



CITB NI CHIEF EXECUTIVE BARRY NEILSON OBE DISCUSSES SECURING THE FUTURE OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY WORKFORCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND...

Forging stronger connections between educational institutions and industry

❶ The Northern Ireland construction industry is a resilient one. It is rich in history, central to our local economy and has developed our cities, towns and landscapes. Despite the construction industry experiencing good levels of growth, the industry faces a range of ongoing and emerging challenges; an ageing workforce, declining numbers of new talent entering the industry, technological advances in IT, the drive for energy efficiency and a net-zero carbon society. Almost without exception, every sector of the industry is struggling to recruit good talent and young people, which we are seeing across all sizes of employers.

It is essential that we re-think how we attract new entrants into the construction sector. We need to look at potential sources of entrants from other sectors including those who have not yet prospered in school or further education, the justice system, people with disabilities, and of course equalising the gender imbalance. We should look at equality and diversity in its true form and seek talent from all sources.

We also need to encourage and instil core values and attitudes early in education, fostering continuous learning and collaboration, to build a secure long-term workforce. It is crucial that we develop stronger connections between educational institutions and industry and engage individuals across all sectors to raise awareness of construction career paths, attracting a diverse and skilled workforce to meet future industry needs. The links forged by **CITB NI** over the



Barry Neilson OBE, Chief Executive, **CITB NI**.

last few years will be invaluable in trying to create an ecosystem that develops individuals that leave school with the core skills and attitudes that the sector needs, and the support to continue their lifelong learning journey through the industry. The landscape over 30 years ago was vastly different, with direct training support for craft apprentices from governmental Direct Labour Organisations, and construction companies of all sizes employed and trained entry-level people (unskilled, apprentices and graduates) to meet their future needs.

At that time, **CITB NI** provided direct training for school leavers as a stepping stone into formal apprenticeship training and the image and perception of construction as a career option was attractive to both young people, parents and teachers. However, the landscape of

the industry has shifted. Direct Labour Organisations have declined in popularity, with construction services increasingly outsourced. Craft apprentices are now generally employed by small- and medium-sized companies, and **CITB NI** was directed by both industry and government to stop direct entry-level training in favour of the further education sector and commercial training providers.

The construction industry today finds itself in competition with emerging sectors that boast enticing opportunities and financial rewards, making them more appealing to the younger generation. Over time, there has been a shift in the attitudes and perceptions of both the youth and their parents and, generally, construction

is perceived less appealing as a career option.

However, with varied and wide-ranging opportunities, a career in construction is challenging, exciting and rewarding. From design, construction and maintenance of buildings to infrastructure projects such as bridges, roads, tunnels and waterways, construction boasts a variety of careers including skilled trades, IT, marketing, project management, design and much more.

At **CITB NI**, we have been working with industry employers and federations through the Department for the Economy Built Environment Sectoral Partnership (BESP) to review and refresh the apprenticeship frameworks, engaging directly with employers.

This process will need to be refreshed soon to meet the changing needs of the economy and the BESP itself needs



W5 Build Your Career event.



Adopt A School event.

to review how it reflects industry needs and influences policy decisions within the departments and the **NI Skills Council**. We are also working with the Green Skills Delivery Group, tasked by the **NI Skills Council** to develop proposals on how to meet the skills challenges, not only within the construction sector, but also the energy generation and infrastructure sectors.

In terms of widening the potential entry routes to construction, **CITB NI** has been working with NIACRO to develop interventions that encourage progression from the justice system into the construction sector, providing benefits for the individual, the economy and our industry. This has led to the development of virtual and augmented reality interventions that, now tested, can be developed and used in other areas such as careers information and taster sessions.

Through our 'Build Your Career - a Future in Construction Programme' for schools and students, we have been delivering construction 'bootcamps' for schools on our inhouse simulated site to provide meaningful experiences to those who have not yet decided on their career path. This initiative has the potential to be replicated across the province as a collaboration with construction companies, local partners and councils.

In addition, our 'Adopt A School Programme' provides opportunities for construction companies to build relations with post-primary schools in their local area of work. Companies provide direct support for schools with construction industry careers activities including careers talks, events, work experience opportunities and site visits. We also have a careers

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ambassador programme, where we work with industry professionals to help promote construction careers in schools, careers fairs and conferences.

Recently, we partnered with W5 and Cool FM to provide interactive job sampling onsite for year 10 and 12 pupils from across **NI**, highlighting pathways into apprenticeships and promoting apprenticeship employer opportunities. This event and others were supported with supplementary information on our careers web portal, www.citbni.org.uk/Careers

We also deliver the **SkillBuild NI** Regional Competition, which showcases the brightest talent in construction within the further education and training sector.

There is still much to do in joining up the various initiatives that support individuals in their progression into and through their career within the industry. This is at a time where the potential demands on infrastructure, construction and the wider built environment industry are mounting. The drive for greater energy efficiency and a net-zero carbon society is a significant challenge. This will require a balance of upskilling the existing workforce in parallel with developing new entrants with the skills and abilities needed for, not just the known future, over the next 20 years or so but also unknown future challenges.



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