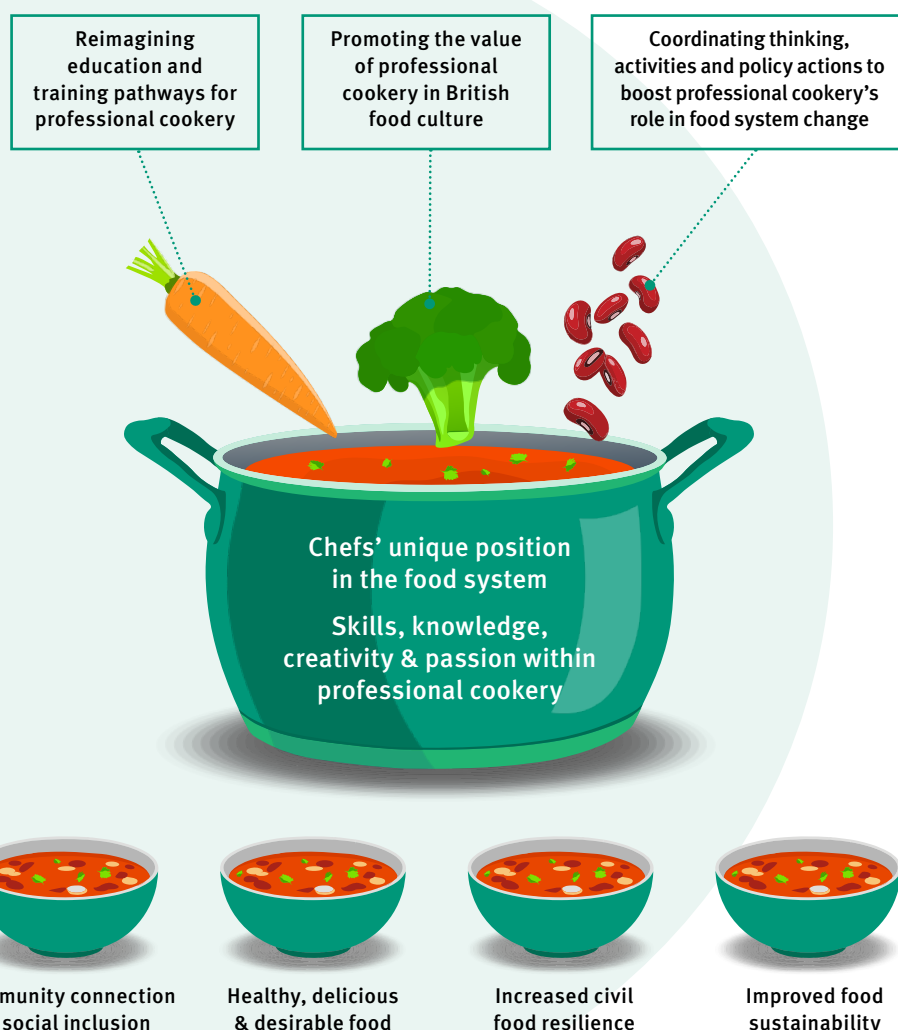
What is needed to build the capacity of professional cooks and chefs as food system transformers

The Pot

What already exists within the professional cookery sector which can be built upon to drive transformative food system change

The Soup

Areas where professional cooks and chefs can deliver change, helping to build a healthy, sustainable, resilient and just food





Valuing the unique role of professional cooks in our food systems

Symposium highlighted that chefs and professional cooks hold a distinct and influential role within the food system and that their existing skills and knowledge offer a unique opportunity to support food systems change.

The work of chefs and professional cooks intersects with multiple food system activities, including production, procurement, consumption, education and social interaction. This unique position enables chefs and cooks in professional kitchens to influence not only what food is eaten, but also how it is sourced, prepared and understood within society. Beyond this, professional cookery can help strengthen community connection, provide a pathway for social inclusion and support food system resilience. In this way, as a workforce, cooks and chefs act as key agents of change.

