

Fast Track 4 Rail Innovation Programme Proves “invaluable” for West Mids SMEs

May 26, 2023



SMEs in the West Midlands have gained valuable insights into new opportunities available for developing products and services into the railway supply chain.

Business owners and leaders in the region have hailed the first **Fast Track 4 Rail Innovation** (FT4RI) programme as “invaluable”, “fascinating” and “a real-world education in doing innovative business in rail” this week.

The two-day programme (with places available on the second event in June still available) was offered free of charge to the region’s SMEs to help them understand the rail industry and take advantage of funding and new business opportunities available. Particularly in areas of innovation that can help the railways to meet clean energy and net zero targets. And it is geared at owners and leaders either already involved in rail manufacture, innovation, and new product development, or those looking to diversify into rail.

The SMEs focused on four key areas:

- UK railway history and architecture
- Product testing, approvals, and procurement processes
- Facilities to support rail development and testing at the Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre (VLRNIC)
- Innovation journey and funding landscape, and next steps.

FT4RI focuses on supporting SMEs to develop rail products and services, from concept to realisation and deployment and helping them understand and navigate rail regulations, legal requirements, procurement and more.

Attendees also took in a full tour of the innovation centre including the rail development and testing site, engineering labs. And they were the first to test out the centre's new very light rail driver simulator which arrived on the second day of the programme and will be a permanent feature at the centre.

Pam Cain, director at MarchantCain Group said: "What a great programme for interactions and knowledge sharing. I'd recommend Fast Track for Rail Innovation to other SMEs. I've left with five or six innovation ideas for our business just on day one!"

Mark Potter, co-founder of Arc Metal Design said: "Rail is an industry we are very interested in entering and, for us, this programme has been eye-opening, fascinating and incredibly useful. Without it we'd be so much more in the dark about the industry. There are so many more opportunities available than we'd realised. What BCIMO are doing is brilliant. We're leaving with a lot of food for thought and useful connections."

At the end of the FT4RI programme, participants get a dedicated Rail Mentor to help them develop a Rail Readiness Action Plan with which to navigate the railway supply chain, creating a blueprint for successful innovation.

Book your place on the next FT4RI programme

FT4RI is being delivered by the [Black Country Innovative Manufacturing Organisation](#) (BCIMO) in partnership with the [University of Birmingham's Centre for Rail Research and Education](#) and [Innovate UK Edge](#). BCIMO is the driving force behind a £32 million research and development facility in Dudley, which is home to the UK's first rail development and testing site and engineering laboratories where rail innovations can be tested and developed, which is where the programme is delivered.

A second free FT4RI programme takes place at BCIMO from Wednesday 7 to Thursday 8 June 2023. Places are still available and if you are a business owner or manager in the West Midlands looking to take part you can [register your interest here](#). The programme is offered free of charge to companies that are based in the Black Country and its borders, have less than 250 employees and a turnover of less than £50 million per year.

More funding on the way via Clean Futures Accelerator

More funding and commercial support for innovative SMEs in the West Midlands is on the way soon. The

Clean Futures Accelerator is a pioneering initiative to drive economic growth and innovation by supporting SMEs in the transport sector. The multimillion pound programme aims to stimulate investment in new products for the transition to Net Zero. FT4RI attendees will be the first to hear about it – so it's well worth getting involved. The funding and support will be specifically targeted at SMEs who are developing products to meet carbon reduction and clean transport challenges, or who are addressing sustainable manufacturing solutions.

It will support SMEs in existing supply chains or those looking to move into new market sectors. These SMEs will be provided with technological and development assistance for their products, as well as business support to ensure market readiness and investment opportunities.

More information about the Accelerator is coming next week.

You can [register your interest for the Clean Futures Accelerator here](#).

