



**TRUSTMARK**  
Government Endorsed Quality

# Skilled to Build:

Empowering the UK's  
Repair, Maintenance and  
Improvement sector  
for a better future.





**TrustMark commissioned research from Eureka! Research and Oxford Economics.**

**TrustMark**

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# Foreword

**It's a commonly accepted fact that there is a shortage of skilled tradespeople in the UK, along with a gap in the skills required to take us forward in meeting the UK's Net Zero target. There has been a plethora of studies that prove that. So, when we commissioned this research we didn't want to add yet another report that would say the same thing, we wanted to do something different. Something that would add another dimension to the conversation.**

We wanted to look at the Repair, Maintenance and Improvement (RMI) sector, specifically the small and micro businesses operating within the sector and the challenges they are facing around recruitment, training and funding and retention, both of people and knowledge.

We wanted to give them a voice. We asked Eureka! Research to speak to them on our behalf.

Making up over **90%** of the RMI sector, micro and small businesses are its lifeblood and their challenges are different in scale and complexity to larger businesses. They rarely have in-house professionals to cover elements such as HR and legal requirements or financial and business planning, making it difficult and costly to access and navigate potential talent pools, skills training and funding.

And there is definitely a desire to recruit new talent. With over **1,200** responses to our research, nearly half (**45%**) of the RMI businesses surveyed reported having at least one existing vacancy. For those businesses looking to expand, the average number of roles available rises to nearly five.

If we also consider the number of existing skilled tradespeople over the age of **55** in this sector who are looking to retire within the next three years - a large number of them having no succession plan - we estimate that **39,000** businesses are at risk of disappearing from the sector in the next **10 years**.

We asked Oxford Economics to carry out analysis on the potential economic impact of recruiting and they identified an additional **195,000** skilled roles could be fulfilled in the RMI sector. Their analysis shows that filling this gap would lead to the sector generating **£4.1 billion** in additional gross value added (GVA), equivalent to **4.3%** of the RMI sector's GVA.

Our research found a strong desire for growth within this sector but these businesses need support to help make that happen. Our report provides not only their view of the challenges they face along with what they need to overcome them, but recommendations for what and how that can be done. This sector needs to be prioritised and by working collaboratively across it, the wider industry, associated organisations and government, we can all help to achieve warmer, more comfortable and healthier homes for the UK.



**Simon Ayers, MBE**  
**CEO of TrustMark**







# Executive summary

TrustMark’s aim for this research was to identify the factors contributing to the skills gap in the UK construction and home repair, maintenance and improvement (RMI) sectors, and propose practical recommendations that policymakers and the industry can action to help close the gap.

The UK construction and RMI sectors face critical shortages of skilled workers, despite the government and the industry having implemented multiple initiatives to fund career pathways within these sectors. The gap is particularly acute in the skills needed when improving homes to make them energy efficient and to lower their carbon footprint. These skills are critical to help achieve the UK’s ambition for a net zero future and its plans for building more homes.

The RMI sector largely operates in home improvements which includes energy efficiency and low carbon interventions in and around homes and sits as a sub sector of the construction sector. There are approximately **280,000** RMI businesses in the UK, all of which are micro, small and medium enterprises.<sup>1</sup> There are **1.2 million** people employed in the UK RMI sector and the sector’s gross value added (GVA)<sup>2</sup> is **£96 billion** annually.<sup>3</sup>

In **October 2024**, TrustMark commissioned research from Eureka! Research to understand and evidence the operational challenges faced by small and micro businesses when accessing skills and to create actionable and comprehensive solutions to address the identified gaps. Oxford Economics has provided an economic analysis of the contribution of headroom vacancies if they were realised. Our research survey elicited **1,233** businesses responses (micro and small sized businesses) with an ‘on the ground’ perspective, providing robust evidence of the challenges and solutions required to help alleviate the skills gap.

<sup>1</sup>ONS 2024, [Business Register and Employment Survey](#). The vast majority of these businesses (95%) employed fewer than 10 people and are thereby classified as micro businesses. Another 5% of RMI businesses are classified as small (10–49 employees), with <1% of businesses classified as medium-sized (50+ employees).