However, despite this ability to touch on multiple areas of the food system, it was felt that professional cooks' potential to drive food system transformation is not widely recognised among food policy groups or those in hospitality, public sector and food manufacturing.

As Peter Kenyon, 2025 Master of the Worshipful Company of Cooks, emphasised:

"We must raise the profile of cooking as a profession to ensure we have the best candidates to manage our industry as a future.... We can and must make our world a better and more sustainable place to live, eat and work."

By choosing fresh, minimally processed ingredients and making thoughtful decisions about sourcing and preparation, **chefs and cooks can significantly impact the sustainability of the food system.** As Paul Newnham, CEO of SDG2 Advocacy Hub, emphasised:

"Chefs are strong voices in the food system. And they are strong voices not only through the foods they create, but the choices they make in doing so.... This is around healthy diets, sourcing ingredients, thinking about alternate grains, ethically sourcing, who they work with, and how they work with different fishers, farmers and growers."

Where food is sourced is crucial for achieving a sustainable food system. Examples from businesses and social initiatives such as Wahaca, E5 Bakehouse and the Chef's Manifesto demonstrate how chefs can prioritise local, ethically sourced ingredients and reduce food waste. This approach to

sourcing can help support local farmers by encouraging fair pay and sustainable farming practices. These practices, when paired with community education, can reshape public perceptions of food and what foods are valuable. Olukemi Atijosan, Founder and Managing Director of Eagle Solutions Services Limited, reinforced this point:

"There are a number of things chefs can do to support food systems change – chefs are big influencers. The first thing chefs can do is source their ingredients responsibly, teaching their communities that ingredients are important."

Cooks and chefs have the ability to **make healthy meals and snacks appealing and desirable.** Providing



Afternoon panel session. From left to right: Sheila Dillon, Presenter of BBC Radio 4's The Food Programme; Olukemi Atijosan, MBA, FRSA, London Food Board, Black Food Fund and African and Caribbean Heritage Food Network Ltd; Lauren Woodley, Nomad Foods; Nicole Pisani, Chefs in Schools; Dr Rebecca Wells, City St George's, University of London.

people with the opportunity to eat delicious, minimally processed foods is central to the shift away from unhealthy processed foods towards healthier diets desperately needed among the British population. Professional cooks have the knowledge and skills to make healthy meals delicious and readily available, making them important influencers in reshaping people's food preferences. As Lauren Woodley, Head of Nutrition at Nomad Foods, noted during the second plenary session of the day:

“Chefs should be involved in the food industry. They have a magical way of helping to make healthy foods tasty.... We can make the healthiest food in the world, but if it doesn't taste good, people won't eat it.”

Throughout the day, contributors and attendees highlighted the vital role chefs and cooks play in **strengthening community connection and social inclusion**. Professional cooks interact with communities in multiple diverse ways across private and public sectors. In our schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons, as well as in restaurants, bars and cafes, chefs and cooks act as vital community assets. Sarah Newton, Food System's Lead at Birmingham City Council, captured this sentiment:

“When thinking of improving our social networks, professional cooking needs to be viewed as an asset; it helps to bring people together, not just a nice to have but as the fabric of society and community.”

Professional cookery can serve as a pathway for social inclusion and rehabilitation. Initiatives such as those led by The Clink Charity, Shelter, and E5 Bakehouse demonstrate how culinary training can support individuals facing

systemic barriers, offering long-term career pathways and community engagement. Camila Marcías from E5 Bakehouse underscored that the ‘Not Just Bread’ programme, which trains refugee women as bakers, offers:

“A sense of being part of a community. It builds a skill set that helps these women to seek work opportunities, not just in bakeries but in diverse areas. It is a diverse traineeship, where the women not only learn about baking but also about procurement, front of house and business management.”

Similarly, The Clink Charity runs training and rehabilitation schemes based around cooking and serving in prisons and supports ex-offenders to find work in hospitality following their release. Neil Delahay, Senior Leader and National Employer Manager at The Clink Charity stated:

“The bottom line is that a combination of training, support and rehabilitation creates greater opportunities for people to work in hospitality... stability, a career path and accommodation reduce reoffending rates by half.”

