

# Kingston hospitality sector endures trials of pandemic

Two years after Covid sent the country into lockdown, employees working in Kingston's hospitality sector talk to *Jacobien van der Kleij* on the highs and lows of the pandemic



Restaurants struggled to navigate Covid restrictions

Photo: Restaurant Guru

## HOSPITALITY: a national view

Hospitality has been one of the worst affected sectors by lockdowns and government restrictions, according to the Office for National Statistics. The sector may have additionally been impacted by Brexit as the transition period coincided with the start of the latest lockdown, though it is difficult to tell.

In April 2020, just under 1,650,000 employees in the sector were on furlough as businesses paused trading, according to data from HM Revenue and Customs. The government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme allowed employers to claim 80 per cent of an employee's usual salary for hours not worked, to a maximum of £2,500 per month. The scheme was extended four times and officially ended on 30 September 2021. The scheme has cost the government £69 billion.

Vacancies have increased since the onset of the pandemic. In June 2021, the numbers of hospitality employees was 11 per cent lower.

Like all hospitality venues across the country, those in Kingston have struggled to navigate various restrictions over the past two years. *impact.* spoke to employees working across four hospitality venues in Kingston to ask how their workplace navigated the pandemic.

### Triple Two Coffee

This speciality coffee shop on Crescent Street serves ice coffee paired with lunches and snacks to-go. The shop had to shut down multiple times during the pandemic because of a shortage of staff and customers. One third-year student at Kingston University is a barista at Triple Two Coffee. She said:

"Our shop only opened in April 2021, but we already saw a lot of employees leaving as we couldn't pay them.

"Now, our team consists of just six employees. With such limited staff, you need to adjust quickly. I woke up ill, but there was no backup employee that could take my shift, so I came anyway."

### Joe & The Juice

Joe & The Juice in Kingston was opened in May 2021 by manager Syed Hamza Ali before he ran the Wimbledon location. At one point during lockdown, Joe & The Juice on

Wimbledon Hill was the only coffee shop open for takeaways. Even Greggs and Pret a Manger closed down.

He said: "The turnover in suburban places such as Clapham, Chelsea and Wimbledon was going through the roof. I remember one day in Wimbledon that we earned £3,000 pounds in one day, compared to £300 pounds prior to the pandemic.

"The increased turnover helped the company think about setting up new initiatives, such as mobile application."

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### The Grey Horse

This long-established whisky and cocktail bar has been a brewery on Richmond Road since 1903. Manager Ionut Bratean said the pandemic was "pretty tough", but that the venue still managed to cope.

He said: "Instead of having less customers when we reopened, we got

more, which is still happening at the moment. It was pretty hard especially for our staff. They only received furlough for a maximum of 40 hours while doing over hours. But eventually, we reported an increase of 30 per cent turnover in 2021 compared to 2018."

### Fortunella

Assistant owner of lunchroom Fortunella Marcella Yassine still remembers the shock she went through in March 2020, when the government announced restaurants needed to close down. "We were a very successful business at the time," she said.

"Every year we were growing. Initially, the support from government was really helpful. But compared to what we were usually making, it was absolutely inadequate.

"The furlough, that covered 80 per cent of employee wages, helped us to cope with the financial difficulties.

"We didn't have to make anybody redundant. In hindsight I think we only closed for one month. We changed our menus as well, when indoor dining was not allowed. People could only order sandwiches and coffee to go.

"What worked for us is that we battled through as a team. It was quite challenging, constantly reading upon all the changes on furloughs and adjusting to the ever-changing Covid-19 rules."

## Let's fly away: travel to take off in 2022

By **AYSHA GILMORE AND JAMES HOGG**

Almost two thirds of people in Kingston said that they felt confident about travelling abroad now that travel restrictions have started to ease in the UK.

A poll conducted by *impact.* found that over 63 per cent of residents were confident about booking a holiday abroad in 2022.

Around 35 per cent of people said they felt apprehensive about flying abroad this year, and just one and a half per cent were unsure about flying all together.

It comes as Heathrow said it was expecting some 45 million passengers to travel from the airport this year, up from 19.4 million in 2021.

The government announced in January that it was scrapping testing requirements for fully vaccinated arrivals from 11 February, which may impact people's confidence as it makes travelling outside of the UK easier.

Covid had a serious impact on international travel but a successful vaccine uptake combined with reduction of travel restrictions means people can be optimistic about jet setting this year.

"As I am triple vaccinated, I'm not feeling too worried. I'm more excited than nervous as I was supposed to go in 2020 and it got cancelled," said Izzy Schulte, 21, from Weybridge.

Schulte is a third year Sussex University filmmaking student and enjoys travelling when it is safe to do so. This will be her first time travelling abroad since the summer of 2019.

In 2019, before the pandemic, Heathrow welcomed more than 80 million passengers and while this year isn't expected to reach those altitudes, the numbers are on a good trajectory for those who work in the aviation industry and for passengers.



Photo: Chine Nouvelle