## Key findings

### The Big Picture: The labour challenge.

There is a strong desire to recruit with nearly half (**45%**) of RMI businesses surveyed reporting they have at least one vacancy. Vacancies increase by size of firm with micro businesses having an average of one vacancy, while small firms have an average of **3.2**. For businesses who have an appetite for increased labour, the average number of vacancies is **4.9**.

A key tactic for businesses to manage skills shortages is to take on less work, cited by **52%** of respondents. A higher proportion of micro businesses and sole traders (**56%** and **51%** respectively) report doing this compared to small firms (**45%**). Forgoing work because of a reduced workforce is diminishing these sectors potential contributions to overall UK GDP.

The second most cited response to fulfilling vacancies is to rely on sub-contractors (**37%**). However, over half (**56%**) of businesses agree that getting reliable sub-contractors is becoming challenging.

Figure 1: Implications of having vacancies amongst the RMI firms surveyed

Take on less work	Makes business inefficient	Use sub-contractors
52%	34%	37%

Source: Eureka! Research

<sup>2</sup>Gross value added (GVA) is the value generated by any firm that produces goods and services. It is easiest thought of as the value they sell their output for minus the cost of bought-in inputs of goods and services used up in the production of the firm’s output. The sum of GVA of all industries plus taxes on products minus subsidies on products gives Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP is the main metric used to measure the size of an economy and is used to judge the rate of the growth of the economy and when it enters a recession.

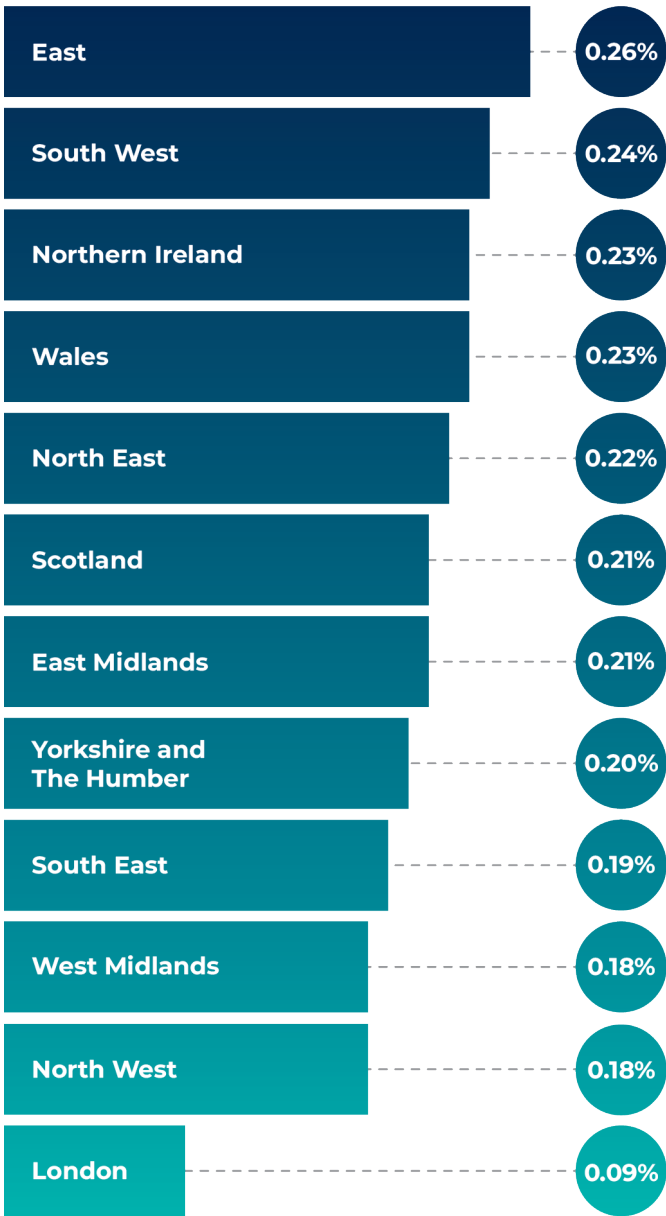
<sup>3</sup>ONS 2024, [Business Register and Employment Survey](#).



### The growth opportunity and additional GVA that could be created in the construction and RMI sectors if headroom vacancies were fulfilled is good for the UK economy.

