



Department
for Transport

High Speed Rail Vocational Qualifications Report 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

January 2025

High Speed Rail Vocational Qualifications Report 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

Presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 66(1) of the
High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Act 2017

January 2025



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1. Background

1.1.1 Creating opportunities for skills and employment is one of the seven strategic goals of the HS2 project, complementing its main purpose to be a ‘catalyst for growth across the UK’. HS2 also represents an opportunity to improve the delivery of the UK’s future project delivery pipeline by leaving a lasting skills legacy for the country.

1.1.2 The annual Vocational Qualifications (VQ) report helps us to understand how the workforce is being upskilled and how the aims outlined above are being achieved across the programme.

1.1.3 The High Speed Rail (London to West Midlands) Act 2017 (“the Act”) provides authority for the construction of a High Speed rail network between London Euston and Birmingham city centre and a connection to the West Coast Mainline (at Handsacre in Staffordshire).

1.1.4 Section 66(1) of the Act stipulates that the Secretary of State must prepare a report on VQs obtained in each financial year in connection with HS2 construction.

1.1.5 Section 66(2) of the Act requires this report to contain an account of VQs gained by individuals employed in constructing HS2, in preparing for its construction and in connected and ancillary activities,

and that they be broken down by type of qualification and activity.

1.1.6 Section 66(3) requires the report to contain an overall assessment of the costs of training for VQs and who paid.

1.1.7 This is the sixth annual VQ report made under the vires of the Act and it covers the period between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023. This report also covers VQs obtained through Phases 2a and 2b of HS2 prior to their cancellation in October 2023. Although these phases technically fall under the requirements of the High-Speed Rail (Preparation) Act 2013 (“the Preparation Act”), for reporting purposes, and in compliance with the VQ requirements of the Preparation Act, they are included in this VQ report. At the time of publication, it is expected that future reports will not include Phases 2a and 2b, following the announcement to cancel future phases of HS2, made by the former Prime Minister in October 2023.

1.1.8 The results set out in this report were sourced from HS2 Ltd, who distributed a survey to workers within HS2 Ltd, main works contractors and the wider supply chain. The survey responses were then collated and analysed to inform the findings of this report.

2. Data Collection

2.1 2023 Survey Key Facts

2.1.1 The time period covered by the survey is 1st April 2022 – 31 March 2023.

2.1.2 The previous survey questions from 2022 were reviewed and it was agreed that the questions would remain the same for 2023 to provide continuity and to aid comparison between the surveys.

2.1.3 The survey was open for 4 weeks. It launched on Tuesday 25th July 2023 and closed on Friday 18th August 2023. It was then extended for a further two weeks to help drive responses and the final closing date for the survey was 1st September 2023.

2.1.4 There were 10 questions, and the survey was expected to take no more than 5 minutes to complete. The survey could be completed online, accessed via a URL link or QR Code.

2.1.5 The survey was completely voluntary, which means that the reported number of completed VQs is likely to be undercounted each year. To help mitigate this, we tested a new method by approaching the Main Works contractors' labour desks directly to provide the data they hold on completed VQs, directly to HS2 Ltd.

2.1.6 To avoid double counting, we ensured all communication with Main Works contractors included an instruction not to contact labour desks, as the HS2 Skills and Employment team were already doing this.

2.1.7 On this basis, the survey was disseminated to contractors' office-based staff to fill in themselves whilst the labour desks provided site-staff VQ completions data.

2.2 Tier 1 and labour desk dissemination process

2.2.1 The focus for 2023 was to build on last year's priority of improving the dissemination process by diversifying the channels through which the survey was promoted. This was due to the voluntary nature of the survey and the lower than anticipated response rate from this group in 2022.

2.2.2 A survey launch meeting was organised before the survey opened where HS2 Legacy Managers were invited to discuss the key challenges and further mitigation measures that could be taken against these. The decision to test a new method of data collection was taken for the 2023 survey so that, in addition to previous methods, HS2 would now look to obtain data directly from Main Works contractors' labour desks who hold VQ data centrally for their on-site staff.

2.2.3 The communications plan included survey start and end dates, with notifications and reminders for the supply chain and labour desks built into the timeline.

