



The apprenticeship agenda

The government has pledged to create 30,000 apprenticeship places across the road and rail industry by 2020. Here, *Highways Magazine* editor Alec Peachey speaks to the chair of the new transport and infrastructure skills strategy, Terry Morgan

As part of the government's commitment to reach this figure targets for the creation of new apprenticeships will be written into contracts.

The Department for Transport (DfT), alongside its delivery bodies, including Highways England and Network Rail, will now work with their suppliers to ensure apprenticeships are at the heart of contracts which will deliver the government's multi-billion pound rail and road investment programme.

Depending on the contract, this means suppliers will either create one apprenticeship for every £3 million to £5m of taxpayers' money spent, or deliver a percentage increase in the number of apprentices employed each year during the lifetime of the contract. In these cases the aim is that the number of apprenticeships created each year will equal 2.5 per cent of the workforce, so for every 200 people

employed, five apprenticeships will be created each year.

The strategy builds upon the work of major projects like Crossrail, which has used responsible contract arrangements to create hundreds of apprenticeships since construction began in 2009

"I'm always a great believer in trying to leverage off things that have worked," Morgan tells *Highways Magazine*. *"At Crossrail, it has worked. We're now at 550 apprentices and are still growing. It has made a big difference to us.*

"When I spoke to Highways England (HE) there was no objection to the principle. I think historically they'd had something that looked like this, but I'm not sure how strongly it had been implemented. With HE it was more a conversation around what does it mean and how does it work. They needed a bit of time to understand what it meant and what they could commit to. I'd rather that than simply saying ➔"

"We all have an interest in trying to ensure that youngsters, when they're making choices about their career, understand the benefits of working in engineering"

Terry Morgan



Hundreds of apprentices have joined Crossrail since construction started in 2009



☛ *yes we agree and then not actually understanding what it means."*

Morgan, who has been chairman of Crossrail since 2009, believes that this approach will soon be commonplace across other sectors.

"One of the recommendations was to do more about the procurement power that we have to try and encourage the apprenticeship agenda," he notes. *"Do not be surprised if you see other parts of government start to follow suit. I think it's inevitable and it is one of those things that businesses are now looking at."*

The former apprentice says that companies who invest in apprenticeships often put themselves in a stronger position when it comes to bidding for work.

"It's not about going after companies that naturally do this anyway, but the reality is 80 per cent of companies don't have apprenticeship programmes," he remarked. *"There are some who say how can I when I have a contract that only lasts another two or three years. Why would I take on an apprentice? In my opinion it comes down to bidding for more work. Companies that invest in apprenticeships are in a much more competitive position. They are offering out to, in terms of clients and organisations, something that demonstrates they are here for the long-term. I get very dismissive of those that say 'I can't invest in apprenticeships because I might not have a business in two or three years' time'. That's not the way to plan a business. That's planning to fail. If you're not investing in people and don't have new people coming in, then you probably will fail."*

The strategy also features some other recommendations around diversity.

Agreement has been reached with Network Rail, Highways England, HS2 Ltd, Transport for London (TfL) and Crossrail for a stretching target for new female entrants to engineering and technical apprenticeships, either directly employed by them or by their suppliers, delivering an increase in the numbers of women employed in the transport sector, with the aim being that this should be in line with the proportion of women in work by 2030.

"I want to ensure that by 2020 20 per cent of apprentices are female," comments Morgan. *"Some people would say that that doesn't sound overly ambitious, but when you start from a position of five per cent, it is a challenge."*

Delivering the right messages

In order to help attract younger people into engineering more must be done to promote the balance between apprenticeships and the benefits of



going to university. This, Morgan says, is true of all apprenticeships.

"There's nothing to stop you doing both," he says. *"Apprenticeships are very often described as a single action. Going forward, I don't think that will be the case. I'm very keen that people recognise they can get paid doing an apprenticeship and they can finish it and decide that they then want to go onto university."*

"One of the reasons for this is either parental prejudice or teacher guidance is often quite limited in terms of anything else other than going to university. Schools historically have always been measured on their academic results and the proportion of students that go to university. That's going to change. It can't work any other way and I think Nicky Morgan (Secretary of State for Education) has got that message. She knows she's got to do more in terms of promoting the balance between apprenticeships and the academic route. Indeed, and in my humble opinion, when you look at what happens when young people leave university they often go onto a development programme. I believe that should also be part of an apprenticeship. I never did understand this demarcation between an apprentice and a graduate. I've lived with it as I was an apprentice and also a graduate. I'm still the same person, but that demarcation is very real, as though it's a statement about different capabilities. I don't believe that either."

Investing in infrastructure

Morgan engaged with the roads sector before the launch of the strategy and believes the current investment in the industry is indicative of the government's current focus on infrastructure.

"What I saw with highways is that it's almost at a bit of a crossroads. The whole establishment of HE is to give it longevity. To get away from annual budgets and to avoid the uncertainty about business expectations."