If these vacancies were created and fulfilled, there is an opportunity to employ an additional **195,000** skilled tradespeople in the RMI sector. This is significantly larger than the **33,000** formally advertised vacancies in the overall construction sector from official statistics.<sup>4</sup> If these vacancies were filled this would increase the RMI firms' revenue by **£9.6 billion**, building on the **£242.9 billion** for the RMI sector's total revenue in **2024**.<sup>5</sup> This would lead to the sector generating **£4.1 billion** in additional GVA, equivalent to **4.3%** of the RMI sector's **£96 billion** contribution to UK GVA.

Figure 2: Regional impact of filling vacancies as a proportion of regions GVA



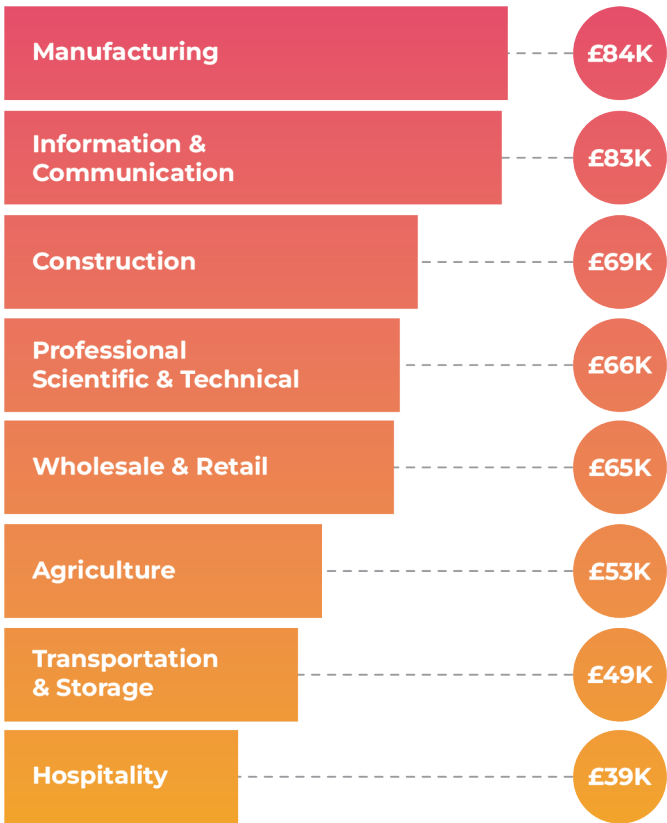
Source: Oxford Economics

Further, filling vacancies in the RMI sector would also help to reduce regional disparities. It has been estimated that **£2.9 billion** (or **72%**) of the total GVA benefit would go to regions outside of London and the South-East – strengthening the case that growth opportunities are available in addressing the well acknowledged North-South divide.

### Filling vacancies in the RMI sector would also boost UK productivity.

The average GVA per head in the construction sector is **£69,000**, significantly higher than industries such as retail and hospitality.<sup>6</sup> This highlights that there are well paid jobs to be had. However, they are not promoted as well paid and sustainable careers or as being as attractive as other sectors. Prioritising filling vacancies in high productivity sectors such as construction would help to raise UK productivity levels.

Figure 3: GVA per head by sector



Source: ONS; Oxford Economics

<sup>4</sup> Labour Force Survey, ONS (September 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Annual Business Survey and Business Register and Employment Survey.

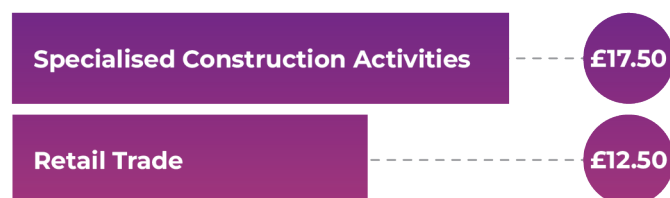
<sup>6</sup> GDP quarterly national accounts, UK: July to September 2024 ONS 2024 and EMP13: Employment by industry, ONS 2024.

