

CSF Onsite Hubs: learner progress

Final report

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Institute for Employment Studies

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Summary

Introduction

This report supplements findings from the main evaluation of the Construction Skills Fund (CSF). The CSF supported the development of 23 onsite training hubs which were mobile training facilities situated on construction sites. They delivered training for in-demand entry level construction skills. By offering trainees the opportunity to learn and apply their knowledge in a real-world industry-led environment, the hubs intended to bridge the gap between training and working in the construction industry.

This research fills a gap in the main evaluation by focusing on the medium-term learner perspectives and experiences of looking for work after completing the course and career and learning progression. A qualitative method was used to provide deep insight into whether and how participants were able to enter employment in the construction sector and any barriers they experienced. In total, 30 interviews were achieved with respondents between nine months and two years after they completed training. The sample included respondents in a range of situations and from a range of backgrounds.

Experience of the onsite hubs

Respondents expressed genuine interest and motivation to work in construction. For some, motivation to work in the sector stemmed from their view that it offered relatively easy access to well-paid entry-level work, and that there were opportunities to progress and earn more over time. Many respondents wanted to gain the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card, which they saw as an enabler to access many construction vacancies. For career changers with work experience in other sectors, the working hours (no night working or shift work) were attractive. The hub registration process was simple and straightforward, reflecting the lack of eligibility criteria for support. Being free of charge for participants overcame any financial barriers, and because the courses had frequent start dates, respondents felt they began a course promptly.

The content of each hub programme was intended to vary locally, informed by the needs of local construction employers based on upcoming vacancies and the skills requirements on local sites. Respondents recalled training of varying lengths, between two days and two weeks. Whatever the length of training, respondents were satisfied with the experience. They valued the technical elements of the course and emphasis on health and safety which they found practical, work-related, and which they perceived prepared them for construction work. Some participants said they would have learned more effectively in a smaller class or with more than one tutor present, as this would have enabled differentiation of teaching and would have accommodated different paces of learning. Experience of any employer engagement in the course was mixed. There were some examples of employer engagement and contributions during the courses recalled

by respondents. However, others could not remember any employer involvement. At the end of the course, if respondents passed a CSCS card test, most said they felt motivated and well-prepared for finding work in the construction sector.

Participant experience: after the training

Participant experience of employment support varied considerably, reflecting the different resources and emphasis of hubs. While some participants could not recall any employment support beyond signposting to agencies, others felt that they were given useful support from hub staff in finding employment.

- Several respondents had started apprenticeship opportunities in construction. Overall, this group were happy with the opportunities they had secured. Many highlighted that their apprenticeship provided them with new experiences. While rates of pay were felt to be low, as these respondents tended to be young and living with family, they felt rates of pay were acceptable in the short-term given the developmental nature of the role.
- Another group had found work in entry-level roles in construction. In most cases, these were general labouring roles. Participants had mixed experiences in these positions with their views on employment quality closely tied to the tasks, rates of pay and length of contract. A few respondents had worked in their position for between one and two and half years. In these cases, respondents reported being reasonably satisfied with their employment. Having no prior experience in construction, they noted how they had become more confident in using tools and completing specialist tasks onsite. Other participants had more mixed experiences in the sector and had worked in multiple short-term positions since completing their training. Where periods in employment were less regular and consistent, participants felt this arrangement was not financially sustainable.
- Other respondents, at the time of the research, had moved away from construction either temporarily or permanently, and were working in other sectors. Some of this group were unable to find a role in construction upon completing the training, and these participants recalled registering with several agencies but not receiving any work. Others in this group sought employment in sectors other than construction due to poor early experiences within the industry. These poor early experiences included: conflicts with a site manager, finding the role more demanding than expected, and one participant experienced racial discrimination onsite.
- Some respondents were unemployed at the time of the research, some of those who were unemployed were still looking for roles in construction and most had been unable to find a role in construction since completing their training. As well as the perceived impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the availability of vacancies other barriers identified by this group included transport barriers, lack of flexible working opportunities, and lack of relevant work experience.

Conclusions and recommendations

While some respondents felt capable and understood how to access work, especially those with wider networks and contacts in the sector, other motivated respondents were not able to do so. While the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly affected labour market experiences, participants experienced other barriers to entering and sustaining work in the sector. These barriers included: a lack of suitable local roles, a lack of support to enter work, and poor early experiences in the sector. To maximise the number of trained participants moving into work in the sector the following could be considered:

- How to create routes into the sector for career changers for whom apprenticeships are not financially sustainable. For example, funding for tickets and qualifications which are required to enter more technically specific job entry roles.
- Participants who struggled to find construction work, were commonly told by agencies and employers that they lacked work experience in the sector. While lengthy unpaid work experience may not be feasible for all and there are risks in 'working for free', the model could place greater emphasis on brokering access to quality work placements where suitable to overcome this barrier to entry.
- Some respondents from diverse backgrounds had difficult experiences. While some employers are undoubtedly more progressive than others, the sector needs to continue to be challenged on diversity and inclusive work practices and the hubs should have an active role here.
- Respondents expected there to be more advocacy with employers from hub staff on their behalf, and stronger brokering into job vacancies. The premise of the programme and its ability to achieve sustained job outcomes from a short intervention, is predicated on strong employer links. In the commissioning and management of similar projects, the quality of support to enter and sustain employment should be given equal consideration in the selection of projects alongside the delivery of training to respond to employer needs.
- Some respondents found work in the construction sector but had poor early experiences and subsequently left. To aide retention, hub staff could provide more substantive in-work support in cases where it is needed.

