

# Meeting the skills challenge



In 2005 2.41 million people were employed in construction. That figure is expected to rise to more than 2.8 million by 2011. To deliver this growth and replace those who will leave the industry over the period, an average of 87,600 new workers will need to be recruited every year until at least 2011. Can we meet the challenge? Linda Towell assesses the views of Sir Michael Latham, Chairman of ConstructionSkills

It's a good time to be in construction if you're a skilled worker, but apprentices and graduate trainees still face difficulties honing their skills. Surprisingly, site experience is proving elusive for trainees – especially in those areas where skilled workers are most in demand. Training, despite the expansion in construction activity, still appears to be a low priority for many companies.

Throughout the country real differences in training opportunities emerge with Scotland clearly ahead. In Scotland for every 100 people employed there are seven

apprentices, but in the South East of England the figure sharply declines to 0.9.

"At the present time around 7,500-10,000 full time students in Further Education colleges are finding difficulty getting site experience. This is a crucial component of their NVQ and framework apprenticeship – without it they can't become competent and qualified. So we have to find work site experience," says Sir Michael.

Addressing the challenge, ConstructionSkills, the Sector Skills Council for the construction industry, is pursuing a number of initiatives supporting the major contractors and housebuilders

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to persuade the supply chain – the sub contractors, to take on more apprentices.

ConstructionSkills has also started programme-led apprentice schemes to enable full time students who have been in college for a year to be placed by the major contractors and home builders groups. ConstructionSkills is budgeting for around 1,000 people this year.

"We're also hoping to set up a new cross federation group supported by leading industry members and ConstructionSkills to see how we can drive this forward. Employers are already eligible for heavy grants and large numbers of apprentices are





◀ already being supported, but we need more. Looking further ahead we're aiming to develop more National Skills Academies for Construction (NSAfC) – where training actually takes place on site at major construction projects around the country.”

The main focus of the Skills Academies is to provide a range of employer-led learning and development opportunities for people that are centred on construction projects. The concept is designed to overcome the challenges of training a mobile

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workforce in a sector where large numbers of very small firms and sole traders are unable to commit to the costs of training on an individual basis, but who come together as part of the supply chain on major projects. “These can also lead to more support, not

## “If it ain't broke, don't fix it,”



Over the last few years local authority building control departments have proved that despite increasing workloads, recruitment difficulties and competition from the private sector, they can still deliver, *writes Linda Towell*.

Many local authorities have risen to the challenge, forging innovative partnerships with design teams and developers, producing a flexible and

competitive service. Yet there are still calls to replace the existing system.

A report by conservative MP John Gummer and environmentalist Zac Goldsmith recommended the abolition of Building Regulations in favour of a centralised National Building Standards System. The proposals, made in the *Quality of Life* report, also recommend an independent Building Standards Agency to replace building control departments in local authorities. Approved Inspectors would provide certificates of compliance with the national standards.

While the proposals may have found favour in some quarters, not everyone agrees. Sir Michael Latham, Chairman of ConstructionSkills, feels that replacing building control departments with an independent Building Standards Agency is simply not necessary. Speaking from a personal viewpoint Sir Michael commented: “I think that building control officers, whether employed by local authority or in the private sector, do an absolutely essential job. I don't personally see why we should be abolishing Building Regulations in favour

of a centralised National Standards System because the present Building Regulations work well. I don't favour moving towards a National Building Standards System or an independent Building Standards Agency because I think that local authorities do this job perfectly well and see no reason why they should not continue to do so.”

The report also raises the prospect of self certification for major construction companies and housebuilders linked with severe penalties for evasion to ensure compliance. It's a concept that has been raised before and doesn't sit comfortably with Sir Michael.

“I have still have doubts. I've not been impressed with Part P. I'm not sure that it has worked terribly well and I think many people in the electrical contracting sector don't think so either. My view has always been if it ain't broke, don't fix it.”

Building control departments will have their work cut out in the next few years as the industry gears up to meet the government's zero carbon targets. While it's not an easy task, ConstructionSkills' “Build to Last” programme of operations is drawing together various sectors of



just for apprenticeships but also for management trainees as well. So a lot is happening."

Professional development is another area that ConstructionSkills is addressing. Until a year ago the number of graduates entering the industry had been falling, but this has improved. Programmes like the Inspire Scholarship scheme (now in its third year) provide essential finance for students. ConstructionSkills will match an employer's sponsorship

costs providing a potential £9,000 over a three year course. Around 300 students have already joined the scheme this year with £1 million set aside. More are expected next year.

While government incentives and ConstructionSkills programmes can lead the way, there is still a need for employers to get more involved. Sir Michael added: "I had hoped to see that with the industry being so busy, that more people would be

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prepared to do training, but unfortunately a lot of companies don't, preferring to use imported labour. But if we can't train when things are going well, then we can't expect people to train when things are going poorly."

## says Sir Michael Latham

the industry to convert innovative ideas into action by offering practical advice on sustainable construction.

Sir Michael continued: "We are presently doing a lot of work with the Building Research Establishment and Home Builders Federation on zero carbon dwellings and modern methods of construction. We're having courses around the country which are intended to be extremely practical; focusing on aspects like waste management on site, which will be a requirement from April next year.

"The one thing I have always insisted upon is that we shouldn't just talk green but give real practical advice to site managers, architects and engineers, on how they can design on a sustainable basis. We need to advise site managers to ensure they buy sustainable kit, avoid a wasteful site experience and recycle correctly.

"There is considerable interest now whereas two or three years ago there wasn't. Advice needs to be given to architects at the design stage as to what is sustainable and what isn't.

"Delivering sustainability means

developing a better understanding among clients, architects, contractors and suppliers – translating words into action throughout the entire industry.

"Local authority building control has a crucial part to play in this process. Expansion, not abolition, might be a more progressive step forward."

