

REINVENTION

2026

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing a yellow hard hat and a high-visibility yellow vest over a light blue shirt, is looking upwards and to the right while holding a set of blueprints. She is standing on a construction site with a city skyline in the background.

Preparing the next generation to deliver a safer, smarter and more collaborative built environment

Driven by Ryder Architecture,
Northumbria University and the
University of the Built Environment



Ryder



A NEW BUILT ENVIRONMENT EDUCATION MODEL

The Reinvention 2026 initiative calls for a radical rethink of built environment education, which builds on the proven success of pioneering programmes such as PlanBEE to widen opportunity and provide the right skills for the sector's growth. Jordan Marshall reports

For more than three decades, the construction industry has been told what it needs to change. From Latham and Egan to Never Waste a Good Crisis and Modernise or Die, successive reviews have identified many of the same underlying problems: fragmented supply chains, adversarial working, inconsistent productivity and a chronic failure to think beyond short-term pressures. Each report has generated optimism that meaningful reform was finally within reach, yet lasting transformation has remained elusive.

The past few years have only added further challenges. The pandemic fundamentally reshaped working practices. The Grenfell Tower Inquiry exposed profound failings in competence, accountability and collaboration. Inflation, geopolitical uncertainty and climate pressures have transformed the environment in which projects are delivered. Meanwhile, the demands placed on the sector continue to grow, with digital delivery, net zero and building safety now central to almost every conversation about construction's future.

Against that backdrop, Ryder Architecture, Northumbria University and the University

of the Built Environment believe the industry has spent too long focused on symptoms rather than causes. Their new Reinvention 2026 campaign argues regulation, technology and policy reform can only achieve so much. If the sector wants lasting change, it must first rethink how it educates the people who will shape its future.

A simple proposition

At the heart of that argument is a simple proposition: today's built environment can no longer be served by educational pathways designed for yesterday's industry. Construction is increasingly interdisciplinary. Digital technologies, sustainability, MMC and evolving regulatory

Today's built environment can no longer be served by educational pathways designed for yesterday's industry

requirements demand professionals who understand far more than their own specialism. Yet many routes into the profession still encourage narrow disciplinary thinking, with limited opportunities to understand how different parts of the industry interact.

At the same time, the sector faces an increasingly

urgent skills challenge. The government's Invest 2035 industrial strategy identifies workforce shortages as a major threat to economic growth, while the Construction Industry Training Board estimates around 250,000 additional workers will be needed by 2028. Traditional routes into professional careers remain expensive or inaccessible for many potential entrants, limiting the industry's ability to attract a breadth of talent.

The consortium believes the answer lies in combining education and employment from the very beginning, giving learners practical experience across multiple disciplines while studying towards professional qualifications.

Proven approach

And it's not just a theoretical proposition - this approach has already been tested. In 2016 Ryder brought together employers including Arup, Cundall, Turner & Townsend and Sir Robert McAlpine to develop PlanBEE, an apprenticeship model that places collaboration at the centre of learning. Working with Gateshead College, the programme combines paid employment with rotational placements across different organisations and professional





Left: A meet the employer event

Below left: PlanBEE was awarded a prestigious Queen Elizabeth Prize for Higher and Further Education in 2025

disciplines, allowing apprentices to experience the full breadth of the built environment before specialising.

Since then, the programme has expanded well beyond the North-east. PlanBEE now operates in Newcastle, Manchester, London and Vancouver, with 150 apprentices having completed the programme. Almost all have progressed into professional careers, while the initiative itself has received national recognition, including the Queen Elizabeth Prize for Higher and Further Education in 2025. A sister programme, PlanBEE Rail, has also been established.

The model's power extends beyond recruitment numbers. By exposing apprentices to architecture, engineering, surveying, project management and contracting through rotational placements, the programme develops professionals who understand not only their own discipline but also the priorities, pressures and responsibilities of others. The result is a workforce better equipped for the collaborative project environments that define modern construction.

It also opens doors to those

Digital technologies, sustainability, MMC and evolving regulatory requirements demand professionals who understand more than their own specialism

who might not have considered a career in the sector. By creating an alternative to university pathways, paid apprenticeships widen participation and allow employers to develop talent that reflects the communities they serve.