## Jobs in RMI however, pay less at early stages of careers and are not appealing to young people.

Construction is a well-paid industry; where median hourly pay for 'specialised construction industries' in **2023** was **28%** higher than for retail jobs and **2.3%** higher than all jobs.<sup>7</sup> However, for those aged **18–21** specialised construction job pay was **3%** lower than for retail workers. This suggests that immediate rather than long-term pay concerns and competition from other sectors could be putting individuals off from entering the sector. As an example, in the retail sector for entry-level employees the time taken between training and earning, especially with organisations like Amazon, is short. In construction this is less likely to happen. Interestingly, **10 years ago**, specialised construction work paid **11%** more than retail for those aged **18–21**. This declining entry-level pay for young people relative to other sectors, may have increased perceptions amongst this group that the sector is not attractive.

Figure 4: Median hourly pay

### All Ages



### Age 18 - 21



Source: ONS; Oxford Economics

## More critically, we have an ageing workforce with many thousands of businesses expected to exit within 10 years. The issue is highly time sensitive.

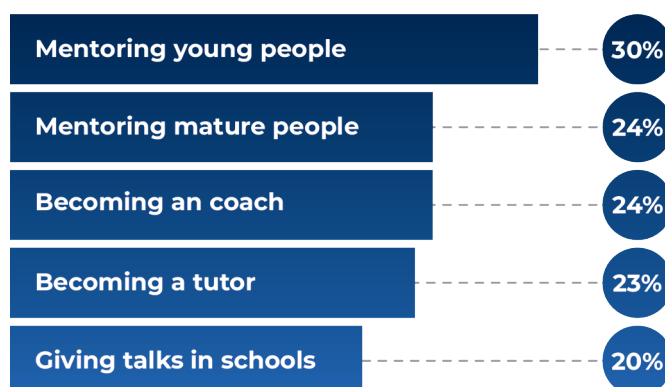
The RMI sector's workforce has a considerably older age profile than the total UK workforce. While **21%** of the UK workforce are aged **55 years** or older, **44%** of the workforce in the RMI sector are older than 55 years. A quarter (**23%**) of those aged **55+** in the RMI sector plan to stop or semi-retire within the next three years.

The sector's ageing workforce is expected to further exacerbate skills shortages going forward. With a significant proportion of surveyed businesses having no fixed plans for succession, it is estimated that a worryingly **39,000** businesses are at risk of disappearing from the sector in the next **10 years**. This poses a critical challenge where the rate of businesses exiting the sector will not be replenished by a similar rate of new entrants.

With a key focus on encouraging young people to enter these sectors and pursue careers, **24%** of businesses cited a limited awareness of trade careers among potential candidates as an issue. Businesses worry that this lack of visibility of the trades as a good career option will result in talent going to other sectors. **15%** of respondents, however, do believe that young people know there is good money to be made and see a trade career as a 'job for life'.

On a positive note, there is a willingness from **55%** of respondents coming towards the end of their career (within the next **10 years**) to give back to the sector.

Figure 5: Preferred mechanisms for contributing to the sector



Source: Eureka! Research

## Short-termism and competition from other sectors hamper construction and RMI recruitment.

Our research also found the lack of a guaranteed pipeline of work was reported by survey respondents as the principal challenge to recruiting and retaining talent. This was particularly true for sole traders, with over half stating that this was a challenge for them. With work order books relatively short across the sector (the average is **2.6 months**), hiring staff becomes a significant risk for businesses.

A further complication is that nearly one-third of businesses stated that competition, from either inside or outside the construction category, is a challenge to recruiting workforce talent. Around one-fifth of tradespeople said future talent is attracted to 'office-based' roles. A slightly smaller proportion also believed that large companies such as supermarkets and retail who often offer better pay and conditions, are key competitors. At the entry level, low pay complemented with an absence of a simple benefits package, makes these sectors less attractive.

However, recruitment into the RMI industry appears to be a much larger issue than retention. Only **14%** of respondents reported that retention is an obstacle to general workforce management. This adds support to the finding that there is limited awareness of the wider benefits of working in the RMI industry.

<sup>7</sup> ONS ASHE data. SIC 43 refers to "specialised construction activities."



## THREE specific challenges called out by businesses

**In addition to the macro challenges facing the RMI and construction sectors, businesses have called out three specific bottlenecks in finding, recruiting and training that require immediate redress:**

**1. Burdensome paperwork and lack of transparency to find and recruit applicants.** 44% of the 1,233 businesses surveyed want an easier and more accessible process of recruitment to navigate, eliminating the operational complexity for employing applicants. 39% of businesses face burdensome paperwork and bureaucracy to find and recruit apprentices.

