

# Hard Hats, High Standards: Why FM Should Welcome the New Technical Education Pathway

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Comment By **Andrew Shelley, Managing Director, Simply Washrooms**

When Prime Minister Andy Burnham stood up this week to announce that students in England will be offered technical education pathways from the age of 14, my first reaction wasn't as an interested observer of education policy. It was as an employer who has spent two decades trying to find, train and keep good people in facilities management.

Burnham's plan for new routes from Year 10 that sit alongside academic subjects, building towards T Levels, apprenticeships and skilled employment is being sold as a fix for youth unemployment and a long-overdue rebalancing of a system that has told generations of young people that a degree is the only respectable destination. I think it's more than that. I think it's a recognition of something those of us in FM have known for years: practical, technical, people-facing skills are not a fallback option. They are becoming more valuable, not less, and the rise of AI is accelerating that shift rather than reversing it.

That might sound counterintuitive from someone running a business that has just spent 18 months building a cutting-edge routing and operations system. We've invested heavily in technology that will transform how we allocate engineers to sites, cutting travel time, improving response rates and giving our clients a level of efficiency that simply wasn't possible a few years ago. I'm proud of it, and I'd encourage any FM business that hasn't started this journey to get moving - the operational gains are real and the industry that doesn't modernise will be left behind. AI-driven scheduling, predictive maintenance, optimal efficiency - this is where the industry is heading, and rightly so.

But the thing that technology can't touch, and never will, is the actual moment when someone has to service a hygiene bin properly or refill period products with dignity and discretion. There's no algorithm that walks into a washroom and senses that something feels off and there's no AI that notices a stock room is a little untidy, or has the emotional intelligence to know how to hold a difficult conversation with a client about standards slipping. That's a person, trained well, caring about the job, present and paying attention.

This is the paradox at the heart of FM, and it's one I think about most weeks. Our sector sits exactly where hard skills meet soft skills. It's technical competence with tools and systems, combined with judgement, discretion and pride in a job well done. You can't automate pride in a job well done. If a person can't do the job well, no amount of technology sitting on top of that gap will fill it. Technology can tell you where to send an operative faster, but it can't make that operative care about the client's site the way a well-trained, well-motivated professional does.

That's why the pipeline question matters so much to me, and why I think Burnham's announcement deserves a genuinely warm welcome from our industry. The harder question is how you make new pathways actually work for young people and the employers who need to hire them – and that's where a few conditions come in.

FM has an image problem it needs to fix. For too long, cleaning, hygiene services and facilities support have been seen as jobs people fall into rather than train for, careers people settle for rather than choose. A system that puts technical routes on an equal footing with academic ones, starting at 14, is a chance to change that story early and show teenagers that a career built on genuine skill, delivered with care, is something to be proud of, not something to avoid.

The conditions are practical ones. This only works if employers like us show up: offering real work experience, mentoring, apprenticeships with a genuine future attached, not tokenistic placements. It only works if the technical pathways include the unglamorous but essential parts of our sector, the practical, hygiene-focused, client-facing skills that keep buildings running. And it only works if we, as an industry, keep investing in people at the same rate we're investing in systems.

At Simply Washrooms, we spend a lot of time thinking about where technology can help us most, and it's a lot of places. But we spend just as much time thinking about where it can't, and how we build, train and reward the people who fill that space. Andy Burnham's announcement is a step in the right direction for the next generation of that workforce. Our job, as an industry, is to make sure there's a good career waiting for them when they arrive.