For labour desks specifically, a meeting was held with key representatives and a follow-up email was sent to a wider, targeted list of labour desks to explain the request, purpose, and context.

2.2.4 The supply chain was also provided with a QR code flyer. The flyer contained a QR code and direct link to the survey that could be printed and placed in site locations. This was to allow site teams easier access to the survey from their own mobile devices, removing the need to share PCs with Site Managers. This had helped to boost the response rate in 2022 and was therefore utilised again for 2023.

2.2.5 HS2 Legacy Managers supported the campaign by providing regular reminders to Main Works contractors' Skills, Employment and Educations leads about the survey and encouraging them to promote the survey within their offices.

2.2.6 Once the survey approached the closing date, we announced a further two-week extension to help further boost the response rate and the above communication measures were taken again to help drive responses. This approach has previously captured an influx of last-minute responses and we found this to be the case again this year.

2.2.7 HS2 Ltd also published an article on 'Interchange', an organisation-wide internal communications channel, to promote the survey and encourage responses across the entire organisation.

3. Survey questions and results

3.1 Responses

3.1.1 When the survey closed there were 1,196 individual responses to the survey, and we also received additional responses from three labour desks.

3.1.2 Of the 1,196 individuals, 148 had completed VQs in 2022/23. The three labour desks from which we received additional data reported a further 164 completed VQs in the same year.

3.1.3 With the survey results and labour desk data combined, 319 people had completed a total of 367 VQs in 2022/23. Over half of the responses were taken from labour desk data that might not otherwise have been captured, demonstrating the value of this element of the process and the need to adjust communications to ensure greater participation from the labour desks for future surveys.

3.1.4 The survey lasted six weeks and resulted in 1,196 submissions. This compares to 1,441 responses from this group last year. We will consider how to improve response rates for next year's report given this reduction in the number of responses received.

3.2 Survey Questions

3.2.1 In total, ten questions in relation to VQs were asked. The survey structure is explained in further detail below. The full list of questions in the survey is:

- Which category best describes your occupation?
- Did you complete a relevant VQ?
- On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?
- Where did you mainly work between the 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023?
- Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?
- What topic was your qualification in?
- What level was the qualification?
- Who paid?
- How much did it cost?
- Did you do another qualification between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023?

Question 1. What category best describes your occupation?

3.3.1 The results set out in table 1 below show that 379 respondents (27.9%) who responded to the survey reported working in Engineering (includes Civils), 290 (21.3%) reported working in a Professional Occupation and 236 (17.4%) reported working as a Manager, Director or Senior Official.

3.3.2 Overall, 182 respondents (13.4%) reported working as Plant Operatives but when HS2 split the data by survey and labour desk, 87.8% of the labour desk respondents identified themselves as Plant Operatives. This is typically a hard-to-reach group and demonstrates the value of the labour desk data.

3.3.3 The results show that 107 respondents (7.9%) reported working in an Associate professional and technical occupation, and that 87 (6.4%) reported working in Administrative and secretarial occupations.

3.3.4 A further 79 respondents (5.8%) reported working as Onsite Construction Operatives, Labourers and Transport operatives, Engagement and Customer Service and Sales and customer service occupations.

Occupation	Total	%
Engineering (includes Civils)	379	27.9%
Professional occupations	290	21.3%
Manager, Director and Senior Officials	236	17.4%
Plant Operatives	182	13.4%
Associate professional and technical occupations	107	7.9%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	87	6.4%
Onsite Constructive Operatives	57	4.2%
Labourers and transport Operatives	10	0.7%
Engagement and Customer Service	9	0.7%
Sales and customer service occupations	2	0.1%
Not Answered	1	0.1%

Table 1 What category best describes your occupation?

Question 2. Did you complete a relevant VQ?

3.4.1 Of the total respondents, 319 people (22.7%) completed a VQ while working on the HS2 project between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023 compared to the 2021/2022 survey where 164 respondents answered that they had completed a VQ while working on the HS2 project in the previous year.

3.4.2 Without the labour desk data, 148 respondents reported a VQ completion, so the survey results are similar to last year, with the labour desk data providing a boost to reporting figures.

3.4.3 If a respondent answered “no” to this question they were taken to the end of the survey and no further information was collected from them.