The CSF programme successfully trained motivated participants to become employment and site ready. It could have placed greater emphasis on supporting trained participants to enter work more consistently. This would have been likely to have improved the ability of the programme to achieve the job entry target and enabled employers and participants to reap fuller benefits of the training investment.

1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the Construction Skills Fund (CSF) and key messages from the main evaluation. These messages from the main evaluation aid interpretation of the participant data collected for this learner progress study. This chapter also details the research aims and methodology for this study.

1.1 The Construction Skills Fund

The CSF supported the development of 23 on-site training hubs. These training hubs were training facilities situated on construction sites. They delivered training for in-demand entry-level construction skills. By offering trainees the opportunity to learn and apply their knowledge in an industry-led environment, the hubs intended to bridge the gap between training and working in the construction industry.

The CSF was launched in October 2018 and delivered to over 13,000 participants until March 2020, it continued to support and track participants into work until September 2020. The hubs aimed for 45 per cent of participants to be from non-traditional entry routes or under-represented groups, and for 15 per cent to be changing careers from employment in other industries. The hubs designed their own interventions, but most consisted of screening, information, advice, and guidance (IAG); training; job brokerage; and in-work support. Some hubs delivered prior to CSF, whereas others set up for the CSF.

The main evaluation found that the CSF programme exceeded targets for engagement with groups traditionally under-represented in the construction industry (66 per cent against a target of 45 per cent) and career changers (41 per cent of participants against a target of 15 per cent). The programme also achieved the target number of individuals becoming employment and site ready (ESR) (13,443 compared to a 13,000 target). However, it did not meet its target for the proportion of ESR participants finding sustained employment of at least three months (23 per cent compared to a target of 30 per cent).

Participants that found work, generally did so soon after having completed the programme. Of the participants that sustained job outcomes, almost four in ten participants (37 per cent) found work within a week of their training. 62 per cent of all sustained job outcomes started within a month of an ESR date.

There were differences between the characteristics of participants that found sustained work. Male participants, those from a white background, people without a health condition or disability, 16–25 year-olds, those with a previous Level one or two qualification, those attending an existing hub and those with a background in construction were significantly more likely than other participants to achieve a sustained job outcome.

1.2 Research aims

This research fills a gap in the main evaluation report and focuses on the medium-term learner perspectives and experiences of looking for work after course completing, exploring career progression. The work aims to gather in-depth information about:

- formal and informal learning undertaken by participants after the CSF;
- the employment experience and career development of participants after they left the hub, including occupational pathways, stability and security of work, travel to work and any difficulties encountered maintaining work; and
- the use of careers information and other support among CSF leavers.

1.3 Methodology

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to provide depth of insight into whether and how participants entered employment in the construction sector and any barriers. A sample was selected from the programme management information. In total, 30 depth interviews were achieved which were each approximately 45 minutes in length (see [Table 5.2](#) in the annex for details).

To ensure the research included respondents in a range of situations and with varied backgrounds respondents from across the eighteen-month implementation period were sampled, as well as learners who found work in construction and those that did not. Care was taken to include learners with a range of characteristics. There is representation from participants from Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic backgrounds, women, and respondents from a mix of ages. Six respondents disclosed a health condition or disability, these included respondents with dyslexia, mental health issues, and one respondent receiving cancer treatment. There were some parents in the sample with children of various ages, and one single parent. Some parents were seeking flexible work.

Respondents in the sample had varied degrees of recent work experience: some were entering the labour market after a period in education and had limited work history; others had worked for many years; some had been in and out of work; and others had been out of work for the last five years. Reflecting the open eligibility criteria around qualification for the programme, the respondents included individuals with degree level qualifications, through to Level 2 qualifications and few or no prior qualifications.

The research was designed to draw out deep insights from a range of trainees. Because responses are not representative it is not possible to quantify the number of respondents that hold a particular view or have particular experiences. However, where necessary for understanding, an indication of scale is provided, using statements such as 'some', and 'most'. Generally, though, in reporting the data, the aim is to present the range of views and experiences and explore the factors that drive these perspectives. To give some sense of scale, the report also includes selected data from two online surveys of participants presented in the main evaluation: an experiences survey completed between two and five months after participants had registered with a hub (by 1,023 respondents),

and an outcomes survey administered five to eight months after registration (with 701 responses) The results of these surveys can be seen in [annex](#) .

2 Participant experience of the hubs

This chapter explores participants' motivations for enrolling with the onsite hubs and their experience of registration. It then explores the participant's' experiences of the training programme and the immediate outcomes that resulted from it.

2.1 Motivations for enrolling with an onsite hub

Respondents to the experience survey were asked why they chose to register with a hub, indicating more than one reason if appropriate. The respondents' main motivations given were gaining employment in the construction sector (61 per cent), or gaining a CSCS card (53 per cent). Other motivations included gaining new skills (40 per cent) and gaining new qualifications (34 per cent). One in five respondents participated in the CSF hubs to find out about careers in construction or to gain work experience. One in ten participants enrolled to increase their earnings from work or to use the programme as a gateway to gain employment in another industry.

Qualitative interviewees reflected the range of motivations for enrolment found in the survey. Most joined the hub because they were motivated to find work in the construction sector, and several discussed the ongoing, large-scale construction work in their neighbourhood which they anticipated would provide local work opportunities.