**2. Lack of quality training provision and providers.** Looking specifically at apprenticeships and those businesses not having an apprentice history, over 22% cite a lack of suitable course provision and 29% a lack of training provider support as to why they have not taken this route. This increases to over 30% across both indicators for businesses that have an apprentice history.

- Only 34% of the businesses surveyed have hired a young apprentice over the past three years. Overall, 52% of respondents have not hired. Although construction apprenticeship starts are back above their pre-Covid-19 levels, the proportion reaching their End Point Assessment (EPA) has declined alarmingly in recent years. While 55% completed their end point assessment in 2017/2018, this number fell to 35% in 2022/2023.<sup>8</sup>

- The reasons respondents believe apprentices left their businesses broadly fall into five categories: poor work ethic, a career mismatch, getting a better offer elsewhere, a failure of the system and training, and differing real world expectations.

On average, 49% of business owners spend almost half of their time hands-on (supervising) their apprentice(s). This highlights the mismatch between the quality of apprenticeship scheme provision and the amount of time still required to train apprentices on the job.

**3. Limited access to and visibility of financial incentives.** 64% businesses surveyed cite the lack of financial incentives and the fact they are not adequate for trade-based apprenticeships. This is closely followed by 32% of businesses saying that insufficient time or guaranteed work is available to train them.

There is little awareness and take-up of funding options for apprenticeships, with only 7% of respondents reporting they used the Apprenticeship Levy (now the Skills and Growth Levy). Businesses report that the flat £1,000 grant is inadequate for a trade business. Only 21% of eligible businesses access the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) training or funding.

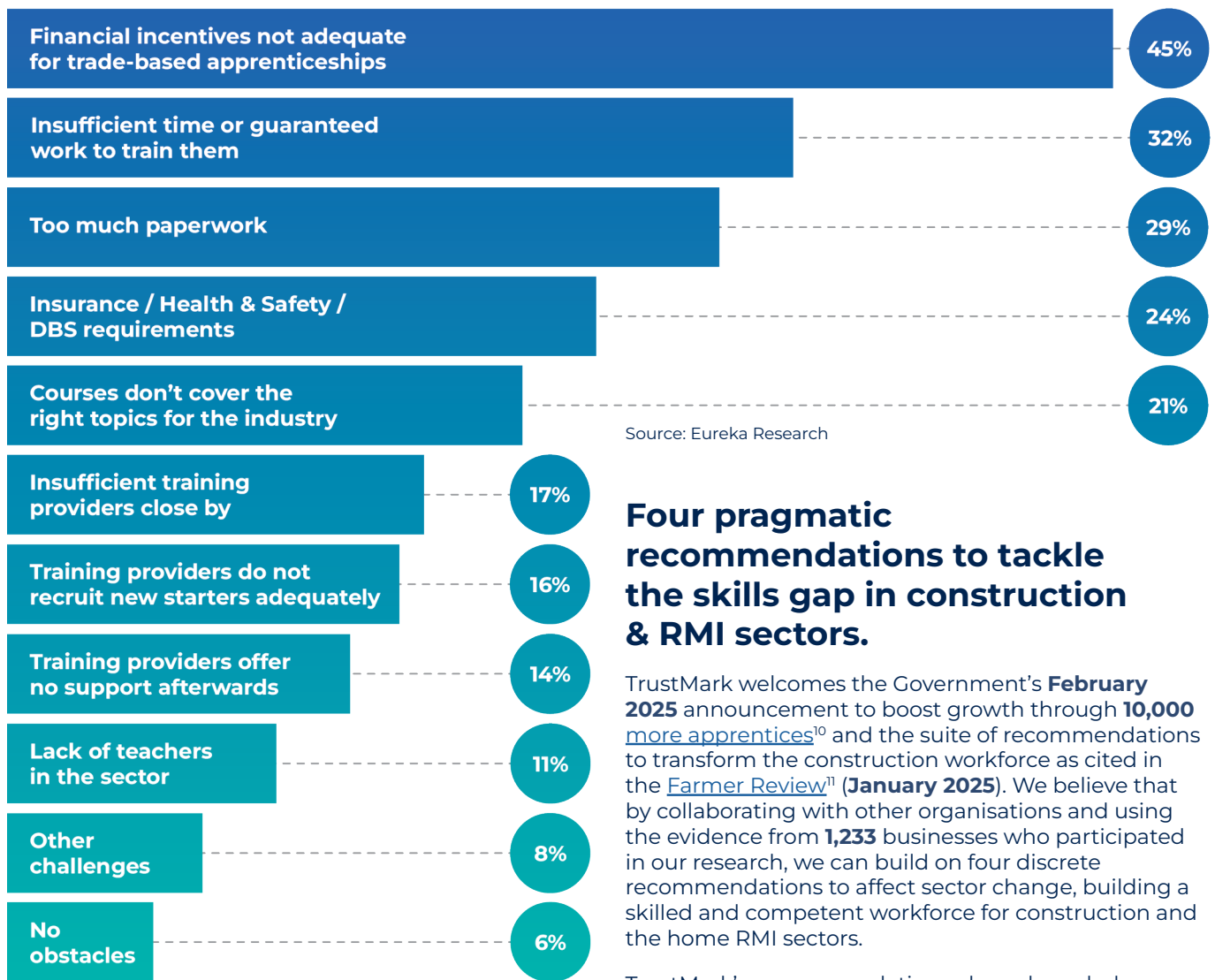
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<sup>8</sup> NOCN Group, September 2024. [Construction Apprenticeship Achievement rates crisis: Good practice solutions](#)