Internationally, the consortium points to countries such as Finland and Germany, where vocational and academic education are far more closely integrated and interdisciplinary learning is embedded throughout professional development. Those systems show technical excellence and collaborative working are not competing priorities but complementary.

The next stage of that ambition is already waiting in the wings. Working alongside Northumbria

University, the University of the Built Environment, Skills England, the CIOB and employers including Arup, Laing O'Rourke and Vinci, Ryder has helped develop a new level 6 design, construction and management degree apprenticeship.

Building on the principles of PlanBEE, the qualification has been designed to produce graduates who enter the profession with technical expertise, practical experience and an understanding of how the wider project team operates.

Ready for delivery

The apprenticeship standard has been completed and is ready for delivery. Its launch, however, remains dependent on final government approval of its funding band, with wider changes to apprenticeship policy delaying national roll-out.

For the consortium, the delay comes at a time when the industry can least afford to postpone investment in its future workforce. Construction increasingly revolves around data, digital systems, carbon reduction, resilience and complex stakeholder relationships. Delivering that

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future requires professionals who are comfortable working across disciplines rather than within traditional silos.

The Reinvention 2026 campaign represents more than another call for reform. It is an attempt to move beyond diagnosis towards practical implementation, building on an educational model that has already shown tangible results.

Its ambition is clear: secure government approval for the new apprenticeship, encourage employers to create opportunities for learners, and establish a national partnership between industry and education that is capable of producing the next generation of built environment professionals.

After decades of reports describing what construction needs to become, the consortium believes the next chapter should focus less on writing recommendations and more on educating the people who will deliver them.

HOW CAN EDUCATION KEEP UP WITH A CHANGING INDUSTRY?

From skill shortages and siloed thinking to confusing career pathways and policy churn, industry leaders gathered to ask whether it is time to rethink the ways the built environment attracts and trains its workforce – and how a more accessible, collaborative and work-based model might look

The built environment has rarely faced such a complex set of challenges: decarbonisation, digital transformation, regulatory reform and persistent skills shortages are all reshaping what it means to deliver projects. Yet, as one participant at a recent roundtable observed, “educational pathways have pretty much stuck in the past”.

That tension – between a rapidly evolving industry and slower-moving education systems – framed a wide-ranging discussion, hosted by Building in partnership with Northumbria University, Ryder Architecture and the University of the Built Environment, among senior figures from across practice, academia and training.

At the heart of the debate, which was chaired by Building’s technical editor Thomas Lane, was a simple but provocative question: are traditional, single-discipline academic routes still fit for purpose?

A perception problem – or something deeper?

For many around the table, the issue begins well before formal education. “There’s a perception issue,” said Aled

Many teachers still think construction is just bricklaying and manual work. We’re not explaining clearly enough the amazing diversity of career options in the sector

Peter Barker, Ryder Architecture

Williams, pro vice chancellor at the University of the Built Environment. “We need around 250,000 new entrants by 2030, and a large proportion of those are technical roles. But we have both an attraction issue and an absorption issue.”

That mismatch between demand and appeal was echoed by Emma Barnes, head of impact at the Construction Youth Trust, who works directly with young people entering the sector.

“Young people want to go where the money and the opportunity is,” she said. “Construction doesn’t yet have the glamour of sectors like tech

or finance. And the landscape is incredibly confusing – there are so many different routes and qualifications, and they don’t always connect.”

She pointed to cases where even well-intentioned reforms fall short: “We’ve had young people doing T-levels being told they don’t qualify for higher apprenticeships. They’re falling between the cracks of different systems.”

For Peter Barker, consultant at Ryder Architecture, the problem is compounded by a lack of coherent messaging. “There doesn’t seem to be any cohesive approach to communicating



Left: Liz Male of Liz Male Consulting, Aled Williams from the University of the Built Environment and Cundall’s Paul Sperring

Right: Barratt's Rian Lamb, Emma Barnes of Construction Youth Trust, Building's Thomas Lane, Susan Dawson of Northumbria University, Clayton Knevitt of Rolton and Caroline Sudworth of the Technical Apprenticeships Consortium

Below: BPTW's Peter Sofoluke and Peter Barker of Ryder Architecture



what the sector is," he said. "Many teachers still think construction is just bricklaying and manual work. We're not explaining clearly enough the amazing diversity of career options in the sector and the stepping stones to get there."