For some respondents, motivation to work in construction stemmed from their view that the sector offered relatively easy access to well-paid entry-level work. They were also motivated by the opportunities the industry provides for workers to develop, progress and earn more money over time as they specialise in a trade or become more experienced. A few respondents also mentioned that they were attracted to the sector by the potential for becoming self-employed or setting up and running their own business. These forms of working are prevalent in the construction sector.

Many respondents were motivated to enrol with the hubs because they wanted to gain the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card, which they saw as an enabler to access many construction vacancies. Where respondents already had construction experience, they felt that a CSCS card would give them a route back into employment. Some other respondents described how they needed a CSCS card to start a work opportunity they had found prior to enrolment. Several respondents who were or had recently been studying construction-related qualifications were also attracted to enrol with the hub to gain other specific technical qualifications, such as scaffolding qualifications (COTS). They did so with the aim of enhancing their employability, as these qualifications are in demand from employers. Many respondents were also motivated by the possibility to engage with employers and vacancies to support their entry into work in the sector and felt that the hubs would be well-placed to support them with this.

For career changers with work experience in other sectors, the working hours offered in the construction sector (typically early starts and long days, but no night working or seven-day shift work) were attractive. Some respondents with experience of working in retail or hospitality sectors for example, wanted to change career direction to find a better work-life balance.

Some respondents changing career direction felt they had the necessary skills from prior work that would easily transfer into the construction sector and the variety of opportunities on a construction site. They included people with experience in: domestic plumbing, domestic painting and decorating, warehousing and logistics, landscape gardening, factories, and security work. Generally, career changers had a wealth of prior experience from several sectors and contexts. They also felt they also brought a good work ethic and had developed other key employability skills, such as good communication.

Other factors noted by respondents as attracting them to work in the construction sector included: wanting to work outdoors, working with their hands and doing something practical, and in some instances, respondents mentioned working in a non-customer facing role was desirable as they felt this was more straightforward. A few respondents also mentioned that they saw the sector as being 'friendly' and providing a work environment that offered good camaraderie among colleagues onsite.

For those who had worked previously in the construction industry, their prior experiences influenced their decision to apply to the hubs. For those without prior experience of the construction industry, connections to the sector were an important influence. Several respondents had friends or family who worked in construction and became motivated to consider the sector themselves after discussing specific roles and work options. For example, one respondent recalled in detail a conversation with a friend telling him about his carpentry work on a construction site which persuaded the respondent to try it.

2.2 Participant experience of enrolment

The participant experience survey found the most common way respondents heard about the onsite hubs was via a partner organisation: a training provider or college (34 per cent), or a local community organisation (15 per cent). Word of mouth referrals were important, with one in five (21 per cent) reporting they heard of the hub via friends and family. A further 19 per cent of survey respondents heard about a hub in another way, such as via Jobcentre Plus. Social media generated seven per cent of referrals.

The qualitative interviews reflect this range of sources. Some respondents who were out of work at the time of their enrolment, found out about the hub either directly from their Jobcentre Plus adviser, or a leaflet from a Jobcentre Plus office or other employment support provider. The onsite hub route tended to be recommended if the individual had expressed a desire to work in the construction sector or in outdoors roles to their adviser.

Other people who recommended a hub to respondents included college staff, who recommended it to students finishing construction-related courses and who wanted to start work. Other respondents found out about their hub from online searches when they

sought information, such as how to obtain a CSCS card or other specific construction qualifications, or via a hub's promotion on social media, such as Facebook advertising.

All respondents found the enrolment process for the hubs to be simple and straightforward, reflecting the lack of eligibility criteria for the support, because the training was free of charge to participants. Additionally, because it had regular and frequent start dates, respondents felt they started a course promptly after expressing an interest and enrolment.

2.3 Participant experience of the onsite hubs

The content of each hub programme was intended to vary locally. It was informed by the needs of local construction employers based on upcoming vacancies and the skills requirements on local sites. The programme typically included initial information and advice. This was offered to assess a potential participant's suitability and motivation for working in construction and their likelihood of being able to become ESR after a short intervention. For all except one of the respondents in the sample, the training was delivered face-to-face. This respondent described a remote learning experience due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 and social distancing measures. In general, training was predominately classroom-based, delivered from an onsite hub. Training included health and safety, developing employability skills for construction where appropriate, and was designed to help participants working towards and the CSCS card. Participants were then tested for the CSCS card by the hubs.

While some of the respondents discussed attending the programme on site, for most their perception of the experience was that it was a classroom-based course (with the classroom being on a construction site). Some respondents in the sample recalled construction site tours and practical activities. There was one example of a work experience placement. This mirrors the management information which found that six per cent of participants had a work experience placement.

There was one respondent in the sample who had gained work experience. They were studying for a Level two electrical course when they heard about the hub programme. They were motivated to enrol by the potential of getting a CSCS card, gaining work experience and receiving help to secure work after completing their college course. After a two-week CSF course, the participant had a two-week work experience placement in a general labouring position which they found helpful to learn and understand what to expect on site. After completing the course, the respondent successfully applied to an electrical apprenticeship. They felt the work experience and CSCS card were hugely beneficial in the apprenticeship.

Respondents recalled training of varied lengths. The shortest was two days, whereas others attended courses for up to two weeks. Whatever the length of the training had been respondents were generally satisfied with the experience. They felt that the course content had been relevant to their needs and work aspirations, engaging, and delivered from good quality facilities. This is supported by the participant survey, where nine out of ten respondents indicated the length of the training was about right (88 per cent). A few participants, however, commented that would have preferred either a smaller case size or

for more than one tutor to be present. They noted that in a class of around 20 people, some of the learners struggled to pick up the content at the same pace as others. Their tutor did not have time to provide these struggling learners with tailored support to help them catch-up.