	Response total	%
Yes	319	22.7%
No	1084	77.3.%

Table 2 Did you complete a relevant VQ?

Question 3. On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?

3.5.1 The majority of the respondents (318 or 98.1%) reported that they were employed by an organisation.

3.5.2 Two respondents (0.6%) were self-employed. Four (1.2%) answered ‘other’.

	Response total	%
Employed	318	98.1%
Self employed	2	0.6%
Other	4	1.2%

Table 3 On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?

Question 4. Where did you mainly work between the 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023

3.6

3.6.1 With the addition of labour desk data this year, HS2 Ltd received a significantly higher response from on-site staff compared to the 2022 survey.

3.6.2 The large majority of responses (199 or 61.2%), said they were mainly working on site, compared to 24.2% in 2022. The main reason is using the labour desk data for the first time this year and therefore most VQ's here will have been completed by site workers. Other factors include lessening impacts of COVID and the stage of the project.

3.6.3 In addition, 34 responses (10.5%) said they were office based and 77 (23.7%) worked in a combination of home-based and on-site.

	Response total	%
On-site	199	61.2%
Office based	34	10.5%
Combination office based/on-site	77	23.7%
Home based	13	4.0%
Other	2	0.6%

Table 4 Where did you mainly work between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023

Question 5. Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?

3.7.1 This question was added to the survey so that we could better understand the distribution of those completing VQs across the line of route. This question was supported by a map of the route with a key to clearly indicate where each phase was located.

3.7.2 The majority of those who responded, 268 respondents (82.5%) worked on Phase One. This is to be expected as Phase One is the most progressed phase of the route.

3.7.3 There were 18 respondents (5.5%) working in route wide roles.

3.7.4 A further 32 respondents (9.8%) were working on Phase 2a, and 7 respondents (2.2%) were working on Phase 2b.

	Response total	%
Phase One – London to West Midlands (Fradley)	268	82.5%
Route-wide	18	5.5%
Phase 2a – West Midlands (Fradley) to Crewe	32	9.8%
Phase 2b – Crewe to Manchester or West Midlands to Leeds	7	2.2%

Table 5 Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?

Question 6. What topic was your qualification in?

3.8.1 For each qualification that a respondent completed, they were asked what topic the qualification was in.

3.8.2 There were 367 responses to this question – greater than the number of respondents as some respondents completed more than one VQ. The most frequently chosen topic was Construction (196 or 53.4%), Health and Safety (44 or 12.0%) and Engineering (40 or 10.9%).

3.8.3 Given the higher representation of on-site staff this year compared to last year (likely due to use of the labour desk data), it is perhaps unsurprising that the survey has captured a proportionately higher percentage of staff (compared to last year's survey) who have completed VQs in Construction.

	Response total	%
Construction	196	53.4%
Health and Safety	44	12.0%
Engineering	40	10.9%
Plant	35	9.5%
Project Management	30	8.2%
Business and Finance	10	2.7%
Other	5	1.4%
Transport/Traffic and Logistics	3	0.8%
Security	3	0.8%
Rail	1	0.3%

Table 6 What topic was your qualification in?

Question 7. What level was the qualification?

3.9.1 Based on feedback from contractors, we included equivalency information for UK and EU qualifications, to help improve respondents' understanding when answering this question. Despite this, the third most popular response was "don't know" at 20.5%, though this was down from 35.1% last year.

3.9.2 All responses that came via the labour desk provided a definitive answer, but of those who responded directly through the survey, 38% of respondents did not know which level they had completed.

3.9.3 Besides this, the two most popular answers were Level 2 (35.4%) and Level 3 (20.8%). 51 respondents (14.3%) had completed a level 5, 6 or 7 qualification.

	Response total	%
Level 1	10	2.8%
Level 2	126	35.4%
Level 3	74	20.8%
Level 4	22	6.2%
Level 5	5	1.4%
Level 6	25	7.0%
Level 7	21	5.9%
Don't know	73	20.5%

Table 7 What level was the qualification?

Question 8. Who paid for the qualification?

3.10.1 As you can see in Table 8, 320 respondents (89.6%) reported in the survey that their employer paid for the qualification.