Yet Liz Male, founder of Liz Male Consulting and an ARB board member, cautioned against overstating the negativity. "There has been a fundamental shift," she said, referencing recent research. "There's a growing backlash against the cost of degrees and a recognition that construction offers strong careers. We need to stop repeating outdated stereotypes."

The case for change

If perception is one challenge, the structure of education itself is another. Participants repeatedly

We value people being able to make professional judgments. That's something traditional degrees haven't always been able to develop

Susan Dawson,
Northumbria University

returned to the idea that early specialisation may no longer reflect how projects are delivered.

"It's not binary - you need both breadth and depth," said Williams. "A broad-based, interdisciplinary route at level 4, followed by specialisation later, could cover a huge range of roles.

You give people exposure first, then allow them to focus."

That approach resonated with Rian Lamb, senior technical co-ordinator at Barratt London, who experienced both traditional and alternative routes. "I joined the PlanBEE apprenticeship in 2016, then went to university," he said. "PlanBEE felt much more in touch with the industry. University, in comparison, felt out of touch with the skills required now."

For Susan Dawson, associate professor at Northumbria University, this speaks to a deeper shift in what education should deliver. "We value people being able to make professional judgments," she said. "That's something traditional degrees haven't always been able to develop. Exposure to different disciplines makes you more aware of how others think and where collaboration can improve outcomes."

Work-based learning and the PlanBEE effect

Models like PlanBEE - combining paid work placements across multiple organisations with structured learning - featured heavily in the discussion, though not uncritically.

For Paul Sperring, associate director at Cundall, the benefits are clear. "We've diversified who we take on - not just traditional apprentices but digital ones too," he said. "That blend is important. It's about building a workforce that reflects how the industry actually operates."

He added that such routes can accelerate development: "They've got a better foundation and they progress much quicker."

The rotational element was seen as particularly valuable. Barker described it as "the bit that's most important", allowing learners to experience different disciplines while earning a salary and to avoid being locked into early decisions.

But participants were keen to stress that no single model should dominate. "It doesn't have to be one-size-fits-all," Barker said. "What matters is giving »

Round the table

Chair: **Thomas Lane**, technical editor, Building

Peter Barker, consultant, Ryder Architecture

Emma Barnes, head of impact, Construction Youth Trust

Susan Dawson, associate professor, and lead for educational partnerships,

Northumbria University

Clayton Knevitt, board director and head of learning and development, Rolton

Rian Lamb, senior technical co-ordinator, Barratt London

Liz Male, founder, Liz Male Consulting

Peter Sofoluke, director, BPTW

Paul Sperring, associate director, Cundall

Caroline Sudworth, lead,

Technical Apprenticeships Consortium

Aled Williams, pro vice chancellor, innovation and partnerships, University of the Built Environment

» people a well-rounded base and clearly signposting their options early, with opportunities to specialise later without creating an overly long route to qualification.”

Barriers to scale: employers, education and trust

If the benefits of more integrated, work-based models are increasingly recognised, scaling them remains a major challenge.

A recurring theme was the difficulty of engaging employers. “There’s still a lack of faith in the further education system,” Barnes said. “Some employers won’t even consider candidates coming through FE routes.”

For Clayton Knevitt, board director at Rolton, part of the issue is mindset. “Taking on apprentices is seen as a risk – but it’s an investment in the future,” he said.

He also highlighted the importance of early engagement. “Getting students in for work experience is key. It’s amazing how many people go through a degree without understanding what the job actually involves.”

Meanwhile, structural challenges within education are also holding progress back. “There’s an extreme shortage of FE tutors, especially in construction and maths,” Male noted. “That’s washing away the foundations of the system.”

Dawson added that delivering consistent experiences across a fragmented employer base is difficult. “We work with hundreds of employers – from SMEs to major contractors – and the level of support varies hugely,” she said.

Policy churn and a confusing landscape

If employers and educators face challenges, many around the table argued that government policy is making matters worse. “There is a constant stream of

A broad-based, interdisciplinary route at level 4, followed by specialisation later, could cover a huge range of roles. You give people exposure first, then allow them to focus

Aled Williams, University of the Built Environment

policy change,” said Caroline Sudworth, lead at the Technical Apprenticeships Consortium. “We’ve had apprentices go through three different versions of a standard during their course. It’s ridiculous.”

