

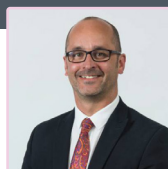
Roundtable - Bridging the Skills Gap

With Adrian Beckingham, Strategy & Policy
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Eleanor Deeley, Managing Director - Deeley Group
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Chaired by Lauren Edwards MP
Portcullis House & Online via zoom



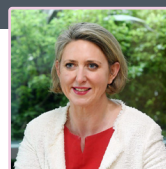
Lauren
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Introduction

This roundtable convened a diverse group of senior industry figures and policy specialists to explore how the UK's skills system can better support the construction, housebuilding, and infrastructure sectors. The conversation reflected a shared recognition that while the demand for labour remains strong, the real challenge lies in equipping people with the right skills, at the right time and in the right places.

Participants discussed the limitations of the current apprenticeship model, particularly for SMEs, and emphasised the need for more flexible, employer-led pathways into the industry, such as skills bootcamps and modular training. There was consensus that public perceptions of construction careers remain outdated, and that earlier, more targeted engagement, especially in schools, will be critical to attracting a more diverse skilled workforce.



The roundtable also highlighted the importance of long-term certainty in planning and project pipelines, which underpin employers' ability to invest in training and recruitment. There was strong support for a more integrated, cross-departmental approach to skills and workforce planning across government, with greater input from industry to ensure that policy is grounded in commercial reality.

Key Takeaways

- While around 200,000 people enter the construction industry annually, fewer than half do so via skilled routes. The industry requires a steady intake of 42,000–45,000 skilled workers per year to meet demand, a figure that has remained stubbornly consistent, suggesting a systemic failure to scale up training. This highlights the urgent need to distinguish between general labour market entry and genuinely skilled workforce development.
- The current apprenticeship model does not work for much of the industry, especially SMEs. Only 21% of companies offer apprenticeships, and just 30% are considering it. Barriers include the mismatch between project-based workloads and rigid training requirements, reliance on short-term subcontracting, and limited employer confidence in navigating the system. As a result, many capable young people opt for full-time college courses without ever transitioning into work.
- Small and medium-sized enterprises were consistently identified as essential to solving the skills crisis. They provide more diverse, hands-on training opportunities and act more nimbly than larger contractors. However, their ability to invest in skills is constrained by short-term planning cycles and uncertain workloads. Recent planning reforms and the introduction of a 'medium site' classification were cited as potentially game-changing by enabling greater visibility and certainty in project pipelines for SMEs and their supply chains.
- Despite significant employer outreach, poor public perception of construction careers and reduced school engagement are major obstacles. One SME noted stark inequality in application rates between affluent and deprived schools, directly linked to the absence of careers advisers. Many students are unaware of the high wages, diverse roles, and non-academic pathways the sector offers. There is an urgent need to reframe technical education and reach children earlier, including at primary school level.
- Traditional apprenticeships have low completion rates, around 50%, and often fail to reflect the needs of employers or trainees. Employer-led skills bootcamps, by contrast, were held up as highly effective: flexible, practical, and better aligned with real job outcomes. One model focused on plant operations achieved an 80% completion rate, and was particularly successful with underrepresented groups such as veterans and ex-offenders. There is a clear opportunity to scale these approaches with targeted government support.
- Across the board, participants emphasised that skills development cannot succeed without long-term project certainty. The ability to invest in training, from apprenticeships to advanced infrastructure skills, depends on a clear pipeline of work. For example, major projects like HS2 and Sizewell were cited as anchors for regional training hubs. Without this long-term view, the risk is that we invest in training but fail to retain or deploy talent effectively, undermining both housing and infrastructure delivery.

- There was strong consensus that responsibility for skills policy needs to be shared across Whitehall. While the Department for Education is central, the Department for Business & Trade and the Ministry for Housing, Communities & Local Government also play key roles. A proposed “DfE parachute taskforce”, proactively supporting employers to deliver training, was cited as a simple but high-impact step. Without better coordination, employers face excessive bureaucracy, duplication of effort, and a lack of clarity on how to engage with the system.

Issues raised

- Many businesses described the skills system as overly bureaucratic and fragmented, especially for smaller firms. The complexity of navigating funding streams, qualification frameworks, and local authority processes discourages employer participation.
- The Apprenticeship Levy was widely criticised for failing to improve overall outcomes. Many employers view it as a tax rather than a tool for development, with limited ability to apply it flexibly to meet business needs. Employers frequently reported getting minimal value from the levy and called for greater freedom to direct funds toward salaries and modular or on-the-job training pathways.
- Young people face a series of access issues, including legal and insurance restrictions that prevent under-18s from entering construction sites. At the same time, many schools lack careers advisers, limiting the visibility of vocational routes. Social pressures and outdated perceptions of the sector (e.g. preference for white-collar roles or digital careers) exacerbate the challenge of recruiting the next generation into skilled roles.
- Construction remains male-dominated, with few women on site or in operational leadership roles. Cultural perceptions, inflexibility in working practices, and lack of visible pathways were all cited as reasons for poor gender diversity. While efforts are underway to create more inclusive environments, participants were clear that construction will not be a success story until it reflects a broader range of people - across gender, socio-economic background, and age.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.

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