



# THE \_\_\_\_\_ **INTERIM 24** PLAYBOOK



[truenorthtalent.co.uk/interim](https://truenorthtalent.co.uk/interim)



[info@truenorthtalent.co.uk](mailto:info@truenorthtalent.co.uk)

# THE SEAT THAT COSTS YOU MONEY BEFORE YOU NOTICE

## What an empty senior role really means for a food and drink site in 2026

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**When a Technical, Supply Chain, Operations or Engineering Manager gives notice, most sites do the same thing. They advertise the role, hold things together as best they can, and wait. This playbook exists because waiting is more expensive than most people realise.**

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Food and drink is the UK's largest manufacturing subsector by a factor of more than two, accounting for over 21% of total manufacturing gross value added. It is also one of the most exposed to the labour market conditions that define 2026. The Make UK Executive Survey published this year found that 86% of manufacturers now cite employment costs as their single biggest pressure point. Across UK manufacturing as a whole there are 48,000 live vacancies. For food and drink specifically, employment is forecast to contract by 3.6% this year against a sector average of 1.2%.

In practice, that means the candidate pool for a senior Technical or Production Manager in your area has become meaningfully shallower. The people you need are already placed, or they are being approached by several businesses at once. A standard recruitment process that might have taken six weeks three years ago now takes longer, and the window between a resignation and a new appointment landing on site has grown with it.

**48,000**

Live manufacturing  
vacancies across the  
UK right now

**-3.6%**

Food & drink  
employment contraction  
forecast for 2026

**21%**

Share of total UK  
manufacturing GVA  
from food & drink alone

Sources: Make UK Manufacturing Outlook Q1 2026; Make UK Executive Survey 2026 (with PwC)

## THE FINANCIAL REALITY OF AN EMPTY SEAT

A vacancy at senior level on a food and drink site is rarely just a HR inconvenience. Within the first week, you are typically looking at compromised shift coverage, a degraded technical oversight structure, and a gap in the ownership of compliance activity. None of those things announce themselves loudly. They accumulate quietly, and they tend to surface at the worst possible moment.

That moment is usually an unannounced retailer visit or a BRCGS audit. The UK's major supermarkets did not slow their technical audit programmes because your recruitment timeline extended. A Grade AA site that drops to a B during a vacancy window faces consequences that a three-month search cannot undo in a hurry. The commercial cost of compromised standards at tier-one level is not theoretical. It is measured in delisted lines and lost contracts. And it is not only audit performance that suffers. The same gap plays out operationally, day in and day out, long before an auditor ever sets foot on site.

**Line downtime, non-conformances that go unresolved, shift plans held together with informal cover arrangements, quality data that nobody owns week to week. These are the real costs of a vacancy. They do not show up on a recruitment invoice, but they show up on a P&L.**

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## WHY PERMANENT HIRING ALONE IS NOT THE ANSWER

None of this is an argument against permanent recruitment. A strong permanent hire is the right outcome for most vacancies. The point is that a three-month search process leaves a site operating below its risk threshold for three months, and in a market defined by skills shortages and the growing pressure of Employment Rights Act changes landing through 2026 and 2027, that exposure window is getting longer, not shorter.

The decision between permanent vs interim hires is not either/or. The sites that handle vacancies most effectively run both tracks in parallel: an interim placed immediately to hold the operation to its normal standard, and a permanent search running properly alongside it without the pressure of a ticking clock. That structure also tends to produce better permanent appointments, because the brief is clearer and the site is stable rather than reactive. Whoever you appoint permanently walks into a well-run operation rather than a backlog.

The rest of this playbook explains how the Interim 24 desk works, what the first thirty days on your site look like, and what our clients have said about the difference it made.



## HOW INTERIM 24 WORKS

**Speed without shortcuts. Sector knowledge without the generalist guesswork.**

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**True North Talent was founded by Amy Griffith and Emma Symonds, two recruiters who between them have spent decades working exclusively in food and drink manufacturing. That specialism is not a positioning statement. It is the reason we can put the right person on your site within 24 hours – not just a warm body to cover a shift.**

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There is a version of interim recruitment that most Operations Directors and HR teams have experienced and would rather not repeat. An agency takes the brief, spends a few days searching, and sends a shortlist of people who look approximately right on paper but have never worked in a chilled ready meals environment, or who understand the technical function in a broad sense but have never managed a BRCGS audit from the front. That approach wastes time that sites with an open vacancy do not have.

It works differently because it is built on a different foundation. We only recruit for food and drink manufacturing, across Operations, Technical, Engineering, NPD, Supply Chain, H&S, Commercial & Marketing, and HR. The contractors in our active pool are sector specialists, not professionals from adjacent industries who happen to be available. When you call us about a Technical Manager vacancy on a fresh produce site, we are not starting a search. We are selecting from people we already know, who are already pre-cleared, and who have already worked in environments like yours.