Barker was blunter: “I don’t understand the logic of constantly tinkering with something over five years. It erodes credibility, creates uncertainty, and employers won’t commit.”

Changes to higher-level apprenticeships were cited as particularly disruptive. “We saw uptake soar from 2017,” said Peter Sofoluke, director at BPTW. “But

since recent changes, we can’t support it in the same way. The diversification we were seeing has come to a hard stop.”

There was also frustration at a lack of co-ordination across government bodies. “The left arm isn’t always talking to the right arm,” Sudworth said.

A system that isn’t joined up

Beyond policy, participants pointed to a more fundamental issue: a lack of integration across the skills system.

“There’s a disconnect,” said Male. “Central government looks at education, skills and employment in silos, while regional initiatives are trying to bring everything together.”

Barker reflected on how

local partnerships had helped PlanBEE succeed. “In the North-east it was employer-driven, founded by Ryder with a receptive FE college (Gateshead College),” he said. “In Manchester, the city council got behind it and gave it momentum.”

For Williams, this kind of joined-up thinking is essential. “We need a connected network – education providers, employers and government working together – to ensure people move into jobs and stay in the industry,” he said.

Inclusion, access and untapped talent

While much of the discussion focused on structure and policy, the issue of inclusion remained



Above: Barratt’s Rian Lamb and Emma Barnes of Construction Youth Trust

Left: Caroline Sudworth of the Technical Apprenticeships Consortium, Susan Dawson of Northumbria University and Aled Williams of the University of the Built Environment

central. “There are nearly a million young people not in education, employment or training,” Barnes said. “We can’t just focus on upskilling existing workers – we need to bring new people in.”

Encouragingly, alternative pathways appear to be helping. “We’ve seen much more diverse cohorts through apprenticeship routes,” Dawson said. “They’re more accessible and better aligned with people’s lives.”

But barriers remain, particularly around geography and social value requirements. “Sometimes projects require apprentices to come from specific boroughs, even if better candidates are nearby,” Sperring said. “It becomes a blocker.”

Looking ahead: what needs to change?

Despite the challenges, there was a strong sense that change is both necessary and possible. For Williams, the priority is clear: “We need strategic workforce planning, alongside upskilling and reskilling, and a focus on future-facing skills.”

Others emphasised the need for stability. “Stop changing the rules,” Barker urged.

“Give employers confidence to invest. Employers are willing to help, as evidenced by the apprenticeship Trailblazer system instigated by Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education [IfATE – now part of Skills England] of which Ryder and other

employers have been a key component.”

Sudworth called for simplification: “Remove the red tape. Let employers use the levy more flexibly.”

And for Male, the solution lies in learning from what already works. “We need to share success factors and scale them,” she said. “I don’t see enough leadership from central government on that.”

From ideas to action

While no single solution emerged, several themes stood out:

- Broader, interdisciplinary early-stage education, made affordable by salaried employment, followed by

later specialisation

- Greater integration of work-based learning into all routes
- Stronger employer engagement, supported by simpler government systems
- More stable, co-ordinated policy frameworks
- A clearer, more compelling narrative to school pupils about careers in the built environment.

As Lamb’s experience illustrates, alternative pathways can already deliver results. The challenge now is whether the industry – and government – can create the conditions for them to thrive at scale.

Or, as Knevitt put it: “It’s about exposure, opportunity and mindset. If we get those right, the talent is there.”

What would next steps look like?

While views differed on the best route forward, there was broad agreement that improving built environment education will require co-ordinated, practical action rather than further structural overhaul. Participants identified a series of near-term priorities for industry, education providers and government:

1. Create a clearer, joined-up skills system

A recurring concern was fragmentation across education, policy and industry. Participants called for a more co-ordinated approach – bringing together employers, FE colleges, universities and regional authorities to map skills needs and align pathways accordingly.

2. Stabilise policy and reduce complexity

Frequent changes to apprenticeship standards and funding rules were seen as a major barrier to employer engagement. The priority now is consistency and simplicity.

3. Make it easier for employers to participate

Employers remain central to any work-

based model, but face administrative and financial barriers.