Experience of whether there was employer engagement in the course was mixed. There were some examples of employer engagement and contributions during the courses mentioned by respondents. For example, one respondent detailed how they benefited from the regular talks from employers in the construction industry throughout the programme. In these sessions, he recalled that employers would discuss the industry and give advice for applying for jobs in the sector. However, several respondents did not recall any employer involvement in their programme. Where this was the case, many indicated that they would have liked, and indeed had expected, there to be contact time with employers based on how the benefits of the programme had been explained to them. This variability in employer involvement and participant expectations was reflected in the participant survey. The survey found that while most participants strongly agreed (33 per cent) or agreed (33 per cent) that the training had enough involvement from construction employers, some strongly disagreed (five per cent) and others disagreed (nine per cent), with the remainder neutral (18 per cent).

Respondents valued the technical elements of the course and emphasis on health and safety which they found practical, work-related, and interesting. They therefore felt that the course would prepare them for construction work. Some respondents also mentioned developing other skills, such as interpersonal skills, via group work with others in the class; and enhancing employability skills, because their course explained how to find and apply for construction vacancies.

At the end of the course, most of the respondents passing the CSCS card test said they felt initially motivated and well-prepared for finding work in the construction sector. They were confident and optimistic. Many respondents had gained a CSCS card and had expanded their knowledge about health and safety measures and behaviours in the construction sector. They were confident that they had gained the technical knowledge and tickets to find entry-level work in construction.

Several felt at the end of the programme there was a lack of information and support to directly access job vacancies, especially where there had not been contact or engagement from employers during the programme. Some described feeling '*left adrift*' and feeling at a distance from being able to and knowing how to access construction employment, due to a lack of 'aftercare' and support from the hub to enter the industry after course completion. Several participants would have liked the hub to have facilitated face-to-face meetings with employers so that they could have direct contact with local contractors as opposed to looking for work via recruitment agencies. They believed that having an opportunity to meet and sell their skills directly to contractors would be more fruitful in terms of it leading to an offer of employment. Other participants wanted the hub to work with local employers to source a greater number of vacancies for learners completing the training. In addition, some participants with caring responsibilities wanted the hub to encourage employers to offer flexible working opportunities so they could apply for roles that would fit around these commitments. The effect of participants varied

experience of employment support on their job and progression outcomes, reflecting the different practices of the hubs, is explored in chapter three.

3 Participant experience after the hub

This section covers participants' experiences after they completed their onsite training and their future plans at the time of the study. It includes their experiences of the careers information and support available from the training hub and other sources to help find employment. This section also explains participants' subsequent employment experiences either in construction or other sectors. For those participants who were unable to find employment in construction, this section also details their views on the main barriers to finding sustained work in the sector.

3.1 Careers information and support to find work

Participants' description of careers information and support available from the hub to help them find employment on completing the training was limited, either because they felt they did not need it, or because it had not been offered.

There was one group that were confident in their ability to find work without support from the hub. Respondents in this group tended to have found employment in construction shortly after completing the course, with relative ease. Most of this group found employment either by registering with a recruitment agency or reuploading their CV (with details of their newly acquired certifications) to an agency they had previously used to find work. Others were directed to potential construction employment opportunities by family members, or in one case by their Jobcentre Plus work coach. A few respondents in this group noted that they were aware there was support from the hub, for example, to identify potential vacancies they could apply for. However, they were confident in their ability to find work independently once they had acquired their CSCS card.

Other participants reported that they did not require further support because they were no longer actively seeking work on completion of the programme due to education participation or emerging health conditions. For example, some respondents had been diagnosed with chronic health conditions shortly after participation, so did not actively look for work following the programme. Others were still completing programmes of study, and so again were not actively seeking employment when they finished the course.

There were a group of respondents that sought support from the hub upon completing the training (most often career changers), and several were critical about the assistance they received. While some of this group commented that they were signposted to live vacancies or brokered job opportunities by the hub, others felt opportunities were not appropriate to their life circumstances. For example, a few career changers noted that they were offered an apprenticeship position, which they had to turn down. The salary offered was apprentice minimum wage and therefore the positions were not financially

viable as they were in their 30s and had financial outgoings that this salary would not support. No further work opportunities were offered in either case.

Another participant was directed to a vacancy by the hub that suited their interests in terms of working outside on a new housing development. The role offered was full-time: 7am-5pm, five days per week. The participant asked whether this position or others were available with more flexibility in working hours. This was because this participant was a lone parent, raising five children, and needed a later start time so that she could make the school run every day. She was disappointed to be told by hub staff that they were not aware of any vacancies that met these needs. She expressed frustration that employers in the industry did not seem to accommodate candidates with childcare commitments.

Other respondents were critical of the lack of follow-up support offered by the hub following the completion of the training. A few commented that they had been unable to find employment in construction and were turned down for vacancies because of a lack of work experience. In one case this was feedback from an employer who the hub introduced to participants as part of the training. Based on these experiences, participants reflected that they were disappointed that their hub did not offer more support with job matching and brokerage or provide access to work experience opportunities. Participants believed that opportunities such as these would have enhanced their chances of finding employment.