In this way, professional cookery has the potential to support systemic changes that not only improve health and sustainability but also wider societal concerns around rehabilitation and unemployment.

Delegates also discussed how **professional cooks and chefs have a crucial role to play in supporting food system resilience**. Despite food being one of the UK Government's 13 critical infrastructures, there is no proper planning for how to feed the nation in the face of external shocks such as climate-related disasters or war⁴.

Jayne Jones, Chair of the Public Sector Catering Alliance (PCSA) and Assistant Director for NHS

Greater Glasgow and Clyde, used the example of how public sector cooks and chefs are crucial in times of crisis:

“In rural Argyll, a storm took out the whole power network. They don't have mains gas, so the entire peninsula was cut off with only one generator. It was the school and hospital that kept the people fed.”

Tim Lang, Professor Emeritus, Centre for Food Policy, City St George's, University of London, emphasised how existing skills within professional cookery, such as those in the festival food sector, can be utilised to help society manage shocks.

“The skills for crisis response already exist in the professional chef and festival food sectors.... Civic society holds potential answers, but it is lacking scale and structure,”

Tim Lang, Professor Emeritus, Centre for Food Policy, City St George's, University of London.

Cutting across food systems challenges of resilience, community cohesion and inclusion, unhealthy and unsustainable diets, professional cookery holds a unique position in its ability to enact change in multiple ways. This position is crucial in supporting wider policy efforts that seek to cultivate a food culture that supports healthy, sustainable, fair and resilient food systems.



Promoting the value of professional cookery in British food culture

The key role professional cooks and chefs can play in transforming British food culture away from reliance on unhealthy processed foods toward freshly prepared, plant-rich foods was repeatedly highlighted throughout the day. Examples of international best practice, innovative local initiatives and policy ideas all contributed to a pathway forward to food culture change.

During their keynote speeches, Thomasina Miers, Co-founder of Wahaca, Chef, Writer, and Baroness Walmsley, Chair of the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, House of Lords, both highlighted that British food culture is dominated by convenience and ultra-processed foods (UPFs). This food culture is causing significant public health costs. Miers cited that poor diets alone cost the UK £268 billion⁵. Across multiple workshops, delegates highlighted the untapped potential of professional chefs and cooks in cultivating a British food culture that values healthy and sustainable foods.

Transforming public sector food systems was identified as a way of reorientating British food culture towards health and environmental

sustainability, with professional chefs and cooks being central to successfully realising this shift. However, it was stressed that **changes in public procurement practices towards supplying more healthy and sustainable food** were needed to support this.

With 5.5% of all out-of-home food in the UK being consumed in public sector catering⁶, governments and local councils across the UK have the power to create opportunities for local and sustainable food production and consumption.

Delegates highlighted that while many councils and devolved nations are making strides in public sector procurement reform, these efforts remain fragmented. Professor Kevin Morgan, Professor of Governance and Development at Cardiff University,

noted that public procurement practices in the UK reflect:

“Low-cost masquerading as best-value.”

This approach prioritises low-cost convenience foods that undermine efforts to promote healthy and sustainable diets to children, prisoners and others reliant on public sector catering. Additionally, this approach contributes to the deskilling of public sector professional cookery staff.

Achieving a shift from the UK’s current public procurement approach, which foregrounds economic value, to a food system approach that weighs economic, social, cultural and environmental value equally will require a strong professional cookery workforce trained in food systems topics.

International examples demonstrate how public procurement policies which connect sustainable production and consumption require professional cookery and nutrition skills to support the implementation of these policies.

Dr Taina Zaneti, Professor at the Centre of Excellence in Tourism, University of Brasília, Brazil, shared that in her country, public procurement regulations mandate that 30% of food for public sector catering⁷ comes from smallholder family farms, supporting both local economies and biodiversity. She further highlighted that nutritionists are hired by school kitchens to develop menus that are healthy, delicious and culturally appropriate.