Suggested solutions included:

- Simplifying access to apprenticeship funding
- Expanding rotational apprenticeship models, adopting a single centralised apprenticeship company to employ the apprentices and simplify the rotational placements (as seen in PlanBEE)
- Providing clearer guidance on entry routes and progression, particularly in schools.

4. Strengthen further education capacity

A shortage of tutors – particularly in construction, maths and engineering – risks undermining the system at its foundation. Investment in teaching capability and sector expertise is critical to the skills pipeline.

5. Embed work-based learning into all routes

Rather than treating placements as optional, participants argued that real industry experience should be

integral to learning – whether through apprenticeships, hybrid degrees or rotational models.

6. Expand early engagement and outreach

Improving perceptions and awareness requires earlier, more consistent exposure to the sector:

- School outreach and work experience
- Clearer communication of career pathways
- Better alignment between schools, colleges and employers.

7. Scale and test alternative models

Models like PlanBEE should be replicated, adapted and stress-tested in different regions and sectors, rather than treated as one-off initiatives.

8. Focus on outcomes: jobs, competence and retention

Ultimately, success should be measured not just by qualifications, but by:

- Employment outcomes
- Professional competence
- Long-term retention in the industry.

TACKLING COLD SPOTS: BUILDING THE SKILLS PIPELINE WHERE IT'S MOST NEEDED

Construction's skills crisis is real, urgent and unevenly spread - and the traditional education pipeline has no convincing answer to the cold spots, workforce gaps and geographic mismatches leaving communities without the homes they were promised, writes Kim Davies of the University of the Built Environment

The facts are well known to anyone in this industry, but they bear repeating because the scale of what is coming demands it.

The sector needs an additional 239,000 workers by 2030 to meet the government's housing target, the CITB puts the annual shortfall at nearly 48,000, and the government's own plan to recruit 60,000 more specialist workers by 2029 covers less than a quarter of what is actually needed.

Nearly half of building firms reported project delays last year because of skills shortages, and 22% had to cancel jobs entirely. The workforce crisis is already costing the industry contracts, costing clients time, and costing communities the homes they were promised.

What gets discussed less is that this crisis is not uniform. Skills shortages in construction are acutely geographic, and the mismatch between where demand sits and where training provision exists is one of the sector's most stubborn structural problems.