3.10.2 Only 30 of the respondents (8.4%) paid for their own qualifications.

3.10.3 Seven of the respondents (2.0%) did not know who paid. This could mean they were unsure about whether there was a cost, or they potentially were taken through the qualification as a result of collaboration between their employer and another organisation, as we assume most people would be aware if they had paid themselves.

3.10.4 The response to this question shows that in most circumstances the employer paid for the qualification, which confirms that during this time the project offered employees opportunities to do a VQ at no cost to themselves.

	Response total	%
My employer paid	320	89.6
I paid	30	8.4
Don't know	7	2.0

Table 8 Who paid for the qualification?

Question 9. How much did it cost?

3.11.1 Most respondents (75 or 21.6%) did not know the cost of the qualification, possibly indicating that they did not pay for it themselves. Where a cost was selected, the most chosen option was '£501-£1000' with 193 responses (55.6%), followed by £1001-£5000 with 34 responses (9.8%).

	Response total	%
Don't know	75	21.6%
£1001-£5000	34	9.8%
Up to £500	32	9.2%
£501-£1000	193	55.6%
£5001 or more (please specify)	13	3.7%

Table 9 How much did it cost?

Question 10. Did you do another qualification between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023?

3.12.1 Around a fifth of respondents (19.8%) said that they had completed a second VQ in the same year and were prompted at this stage to fill the survey out again to capture this information.

	Response total	%
Yes	33	19.8
No	134	80.2

4. Overall conclusions and next steps

4.1.1 Of the 1,196 individuals who completed the survey, 148 had completed VQs in 2022/23. The three labour desks from which we received additional data reported a further 164 completed VQs in the same year.

4.1.2 With the survey results and labour desk data combined, 319 people completed a total of 367 VQs in 2022/23. 82.5% of respondents worked on Phase One (the most progressed phase of the route).

4.1.3 The vast majority of respondents (98.1%) reported that they were employed by an organisation (rather than self-employed or other). The majority (61.2%) were mainly working on site, a large increase compared to 2022.

4.1.4 The most popular VQs were in construction (53.4%), followed by Health and Safety (12.0%) and Engineering (10.9%). Over a third (35.4%) of qualifications were at Level 2 and over a fifth (20.8%) were at Level 3.

4.1.5 The large majority of respondents (89.6%) reported that their employer paid for the qualification. Where the cost was known, more than half (55.6%) reported that it cost between £501 and £1000.

4.1.6 The total estimated cost of all the VQs reported in this survey is between £206,500 and £472,000. This is significantly higher than estimates from previous years, most likely due to the inclusion of the labour desk data. Last year's estimated cost was between £122,000 and £355,000. As with previous years, the cost was largely met by employers. As with previous reports, it is likely that the estimated costs for the 2022/2023 data are an underestimate due to the high proportion of "Don't know" answers to question 9. There is also uncertainty about the cost of courses in the upper band of £5,001 or more, which 13 respondents selected.

4.1.7 The use of labour desks to supplement this year's survey data has helped us capture a higher number of VQ completions with less resource. The data also helped to lower the proportion of "don't know" responses, enabling us to capture clearer and more definitive data. Previously, the survey has captured a high level of responses from those at senior levels but the labour desk data has allowed us to capture a significantly higher proportion of both on-site staff, and those not counted within the senior-level category.

4.1.8 We therefore consider the labour desk trial to have been very successful and will continue to implement this in future years. This year, we only received data from three labour desks. Next year we will be widening our communications efforts to ensure we secure a higher level of participation from all our labour desks.

4.1.9 The focus of this survey is on VQs but this is not the full breadth of training that takes place on the HS2 project. Many other training courses and skills development programmes have been completed which will not have been captured in this data. It should also be noted that these survey results only capture a relatively small proportion of the overall workforce of the project.

4.1.10 By upskilling the workforce, the HS2 project is meeting its aims of making sure that the right skills are in place to deliver the railway. Promoting VQs ensures that the demand for high skilled labour is met over the course of the HS2 programme and contributes to providing high quality and long-term employment opportunities. This report demonstrates how VQs are a key tool in the creation of a skilled construction and transport workforce for the HS2 project and beyond.

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