

Homeowner demand for building services triggers calls for an increase in apprenticeships

By Carol Kavanagh, Group Human Resources Director, The Travis Perkins Group

The UK housing market is finally flourishing again. As a result, demand for building services is rocketing, with many homeowners seeking to sell or renovate properties. At the same time, demand for new housing stock is on the rise, putting both the government and developers under pressure.

While this growing demand is undoubtedly good news for those in the building trade, it coincides with a potentially serious skills shortage. Current rates of employment show that there are insufficient numbers of new talent coming into the building and construction trade, something that is threatening the industry's ability to meet this rise in requirements.

In fact, government figures reveal that just 14,000 apprenticeships were created in the construction, housing and environmental build sector in 2012-13: 8,000 less than in the previous year. If estimates from the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) are correct, this is a long way from meeting the 182,000 new jobs that will need to be filled over the next four years if demand is to be met.

Call for apprentices

Unless action is taken now, it is clear that this skills shortage will only escalate, and homeowners already feeling the pinch are calling for solutions. The answer could lie in creating more apprenticeships: a move that has already won the support of many homeowners. According to research from The Travis Perkins Group, 70% of UK homeowners believe that any building firm turning over more than £500,000 a year should be required to take on a new apprentice each year.

There is also widespread support for government involvement: 55% believe the government should pay for a year's apprenticeship for new entrants to the building trade aged 19-24. More apprenticeships could certainly help to get more young people into employment, a pertinent issue when government figures show that 19% of 16-24 year olds were unemployed between December 2013 and February 2014.¹

Problem solver

There is no reason why apprenticeships should only help young people into employment either: 48% of those questioned by Travis Perkins were in favour of

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN05871/youth-unemployment-statistics>

a government-created scheme aimed at retraining older age groups, while 64% also supported the idea of a special government scheme to train the long-term unemployed in building skills.

Apprenticeships certainly pay off for the companies that offer them. Travis Perkins has long operated its own schemes aimed at attracting people of different age groups, backgrounds and experience levels. Proving how well it works, our chief executive John Carter is one of many executives that have risen up the ladder through our management apprenticeship scheme. This year too, we have committed to taking on more apprentices than ever before, with a plan to bring 138 into the Group.

There can be no doubt that apprenticeships are hugely valuable - both to the businesses that provide them and to the industry itself - offering an essential way of passing on skills and boosting the long-term prospects of both. They also provide new, much needed jobs, particularly among those age groups that need these opportunities the most, and, with the UK housing market booming once more, the more apprentice positions the industry creates, the more able it will surely be to meet demand.