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## WHAT “PRE-CLEARED” ACTUALLY MEANS

The reason we can move in 24 hours is that the compliance work is done before the phone rings. Every contractor we hold on file has completed right-to-work verification and full referencing in advance. When a vacancy comes in, we are not waiting around, we know who exactly to call.

That distinction matters more than it might seem. The compliance step is where most agencies lose a day or two on an urgent placement. By removing it from the critical path entirely, we give contractors the conditions to achieve real autonomy from day one rather than day three or four. They arrive ready to take over and take your stresses away.

## BEFORE THE CALL

### What is already done

- ✓ Right-to-work verification completed
- ✓ Full references taken and held on file
- ✓ IR35 and insurance status documented
- ✓ Food sector credentials confirmed
- ✓ Contractor briefed on current market

## AFTER THE CALL

### What happens next

- ✓ Site matched to contractor specialism
- ✓ Briefing prepared and issued
- ✓ Contractor on site, day one, achieving autonomy
- ✓ True North point of contact stays live
- ✓ Regular check ins, standard

## WHY SECTOR SPECIALISM CHANGES WHAT IS POSSIBLE

One of our clients described it plainly: a call on a Friday morning, four strong CVs in his inbox by Friday afternoon, interviews complete by Monday afternoon, offer made. The difference, in his words, was that Amy understood the industry and asked the right questions about the placement. A generalist recruiter with a broad manufacturing network does not have that conversation. They have a different one, and it takes longer.

We cover every major product category in UK food and drink: fresh produce, bakery and patisserie, dairy, chilled and frozen ready meals, meat, poultry and seafood, ambient, drinks, and free-from. We understand the specific audit demands, the retailer codes of practice, and the shift patterns that apply to each. That is the difference between a contractor who can hold a technical team together on day one and one who needs a fortnight before they can run a briefing on their own.

**We do not send six CVs and let you filter. We send the right person for your site and your standard. Because we only work in food and drink manufacturing, that is a distinction we can actually make and stand behind.**

## WHAT WE COVER ON THE INTERIM 24 DESK

The desk holds active, pre-cleared contractors across Technical, Quality, Production, Engineering, NPD and Process Development, Supply Chain and Planning, Health and Safety, Hygiene and HR. Whether your vacancy is driven by an unplanned resignation, a period of shift coverage pressure, a site expansion, or a TUPE transfer, the desk can respond within 24 hours. The brief does not need to be complicated. It needs to be honest, and we will take it from there.

# THE FIRST 30 DAYS: A SITE STABILISATION BLUEPRINT

## What a True North interim actually does when they arrive on your site

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**A good interim does not need a settling-in period. By the time a True North contractor walks through your gate, they already know what week one looks like. This is the structure they follow, and the outcome you should expect.**

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The first thirty days of an interim placement divide naturally into two phases with different objectives. The first week is about securing the site against any risk that has accumulated since the vacancy opened. If you have an open vacancy, days eight to thirty are about building the platform that makes your permanent search worthwhile, so that whoever you appoint walks into an operation in better shape than the one your departing colleague left behind.

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### DAYS 1 TO 7 – IMMEDIATE STABILISATION

The contractor's first priority is to understand what has drifted during the vacancy period and close any gaps before there are any audit or production failures. This is not bureaucratic box-ticking. It is the practical work of re-establishing proper cover on a site that has been running without it. That work covers both sides of the gap a vacancy leaves behind: the compliance and technical checks that keep you audit-ready, and the operational checks that keep the shop floor running as it should.

- ✓ Full review of live Critical Control Points against the current HACCP plan, with any deviation or undocumented adjustment from the vacancy window flagged and actioned
- ✓ Shift layout assessed and documented: where is cover thin, where has informal arrangement replaced proper oversight, and what needs to change before the next audit window
- ✓ Direct contact established with tier-one retail account technical contacts, with all relevant codes of practice confirmed current and any outstanding actions owned
- ✓ Open non-conformances and corrective actions from the most recent internal or external audit reviewed, with clear ownership assigned to each



✓ Line performance data from the vacancy period reviewed: downtime events, reject rates, and throughput figures examined for patterns that need investigation

✓ BRCGS readiness check: documentation, traceability systems, and labelling compliance assessed against the current standard version

✓ Team structure conversation: who has been doing what in the absence of senior cover, and where informal arrangements have been creating unacknowledged risk

**By the end of day seven, your site should be operating within its normal risk envelope. Not in the process of getting there – already there. If it is not, you will know exactly what is outstanding and who owns it.**

## **DAYS 8 TO 30 – PROCESS, EFFICIENCY AND HANDOVER**

Once the site is stabilised, the interim's work shifts from risk to improvement and knowledge transfer. This is the phase that determines whether your permanent hire inherits a healthy operation or a backlog of deferred problems. It is also the phase that tends to produce the most tangible commercial benefit from a placement.

