



CONSTRUCTION
YOUTH TRUST

Thinking Differently about Future Talent

Insights Report





‘Thinking Differently’

With the spotlight on housebuilding, infrastructure and decarbonisation, construction and the built environment is at the heart of the UK plans for economic growth. Investing in skills to meet this demand is crucial to the sector’s ability to make growth a reality.

Contents

- 1 — Attract
- 4 — Recruit
- 8 — Retain
- 12 — Key Insight
- 13 — Moving Forward

The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) estimates that the construction industry alone needs 250,000 additional workers over the next five years. This future demand means there is enormous potential for the built environment to be a powerful engine of opportunity and social mobility for the next generation of young people entering the workforce. There is a strong consensus that increasing apprenticeships and other employer-led pathways is a cornerstone of boosting sector skills.

However, apprenticeship starts are nowhere near the 50,000 new workers the sector needs each year, and only about half of apprentices actually achieve their qualification. The sector also continues to face challenges in terms of workforce diversity. It is estimated that just 6% of the construction workforce comes from minority ethnic backgrounds and women represent

only 14%. With the level of skills demand in the pipeline, construction and the built environment cannot afford to miss out on the full breadth of the workforce.

Recent changes designed to remove barriers to apprenticeships, such as giving employers more flexibility around English and maths requirements, are encouraging but the situation remains multi-faceted and complex. There is much more to consider.

Generously funded by the Wates Family Enterprise Trust, Construction Youth Trust (CYT) has carried out a learning project to add **the voice and perspective of young people themselves** to the national debate around apprenticeships and sector skills. Supported by nearly 150 employer partners across the sector, *Thinking Differently About Future Talent* engaged over 1,000 young people through focus groups, pilot initiatives

and direct feedback. The findings allow us to better understand how construction and the built environment can appeal to the next generation of young talent, remove hidden barriers to social mobility and create genuinely life-changing career opportunities.

We need to invest in young people to be the thriving apprentices, professionals and leaders who will build and shape our future. We hope our key learnings from this project, shared in this report, will help us all think differently about how we increase the number of young people who construction and the built environment can attract, recruit and retain, especially those currently underrepresented in the sector.

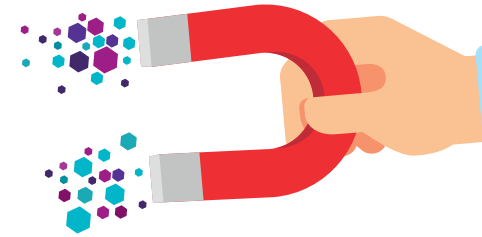
We hope the findings of this project can add new insights and a youth-voice perspective in the following three areas:

Attracting & inspiring the next generation: Given its importance to economic growth, how does construction and the built environment become the career of first choice for young people?

Recruiting diverse young talent: What can sector employers do differently to recruit more young people, especially those currently underrepresented in the sector?

Retaining our future workforce: How can the modern construction and built environment workplace support and retain apprentices and other new entrants from all backgrounds to contribute and fully commit to this important sector?

Attracting & Inspiring the Next Generation



Construction and the built environment continues to face challenges in attracting young talent. ‘77% of UK full-time students between the ages of 18-24 state that they would not consider a career in the construction industry.’ So, how can we change their minds and spark more interest in the sector?

Impactful school engagement

The importance of engaging and inspiring young people while they are still at school is well recognised. Research from The Careers & Enterprise Company tells us that when young people engage meaningfully with employers early on, their career aspirations improve, their prospects widen and their chances of successful employment increase.

However, young people tell us that not all employer engagement efforts have the same impact, and they connect best when career outreach is interactive and engaging. Hands-on activities, site visits, and real-world work experiences bring the industry to life far more effectively than ‘speeches’ from industry ambassadors who young people struggle to relate to.



It doesn't sound like they [employers] are selling to young people. Maybe they should ask someone younger/current apprentice who can advise them on how to phrase things.”

Young person

‘You can't be what you can't see’

Young people want to see themselves represented in the industry's success stories. That means hearing from employees who are relatable to the young people. Apprentices who are just a few steps ahead are so much more impactful than professionals who are years into their career and followed traditional university paths. Engagement is particularly powerful when young people meet role models from their own communities or schools. Relatability is especially important for young women, who benefit from seeing successful female professionals in the sector.



Industry seems dominated by white males; I don't see anyone like me within the industry.”

Young person



Attract

continued

Talk about pay

Young people consistently tell us that they want much more upfront information about salaries. Their career decisions aren't just about passion; they're also about financial security. This is particularly important for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, who need transparency about earning potential before committing to a career path.