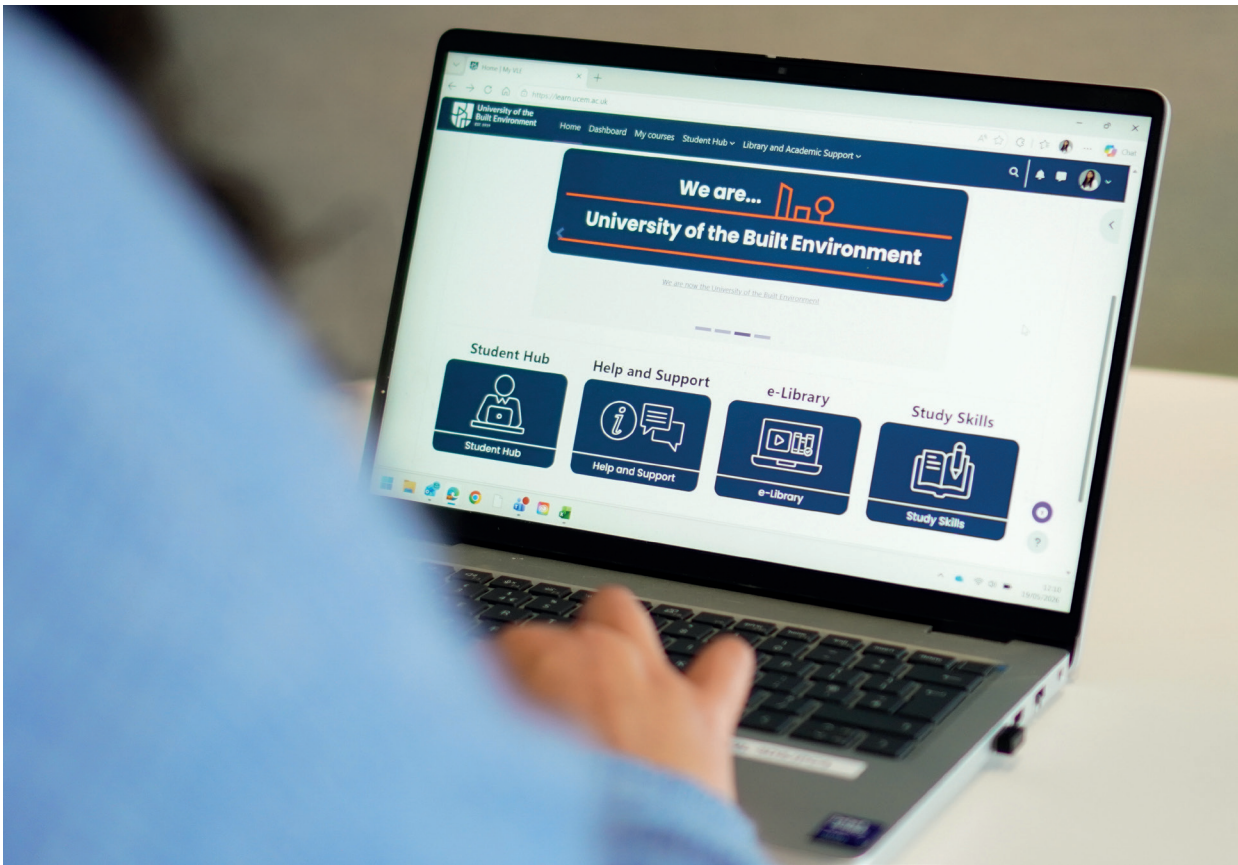
Geographic cold spots

The North of England is currently the highest-risk region for labour-driven delays, with new order values growing at 33.2% year-on-year against an annual recruitment rate of just 2.15%.

London, despite concentrating 30% of the country's construction firms, has the lowest rate of new construction apprenticeships of any English region.

In rural areas, from parts of Cumbria and Cornwall to Wales and Scotland, local provision is thin, populations are small, and projects routinely import workers from elsewhere at significant cost. These are the cold spots, and the traditional education system has no convincing answer to them.

The starting point for any serious response is data. We need to map where shortages are most acute, not just by trade but by level and specialism, and then ask an honest question about what kind of intervention each place actually needs.



Opposite page: Virtual campuses enable students to collaborate with their classmates and offer the flexibility for people to learn alongside their careers

Left: The University of the Built Environment has taken this further by developing virtual laboratories that simulate real-world environments

In some areas, the right answer is targeted investment in local, in-person provision, particularly in communities that have historically low engagement with further education, where physical presence and peer learning matter for recruitment as much as for delivery.

Remote learning

In others, the right answer is high-quality remote education.

Thankfully, online education for the built environment is evolving. Virtual campuses enable students to collaborate with their classmates and offer the flexibility for students to learn alongside their careers.

In some cases, we've been able to take this even further by developing virtual laboratories that simulate real-world environments.

While hands-on, physical experience remains essential for certain practical skills, advances in virtual learning

We need to map where shortages are most acute, not just by trade but by level and specialism, and then ask an honest question about what kind of intervention each place actually needs

are making education widely more accessible and adaptable, especially for a workforce that is increasingly time-constrained and geographically dispersed.

For a site manager in a cold-spot region who cannot attend day-release provision, or a planner at an SME without the budget for extended offsite training, online learning tools represent a viable and genuinely

rigorous route to professional development.

The barriers that made remote upskilling impractical a decade ago are falling away, and the firms that recognise this earliest will be best placed to build the workforce they need ahead of those still waiting for traditional provision to catch up.

Equitable and affordable

These are the values at the heart of Reinvention 2026, a collaboration between Ryder Architecture, Northumbria University and the University of the Built Environment.

We believe that education should be equitable and affordable, that industry and academia are stronger when they design learning together, and that a young person's postcode or background should not determine whether they can build a professional career in this sector.

We believe that the built

environment, at its best, is one of the most important things a society does for itself, and that the people who deliver it deserve an education system that takes them seriously.

Construction is no longer simply bricks and mortar; it is data, systems, climate resilience and the fabric of communities. The professionals the industry needs must be able to think and work across disciplines from day one, and the education system that produces them has to be flexible enough to reach them wherever they are.

Cold spots will not fix themselves, and the homes target will not be met by waiting for the traditional pipeline to widen. The tools, the models and the partnerships to do something different are available now, and the industry has every reason to use them.

