



BUILDBACK TO THE FUTURE

FIS Skills has come up with a great way to match job seekers with construction firms desperate for skilled workers. **Victoria Madine** hears about the early successes of the new programme

At the start of 2017, job seeker Alex Baillie knew next to nothing about the interiors trade and had never heard of 'interior systems'. Fast-forward four months and Alex is working on site with Kenmor Ceilings & Partitions in his first steady job for several years – and training for an NVQ Level 2 in drylining (see box overleaf: All about Alex).

He has FIS Skills' new training initiative, BuildBack, to thank for his introduction to the finishes and fit-out sector and the opportunity to learn a new trade.

The idea behind BuildBack is simple – it bridges the gap between job seekers who are serious about developing a career in the finishes and interiors sector, and employers who need keen new workers more than ever.

In a survey of FIS members in March, 90% of trade company respondents said their business was being hindered by a lack of skilled trade

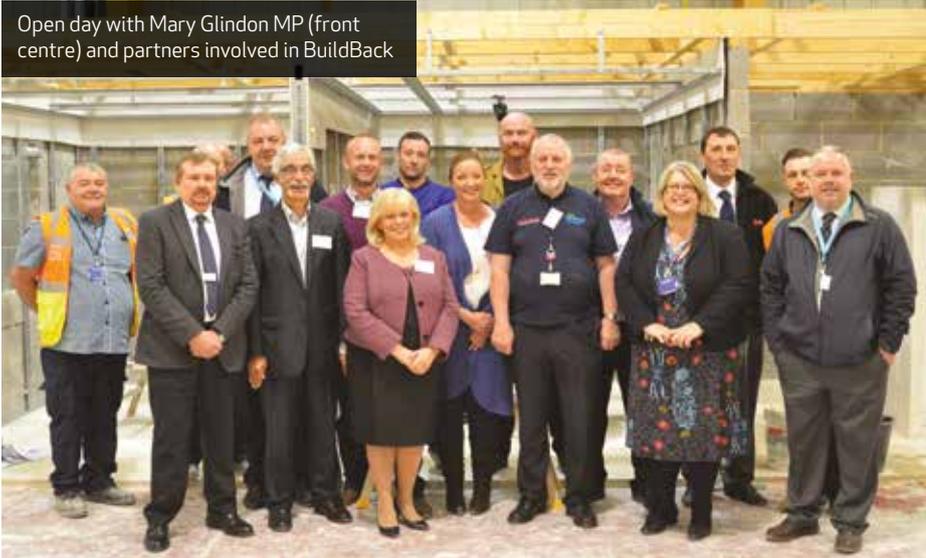
operatives, and almost half of companies faced increased labour demands (see box overleaf: Skills crisis in numbers).

FIS Skills estimates the sector needs to attract around 1,500 skilled new entrants every year by 2020 to keep pace with demand. BuildBack is part of its response to the growing skills crisis in the finishes and interiors sector.

As Paul Glover, project manager at FIS Skills explains, the crisis is the result of a combination of factors. "Our sector has an ageing workforce and a lack of new entrants," he says. "In part, this is due to a lack of general awareness about the opportunities in the trade, and reflects wider issues about people's sometimes negative perceptions about work in the construction sector."

He highlights the threats to the existing labour supply. "Brexit raises further question marks about the supply of labour. With well over half our members employing European

Open day with Mary Glindon MP (front centre) and partners involved in BuildBack



“By the time the person comes to site, they have a grasp of tools and materials and a CSCS card. Beats putting out a job ad and hoping for the best”

workers, any changes to the rules and regulations for immigrant labour could have a significant impact.”

Launched in February at Tyne Metropolitan College (TyneMet), BuildBack aims to demonstrate how the skills gap can be filled by tapping into the current pool of 1.56 million unemployed people available to work (ONS Labour Force Survey, February 2017).

There have been numerous initiatives over the years to encourage job seekers to consider working in construction. But BuildBack has a screening process to find the people with a genuine interest in the sector, and promises to make participants site-ready more quickly.

BuildBack participants spend two weeks at college, completing a Specialist Upskilling Programme (SUP), followed by a two-week work placement on site with an employer.

All trainees are then offered at least one job interview and those who secure full-time employment with an employer are eligible to

have their fees paid for ongoing training to NVQ Level 2 in drylining. In addition, trainees receive free personal protective equipment (PPE) and a basic tool kit, and they are provided with a CSCS card. The idea is to minimise, as far as possible, any burden on the employer.

BUILDBACK IN DETAIL

So how does it all work on the ground? For the pilot BuildBack programme, FIS Skills worked in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus (through work coaches) to invite a group of unemployed individuals in the North East to an introduction to BuildBack at TyneMet.

During the day, attendees were introduced to the basics of drylining, with local employers on hand to talk about a career in the sector.