Young people don't just want to know starting salaries. They want a clear picture of where they could be in two, five and ten years. This is crucial for longer-term apprenticeships, such as higher-level degree apprenticeships, which can take over five years to complete.

It may sound obvious, but school outreach and recruitment campaigns need to communicate clear pay and progression expectations, setting out milestones for promotions and salary increases. Industry ambassadors to schools may need to shift longstanding taboos around talking about pay, as young people don't appear to share this reticence. They expect open conversations about salary progression as a standard part of career dialogue, not just something mentioned during recruitment drives.

Pay and Progression Pilot

As part of *Thinking Differently*, we tested a dedicated session on pay and progression, in place of our standard 'careers' session.

Overall, we engaged:

358



young people aged 16-18 with the pilot sessions and connected them with industry professionals willing to offer real insights into career growth and financial prospect.

77%



of young people agreed/strongly agreed that the session improved/strongly improved their understanding of career progression in construction and the built environment.



It is definitely higher pay than I expected and offers very quick progression!"

Young person



[Before] I thought construction was only bricklaying and low pay."

Young person



Attract

continued

Engage and inspire parents

Young people aren't the only ones who need to see the built environment sector differently. Young people tell us that parents often play an influential role in career decisions but can have out-dated views of construction. Many still see university as the safest and most esteemed option and are often unaware of the opportunities available through apprenticeships and other alternative learn-and-earn pathways.

General discussions about careers and apprenticeships are helpful, but we found the real impact with parents comes when they meet working apprentices first-hand. This is especially true if these early career models are relatable to their own young person, and parents can see for themselves where their child could be in just a few years' time.

We did find throughout the project that it is not always easy to engage with parents. On a positive note, however, we learned parents are much more likely to engage if we have already piqued the interest of their child. Young people are better placed to encourage their parents' involvement than relying on general school-organised parents' events.

Parental Engagement Pilot

We spoke to nearly 100 parents and guardians through our Parental Engagement pilots. These events connected parents with relatable industry role models, including current apprentices — some of whom had attended the same schools as the parents' children. By sharing their journeys, the apprentices demystified earn-and-learn routes and highlighted the significant benefits these can offer, including rapid professional development.

92% 

of parents/guardians agreed/strongly agreed that the session helped to develop their understanding of apprenticeship routes.

85% 

of parents/guardians agreed/strongly agreed that the session helped to develop their openness to these routes for their child.



It was great to see the apprentices speaking about their experiences. They were brilliant — very inspiring.”

Parent



My favourability has increased as I'm now able to better understand how apprenticeships work.”

Parent

Methodology

Attract & inspire

Through a series of in-depth interviews, focus groups and pilot initiatives, we engaged

562

young people about the factors that attract them to, and deter them from, pursuing careers in the sector.



Recruiting Diverse Young Talent

Employing and training up young people must be a cornerstone of building the industry's future skills pipeline. Apprenticeships are widely promoted as a key solution, so how does the sector compete effectively for young talent and access the widest talent pool available?



Pre-recruitment engagement

If employers want to encourage a wider range of young people to apply for their apprenticeship opportunities, young people recommend they invest in targeted early engagement prior to opening their recruitment process. They told us they perform better and are more likely to succeed when their first interaction with a prospective employer is not the formal interview or assessment centre. This 'pre-recruitment engagement' enables young people to gain insight into the company, develop rapport with staff and build their confidence. Both sides get a chance to decide whether it is the right fit for them.



Recruiting employers should get apprentices to come into schools and speak to young people."

Young person



Have a local presence; offer more work experience; be present in schools where students are doing interactive things."

Young person

This feedback challenges the industry to consider whether just tweaking existing recruitment strategies is enough to make a step-change in the demographics of our future workforce. No matter how many times recruitment processes are refined — whether through blind CVs or updated assessment centre structures — very little will change if the same pool of applicants keeps coming through the door.



Before any interviews/assessment centres, employers should have some sort of Tour Day or Open Day to understand the company so young people know what they're applying for."

Young person

Recruit

continued

Work experience works

Young people see work experience as the ultimate pre-recruitment engagement and *Thinking Differently* employer partners seem to agree. Work experience participants overwhelmingly report that placements provided insight into the world of work, helped them develop skills and confidence, and allowed them to envision a future working in the built environment and as a future employee of their host organisation. Spending time in the workplace gave them the opportunity to engage with employees, understand day-to-day responsibilities, and build professional connections. **See Moriah's journey on page 7** from work experience to an apprenticeship with the same company.

73% 

of young people agreed/strongly agreed that their work experience placement increased their confidence in securing their desired next step or career.