Kim Davies is director of marketing, communications and brand at the University of the Built Environment

REINVENTING THE BLUEPRINT: AN END TO SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS

The built environment sector has proven solutions to its workforce problem - but policy-makers keep overlooking them in favour of quick fixes that look good on paper, writes Ryder Architecture's Peter Barker

Ask anyone not working in the built environment sector which skills they think are essential for the professional roles, and they will probably name technical competence, team-working, problem-solving, social responsibility, creativity and financial awareness.

It comes as a surprise to those outside the industry that many entering their first professional role after qualification often feel poorly equipped to meet these demands, and that employers frequently need to top up these skills deficits to reach minimum levels of competency.

These shortcomings - and their potentially catastrophic implications - also drew the attention of the Grenfell Inquiry.

Much of the focus of recent policy for government and industry groups has been on addressing skills shortages that stand in the way of tackling urgent socioeconomic needs, such as the demand for 239,000 workers by 2030 to meet housebuilding targets.

There is also a growing recognition that escalating numbers of those not in employment, education or

training (NEETs) must urgently be addressed.

Regrettably, the response to these pressures has been to grasp at quick-fix solutions and short-term schemes designed to rapidly improve such statistics, rather than providing substantive and long-term solutions.

Former health secretary Alan Milburn recently reported that his review found the state was spending 25 times more on benefit payments for young people than on providing measures to get them into jobs.

The frustration from many employers is that there are proven solutions already out there... which are being ignored as the wheel is needlessly reinvented by government

With over one million young people not in education, training or employment, a complete system reset is needed. However, the frustration from many employers is that there are proven solutions already out there and working well, but which are being ignored as the wheel is needlessly reinvented by government.

Ten years ago, a cross-disciplinary consortium, including Arup, Cundall, Turner & Townsend and Sir Robert McAlpine and led by Ryder Architecture, established a Plan for Built Environment Education. This led to the creation of the award-winning cross-disciplinary PlanBEE apprenticeship in partnership with Gateshead College.

The level 4-5 apprenticeship has operated successfully in Manchester (with support from Manchester City Council), London, Newcastle and Vancouver. It provides salaried industry experience and education for young people, including those from underrepresented backgrounds, into professional built environment careers, acquiring



Below left: Industry is more than willing to contribute to solutions

Right: Much of the skills shortage focus is through the lens of pressing policy priorities such as the government's housebuilding targets



the latest skills and cross-disciplinary experience through rotational work placements with a range of industry employers.

With more than 150 graduates to date, 98% of whom have progressed into professional careers, this programme has fundamental principles that provide an inclusive and affordable route to build the professional workforce of the future.

The programme has been recognised in several awards, most recently the Queen Elizabeth Prize for Higher and Further Education in November 2025.

"PlanBEE apprentices are now an integral part of our early careers recruitment, as they bring as much value to us as our graduates... We have been impressed by the apprentices we've hosted at Cundall - so much so, that we've wanted to keep each one after their rotation with us," says Paul Sperring, associate director at Cundall.

Ian Knight, programme director at Manchester Life, echoes this: "The calibre of apprentices has been exceptional. They bring the

Most employers are willing to invest their time and funds in nurturing talent if they know that learning providers and government are also playing their part

mindset, skills, and adaptability the sector needs."

And Dave Scott of Ameen adds: "Our PlanBEE trainees have been a breath of fresh air, bringing a real thirst for knowledge. The initiative, intellect and work ethic displayed by these trainees is testament to the unique qualities and ethos of the PlanBEE programme."

Meanwhile, Manchester City Council has described PlanBEE as helping "meet the need for skilled employees in the North-west construction sector" while equipping young people "to thrive in the industry".

Ryder and the rest of the team are also leading the development of the new cross-disciplinary level 6 design construction and management degree apprenticeship, building on the proven record of PlanBEE.

This qualification has been designed in partnership with Skills England and is ready for delivery, pending final approval. However, the current restructuring of government skills initiatives has brought uncertainty over the programme's roll-out, hindering the opportunity to bring this progressive educational programme to young people and support the industry and wider economy.

The government's desire to be seen to be addressing numerical deficiencies and to be able to cite statistics to demonstrate success is understandable, but we have reached a situation where the effort and financial support is going to short-term fixes, rather than meaningful, lasting change.

