

## Light rail training in the spotlight during National Apprenticeship Week

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The importance of specialist training programmes to the growth of light rail in the UK has been put in the spotlight by sector leaders during National Apprenticeship Week (February 8-14).

UKTram is already playing a key role in helping to shape future apprenticeship programmes alongside a host of other initiatives designed to bridge a growing skills gap while encouraging more young people to consider a career in a sector that offers a wealth of opportunities.

Having launched his own career as an apprentice engineer at Seaton Tramway in Devon, the Managing Director of UKTram, James Hammett, is well placed to highlight the benefits of a structured approach to training and development.

“From my own experience I know that apprenticeships provide a solid platform on which to build a successful career, and across the sector we have many professionals in key operational and managerial roles who have followed a similar path,” Mr Hammett explained.

“However, as light rail becomes increasingly important in improving connectivity and air quality in many

urban areas, it's clear we need to boost the number of people coming into the sector with the required skills."

Although 2020 proved a challenging year for everyone, the coronavirus pandemic didn't prevent significant progress being made on addressing the issue, with UKTram playing a pivotal role.

Late last year the organisation joined a 'trailblazer' review of engineering apprenticeships that aims to ensure future schemes meet the specific needs of the sector.

Meeting online, representatives from heavy and high-speed rail, as well as light rail, looked at the development of Rail Engineering Operative Level 2 and Rail Engineering Technician Level 3 Apprenticeships.

"This review is bringing together experts from across the transport sector to look at existing apprenticeship schemes with a view to developing new training programmes tailored to the specific needs of different modes of transport," Mr Hammett said.

"Future apprenticeship programmes will also need to look at increasing diversity to attract more women and people from BAME communities, and other issues highlighted by the review such as the need to include non-technical skills like communication and team working.

"The development of pathways within apprenticeships to encourage mobility between heavy, high-speed and light rail is also a key priority."

The move builds on work already being done in regions such as the West Midlands, where major tram extensions are currently under construction.

Nine people in the region are set to become amongst the first to achieve a qualification in Light Rail following the 2018 approval of an apprenticeship in Tramway Construction by the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education (IfATE).

Led by Midland Metro Alliance (MMA), which is extending the West Midlands Metro across the region on behalf of Transport for West Midlands, light rail employers from across the country helped design the level two apprenticeship specifically for the sector.

It's aimed at individuals who want to develop a career in the tramway construction environment and complements a range of other initiatives to ensure the £1.3 billion project delivers the maximum career opportunities for local people.

The MMA have also led in similar schemes, including assisting in regional 'Sector Work Academy Programmes' which help equip local people, who might be out of work, with the skills they need in the sector ahead of moving into full-time employment or an apprenticeship programme.

Speaking of the activity, Rose Rees, MMA Head of Engagement & Skills, said: "The light rail sector is currently undergoing a period of expansion and good quality apprenticeships are an ideal opportunity to

re-focus and invest in local people ensuring they benefit immediately from these massive infrastructure projects.”

This commitment to providing exciting career opportunities while closing the skills gap is reflected across the country, and UKTram is currently at the forefront of a range of training-related projects.

Mr Hammett said: “Work is well underway on developing a suite of National Occupational Standards (NOS) for roles involving traction power and rolling stock as well as infrastructure maintenance.

“We’ve received a very positive response to initial drafts of the new standards that employers can use to compare their internal practices and procedures, and as a basis for developing training programmes, including apprenticeships.”

Similar NOS are in development for other key roles, including drivers, while tram operators have already embraced apprenticeships as a way to equip employees with the skills needed for broader support roles such as marketing, administration and finance.

“In fact, light rail offers a broad range of different career paths, and both UKTram and our members are committed to encouraging young people to consider working in the sector,” Mr Hammett added.

One teenager who has already chosen to take up an apprenticeship in the sector is Mr Hammett’s own nephew, Alex Baldwin.

Later this year, he will follow in his uncle’s footsteps when he starts at Seaton Tramway as an apprentice mechanical engineer, while studying part-time at Exeter College.

The move follows time spent as a volunteer on the tramway while working towards his Duke of Edinburgh Award, and he says he can’t wait to start his formal training shortly after his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

“I’ve always been interested in how things work, and I’ve loved being around trams since my uncle took me on a tour of the depot when I was about six or seven years old,” he said. “I’ve seen for myself the many opportunities offered by light rail and I’m really excited about embarking on a rewarding career in tramway engineering.”

*Photo credit: UKTram*