Keynote speaker Baroness Joan Walmsley

Similarly, Dr Stephanie Assmann Terada, Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Hyogo, Japan explained that chefs and nutritionists are required by the Japanese policy to collaborate in schools to design balanced meals for children. These two examples illustrate the value placed on the skills required to develop and prepare healthy, locally sourced meals.

Training and reskilling public sector cooks and chefs in healthy, sustainable menu development can support the changes that a revised procurement approach seeks to achieve. Accompanying sustainable procurement policies with food education activities such as food preparation, school meal service and food systems knowledge has facilitated changes in food culture in these international examples.

Several conversations emphasised the importance of food education in schools and centred on **the crucial role of professional cooks and chefs in developing a love of healthy, sustainable foods and understanding our food systems from an early age.** Nicole Pisani from Chefs in Schools commented:

“You can’t change how children eat without first educating them about food and how to eat.... We need to start understanding that food education is not something to teach, but something to embed in schools.”

Initiatives such as TastEd and Chefs in Schools show how chefs and professional cooks can support children’s food literacy. Maria Dunbar, CEO at Leith’s Education, highlighted that schools can act as a safe space for children to experience healthy, sustainable foods which may be new to them.

Olukemi Atjiosan (Eagle Solutions Services Limited) shared the importance of involving local stakeholders in school food

environments through activities such as open days for parents to have lunch with children or child-run breakfast services. These activities enable food literacy skills acquired in schools to extend out into the wider community. The positive impact of food-related educational opportunities extends through schooling and into higher education.

Offering students opportunities to pursue pathways in professional cookery through formal post-16 qualifications, such as reinstating cookery A-Levels, was identified as a way to help improve the way professional cookery qualifications and skills are valued, and so, encourage more young people to move into food-related careers.

One of the workshop discussions highlighted that **policies are needed to support an equitable change in food culture.** These policies are particularly important for groups most at risk of poor diet, including families living on lower incomes, young people and older adults, in recognition that healthy foods and healthy meals are considerably more expensive than unhealthy, highly processed foods. One initiative that delegates discussed was the potential opportunities afforded by public diners in:

“Providing healthy and affordable meals for workers through community canteens with the issuing of meal vouchers,”

Delegate from Workshop 2.

Government subsidised public diners could offer affordable, healthy, sustainable and delicious food that brings people together and is convenient. Public diners would help to replace the unhealthy fast food and mass-produced pub meals that currently dominate our high streets and could open further employment opportunities for professional cooks skilled in food systems topics.

In combination with broader policy initiatives aimed at improving diets, such as junk food advertising and marketing bans and mandatory nutrition labelling, sustainable public procurement, compulsory food education and public diners can support professional cookery to drive a transformative shift towards a food culture that values healthy, sustainable food. However, for this shift to occur, there is a need to increase professional cookery’s workforce capacity and the value of cookery skills. Training and education were identified by delegates as a key route to achieving this.





Reimagining education and training pathways for professional cookery

Training and education offer important avenues for increasing the value of professional cookery skills and supporting chefs to enact changes within the food system but core curricula need updating and training pathways expanded and streamlined to build adequate workforce capacity.

Keynote speaker Thomasina Miers summed this theme up nicely:

“If you’ve got trained cooks, if you can educate them, then they can be innovative.”

Revising outdated curricula provides the opportunity to include food systems topics, such as food waste management, nutrition and sustainable procurement. This knowledge can enhance the existing skills of professional cooks and chefs, increasing their capacity to support the provision of healthy, sustainable meals across our everyday settings.

“We must educate our chefs and restaurant managers to look at the sustainability of the ingredients and the end product. To look at the quality of the product, how it was produced and transported, and to look at different food that might be more suitable for different climate scenarios,”

Peter Kenyon, Master of the Worshipful Company of Cooks 2025

Vince Kelly, Hospitality Skills Academy Manager at Capital City College Westminster and the Culinary and Sustainability Director at Culinary Medicine UK, highlighted that many training courses still focus

on traditional French cuisine and are often heavy in meat and dairy. He emphasised that exploring plant-centric techniques not only brings in more health and sustainability elements but also reduces overall costs, linking directly to business management, another key skill of professional chefs.