Some participants also experienced difficulties in acquiring their CSCS card and did not receive follow-up support from the hub to help. For instance, one participant noted that after passing their CSCS test they assumed they would receive their card automatically and that the hub would take care of all the paperwork. This did not happen, but as they went into employment in the industry shortly after completing the training, and their employer did not require them to have a CSCS card for their role, they did not enquire about it at the time. As a result of the pandemic this individual was made redundant and was looking to obtain their card to improve their chances of finding work. They uploaded their certifications to the CSCS portal and applied for the card online but were told three months later that their certificates were not up-to-date and therefore invalid. The participant found the experience very frustrating and wished the hub had informed him about what he needed to do to apply for the card after completing the training.

For those participants that felt they had received useful support from the hub in finding employment, this centred around finding work placements and assistance with job-search. For example, one respondent recalled receiving help from hub staff to refresh and update her CV and help to improve her interview technique. As English is her second language, the participant explained that it was sometimes difficult for her to fully understand everything an interviewer was saying. The hub staff encouraged and gave her the confidence to ask the interviewer to rephrase questions if she did not grasp what they were asking first time round, and to take her time to answer the question and formulate a response. Another interviewee also recalled receiving support with their interview technique, which had been delivered virtually since the beginning of the pandemic.

3.2 Employment and career development

Participants were asked to describe their employment and career development since completing the programme. This included whether they had experienced any in-work progression or had engaged in any further training opportunities since leaving the hub. These experiences are presented separately for those who found sustained employment in construction; those who found work in a separate industry; and those who have had lengthy periods of unemployment since completing the training.

3.2.1 Working in construction

Apprentices

Several participants had started apprenticeships in construction since completing the training in a range of trades, including plumbing, electrical, and carpentry and more broadly, such as in business administration. Overall, this group were happy with the opportunities they had secured. Many highlighted that their apprenticeship had provided them with new and challenging experiences, which they were supported through and enjoyed. A few commented that they liked the fact that they were worked on different sites, and this helped maintain a level of engagement and interest in the role. In some cases, respondents noted that the role had exceeded their expectations giving them a variety of tasks and personal development.

Aside from those apprentices employed by local authorities, rates of pay for apprentices hired by private companies were reported to be quite low. These respondents were generally quite young, in their late teens to early 20s, and were still living at home with family. Therefore, they felt that these low rates of pay were acceptable in the short-term, given the developmental nature of the role. However, one participant did question the rates of remuneration in cases where they had to work overtime.

Entry-level roles in construction

Another group of respondents found work in entry-level roles in construction. In most cases, these were general labouring roles. Other positions cited included: a bricklaying improver, general maintenance roles and a plumber's mate. Participants had mixed experiences in these positions with their views on employment quality closely tied to the tasks, rates of pay and length of contract.

A few respondents had worked in their current position for between one and two and half years. In these cases, respondents reported being reasonably satisfied with their employment. This group had no prior experience in construction. They noted how they were becoming gradually more confident in using different tools and with completing some more specialist tasks onsite, such as dry lining, under supervision. This group hoped in time that these experiences would allow them to apply for more skilled, better paid positions. Other aspects of the role that participants enjoyed included travelling to different sites, meeting new clients, and working outdoors. One respondent in this

position, working in a largely rural county, noted that did not have their own transport when they started the role. However, their employer provided them with a loan so they could buy a motorcycle and travel from site to site, which they appreciated and enabled them to stay in work.

Participants in sustained entry-level roles felt that their starting salary had been quite low. However, a few had subsequently received a pay rise. In one case, this was provided after roughly a year by their employer as they gained more experience. Another participant saw quicker progression. They had a discussion with their contractor shortly after starting the role where they requested a pay rise due to their personal circumstances. The participant explained they had an infant daughter they needed to provide for, and noted they were taking a big financial risk by working in this role. As they were technically self-employed, if they had an accident onsite and were unable to work, they would not be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, for example. The contractor was responsive to these circumstances and agreed to the pay increase.

Other participants had more mixed experiences. Generally, they had worked in multiple short-term positions since completing their training. In most cases this was based on the length of contract they were offered. Although, a few participants noted that they had left their role after a few days because they were unhappy with the tasks they were asked to complete (eg cleaning). Where participants were able to consistently find temporary opportunities (aside from during the brief hiatus in construction work following the first national lockdown), they were satisfied with this arrangement in the short-term. One participant commented that they had enough income from this work to support themselves financially as well as fund further training (eg a level two City & Guilds plumbing qualification). Once they completed this course, they hoped they would be able to access skilled roles in this trade.

Where periods in employment were less regular and consistent participants felt this arrangement was not financially sustainable. Some participants noted that they felt they were losing money. Others had started claiming Universal Credit as work opportunities had become sparse over the past 12 months because of the pandemic. In terms of pay, participants who moved from temporary contract to temporary contract saw no notable increases. Their pay could go up or down based on the type of site they worked on. One participant who had been employed in their current role for a few months noted that they had started to take on some supervisory duties. However, as they were employed and paid via a recruitment agency, their pay levels did not change. Based on this and a lack of enthusiasm for the type of work they were doing (installing kitchen appliances), they were looking to access further training and to change roles soon.

3.2.2 Working in another sector

Respondents working in another sector at the time of the research had moved away from construction either temporarily or permanently for different reasons. This included being unable to find employment or sufficient work in the construction industry or having a poor experience in the first construction roles they found. In all cases, the pandemic, and perceived impact this has had on the availability of construction vacancies, led participants to pursue employment in other sectors in the short to long-term.