From this group, representatives from FIS Skills, along with tutors from TyneMet, invited 30 people (three cohorts of 10 individuals) to participate in BuildBack. The first cohort



has now completed the course and work experience, and four individuals have job offers as a direct result of the programme.

Alyn Carr, deputy head of construction at TyneMet, puts the success of BuildBack down to its focus. “There are a lot of courses

SKILLS CRISIS IN NUMBERS

Findings from FIS's survey of members and stakeholders in the first quarter of 2017

56%

of companies didn't claim training grants in 2016

48%

of companies face increased labour demands

54%

of companies didn't employ an apprentice in 2016

57.5%

of companies employ European labour

44%

of companies think taking on more contractual work will be hindered by a lack of skilled operatives

9%

of companies have a 90%-100% NVQ-qualified workforce

2%

of the workforce in employment are apprentices

90%

of trade companies say they are hindered by a lack of skilled operatives



All about Alex

Each week day, Alex Baillie leaves his North Shields home at 5.30am sharp to take the Metro to Sunderland, where he works on site as a trainee dryliner with Kenmor Ceilings & Partitions.

Despite the early start, Alex says he “can’t wait to get stuck into work, and never felt more positive about the future”.

And Paul Devlin, director at Kenmor, says that Alex is everything he likes to see in a new recruit – “keen to learn, reliable, gets on with everyone”.

Paul met Alex at FIS’s introductory event in early 2017 at Tyne Metropolitan College to choose participants for the pilot phase of BuildBack. He says Alex’s enthusiasm stood out immediately. Paul offered Alex a work experience place, and full-time employment soon followed. Alex is now working towards a Level 2 NVQ in drylining.

With a background in the military, Alex had limited experience of the construction industry, working with piling contractors, so his work coach at the local Jobcentre Plus suggested he take part in BuildBack.

Says Alex: “I could see this was a great opportunity to learn a trade – a way to earn a living. My travel to college and then to work experience was funded, and I was given the basic tools.

“I needed to show I was employable on site, so I focused on that. And it was proper work experience – I wasn’t there to make the tea. I was proactive and made sure that all the lads knew I wanted to learn as much as possible.”

FIS Skills delivery director Helen Yeulet with TyneMet’s Dave Weatherburn (left) and Stevan Dawson



aimed at those seeking work, but most are very general and focused on employability. The appeal of BuildBack is that it’s offering people the chance to develop a specific skill within a short period of time.”

So is four weeks long enough to lay the foundations for a career in drylining? Paul Devlin, managing director at Kenmor Ceilings & Partitions – who recruited Alex Baillie through BuildBack – is in little doubt. The beauty of the scheme, he says, is its selective nature.

“You’re meeting people who have made a positive decision to enter the trade,” he says. “The college course means that by the time that person comes to your site, they have a basic grasp of which tools and materials do what, as well as a CSCS card. This beats putting out a job ad and hoping for the best.”

The early success of BuildBack inspired FIS Skills to hold an open day at TyneMet in April to

showcase the scheme to employers and celebrate the collaborative efforts of its stakeholders – CITB, the Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus, FIS Skills and groups including the Dry Lining and Plastering Training Forum (DLPTF) and Wheels to Work.

Mary Glendon, MP for North Tyneside and shadow minister for environment, food and rural affairs, attended the day and was impressed by the initiative, attributing its success to working with the right partners and a firm foundation in work experience.

She says: “I believe this gives trainees more confidence and incentive to complete their training. This FIS Skills programme in North Tyneside has been so successful – I’d like to see FIS Skills expand it by setting up projects across the UK.”

ROLLING IT OUT

The FIS Skills team are in the process of talking to colleges across the country about rolling out the BuildBack scheme. Glover is confident there are enough colleges with the right facilities to support a nationwide scheme.

But Helen Tapper, finance director at Oxford-based Tapper Interiors and an FIS Skills board member, believes employer buy-in will be crucial if the scheme is to flourish across

the country in the long term. “One of the biggest challenges we face is that self-employment in the sector is now the norm,” she says. “Companies subcontract their labour and that leaves them with little incentive to offer training or career development support.”

It will take a shift in the culture of the industry to address training shortfalls, Tapper adds, and schemes like BuildBack will have to raise awareness about the wider benefits of training.

“This is no quick fix to the skills crisis,” she says. “FIS Skills needs to continue to be creative in how it reaches out to those who do still employ people directly.”

FIS president Steve Coley agrees that the key to BuildBack’s success will be networking with employers, securing financial support from CITB in the form of grants, and maintaining strong links with organisations such as Jobcentre Plus.

“BuildBack is a step in the right direction towards connecting people who are looking for work and employers who have jobs to fill,” says Coley. “We know there are enough people out there with the potential to thrive in the finishes and interiors sector if they are given the chance to do so – and understand that these chances exist.”