The best part of the placement was getting to go on site and speak with actual civil engineers and operatives that worked on site. This was really helpful as it gave me an insight as to what my future career would look like.”

Young person



The best part of the placement was talking with the people on site and the people at the office as it gave me a far better idea of what work they actually do and what sort of skills I will need.”

Young person

Employer partners also confirm the effectiveness of work experience in the recruitment journey. Many highlighted how placements can really help the host employer to get to know the young person (and vice versa) and identify potential candidates for future apprenticeship opportunities. They also saw work experience as an invaluable addition to a young person's CV, especially for those who don't have previous employment to showcase in their job applications.

Work Experience Pilot

As part of our *Thinking Differently* project, we conducted a Work Experience pilot, facilitating nearly 200 placements with 84 different employers. 98% of participants were from disadvantaged or underrepresented groups in construction and the built environment (e.g. women, ethnic minority backgrounds).



Work experience is a two-way street. While it gives young people the opportunity to experience the workplace and industry and find out if it could be right for them, it gives employers the opportunity to see if the individual has the attributes and skills that'd make them an excellent hire. We find work experience is particularly beneficial to those that may struggle with interviews and CV writing, as during these placements candidates have the opportunity to show their best qualities and to stand out from the crowd.”

People Lead,
CYT Employer Partner

93% 

of participating employers agreed/strongly agreed that placements improved a school leaver's chances of securing an apprenticeship.

Recruit

continued

Be welcoming to school leavers

Employers may wish to consider how their recruitment processes can better connect with young people entering the workforce directly from school. Young people do not fully understand traditional recruitment methods, such as assessment centres, or the specific skills that employers are seeking. As a result, they would appreciate more guidance and clarification from employers. For young people from less affluent backgrounds or underrepresented groups, creating a warm and friendly environment is especially crucial to help them feel welcome and comfortable throughout the process.



82%



of young people agreed/strongly agreed that their work experience placement helped them develop skills sought by employers.



In the actual application process, I would like to add that when we did practice assessment centres and questions, that really helped. Because if we hadn't have joined CYT, I don't think I would have learned how they work and what employers are looking for."

Young person



Recruit

continued

Moriah's Journey:

Pre-Recruitment Engagement in Action

Moriah, a young woman from Lewisham, was 16 and considering her next steps after school when she began working with Construction Youth Trust. She had an interest in project management but was unsure whether she could pursue it directly after finishing sixth form.

Through our *Pathways to Professional Careers* programme in her final years of school, Moriah connected with project managers who shared insights into career pathways and apprenticeships. She gained a first-hand understanding of what an apprenticeship involves, how it accelerates career progression, and the skills employers look for.



CYT gave me the tools to create an amazing professional network, gain valuable experience, and meet lots of employers in the industry.”



A key turning point in Moriah's journey was her participation in two work experience placements with a global consultancy and construction firm, where she would eventually secure an apprenticeship. These placements deepened her understanding of the industry, boosted her confidence and helped her build relationships with professionals in the company. Experiencing the organisation's culture first-hand confirmed that it was the right fit for her career aspirations.

With this experience under her belt and encouragement from her CYT coach, Moriah applied for a higher-level apprenticeship in construction management. To strengthen her application, we connected her with a CYT alumni who had recently secured a similar apprenticeship. This mentoring opportunity provided valuable insights into the recruitment process and interview techniques.

Having successfully navigated the selection process, Moriah was offered the apprenticeship — and she is now thriving in her role! Excitingly, Moriah has continued to engage with CYT since starting her apprenticeship, and we maintain a strong relationship with her. She is a valued member of our Alumni Network, inspiring and supporting young people who are at earlier stages of their career journeys. She has even taken the opportunity to present her story to CYT's Board of Trustees.

Methodology

Recruiting diverse young talent

We engaged

477

young people through focus groups and work experience pilot initiatives, including apprentices who had recently navigated industry recruitment procedures, to explore hidden obstacles in application processes and how built environment employers can level the playing field.



Retaining Our Future Workforce

In 2022/23, the achievement rate for apprenticeships was 54.5% (53% for construction). Individuals from the most deprived backgrounds are the least likely to achieve their qualification. So, how might we achieve better retention and motivation of apprentices?

Recognising the needs of school-leavers

Young apprentices who entered the workforce straight from school/college emphasise the importance in recognising that they have very different needs to more mature employees and/or graduates who come to the workplace with more life and work experience.

Current apprentices felt that some employers have very high expectations of their school-leaver apprentices without taking fully into account their lack of technical skills or prior workplace experience. Many described limited induction processes, with little to no training in essential skills, like working with Excel, which they have not been taught in school.