“We’re trying to be more plant-centric, and it’s also much cheaper. We talk about markups - if you have that cheaper ingredient, it doesn’t mean that we don’t have meat, but the quality of meat can be so much better,”

Vince Kelly, Capital City College Westminster.

Embedding food system topics as core subjects alongside existing core food preparation skills, food safety, business management and front of house service subjects can support chefs to integrate healthy and sustainable practices into their work.

A number of organisations, such as Capital City College, Leith’s Education and the School of Artisan Food, among others, are delivering food systems training within existing college and professional development culinary education programmes. Speaking from the perspective of food manufacturers training their chefs, Lauren Woodley from Nomad Foods stated:

“Generally, our chefs come from restaurants, and they want to use lots of butter, but then they go through our nutrition training which helps them meet sustainability and health parameters. Training is vital in this way.”

Adopting a holistic approach to training and development reflects the realities and responsibilities of modern food systems and can support food businesses to thrive commercially as part of these systems. **Simplifying education and training pathways and promoting the value of chefs and cooks** across hospitality, public sector catering and food manufacturing was considered important to increase the status of professional cookery as a viable and celebrated career pathway that is welcome to all.

Despite hospitality and catering skills being vital to society and professional cookery’s potential to offer flexible, meaningful employment, as well as contributing to public health and sustainability, delegates expressed that the profession is an undervalued career choice. It is often portrayed as a fallback option rather than an inspiring and respected profession. As Maria Dunbar from Leiths Education observed,

“Culinary-based courses are relegated to less-able students as a career pathway.”

This perception is reinforced by low wages, perceptions of toxic workplace cultures, and a lack of visibility in mainstream education. These factors collectively limit young people’s desire to enter the sector and contribute to workforce recruitment and retention issues the sector is experiencing. From 2024 to 2025, the UK’s hospitality sector lost 59,000 employees, the largest loss of any sector within the same time period⁸.

Discussions highlighted that the lack of clarity in professional cookery training and career pathways is hindering workforce growth. As Vince Kelly emphasised:

“Our industry is such a great industry. Professionals work hard and have multiple skill sets and knowledge, but we need to professionalise the industry”

Jenny Paxman, CEO at the School of Artisan Food, noted that not having a streamlined career pathway, such as a clear A-Level route, may be blocking young people from entering the sector:

“There is currently no consensus on how to get into a professional food career. There is a need for change, especially at A-levels, so that students can find different routes from level 3 into food roles.”

Streamlining professional cookery education could help to elevate the perceived value of cookery as a career, enhance food system literacy, and support sustainable pathways into the sector. But delegates cautioned that reforms must balance formal qualifications with accessibility to ensure diverse entry routes into the sector are maintained.

Many individuals enter professional cookery through practice-based pathways. These diverse entry points offer flexibility and accessibility for employers and employees, especially those with limited formal education. Delegates described accessibility as a core strength of the sector that must be protected through pathway revisions.

“Hospitality can’t just be about regulated qualifications, learning and development in businesses is really important and on-the-job training is an important part of cheffing and cooking,”

**Julianne Caillouette-Noble,
Managing Director, Sustainable
Restaurant Association**

Concerns attached to over-professionalisation centred on a fear that people who entered the industry through practice-based pathways may be excluded. Jayne Jones, Chair of the Public Sector Catering Alliance (PCSA) and Assistant Director for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, highlighted the need to protect public sector catering’s diversity:

“Professionalisation has been much needed to a degree, but others see themselves as nurturers, as givers, and don’t want to be professionalised. They don’t want to be forced into a box that they aren’t comfortable with. We need to be cautious with some of this.”