For respondents who were unable to find a role in construction upon completing the training, participants recalled registering with several agencies (some of which they were signposted to by the hub) but not receiving any work. In each case, these respondents had very little or no prior experience in the industry, although they did not necessarily see this as a barrier to employment. They felt that transferable skills meant they would find work quickly once they obtained their CSCS card. This perceived lack of opportunities led them to consider other options. These options included starting a gardening business (with working outdoors seen as viable during the pandemic), as well as undertaking further training through Jobcentre Plus in forklift driving and security, which led to paid employment in these areas. Participants were generally happy with the roles they had secured in other sectors, with some noting that they felt the pay was higher than they would have been able to obtain from an entry-level construction role. Some participants could demonstrate this pay difference through subsequent job offers they had received since starting their current role.

Another respondent aimed to become a self-employed painter and decorator and had found some limited work through personal contacts after the course. They had started to obtain word-of-mouth referrals in early 2020. However, putting their business on hold during the national lockdowns affected their ability to get it off the ground. In the interim this participant found a customer service role in a local shop to maintain income, although they were keen to return to painting and decorating.

Some respondents sought employment in sectors other than construction (either temporarily or permanently) due to poor early experiences within the industry. In these cases, poor early experiences led them to leave roles secured upon completing the training either by choice or due to their employer terminating their contract. The initial roles secured in construction included telehandling, pipe fitting and sprinkler installation, as well as an apprentice plumbing position. Some respondents had poor experiences due to the approach of their site manager who they felt was pushy and made the role stressful. Others found their role more demanding and challenging than expected. One participant, with a Black African ethnic background, recalled experiencing racial discrimination. He recalled how colleagues questioned his competency for the role and whether he should be operating machinery, despite him having the necessary training and prior work experience. In this case, the participant had their contract terminated after three days, with the agency that hired them citing their ability to operate machinery as the key reason. While the participant did not feel this was a valid reason to end his contract, he did not challenge the decision as he did not see the job as being feasible and safe without the support of his co-workers. This respondent had prior positive experiences of working in construction prior to enrolling with the hub. Therefore, he remained confident in his ability to find another role of this type in future and perform it successfully.

Participants who had poor early experiences had started work in other occupations including as: a bartender (on furlough at the time of interviewing), a customer service representative for a transport company, as well as an assembler of air conditioning units. One participant was enjoying their current role as a bartender. They were not looking to return to a career in construction in the short-term as they did not see the stress and demands placed on them onsite as being commensurate with the levels of pay. Others

saw these positions as short-term stopgaps: a means of supporting themselves financially over the course of the pandemic while there were fewer roles available in construction. Some had a clear idea of the type of work they wanted to return to (ie telehandler), while others were considering other trades they could enter, such as electrical engineering. They felt that these trades might offer better working conditions than the trade they initially tried.

3.2.3 Unemployed

For those respondents who were unemployed at the time of the research, several were still looking for roles in construction, while others had temporarily paused their job search as they recovered from long-term illnesses or because they were in full-time study. The experiences of each of these groups is presented in turn.

Actively looking for work in construction

Most participants who were unemployed at the time of the research had been unable to find a role in construction since completing their training. As well as the perceived impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the availability of vacancies and greater competition for vacancies, other barriers were identified by this group that impeded their job-search. These varied between participants and were often related to their personal circumstances.

In one case, for instance, a participant living in a rural county noted that they had been offered various positions since completing the training and registering with a recruitment agency. However, in all cases the sites were not accessible either by public transport or by foot; as this individual did not have their own means of transport, they were unable to take-up these offers of employment.

Other participants were unable to find employment in construction as the positions they were signposted to were full-time and did not offer any flexibility to accommodate childcare responsibilities. As well as this indirect form of discrimination, some women felt they were unable to find work due to more direct forms of prejudice based on their gender. One participant, a French immigrant living in London, paid for and completed a level two diploma in plastering immediately after finishing her onsite training. Despite obtaining this additional qualification, living in a large urban centre with lots of construction work, she was unable to find a position in the industry. The participant stressed that she had been willing to work for free for a time to gain relevant work experience, but these attempts had been unsuccessful. After a few months she paused her full-time job-search and took up a role as a nanny, which matched her prior work experience.

A few participants also stated that they were unable to find work due to a lack of relevant work experience. Participants who cited this barrier were over the age of 35 and had recent periods of unemployment lasting 6 months or more. Some had applied for many different entry level roles since completing their training but had received verbal feedback from employers that they did not have enough onsite experience. Others noted that they were unable to apply for most roles they saw as a minimum of 12 months' work experience was often requested. Again, this group highlighted that it would have been

beneficial if they could have undertaken some work experience as part of their onsite training to help address this need. Undertaking work experience would also potentially have helped them to develop a relationship with prospective employers.

A few respondents who were unemployed at the time of the interview found short-term labouring positions via recruitment agencies after completing their training. However, their contracts had either been terminated since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, or their contract had ended, and they had been unable to find further work over this period. These interviewees remained motivated to find further employment in construction but hoped for better job prospects when they returned. For example, one participant recalled that the pay they received while working as a labourer was low and that the role was only financially viable as they worked overtime. This meant that their working week was often 60 hours, rather than the 40 hours they were contracted for. The participant also noted that their safety boots wore out quickly in this position as they were working on hot tarmac, but the boots were not replaced as the participant was hired via an agency. Finally, they commented that their employer did not recognise certain tickets they held (eg abrasive wheels) and would not let them operate machinery unless they completed the contractor's own bespoke training. Again, this training was not available to them as an agency worker.