"It's still going to be a competitive market, but the whole thing about HE is that it will have a long-term vision about what it's trying to do. What I saw was a group of contractors who

are waiting to see what it looks like. In some respect there was noise about the fact that the early stages had created a bit of disruption. I'm not surprised by that with the changes that are going on, but it is an industry that should actually look forward to longevity. The government have set a priority on infrastructure investment. The only way that's going to be questioned is if we fail to deliver. If it's not done properly then why would politicians prioritise taxpayers' money to be wasted?"

"If you look at what's going through government at the moment it still retains a high priority towards infrastructure, whether it is HS2, nuclear or roads. It has a much higher priority than I've experienced in the past. The government have always got this trade off between investing in the future or investing in our needs today. It is continuing to prioritise infrastructure and I think we'll see more signs of that in the Budget coming up in the next month or so."

Working together

Rather than have different engineering sectors competing against each other to attract apprentices, Morgan says industries must work together to address the skills shortage.

"We all have an interest in trying to ensure that youngsters, when they're making choices about their career, understand the benefits of working in engineering."

"If I'm honest I do worry sometimes. Monday it could be Crossrail coming in to talk about the benefits of engineering, Tuesday it could be Network Rail, Wednesday it's Highways England - and they've all got different messages. Again one of the things that's important is how do we coordinate our efforts."

"Which part of our sector, in engineering terms, do they go to? From my experience too many youngsters make a decision too early on that they're not going to do engineering. For me the most important thing is trying to deliver that message without getting too much into the detail about the advantages of careers in roads versus rail. I'd rather get youngsters familiar with an engineering route. To be frank

I'd like to see a lot more people move across different sectors of engineering."

The academy question

As part of the strategy, the government wants to develop a coordinated national network of transport infrastructure skills colleges to train the transport workers of the future.

The National Training Academy for Rail (NTAR) has recently opened in Northampton with the government providing 50 per cent of the £7 million funding.

So is it time for a physical academy that's dedicated to highways training?

"The whole question about creating centres of excellence to bring common competencies together is critically important," answers Morgan. *"If it's real then it is up to whoever decides to do that to put the business case together and to bid into government."*

The Institute of Highway Engineers (IHE) recently launched its new virtual National Highway Engineering Academy (NHEA).

According to the IHE, the virtual academy will focus on providing engineers and technicians with the skill

set and expertise that is vitally needed by the highways industry.

"It's a great start, but it doesn't have to stop there," notes Morgan. *"I can only go by my own experience. Virtual is good, but getting youngsters together to get experience is equally important."*

George Lee, chief executive of the Road Safety Markings Association (RSMA), recently argued that specialist training is important when it comes to installing performance products on the road network (see Jan/Feb 2016 issue of *Highways*).

Morgan agrees with this observation, adding: *"When you talk about specialisms, that's a great example, which is similar to High Speed. We want a centre of excellence that's got the knowledge and for it to be recognised for that. If it's possible to deliver the programmes at that location then fine, but if other colleges want to deliver the programme then I would be looking for them to go to centres of excellence to learn what it is they think the industry needs. The worst thing is if there is a determination to be recognising specialism and you've got 20 colleges thinking they're all delivering the same programmes, but they're all*

different, then as an employer that's quite difficult to determine what level of accreditation has been achieved. I would be looking for a model around national standards to try and make the most of these national centres that we're currently developing."

One of the most important things, Morgan highlights, is the importance of finding people apprenticeship places – using an example to illustrate his point.

"Say Network Rail want 500 apprentices, they're likely to get 3,000 people applying. What happens is Network Rail will choose the ones they want and the rest will get rejection letters. I'm keen to make sure that we don't lose those people."

"I want to make sure that once individuals show an interest in apprenticeships we do everything we can to find them a position. Historically, that has not happened."

When asked how big the challenge is around creating thousands of apprenticeships, Morgan answers with one word – **"huge"**, he responds.

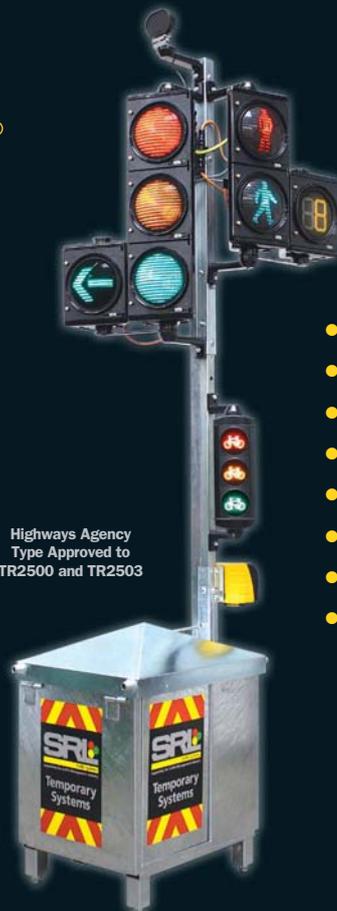
He confirmed that a steering committee will now be tasked with carrying out the implementation of the strategy. ☹

To view the strategy visit: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/495900/transport-infrastructure-strategy-building-sustainable-skills.pdf

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