Root cause analysis on any line inefficiencies or recurring quality issues identified in week one. Corrective action plans documented and implemented with measurable targets. Supplier non-conformance handling reviewed and tightened. Shift briefings re-established to a consistent standard across all teams. These are not optional extras. They are what distinguishes an interim who holds the line from one who actively improves it.

## DAYS 8 TO 15

### Root cause and recovery

- ✓ Root cause analysis on downtime and quality events from week one
- ✓ Corrective action plans documented, owned, and actioned
- ✓ Shift briefing cadence re-established across all teams
- ✓ Supplier non-conformances reviewed and tightened

## DAYS 16 TO 30

### Handover preparation

- ✓ Full site handover document prepared for permanent hire
- ✓ Open projects and actions logged with status and owner
- ✓ Decision on permanent vs interim hires supported with evidence
- ✓ Knowledge transfer to deputy or team lead completed

The thirty-day structure also changes the quality of your permanent search. When the site is stable and the handover document is thorough, the brief you take to market is specific and confident rather than pressured. You are hiring for a well-defined role rather than reacting to a problem. That tends to produce better permanent appointments, and it gives candidates a clearer picture of what they are walking into.

## ON REDUCING DOWNTIME

We are sometimes asked whether interim cover actually reduces downtime or simply defers it. The honest answer, based on what our clients tell us, is that a well-matched contractor placed quickly tends to reduce downtime during the vacancy period rather than simply maintaining it. One client told us their True North interim had resolved three recurring downtime issues within thirty days that the previous postholder had never got round to addressing. The permanent hire walked into a better operation. That outcome is not guaranteed, but it is common enough that the question of whether to cover a vacancy is less interesting than the question of how fast you move when one opens up.

## WHAT OUR CLIENTS ACTUALLY SAY

### Direct words from Operations Directors, Site Leads, and HR teams

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We do not think recruitment companies should speak for their clients. These are real words from real people who have worked with True North Talent, including through Interim 24.

Outstanding service. Faced with an urgent interim requirement, the team delivered a shortlist of candidates within 12 hours and the role was successfully filled in under a week. Exceptional responsiveness, professionalism and results.

**OPERATIONS DIRECTOR**

A call on a Friday afternoon and by Monday I had four strong CVs in my inbox with comprehensive summaries that took into account my brief. By Wednesday I had seen all four candidates and made an offer. The most positive experience I have had with a recruiter in the last decade.

**HEAD OF SUPPLY CHAIN**

Emma has placed a number of people into our business including recently two site leads. On every occasion she has taken the time to fully understand our business and the specific needs of the roles. She is very well connected across the industry and her extensive experience really shows.

**GROUP OPERATIONS DIRECTOR**

Amy was recommended to me when I needed help recruiting an interim at short notice. From the moment I reached out, Amy was super helpful, easy to talk to, and never took her foot off the gas. I would not hesitate to recommend her to anyone looking for support recruiting interims.

**HEAD OF NPD**

I cannot recommend enough how supportive Amy is when we have an interim need. Working late, giving valuable market insight and providing the support I need when filling an urgent vacancy. She is easy to talk to, down to earth, and gets recruitment done.

**TALENT MANAGER**



## A NOTE ON WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

If there is a pattern in what our clients and contractors tell us, it is this: the thing they value most is not the speed, though they notice the speed. It is that the person who arrives actually knows what they are doing in a food and drink environment. They do not need to be told what a CCP is. They do not need a fortnight before they can take a shift briefing on their own. They understand retailer codes of practice, they understand the pressure of an unannounced visit, and they can have a credible conversation with your site's technical contacts from day one.

That happens because we only work in this sector. We are not a generalist agency with a food and drink division. Food and drink manufacturing is the entirety of what True North Talent does, and that focus is what makes the 24-hour turnaround meaningful rather than just fast.

**The best time to call is before you need us. A proactive Talent Mapping Call costs nothing and means that if a resignation lands on a Thursday, we are already aligned to your site, your standards, and your team rather than starting from scratch on a Friday morning.**

## ACTIVATE INTERIM 24

Whether you have a vacancy now or want to map the market before one appears, we are straightforward to reach. One conversation is all it takes to understand your site and make sure we are ready when you need us. Interim 24 covers mid to senior management level across Technical, Quality, Production, Engineering, NPD, Supply Chain, H&S, and HR for food and drink sites UK wide.



**CALL US**  
0161 399 1575



**EMAIL**  
info@truenorthtalent.co.uk



**ONLINE**  
truenorthtalent.co.uk/interim



**BOOK A CALL**  
Talent Mapping Call  
available within 48 hours