

Construction industry needs a long-term plan to succeed

11 months ago



In an exclusive comment piece, Dr David Crosthwaite, chief economist, Building Cost Information Service ([BCIS](#)) tells FM Business Daily why – despite the figure of 10,000 more apprentices sounding impressive in this week's headlines – in reality, it's not enough.

On the surface, easing restrictions on apprenticeships and creating greater flexibility for businesses is a welcome step. However, we need to ask serious questions about how much of an impact this will have in the short term.

The headline figure of 10,000 more apprentices sounds very impressive, but in reality, is not even enough to address the significant loss of skilled labour seen over the past five years.

Taking other sectors into consideration alongside housing, we're short by hundreds of thousands.

Further, while reducing the minimum apprenticeship duration from 12 months to 8 months might improve completion rates, it raises concerns about training quality.

If it previously took a year to equip apprentices with the necessary skills, can this be effectively achieved in just eight months without compromising standards?

Cutting training time may make apprenticeships more appealing and reduce dropouts but if it comes at the cost of producing underprepared workers, the industry may suffer in the long run.

Skilled labour is crucial for maintaining safety, quality and efficiency on construction sites and any dilution of training standards could have unintended consequences.

If the government is serious about tackling the construction skills shortage, it needs to commit to a broader strategy which cannot ignore the historic importance of overseas workers. The construction industry has long relied on skilled labour from abroad to meet demand and with current workforce shortages, this remains an essential factor.

There is a balancing act between ensuring enough skilled workers are available now and building a more sustainable pipeline of domestic talent for the future. However, the degree to which Labour is managing this remains to be seen.

This is particularly important given the scale of demand not just for housing, but also for the transition to a greener future. Labour's lofty ambition to build 1.5 million homes over the course of a Parliament places enormous pressure on an industry already struggling with shortages. In an ideal world, you would be able to deliver projects with a pool of locally available labour but that hasn't been the reality in the UK for some time and it's not what the industry has experienced throughout its history.

Many of the skills required for facilities management, such as electrical, plumbing and HVAC maintenance, overlap with those in construction.

A shortage of skilled workers in construction has a knock-on effect, delaying building projects and, in turn, the facilities management sector's ability to maintain and service buildings efficiently.

Addressing the skills gap in one area, without considering the interconnected nature of these industries, would be a missed opportunity.

Overall, aligning the needs of the industry with education provision is sensible but there's an unavoidable lag from getting more young people into apprenticeships to getting them on site. Even the establishment of Skills England is taking place in phases. We absolutely need a long-term plan, but the government can't ignore what's right in front of them now.

Finally, the industry must play its part in this too by making construction an attractive career option with more direct employment in place of self-employment. A shift towards stable, well-paid roles with clear career progression could help encourage more young people to enter these fields and stay in them for the long term.