

Lack of construction careers advice in Northern Ireland threatens housing and Infrastructure targets, while almost 10% of 18-24 year olds are not in education, employment or training. Research Briefing – May 2025

Who are CIOB?

The Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) is the world's largest and most influential professional body for construction management and leadership. Our members, over 3,000 of whom are in Ireland, work worldwide in the development, conservation and improvement of the built environment. Our status as a chartered professional body means we act in the public interest and develop policy positions, recommendations, and research that is based on evidence and best practice. We accredit university degrees, educational courses, and training - internationally and in Northern Ireland.

Key messages

- New data released by the CIOB for Northern Ireland shows changing attitudes to construction careers amongst young people and parents.
- A recent survey by the CIOB found almost 80% of young people aged between 16 and 24 in Northern Ireland hold a positive view of construction careers, and more than a third (35%) would consider working in the construction sector.
- A survey of parents of 16-24 year-olds showed more than three quarters (77%) in Northern Ireland would be supportive of their child working in construction, with only 8% saying they'd be unsupportive.
- However, over half of those surveyed (63%) said information about the sector was not included in the careers advice they received whilst in education.

Introduction

Ensuring the construction industry has a steady supply of labour with the necessary skills continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing the industry in Northern Ireland. The construction industry has long suffered from challenges posed by skills shortages and skills gaps. The recent cyclical, boom and bust history of construction means workloads and staffing requirements have been heavily dictated by the general condition of the economy.

Research from The Construction Skills Network Northern Ireland noted that in order to deliver expected national construction work requirements to 2028, recruitment needs to increase by 1,040 new workers each year.<sup>1</sup> While Northern Ireland has fewer construction job vacancies and greater apprenticeship uptake when compared to the rest of the UK, the 1.6% required increase in the annual recruitment requirement (ARR) nevertheless represents a doubling of the workforce growth rate of 0.8%. Furthermore, there are more workers leaving than joining the workforce in Northern Ireland each year. This outflow of workers is why the ARR rate is higher than the workforce growth rate.

Meanwhile, according to the May 2025 Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey, there were an estimated 19,000 young people aged 16 to 24 years in Northern Ireland who were not in

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<sup>1</sup> Data from Construction Skills Network, Labour Market Intelligence Report 2024-2028

education, employment or training (NEET) in January to March 2025. This was equivalent to 9.4% of all those aged 16 to 24 years in NI.<sup>2</sup>

New data from the CIOB indicates the Northern Ireland Assembly's plans to increase housing supply, modernise Northern Ireland's infrastructure, and achieve ambitious climate change targets will not be achieved if urgent action is not taken to entice young people into the construction sector. If the Assembly is to realise its Programme for Government<sup>3</sup> ambitions to provide more Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing, water and wastewater infrastructure, roads and transport, and sporting infrastructure, the current construction workforce needs to be bolstered and a pipeline of competent people entering the industry needs to be developed.

### Changing perceptions of the construction industry

The CIOB's survey found almost three quarters (74%) of young people aged between 16 and 24 in Northern Ireland hold a positive view of construction careers, and more than a third (36%) would consider working in the construction sector. However, almost half of those surveyed (43%) said information about it was not included in the careers advice they received whilst in education.<sup>4</sup>

A similar survey<sup>5</sup> of parents of 16-24-year-olds showed more than three quarters (77%) in Northern Ireland would be supportive of their child working in construction with only 8% saying they'd be unsupportive. Over a third (39%) of parents surveyed in Northern Ireland said they would prefer their child to "earn while they learn" instead of going to university, reflecting concerns over the rising cost of living for students and a lack of graduate opportunities.

When asked to choose words to describe construction roles, "highly skilled" and "professional" were among the top four selected by the 2,000 young people surveyed across the UK with "working on building sites" and "careers for men" being the other two most selected options.

The CIOB's survey data also shows an encouraging trend in young people's perceptions of the industry, including more than 1 in 10 associating the sector with modern, tech-focused roles, and describing the sector as "diverse."

