

# Hospitality in 2021

*Marisa Bidois, [Restaurant Association](#), talks with AdvocacyUpdate*

*AdvocacyUpdate:* How would you describe the hospitality sector and the Restaurant Association?

*Marisa Bidois:* The Restaurant Association represents 2,500 businesses, mainly restaurants and cafes. Overall, the hospitality sector is made up of 18,000 businesses employing about 130,000 people across the country.

*AdvocacyUpdate:* How does the hospitality sector here compare with others overseas?

*Marisa Bidois:* There's a lot of similarities, I regularly touch base with overseas associations, and we often have more in common than not. But the differences - the food's better here! We're so lucky in NZ, we have this incredible produce - just the other day I was at a conference with some Agri producers, getting an update on avocados and understanding how much more nutritious NZ avocado are than avocados grown elsewhere, the difference in quality is mind-blowing.

*AdvocacyUpdate:* How do NZ restaurants compare with those in other countries?

*Marisa Bidois:* We have a lot of different cuisine types coming together to culminate in something quite spectacular. We are spoiled for choice, quality dining establishments and really high-quality food as well. One of my key missions at the association is to make sure that hospitality plays a significant role in NZ's food story, because we have something unique to share.

*AdvocacyUpdate:* But your sector is in a bit of strife right now.

*Marisa Bidois:* Yes, it's been a bumpy ride for many businesses over the last 18 months. We were hit hard by Covid, but we've seen a really positive recovery in terms of our trading numbers in the last three or four months. However, we've also had a real labour squeeze, particularly over the last six or seven months.

*AdvocacyUpdate:* The thing we've seen in the media most recently is your Lights Out event - restaurateurs turning their lights off, to protest about immigration policy - how did you arrive at that?

*Marisa Bidois:* It was sparked by our extreme difficulty getting staff. Traditionally we've relied heavily on people coming in on holiday visas to supplement our staff numbers. But then Covid hit and suddenly we had no access to them, with the borders closed. We went from around 30 percent of our workforce being made up of migrant labour to suddenly 15 percent. That's a significant number of people to lose in a short period of time.

The Lights Out campaign was a two-month collective action to raise awareness around some of the challenges we were facing, including immigration policy. Essentially, it was showing that without people, the lights will go out. We wanted to give customers and the public a bit of a taste of, well, what would your town look like if restaurants weren't there? Some of

the great feedback we've had about this campaign is that it gave our businesses the opportunity to talk to their customers about what they're facing as a business. And there were some really great, supportive conversations. The campaign gave the opportunity for customers to understand what their local businesses were facing.

The campaign actually started out with a more traditional advocacy approach. We wrote letters to our Ministers, we met with officials, we talked about issues and possible solutions, however we didn't really see a lot of change happening. In many cases our businesses were feeling quite desperate. They were closing down, reducing hours. We felt that the message maybe wasn't being quite as clear or strong as it needed to be, to show what an impact this was having on our sector.

So, we took a different approach. We started up a petition to examine immigration policy and got almost 4,000 signatures in three weeks. That gave us an opportunity to talk about the petition and about our issues, and this was picked up by local media as well. Our plan was that if we didn't have the opportunity to discuss and meet with officials further about our concerns, our next steps would be the Lights Out campaign.

*AdvocacyUpdate:* What did you achieve?

*Marisa Bidois:* We are really pleased with the result. We've had a very engaged immigration office, we have a meeting set with the Minister, and we've had engagement specifically from their office around some of these issues, which we've really appreciated. And now we've seen change happen as well, in terms of the extension to the essential skills visas - a great win for our sector. There are about 10,000 of these visas within the hospitality sector currently, so that's a lot of people who've essentially had their visas extended for two years.