Not actively looking for work in construction

Several interviewees who were unemployed at the time of the research were not actively seeking work in construction or any other sector. Most often, these participants had long-term chronic health conditions that prevented them from working in any capacity. Some received their diagnosis shortly after completing the training. While none had ruled out working in construction altogether in future, all were waiting to receive or finish their ongoing treatment before they were ready to consider their work situation. Additionally, a few participants were completing a college or university course of study following the training, and so were not considering their employment in the short-term.

3.3 Future Plans

Participants were asked about their future work and training plans. Their responses were invariably tied to their employment experiences since completing the onsite training.

3.3.1 Employed in construction

For those respondents who had managed to secure sustained employment in construction following their training, the level of clarity around their future plans differed depending on whether they had started an apprenticeship role. The apprentices interviewed did not generally have long-term career development plans, instead their short to medium term focus was on completing their training and finding employment in their chosen trade. Some apprentices were confident that their current employer would continue to employ them after their apprenticeship completed.

For participants that found work in entry level positions, their future plans largely centred on career progression. This group either wanted to work their way up to a supervisory or site management position or were looking to eventually run their own business and become a sole trader. In both cases participants main motivation to progress their career was to increase their earnings, and in the case of becoming a sole trader so they could 'become their own boss'.

Some participants had the intermediate career goal of becoming a skilled labourer. This applied to a few participants who were unable to find regular employment in construction. In these cases, they sought more stable employment in construction or other industries (eg warehouse work) to enable them to fund further training and access these positions.

3.3.2 Working in another sector

Among participants working in sectors other than construction, levels of motivation to return to the industry varied, although all were open to the idea albeit under certain conditions. A few wanted to return to their chosen profession in the industry, for instance, as a telehandler. These few felt that there had been a temporary hiatus in the number of roles available or a reduction in the opportunities available to develop their business because of the pandemic. They hoped opportunities would arise when lockdown restrictions eased.

Others had vaguer aspirations and were not certain that they would return to the industry. Some were enjoying their current role, but were open to the idea of temporary labouring work in future if they needed to boost their income or if they were made redundant from their current job (eg in hospitality). Some with poor experiences of working in construction said they would return in specific conditions. For example, one respondent said they would only work on small projects in future with a single team because they found larger sites disorganised and the presence of multiple contractors quite stressful.

3.3.3 Unemployed – Optimistic about finding construction work

Several participants who were unemployed at the time of the study were still motivated and optimistic about finding work in construction. In terms of future plans, all were eventually aiming to hold skilled positions in the industry, as a dumper truck driver, for instance. They were motivated to find these positions because they felt they liked the sound of the job role and felt they would offer better remuneration than many entry-level posts. This group of participants were aware they would need further training and work experience before they would be able to access these positions. How they would secure these training and work placement opportunities was, however, unclear.

3.3.4 Unemployed – Pessimistic about ability to find construction work

Another group of participants who were unemployed at the time of research were pessimistic about their ability to find work in construction in future. This largely stemmed from the lack of success they had in finding work in the industry, despite applying for numerous vacancies. Again, participants saw the main barriers as a lack of relevant

experience, as well as gender discrimination. In these cases, participants had started to consider alternate career paths in other industries such as administration. Others felt that after a long period of ill-health, together with their age, they would not be well enough to meet the physical demands of entry-level roles in construction even after they recovered.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

This section outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the programme from the participant perspective, setting out what could be done differently in similar programmes in future and what could be adapted to best support participants to find and sustain work in the construction sector.

From the participant perspective, the training experience has been a key strength of the programme. The hub registration process was simple and straightforward, reflecting the lack of eligibility criteria for support. Being free of charge for participants overcame any financial barriers, and because the courses had frequent start dates, respondents felt they began a course promptly after expressing an interest and enrolling. The relatively short length of the course was seen as positive by most participants. Participants felt the length was sufficient to provide basic insight into the construction sector and to develop the initial health and safety knowledge and qualifications required for entry-level roles (eg CSCS card). Respondents generally found the course practical, work-related, and interesting. Some also mentioned developing skills such as interpersonal skills via group work and enhancing employability and job search skills. Some participants felt they would have learned more effectively in smaller cases size with more than one tutor present. This would have enabled more differentiation and different paces to accommodate all learners. Participant experience of whether the programme included any input from or contact with employers was varied, reflecting the mixed approaches of the hubs and different approaches to employer engagement between the hubs.

The programme enabled motivated participants, with an appetite to work in construction, to believe they could move into a sector which they felt presented good quality, local employment opportunities. The sector was viewed positively, as one which offered regular working hours (no night shifts or weekend working) alongside the potential to work on a self-employed basis or to set up a business with sufficient experience.

However, it was on completion of the course, when trying to enter construction work, that participant experience diverged. While some respondents felt capable and understood how to access work, especially those with wider networks and contacts in the sector; other respondents although motivated to find work, were not able to do so. While the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly affected labour market experiences, participants experienced other barriers to entering and sustaining work in the sector. For example, a lack of suitable local roles, transport barriers, a lack of support to enter work, and poor early experiences in the sector among some participants that started work.

