

Midland Metro Alliance working with NEETS: FIR case study

1. Background

The Midland Metro Alliance comprises the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA); a consortium of design experts from Egis, Tony Gee and Pell Frischmann; and rail construction specialists Colas Rail, with Colas' sub-alliance partners Colas Ltd, Barhale, Bouygues UK and Auctus Management Group.

The Alliance is expanding the tram network in the West Midlands by around 34 kilometres, helping to achieve social and economic regeneration across the region. The total budget is £1.35 bn.

The first major construction project, Bilston Road updates was completed during June to December 2017. The final extension currently planned is the Birmingham Eastside Extension, which extends the route 17km eastwards, to serve Solihull and terminate at the High Speed 2 (HS2) interchange station close to the current Birmingham International railway station.

2. Why address NEETS?

The West Midlands is a region of low productivity and a shortage of skills at the lower and higher ends of the skills spectrum. On current trends the output gap between the West Midlands and the rest of the UK will widen, because of the comparatively high proportion of residents with low skills and few qualifications and complex constraining issues including poor mental health and worklessness in households.

In 2017 in the West Midlands, [13.1% of people aged 16 to 24 were NEET](#), the second highest level of any English region.

WMCA is committed to tackling these issues It expects its [supply chain to promote equality and diversity](#) and generate and report [social value](#). This includes the employment of apprentices, the creation of opportunities for people not in employment, education or training (NEETS), jobs for long term unemployed, young offenders supported back to work and provision of training opportunities.

MMA, in turn, is passionate about using local talent. It recognises the need to redress an aging workforce, as the average age in construction and rail is 45 years old and to create a trained, enthusiastic and committed workforce to meet its skilled and semi-skilled resource plans over the next ten years.

MMA needs people with specific skills, including mandatory accredited qualifications such as Construction Skills Certificate Scheme (CSCS) cards, excellent customer service skills for working in an urban environment, and trades including concreting and carpentry.

3. What has MMA done?

a. Creation of a Sector Based Work Academy (SBWA)

MMA has worked with local colleges, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), councils and other funding bodies to deliver a bespoke six-week Sector Based Work Academy (SBWA) in Light Rail.

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The SBWA offers unemployed candidates, aged 18 and over, the opportunity to achieve accredited qualifications, develop personal skills and gain practical experience in key competencies required to kick-start a career in the light rail sector.

The participating colleges are:

- Dudley College (supporting Dudley and the Black Country)
- City of Wolverhampton College
- Birmingham Metropolitan College (with intakes from Birmingham North, Central and West)
- Solihull College (with candidates from Birmingham South and East)

b. Recruitment to the SBWA

The SBWA programme initially targeted young people aged 18 to 29, because of their typically low levels of qualifications, historic disengagement with education and lack of suitable employment opportunities in the West Midlands. The opportunities were 'offender friendly', targeted women, BAME groups and specific deprived areas within Birmingham and the Black Country. There was considerable interest from more mature, longer term unemployed Job Centre Plus clients and MMA recognised that the training opportunities could benefit all.

Group information sessions and initial assessments were delivered to unemployed people in each geographical area, with people referred by DWP coaches after initial one-to-one consultations.

Following these, candidates took a rail sector approved drug and alcohol test and medical.

Successful candidates attended the SBWA at their local college; undertaking an intensive six-week programme of practical learning with assessments throughout. All candidates benefited from ongoing support from college staff and the MMA.

Following successful completion of the course, all candidates then received formal interviews by panel, with each MMA partner represented, and participated in group celebrations of success where the MMA Project Director and college principals issued certificates.

4. Impact & Benefit Realised

56 candidates started the six-week programme. 50 completed and attended interviews with MMA. By July 2017, 22 candidates had been offered and accepted roles within MMA. The MMA Training team forwarded unsuccessful candidates' CVs to their partners' supply chains, bank of agencies and contacts in local construction companies. 26 people are known to have been employed, in total.

Some of the candidates who went through the course and into employment are shown in the film [MMA Candidate Testimonials](#)

By April 2017, at least 14 are still employed on the project. This includes one person, given an initial, 6-month contract, who has been taken on now permanently by Colas Rail and enrolled on a leadership apprenticeship.

MMA report that, anecdotally, they find employees from traditionally 'hard to reach' backgrounds to be more committed and loyal to their employer than average employees and so more energetic and 'driven'. Bringing different mindsets into businesses brings innovation.

5. Leadership

Leadership within all consortium partners fully support:

- Work to bring NEETS into the workforce
- Individuals within consortium partners becoming FIR Ambassadors and FIR Trainers, so that a workplace culture is established within MMA that enables the formerly NEET recruits (and others) to succeed.

6. Tips

MMA advises employers and programmes looking to work with NEETS to:

- ✓ Go and find them! They won't come to careers fairs or forums; they have multiple challenges to getting into the workplace and so don't behave as employers traditionally expect potential employees to do.
- ✓ Use brokerage services. But be aware that each service is only as good as the individual you are dealing with, within it, so seek out the 'doers' within each service and work with them.
- ✓ When going into colleges, engage with students on a human level, without being patronising. If you want to explain the industry approach to drug and alcohol testing, for example, start by asking "anybody here smoke weed?" and then explain the implications of that. To explain opportunities for earning and career progression, MMA show an image of a young worker with his BMW and tell students that it took the worker just 2 years working to be able to save and buy it.
- ✓ Be flexible around minimum educational requirements for apprenticeships and encourage your educational partners to be. Requiring every apprentice candidate, for example, to have 5 good GCSEs will automatically eliminate certain people from hard-to-reach backgrounds who might have great potential and whose skills in English and maths can be developed over the course of the apprenticeship.
- ✓ Establish a sector-based work academy. You can apply for external funding to do so, and you can train people up to deliver exactly the roles you need.