Figure 6: RMI survey participants perceptions about the barriers to apprenticeships



## Four pragmatic recommendations to tackle the skills gap in construction & RMI sectors.

TrustMark welcomes the Government's **February 2025** announcement to boost growth through **10,000 more apprentices**<sup>10</sup> and the suite of recommendations to transform the construction workforce as cited in the [Farmer Review](#)<sup>11</sup> (**January 2025**). We believe that by collaborating with other organisations and using the evidence from **1,233** businesses who participated in our research, we can build on four discrete recommendations to affect sector change, building a skilled and competent workforce for construction and the home RMI sectors.

TrustMark's recommendations also acknowledge the skills aspirations as laid out in the Industrial Strategy (2035 Vision), Infrastructure Strategy, the ongoing consultations from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and the Energy Security and Net Zero (ESNZ) Committee's aspirations stipulated in the Government's vision for Local Growth plans being led by regional mayors. Working with and collaborating with others, TrustMark is committed to addressing the chronic skills situation the construction and home RMI sectors are facing. These recommendations aim to drive a national campaign on how the skills challenge can be addressed through:

- developing and delivering fit-for-purpose training & curricula
- strengthening the navigation system for businesses to find recruits

## Looking to the future, the opportunity in renewables and clean heat technologies is for the taking, however help is required.

Certain trade types such as those working in renewables and clean heat technologies, are struggling to recruit staff more than others, with **79%** of renewables businesses reporting vacancies.<sup>9</sup> Persistently high vacancies in the renewables sector mean that **42%** of businesses report skill shortages leading to severe problems. More effort is needed to help businesses transition into renewables and clean heat technologies to meet a future challenge when the market becomes buoyant.

The sector has called for more training in renewables and clean heat technologies with **44%** of businesses indicating they need financial help to pay for training courses and that time off to retrain would be welcomed. **20%** of businesses indicate that dedicated renewables training centres are needed. It would appear that the market for these technologies in homes is not mature enough yet for the trained professional to deploy their skills.

<sup>9</sup> The renewables sector in the context of the RMI sector involves the installation of renewable activities such as air source heat pumps and solar PVs.

<sup>10</sup> [10,000 more apprentices as government slashes red tape to boost growth](#), GOV.UK

<sup>11</sup> 2023 Industry Training Board (ITB) Review: Transforming the construction workforce, (January 2025).

- unlocking and raising awareness of the financial incentives available; and
- training and encouraging businesses into renewables and clean heat technologies.

To be clear, our recommendations are not stipulating that government financially invests into developing new structures but inherently, to work with industry to enhance the current structures and the joining of dots. Further, it is about developing a competent and skilled workforce across the construction and RMI sectors – for now and the future – and upskilling certain roles so that they can work across industries. Our surveyed businesses invite government and the wider industry to offer its expertise in unravelling bottlenecks to building a resilient and long-term competent workforce.