Professional cookery is an important pathway that offers flexible work for individuals with limited formal education and flexibility in working hours. Alicia Walker, Assistant Director of Advocacy and Activism at Shelter, highlighted the importance of:

“Upskilling through different pathways and meeting people where they are.”





Morning panel session. From left to right: Professor Christina Vogel, City St George's University of London; Kate Nicholls, UKHospitality; Vince Kelly, CCC Westminster; Jayne Jones, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde; Professor Tim Lang, City St George's, University of London.

Delegates emphasised the need to focus on consistency of quality and competencies rather than standardisation per se. This approach would protect the multiple entry points to becoming a chef or professional cook, whilst also increasing the perceived value of professional cookery skills.

Approaches such as skills passports and flexible qualifications allow individuals to demonstrate competencies gained through diverse experiences while maintaining high standards across the sector and greater certainty for employees. Speaking on alternative educational schemes, such as the Food and Drink Career Passport, Caroline Keohane, Head of Industry Growth at the Food and Drink Federation, stated:

“The food and drink manufacturing sector is highly diverse, which makes identifying the necessary skills very difficult.... A flexible approach to skills capacities is needed to help the food and drink manufacturing sector match employers and employees.”

Currently, there are **significant gaps in knowledge and understanding of what chefs and hospitality professionals are learning** through various training pathways, as well as limited visibility of what chefs are doing across the industry and where best practice sits. Recognising and mapping the broad range of competencies within professional cookery – from high-end restaurants and food manufacturers to school kitchens and hospital catering – was viewed as important to ensure training courses match these needs.

Camila Marcías (E5 Bakehouse) emphasised the need to adopt a food systems approach to training, cautioning against piecemeal skills development that overlooks the wider context in which food is produced, procured and served. She argued:

“We must avoid thinking in silos when planning skills training. Capacity building should come from diverse parts of the food system. This includes incorporating food systems thinking into capacity building, considering not just cooking, but also food procurement and management, and front-of-house operations.”

Building capacity for professional cooks and chefs to support food system change from their unique position requires a shared understanding of essential competencies across hospitality, food manufacturing and public sector catering, and clear pathways for developing them. Delegates expressed a strong appetite for joining-up training, competency and career pathways across hospitality, public sector catering and food manufacturing, so the sector can speak clearly to policymakers about what is required for professional cooks and chefs to advance food system transformation across these settings.



Coordinating thinking and actions to boost professional cookery's role in food systems change

There is a wealth of innovative activity inspiring change across the professional cookery sectors, but a coordinated approach is urgently required to bring about coherent and effective changes in policy and practice.

Exemplar activities within the sector ranged from local authority initiatives and campaign groups to chef-led networks and long-term charity projects. However, there was a collective sense among delegates that these efforts often operate in isolation. The urgent need for greater cohesion, collaboration and development of a shared vision across the sector was clear. This collective action would aim to align training pathways, accreditation and advocacy to build a united, strong voice for change.

“Work together, break down silos, ensure everyone has a voice. It’s a win for skills, the economy, and the environment,”
Tim Lang, City St George’s, University of London.

Participants noted that progress is being held back by the limited representation of professional cookery in policy forums. Concerns were raised about the **disconnect between government policy action that affects professional cookery and the realities** of the hospitality, public sector catering and food manufacturing sectors on the ground. Highlighting the issues in public sector catering, Jayne Jones, NHS Scotland, described how:

“We [public sector catering] continue to be overlooked as an industry and locked out of decision-making forums. We have to be heard to help enable the food systems transformation we want to see.”

Professional cooks, chefs and caterers struggle to keep pace with a wide range of policies affecting their work across hospitality and manufacturing regulations, and public sector catering standards. Stakeholders want to be part of the ever-changing policy context, but there is a general feeling that certain sectors are not always actively involved with policymaking.

“Hospitality needs to be in the conversation about the national food strategy, but that conversation can’t just be about viable businesses and profit, we need the carrot and the stick. Policies such as better business rates and reductions should support creative changes,”**

Juliane Caillouette Noble, The Sustainable Restaurant Association.