There is a danger of overlooking the quality and appropriateness of some of the innovative education programmes being delivered, and

a lack of connection between policy-makers and those at the sharp end - the employers and the workforce of the future.

Too many of our existing built environment educational programmes are derived from the practices of the 20th century and fail to meet the needs of a changing industry; architecture is a prime example.

The recognition of the value of higher and degree apprenticeships from 2016 onwards has been an encouraging sign, however. The Architects Registration Board (ARB) reforms - under the banner Tomorrow's Architects - have refocused on the need to broaden competencies, widen opportunity and access, and emphasise the value of practical learning derived from the workplace.

Most employers are willing to invest their time and funds in nurturing talent if they know that learning providers and government are also playing their part. For example, Ryder has developed its own cross-disciplinary apprenticeship and has internally developed learning programmes that cover everything from damp-proof detailing to negotiation skills.

Employers see the value of the returns on such investment and the positive impact on their recruitment pipeline. All they ask is that government provides the regulatory framework allowing such work-based learning programmes to flourish - rather than frittering public money on short-term, unsustainable training schemes just to appeal to voters.

Most employers are not looking for government handouts, only for more focused investment in programmes that will deliver lasting and impactful change.

Peter Barker is a consultant at Ryder Architecture

WHERE NEXT? HOW WE CAN FOSTER A DEMAND-LED EDUCATION SYSTEM

The next challenge for the built environment is not just to create more skills and opportunities, but to connect them. Dr Susan Dawson explains how employers, educators and professional bodies must work together to build a more responsive system for the workforce of the future

Preparing for the future requires more than new qualifications; it requires new ways of thinking about professional education.

The conversation could not be more timely. Government policy is increasingly pointing towards more responsive, demand-led education systems through Skills England, local skills improvement plans, the lifelong learning entitlement and devolution.

Policy can tell us what should be aligned, but our challenge is understanding how regions create the conditions that make that alignment possible and translate best practice into wider system change. Across the sector there are remarkable examples of successful innovation and collaboration. Employers are investing in apprenticeships, schools engagement and workforce development. Colleges and universities are developing flexible, employer-focused provision, while professional bodies champion lifelong learning. There are pockets of excellence, but too many remain isolated and disconnected.

Our experience at Northumbria, working with over 550 employers through one of the

UK's largest built environment degree apprenticeship portfolios, has demonstrated both what is possible when education and industry work together - and how challenging those partnerships can be to sustain.

Building on the national Reinvention 2026 campaign - a collaboration between Ryder Architecture, Northumbria University and the University of the Built Environment - Northumbria recently convened employers, colleges, universities, professional bodies and regional partners from across the North-east to ask a different question.

Rather than revisiting the familiar discussion around skills shortages, we wanted to understand what a genuinely connected, place-based, demand-led education system might look like. One participant captured the discussion: "There's so much going on... the problem is that some of it isn't joined up."

The challenge isn't a lack of ambition or innovation. It is creating stronger connections between regional priorities, employer demand, educational provision and professional development - making opportunities and career

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pathways easier to find and navigate for employers, educators and those building careers.

Perhaps this is where the next conversation begins. We spend enormous effort designing the physical infrastructure our economy depends upon. Now we must give equal attention to the infrastructure of opportunity that develops those who design, construct and maintain it.

That infrastructure already exists. Schools, colleges, universities, employers, professional institutions and lifelong learning all have a role to play, but we need to create the conditions that allow them to work together more effectively.

This is where universities have an important civic role - not simply as providers of education, but as trusted conveners. By

bringing together employers, educators, professional bodies and regional leaders, they can help develop the shared understanding, relationships and confidence needed for genuinely demand-led education systems to emerge.

That thinking is informing the development of the North East Built Environment Futures Alliance, a forum bringing together education, industry and the professions to translate regional skills intelligence into collaborative action on professional learning. Rather than creating another regional initiative, it seeks to complement the local skills improvement plan and wider national reforms by connecting employers, educators and professional bodies around the future of the built environment workforce.

Although this conversation began in the North-east, its relevance is national. Perhaps the next competitive advantage for the built environment will come not from creating more opportunities, but from creating the conditions that make those opportunities easier to connect.

Dr Susan Dawson is an associate professor at Northumbria University