For some participants, the hubs supported and enabled their entry into apprenticeships in the sector. Where these roles were a suitable option, participants found them developmental, and they enabled them to start a career in the sector. The programme management information found one in four participants with a sustained employment

outcome began an apprenticeship (23 per cent). However, there were notable differences by age. Among participants finding sustained employment: 50 per cent aged 16-20 entered an apprenticeship; 18 per cent of those aged 21-29 did so, and six per cent of participants aged 30 or above. The qualitative data shows that despite viewing apprenticeships as offering a good quality experience, older respondents, typically career changers with financial commitments, did not view them as a viable financial option. This closed a secure entry route into the sector for this group. Further consideration should be given to how to enable career changers for whom apprenticeships are not financially sustainable to move into the sector. For example, additional support or advice about entry routes, and additional funding for tickets and qualifications which help secure entry to more technically specific job entry roles.

Participants who struggled to find construction work, were commonly told by agencies and employers they lacked work experience in the sector. While work experience was part of some participants experience of the programme (six per cent), a minority of participants gained it. While unpaid work experience might not be feasible for all participants, and there are risks regarding 'working for free', the model could have placed greater emphasis on brokering access to quality work placements to overcome this barrier to entry.

There were a few participants who, after completing training, found work, but were unable to start positions due to lack of private transport. This was the case in sub-urban, or rural areas, where access to new development sites was not possible by public transport. While Covid-19 has made lift-sharing more difficult, in future, considering opportunities for lift-sharing, or other ways to help support participants to overcome travel barriers could be considered by the hubs.

The main evaluation used the Labour Force Survey to illustrate that the construction workforce predominately consists of males (87 per cent overall, and 99 per cent of the manual construction workforce) and individuals from a White ethnic background (93 per cent overall, and 95 per cent of the manual construction workforce). Some respondents in the sample from groups less represented in the construction workforce, discussed a lack of flexible working options and a lack of willingness from employers to adapt working hours (or indeed among the hubs to ask employers to do so). The respondents in this situation had been unable to find work in the sector. As with the pay levels for apprenticeships, this is likely to create barriers to entering the workforce for people in mid and late career. A few respondents perceived they had been racially discriminated against, either during the recruitment process, or once onsite. While some employers are undoubtedly more progressive than others, the sector needs to continue to be challenged on diversity and inclusive work practices.

Respondents expected there to be more advocacy from the hub on their behalf, and stronger brokering into secure job vacancies. Most participants enrolled to find work in the sector. However, their experience of the ease of accessing vacancies depended on whether employer contact formed part of the programme, and more generally the extent which the hub was genuinely employer-led (ie with employer involvement from the start to design, develop and deliver training for identified job vacancies which were available to participants to apply to). Many participants felt that the programme had been marketed as including employer contact, and that they would be able to access a 'hidden job market'.

However, several felt they were left applying via recruitment agency roles and finding advertised opportunities for themselves. The premise of the programme and its ability to achieve sustained job outcomes from a short intervention, is predicated on strong employer links.

Strong employer links in the programme would help to overcome participants' reliance on recruitment agencies to find work, which can be a source of precarious employment in the industry. In the future, when funding and commissioning of employer-led employment support models, there could be a stronger emphasis on suppliers' ability to demonstrate employer leadership. In the construction sector, Section 106 agreements and enforcement have proved useful in enabling employer engagement alongside contractor recognition of social value.

There were some respondents that found work in the construction sector but had poor early experiences and subsequently left. To aid retention of participants, hub staff could provide more substantive in-work support in cases where it is needed, and perhaps provide some arbitration to try and resolve early issues. The feasibility of this in practice is likely to be dependent on how the participant sourced the role, and whether the hub staff have any prior connection to the employer.

Participant views and experiences reflected the lack of consistency between the hubs; some hubs offered extra support to support one-to-one job brokerage whereas other hubs provided little support. In the commissioning and management of similar projects in future, the quality of support to enter and sustain employment should be given equal consideration in the selection of projects, alongside the delivery of training to respond to employer needs. Even when there are vacancies due to a skills shortage, without strong support to open doors and enable trained participants to access vacancies, the onsite hub model will not be sufficient alone to help participants to enter the sector. The CSF programme trained motivated participants to become employment and site ready. The programme could have placed greater emphasis on supporting trained participants to enter work more consistently between hubs. If this had been the case, it would have improved the ability of the programme to meet the job entry target and for employers and participants to reap the full benefits of the investment.

5 Annex

The programme management information was used to draw the qualitative sample. Respondents were asked to confirm their demographic characteristics at the end of the interviews.

Table 5.1 Achieved interviews, by enrolment period and job outcome

	Enrolled Oct 2018 - March 2019	Enrolled April 2019- Sept 2019	Enrolled Oct 2019 – March 2020
Sustained job outcome	5	5	6
Employment and Site Ready but remained out of work	3	6	5

Source: IES, 2021

Table 5.2 Achieved interviews, by demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics	# of achieved interviews
Male	25
Female	5
White ethnic background	19
Black, Asian or Minority ethnic background	11
Aged 16-24	10
Aged 25-49	16
Aged 50+	4
Health condition/ disability	6

Source: IES, 2021

The experience survey included participants enrolling between January 2019 and March 2020. In total there were 1,023 valid responses to the survey, a response rate of 17 per cent. The **outcomes survey** administered to participants enrolling between October 2018 and March 2020, five to eight months after they enrolled. In total there were 701 valid responses to the survey, a response rate of 11 per cent. The survey data are unweighted due to some variables being incomplete in both the survey responses and the management information which provided the sample frame. Some of these fields which showed difference between the sample and population, such as prior level of education, were not part of the core management information set required of hubs.