They also felt supporting an 18-year-old straight out of school needs more than just technical training — it requires a level of guidance, encouragement and a genuine investment in their growth to help their transition.



It's not a surprise that it's overwhelming. You're not getting as much support as you were getting in school. Even if it feels overwhelming at first or you're not instantly taken with it, I would advise apprentices to stick with it at least four to five months."

Apprentice

Providing structured onboarding, tailored training and clear communication about expectations from the outset can make a huge difference in helping apprentices settle in and succeed.



I'm having to use Excel day-to-day now, and because I don't know any of the tricks, it takes me twice as long."

Apprentice



We're new to the company. We don't completely understand their values or exactly what they expect from us."

Apprentice

Retain

continued

Try it on for size

Young apprentices also reinforced the importance of more preparation and engagement prior to starting an apprenticeship, particularly the opportunity to do work experience with your prospective employer. This gives the young person an opportunity to understand and prepare for the reality of their new role before they commit to the apprenticeship. It is so much better for a young person and their employer to really consider if the fit is right before the apprenticeship starts, especially for lengthier higher-level qualifications.



I feel like having more apprentices going to schools and speaking with the students would help. Actually showing them realistically what it is like, saying there are days that maybe you're feeling a bit down, there's a load of work, you're feeling pressured to get stuff done, and that's okay."

Young person



We find work experience to be one of the most beneficial indicators as to whether a candidate is suited to the role, and it also takes the pressure off the young person to know a little more about what the job actually involves before committing to a long-term position."

Senior People and
Development Executive
CYT Employer Partner

Retain

continued

Carefully select and train line managers

Managing a school-leaver on an apprenticeship is very different from managing a mature colleague or even a graduate who has already completed their qualification. It requires an understanding of the apprentice training schedule, balancing work and study, exam preparation etc., as well as their likely limited technical skills and the transition from school to work. What seems second nature to experienced professionals can be overwhelming for someone just starting out straight from school.

Young people felt strongly that apprentice line managers should not be assigned arbitrarily. Instead, they should be carefully selected and receive training as necessary, to appreciate the unique challenges young apprentices face. Ideally, managers should have first-hand knowledge of the apprenticeship route. Young people felt recently-graduated apprentices, for example, would make excellent mentors because they understand the journey first-hand.



Rather than just saying to line managers, you're going to get an apprentice, I think employers should ask their line managers - here's the apprentices we're going to have, who is willing to come forward?"

Young person



I think it all comes down to your manager's willingness to teach, to want to show you the ropes, not just give you tasks and expect you to know it."

Young person



Retain

continued

Build a welcoming community for apprentices

Young people really value receiving a warm welcome in their new apprentice role. They believe a strong sense of belonging boosts the new entrant's confidence and improves retention rates. They think it is very important for companies to encourage staff to get to know the apprentices and the apprentices to get to know each other.

Young apprentices can feel isolated, especially if they discover the sector is not as diverse as they anticipated or if they aren't sure they fit into their new company. They recommend that a network or community of other apprentices, or 'buddy' colleagues they can relate to, would help them to settle in better. This suggests a greater onus on employers to create a warm, positive environment for all and take proactive action to help individuals settle in and feel welcome, especially if they are from an underrepresented group.



I was a bit shocked to find out that of the 90 apprentices in my cohort, only 4 young people were from ethnic minority backgrounds."

Apprentice



I think it's a great opportunity to network. You're literally in a place where, you know, there's just so many experienced professionals who have been in the industry for years and years."

Apprentice



We've got a whole community of grads and apprentices, in different year groups, who all just come together. We have socials and things like that, we all know each other. They're there for support, which is great."

Apprentice

Alumni Network Pilot

As part of *Thinking Differently*, we piloted the CYT Alumni Network of new apprentices across the sector. Through professional networking events, young apprentices have had the opportunity to connect, share experiences, and support one another. Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the impact of fostering a strong peer network:



The events help me prepare for the things I will learn and the obstacles I will face in the future of my apprenticeship."

Apprentice and member of CYT Alumni Network

100%

of apprentices agreed/strongly agreed that networking events improved their confidence to thrive in the workplace and feel comfortable being themselves, and they saw their future in the construction and built environment industry.

Methodology

Retaining our future workforce

To better understand the retention challenge we engaged

66

new entrants through focus groups, interviews and pilot initiatives to hear about their lived experiences in built environment workplaces.



If we build it, they will come



A key theme to emerge throughout this *Thinking Differently* project is the growing appeal of apprenticeships and other employer-led pathways to young people. This shift in interest coincides with a steady decline in university applications and enrolments, in parallel with a surge in interest in high-level apprenticeships.