At varying points throughout the day, conversations returned to the tough economic environment the hospitality industry is currently experiencing, alongside the sector’s continued struggles with recruitment and retention of staff⁹. Delegates discussed the opportunities offered by fiscal policy reforms, such as reduced business rates and financial incentives, to support innovations in the sector. However, they emphasised that the policy approach must be holistic and joined-up across economic, training, procurement, education and social care policies. Adopting a joined-up approach would help to bring the sector together.

“A holistic national food strategy is essential. It must support sustainable businesses – from small cafés to farmers – and prioritise health and nutrition as enablers of growth both at home and out of home.... We can’t solve this separately. Government likes silos, but we must break them down within industry and public sector catering. We need a comprehensive strategy, good training and quality procurement. Nothing is more foundational than food and it must be part of the industrial strategy,”

Kate Nicholls, CEO, UK Hospitality.

A clear appetite emerged among delegates for a coordinated approach to bring about coherent change and address challenges facing the professional cookery sector and the food system more widely. Delegates called for the sector to celebrate the excellent work already underway – making it visible and valued – so that promising practice can translate into up-scaled action.

Many called for the **development of a collaborative community of practice** (CoP) to share best practices, develop research, explore curricula updates and training models, and to consider the central role of food

^{**} At the time of the Food Policy Symposium, hospitality was not represented on the Food Strategy advisory board; however, they are now represented by Bidcorp and Cranswick. Public sector catering is still not independently represented.

culture. The outcomes of this CoP could focus on the collaborative development of key policy asks that would provide the supportive policy environment to enable sustained change.

The Centre for Food Policy has begun to explore this idea with the Chef's Manifesto and Capital City College Westminster, along with leaders from across professional cookery training, practice and culture. The CoP aims to bring together stakeholders to foster learning, innovation and collective action to inform clear policy directions. The CoP aims to build the capacity of professional cooks and hospitality professionals as food system transformers, embedding sustainability, healthy eating and resilience into professional cookery education and practice.

The CoP activities will seek to: share best practice in sustainable and healthy professional cookery; identify evidence gaps, including developing the Centre for Food Policy's mapping work to understand modern competencies across the sector; develop a strategy to improve training including updates to existing curricula and the potential of a sector-wide accreditation scheme; explore the role of professional cookery in British food culture and reshaping how and what we eat; and developing clearly defined policy solutions that can facilitate professional cooks and chefs as food systems changemakers. For more information or to join the CoP, please email foodpolicy@citystgeorges.ac.uk.

The passion, innovation and commitment for future action from delegates and others across the sector were clear during the event. Future collective action can harness the capacity of cooks, chefs and front of house professionals to realise their potential in bringing about change to British food culture and the provision of healthy, sustainable and delicious meals at scale across the UK.

Directions for policy and practice:

Because of their unique role within the food system, professional cooks and chefs are well placed to drive meaningful change. Strengthening their capacity as agents of food transformation can support progress toward a fairer, healthier, more sustainable and more resilient food system.

Across the key discussion areas, several policy and practice directions emerged to help make this possible:

1. Valuing the unique role of professional cooks in our food systems

- Encourage food sourcing, preparation and waste management practices that support professional cooks and chefs to prioritise food that is healthy, delicious and sustainable
- Invest in inclusion and second-entry pathways in professional cookery to enable the sector to be available to all
- Mobilise professional cookery skills and knowledge within resilient food infrastructure

2. Promoting the value of professional cookery in British food culture

- Embed chef-led food education in schools as part of the national curriculum
- Revise public procurement practices to account for a true value approach
- Expand regulations that restrict the marketing and appeal of processed and unhealthy foods and meals

3. Reimagining education and training pathways for professional cookery

- Reimagine streamlined professional cookery training and career pathways that include food systems topics, including nutrition, managing food waste, and sustainable menu-planning and procurement, as core curricula
- Map existing curricula and identify modern competency needs across hospitality, public catering and manufacturing to inform the development of an accessible, sector-wide accreditation