## **Recommendation 1: Increase support for trades on the school curricula agenda delivered by expert trainers.**

With **55%** of respondents coming towards the end of their careers (within the next **10 years**) and wanting to give back, there is an open invitation from within the industry to encourage and develop a talent pipeline, and for academia and training providers to capitalise on this opportunity. In the same vein, this presents an opportunity to create a more diverse workforce, potentially unlocking interest from currently under-represented groups; females, ethnic minorities, and those living with an impairment.

**There are three distinct areas in which this willing army of experts can quickly be utilised to support schools and colleges:**

- **Introduce trades on the school curricula.** Subjects such as woodwork, metalwork and wider crafts are barely taught as part of the school curricula, as the cost of running these subjects is higher than STEM subjects. Indeed, consideration needs to be given to the steps that can be implemented to formally position this type of subject as equal to other subjects. With government's recent announcement to remove the mandatory English and Maths functional skills requirement for apprentices aged **19+** at the start of their apprenticeship training (for construction related apprenticeships it is pending), this perhaps presents an opportunity for trades to be re-emphasised and assimilated into the school crafts curricula. In the medium to long run, this could prove to be a worthy investment.

For students who are digitally savvy, there is an exciting opportunity to teach new subjects and skills, such as renewables and clean heating technologies. With trade professionals coming into the educational setting this presents an opportunity to tackle negative perceptions around trades.

- **Offer students work experience in home RMI trades and construction.** Work experience offers students the opportunity and insight of working in the real world before selecting their education and career paths. This is a practical way for schools to introduce more young people to the idea of a career in home RMI. It provides visibility into the myriads of well-paid and sustainable career paths that trades can offer. Government could also explore whether work experience in these sectors is made mandatory or not, and if offered, last for longer than a week.

Further, a network of experts across the UK is ready to give career talks in schools that either need to be co-ordinated by the school itself or through the Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) working with a network of schools.

- **Improve the quality of vocational training provision.** Training providers need to input into the content of qualifications that is currently being decided by Trade Boards, Awarding Bodies and employer groups. Equally, improved thinking is required around the business models to run fit-for-purpose courses in colleges, while mobilising the **c.600** businesses across the UK who can provide expertise.



## Recommendation 1:

**Ask 1.** Working with **c.18k** businesses and our **40** Scheme Providers, TrustMark is willing to facilitate networks for trade professionals willing to give back, whether that be promoting trades, mentoring, teaching or developing course content. A concerted effort is now required including Skills England, MATs and other relevant bodies including large contractors, to bring schools and colleges to the table to develop an engaging environment to address construction and RMI trades in curricula, work experience and training. With **51%** of respondents at the 'mature' end planning to stop or semi-retire within three years, this opportunity needs urgent activation.

**Ask 2.** There needs to be a better progression route from full-time qualifications into apprenticeships. Better collaboration between schools and training providers is required, so there is also no duplication of content.

**Ask 3:** It's not broken – Occupational Maps need better promotion! The Occupational maps framework by Skills England is a strong tool in mapping out both qualification (T-Levels, apprenticeship routes, higher education) and career pathways across sectors. Improved visibility and transparency of these occupational maps – at schools, colleges and employer levels – would bring them to the attention of a wider audience. The only additional call is for better promotion of trade professions within these occupational maps.

## Recommendation 2:

**Make it easier for small and micro businesses to find and recruit applicants. Create an easy to use facilitation service that brings businesses and competent, employable candidates together.**

**Businesses want an easier and more accessible process to navigate when looking for and employing applicants. It is a crowded market of players (recruitment agencies, training providers, trade businesses) further complicated by heavyweight paperwork that businesses need to complete. A call by the construction and home RMI sectors is to clean up the market by providing a:**

- **respected facilitation system** where employers can easily find suitable and vetted candidates that have received relevant training by competent trainers. The scope can even be extended to pre-training; by giving early access trials to potential candidates to create a better funnel into the workplace – a “try before you buy” approach.
- Template suite of **policies and processes** that employers have at their disposal ranging from safeguarding, health and safety practices, personnel development, etc.