The research suggests that well informed careers advice and guidance are crucial. The construction sector offers a wide range of careers suitable for people with different skills and interests, with different routes to entry. Yet, the variety of roles within construction is not captured by wider societal perceptions of construction work. Worryingly, the data suggests that career guidance is not challenging this perception. Encouragingly, the findings indicate there is an opportunity to appeal to young people beyond those who are interested in skilled trades, by emphasising roles in areas of construction such as management, technology, and health and safety.

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<sup>2</sup> Data from Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey – Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) – May 2025

<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland Executive. (2025). Programme for Government 2024–2027: Our plan—Doing what matters most.

<sup>4</sup> The research was conducted by Opinion Matters, among a sample of 2001 young people in the UK aged 16-24. 136 of them live in Northern Ireland. The data was collected between 04.02.2025 - 07.02.2025.

<sup>5</sup> The research was conducted by Opinion Matters, among a sample of 2000 UK Parents, aged 31+, with children aged 16-24 years old. 145 of them live in Northern Ireland. The data was collected between 04.02.2025- 10.02.2025. Opinion Matters abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Opinion Matters is also a member of the British Polling Council.

## Closing the skills gap

Despite these promising shifts in perceptions of the construction sector, barriers to recruiting and retaining the necessary pipeline of skilled workers to undertake construction projects remain. The NI Audit Office found that skills-shortage vacancies significantly increased, almost doubling – from 5% to 9% - in the construction sector between 2019 and 2022.<sup>6</sup>

Urgent action is needed to address the worsening skills gap and to bolster recruitment efforts for the industry in Northern Ireland. To that end, we have outlined the CIOB's policy recommendations for skills below.

### Policy asks

- **Skills stock-check** – The CIOB would like to see the Northern Ireland Assembly take a comprehensive stock check of the current skills systems. This would involve finding out how much the current skills systems contribute in terms of new entrants, and the current landscape of expected new entrants as compared to the number needed to deliver expected national housing and infrastructure targets. Given the Northern Ireland Audit Office's recent finding<sup>7</sup> that there is a lack of clarity around the governance of skills between various Government Departments, the Department for the Economy – as the owner of the current NI Skills Strategy – should be tasked with carrying out this stock check. This stock check is urgent, and needs to happen prior to the Northern Ireland Skills Council's review and rationalisation of existing advisory bodies targeted for completion by March 2027. This stock check would allow the Assembly to refocus priorities to understand what changes need to be made to existing systems and what new systems need to be implemented to stimulate the growth of the construction labour force.
- **Increased resources for apprenticeships** – With Northern Ireland's economy struggling to bridge skills gaps, one of the main problems is the overly complex and disjointed apprenticeship system. The apprenticeship process could be made easier to navigate, with better communication around the considerable benefits for employers, and support tailored to their needs, particularly SMEs. Construction apprenticeship starts in Northern Ireland have picked up strongly since the pandemic. The overall pattern in Northern Ireland is different to what is being seen in England, where construction apprenticeship starts have reduced in recent years. Looking across the range of construction training achieved in Northern Ireland at Level 2 and above, there is also a positive picture. Since 2020, there has been a steady increase in the number of qualification achievements, rising in each of the last four years.<sup>8</sup> It is imperative that the Assembly seize on this momentum by making the apprenticeship process simpler and better resourced to entice even more employers into the system.
- **Improving careers advice** – There is an opportunity to reach a wider talent pool of young people through more consistent coverage of construction in careers advice in schools, given almost half of young people reporting these were absent. The Department for Education should therefore work with the Department for the Economy

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<sup>6</sup> Data from the Northern Ireland Audit Office, Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future. September 2024

<sup>7</sup> Data from the Northern Ireland Audit Office, Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future. September 2024

<sup>8</sup> Data from Construction Skills Network, Labour Market Intelligence Report 2024-2028

in looking at opportunities to strengthen the accuracy and quality of careers advice to ensure that key sectors of the economy, such as construction, are covered appropriately. This would simultaneously tackle Northern Ireland's almost 10% rate of 18-24 year olds not in education, employment or training.

### 3. Further Information

CIOB is keen to collaborate to help develop policy priorities to ensure that they work for the benefit of all users and creators of the built environment.

We would be delighted to brief you further on any of the points raised within this briefing, to support the development of parliamentary questions or to speak with you further about our research. With that in mind please let us know if you would be interested in meeting with our policy and public affairs team either virtually or in person.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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