4. Coordinating thinking and actions to boost professional cookery's role in food systems change

- Ensure representation of the hospitality, public sector catering and food manufacturing sectors in the development of the national food strategy
- Establish a professional cookery Community of Practice to scale best-practice and collaboratively develop key policy asks that build cooks and chefs' capacity as food system transformers

A History of Professional Cookery in the City of London

Professional cookery has a long and rich history in the City of London. The case studies presented below illustrate how the societal role of professional cookery has evolved over time, reflecting shifts in what has been required and expected from professional cooks and chefs. The necessary changes within professional cookery required to meet the needs of a modern food system, as explored in this report, can therefore be viewed as part of this evolution.

The Worshipful Company of Cooks

By Past Master Grainger

The Cooks' is one of the oldest Livery Companies in the City of London. Incorporated by Royal Charter in 1482, our origins can be traced back to around 1170 with the joining of two medieval guilds of cooks to regulate the profession within the City – the Cooks of Eastcheap and the Cooks of Bread Street. We are the smallest Livery Company and rank 35th in the City's order of precedence.

The Royal Charter of 1482, in effect, gave the Company control of the catering industry across the City and for a four-mile radius beyond. One could not run a cook shop or restaurant unless you were a

member of the Company and all cook apprentices had to be overseen by a member of the Company. Those who failed to comply with the Company's bye-laws, whether a member of the Company or not, could be brought before the Court of the Company and fined or even imprisoned. The Company remained the accepted regulatory body for the catering industry for the next three centuries and it was only in the early nineteenth century that the Company formally lost control of the trade, although in reality, the Company's influence had been waning for 50 years or more. However, the Company wanted to

continue to play a role in the training of cooks and in 1878 it was one of the founding Livery Companies that created the City & Guilds of London Institute.

Today we are an active and vibrant organisation with a renewed role and relevance, but one firmly rooted in our history and enduring values. In common with the other 114 Livery Companies, our focus is on Fellowship, the City, the Trade and Charity. We deliver all our philanthropic impact through The Cooks Charity and through the separate Worshipful Company of Cooks of London.



Interior of an eating house, etching by Thomas Rowlandson, c.1800. Published in *A History of The Worshipful Company of Cooks* by Alan Borg, 2011. Reproduced with permission of the Worshipful Company of Cooks.

Professional Cookery at City St George's, University of London – Lessons from History

By Professor Martin Caraher and Dr Rebecca Wells

There is a rich history at City St George's, University of London of cooking within a domestic economy framework being the focus of teaching and research. Over the ages this shifted from cooking lessons being offered at the institution, through periods of academic professionalisation and specialism; to more recently being the subject of research at the Centre for Food Policy.

When it opened its doors in 1896, the then Northampton Institute, Domestic Economy and Women's Trades was one of six core sections¹⁰. Like other polytechnics and technical institutes across London, cookery classes were part of domestic economy and women's training. This course was targeted at young women of low and lower middle-class origins and equipped students with skills to

enter domestic service. Many also used these skills to run their own households¹¹.

A move to more academic content and desire for courses with degree awarding status led to the London County Council deciding to consolidate teaching of subjects with "minimal academic content" in 1912-1914¹². Domestic economy was removed to other colleges, of which there were 13 in the London area¹³. Archived records suggest that domestic economy and cookery classes were never resumed after the end of the Second World War.

The study of professional cooking and cooking skills resumed with the arrival of the Centre for Food Policy at City St George's, University of London. Early research carried out at the Centre assessed cooking among the UK population and a Worshipful

Company of Cooks (WCCs) funded PhD studentship assessed cooking in schools. Many publications on cooking originating from the Centre with the help of the WCCs have been produced. This report of the 2025 City St George's Food Policy Symposium Professional Cookery: the missing ingredient for food systems transformation continues this legacy.



A cookery class at the turn of the 19th century at the Northampton Institute, in College Building. The Northampton Institute would later become City St George's, University of London. Reproduced with permission of City St George's, University of London Archives and Special Collections.

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