The industry would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and Department for Education (DfE) to refine and strengthen the current system. TrustMark and other relevant industry stakeholders would be pleased to support the Departments in this redesign. The aim of such an initiative would be the tightening and building of a resilient navigation system, to provide clear and easy support for employers to find, employ and train talent through a neutral organisation.

Secondly, through its network, TrustMark can support the approved system, alleviating businesses' pain-points when finding, recruiting and training talent.

**The Ask:** For the DBT and/or DfE to work with TrustMark, CITB and other relevant bodies to develop an engaging and supportive facilitation system for employers to find, employ and train talent.





### **Recommendation 3:** **Improve awareness of the financial incentives available to micro & small businesses and develop methodologies to access.**

**There are several funding pots available that businesses are either not aware exist or find it challenging to access. Chief among them are:**

- unspent Apprenticeship Levy. Official figures indicate that in **2022 £3.3 billion**<sup>12</sup> had been returned to the HM Treasury since its launch in **2020**. Through the newly positioned Growth and Skills Levy this unspent Apprenticeship Levy can be restructured and made available for micro and small businesses
- the CITB has allocated **£147 million** for Employer Support for **2025/2026** that will be available to access
- the Local Skills Improvement Funds (LSIF)<sup>13</sup>, valued at **£85 million** in **2024-25** is regional funding for training in priority sectors such as construction, engineering, and green industries where training providers, colleges, and businesses can apply
- the UK Shared Prosperity Fund<sup>14</sup> and successor to EU Structural Funds (post-Brexit), valued at **£2.6 billion** is applicable to vocational training for workers in high-demand sectors, offering support for entry-level and advanced construction skills.

Across these different pots, there are funds that our surveyed businesses are either not aware of or face varying challenges to access. More effort needs to be invested in developing methodologies or channels to access funding.

**Ask 1.** For government to create greater visibility of the financial incentives available to micro and small businesses, how they can easily access with the appropriate due diligence in place, so they can employ and train more apprentices / new learners.

**Ask 2.** For government to confirm and revisit the unspent pot of the former Apprenticeship Levy (Growth and Skills Levy), and where applicable, make available to micro and small businesses in the construction and RMI sectors.

**Ask 3:** As part of the Department for Education (DfE) response to the 2023 Industry Training Board Review, CITB should work with government to determine what additional support can be offered to out-of-scope micro and small businesses that are not registered.

### **Recommendation 4:** **Grow a competent workforce in renewables & clean heat technologies by transitioning existing capabilities and building a talent pipeline.**

**With the ESNZ's Committee focus on skills into renewables as cited in the Clean Power 2030 mission, 44% of businesses indicated needing financial help to pay for training courses and time off to retrain. The focus needs to be around extending the already existing skillset and developing into renewables clean heat technologies, rather than building separate industries. The point is one of transition.**

The issue is compounded in that the homeowner market for renewables and clean heat technologies is nascent as compared to traditional energy types e.g. natural gas. Therefore, until such time as government incentivises the take-up of renewables and clean heat technologies in homes, the workforce requirements in terms of volume at least, is likely to remain subdued. The challenge is further stretched in the limited information and confidence that homeowners have in renewables and clean heat technologies being deployed.

**The Ask.** For government to simplify the training pathway, where industry-led knowledge can be harnessed to develop industry-needed qualifications, not only for the next **10 years** but beyond given the rapid pace at which technologies are developing. TrustMark, along with stakeholders such as the Energy & Utility Skills Group and others, is ready to support government-led initiatives and facilitate activity, with the aim of enabling more micro and small businesses to participate in the sector and deploy renewables and clean heat technologies.

### **Final thoughts...**

These four discrete recommendations do not stipulate that more funding is required, rather as a first step to unlock and strengthen what is already available. A kickstart is required to bring the various stakeholders together to work effectively in creating a landscape that is easy to navigate and works well, supporting micro and small businesses to recruit more and train effectively.

<sup>12</sup> Over £3 billion in unspent Apprenticeship Levy lost to Treasury 'black hole' new data reveal, IPPR, (July 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Funding guidance for the local skills improvement fund (LSIF), Department for Education, (June 2023).

<sup>14</sup> UK Shared Prosperity Fund, GOV.UK.

**Eureka!**  
ILLUMINATING RESEARCH



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