In the 2024/25 academic year, higher apprenticeship starts increased by 8.1% to 50,000, with Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships now accounting for 19.2% of all apprenticeship starts.

Alongside the notable shortage of skilled tradespeople, the industry faces a deficit of construction managers, surveyors and engineers, so the opportunity seems clear: invest in apprenticeships and other employer-led pathways and leverage these to attract young talent into the industry. While construction and the built environment sector may still struggle to establish itself as a first-choice career pathway, we are increasingly convinced that if the sector develops a competitive, supportive

apprenticeship/learn-and-earn offer, young people will most definitely follow. If we build it, they will come!

We started this *Thinking Differently* project believing the biggest challenge is encouraging and supporting a more diverse range of young people to enter sector careers, but we soon recognised that this has to be matched on the supply-side with more good apprenticeships and learn-and-earn pathways. In 2023/24, for instance, London saw only 1,930 new construction apprentice starts: the lowest in the country despite the pipeline of work in the capital. According to the CITB, only one in five construction employers currently take on an apprentice, and just one in ten employ more than one.

An unexpected bonus of this *Thinking Differently* project has been the coming together of employer partners and the power of industry working in partnership to attract, recruit and retain emerging talent and create new opportunities. Young people have enjoyed the opportunity to engage with employees from companies of different sizes and disciplines and, just as importantly, employers have benefitted from the mutual support and shared learning. We have seen how partnerships can serve as a catalyst for action.

Large construction organisations are much more likely to have an apprenticeship programme, so working together has been particularly helpful for smaller companies who are more reluctant to recruit apprentices.

Moving forward, how can we encourage greater collaboration and mutual support across industry as part of the solution to building a viable skills pipeline to meet demand and transform how we attract, recruit and retain the young people who in the years to come will build our future?

Carol Lynch,
CEO, Construction Youth Trust

Moving Forward

Attract

The construction and built environment sector can offer so much to young people, but they (and their parents) need to be shown the modern workplace where all young people, regardless of background, are welcomed and can succeed. By providing impactful employer engagement, inspiring and relatable apprentice role models, more transparency about pay and targeted parental engagement, we can shift perceptions and attract the next generation of talent to the industry.

Recruit

If we always do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always got! Feedback from young people suggests we need to target young people well before the recruitment process if we want to expand our traditional talent pool. By investing in early engagement, especially work experience that allows young people to try out real roles, young people are inspired and empowered to make informed career decisions, apply for roles they may not have previously considered and become part of a more diverse, skilled workforce for the future.

Retain

By building a strong support network for apprentices, employers can create an inclusive, welcoming environment where all apprentices feel valued and empowered to succeed. Carefully selecting and training line managers can help employers to recognise and meet the needs of young people entering the workforce straight from school. Investing in young talent isn't just good for the young people — it's essential for the future of our industry.

The built environment sector has significant potential to drive social mobility. Insights from young people suggest that thoughtful adjustments to various stages of the recruitment cycle will make a significant difference to how we position sector careers as a highly competitive choice, remove hidden barriers and create genuinely life-changing opportunities. If this is coupled with industry investment in the supply of good employer-led pathways, we believe the industry can transform how we attract, recruit and retain the next generation of diverse young talent to meet the skills challenge and build our future together.

By working collaboratively — employers of all sizes, schools, and charities like CYT — we can break down barriers, unlock untapped talent, and create meaningful pathways into the construction industry.

If you would like to learn more about how you can collaborate with CYT to drive lasting change, please contact us by scanning the QR code below.



Broadgate Future Talent:

A model for success

Broadgate Future Talent is a collaborative partnership led by British Land, Sir Robert McAlpine and CYT to bring partners on the Broadgate project together with the aim of establishing the development as an innovative exemplar of how a major London project can drive social mobility.

A great example of this in action is the Broadgate Live Vacancies Day, run by six different Broadgate partners offering a range of apprenticeships, including quantity surveying, project management and engineering. Twenty-four young people from local communities (79% from groups underrepresented in construction) had the opportunity to showcase their skills through a series of activities and mock interviews, including meeting young apprentices already working on the Broadgate pilot. Eighteen young people applied for roles, eight were interviewed, and four are now thriving in their new apprenticeship — all from one day.



Thank you for this opportunity! I enjoyed it a lot as I got to speak to different students and got valuable advice from apprentices who were in my place last year.”

Young person



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Thank you to the Wates
Family Enterprise Trust for
generously funding the
Thinking Differently project.

Wates Family

ENTERPRISE TRUST

Construction Youth Trust is a social mobility charity that inspires and enables young people to reach their full career potential by connecting them with employers and opportunities in construction and the build environment.

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