



Department
for Transport

High Speed Rail Vocational Qualifications Report

1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024

February 2026



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for Transport

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1. Background

- 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.
- 1.2 The annual Vocational Qualifications (VQ) report helps us to understand how the workforce is being upskilled via VQs, which is just one of the ways in which the aims outlined above are being achieved. Across the programme there are many other types of training taking place, such as apprenticeships and short construction courses.
- 1.3 The High-Speed Rail (London to West Midlands) Act 2017 ("the Act") provides authorisation for the construction of the High-Speed rail network between London Euston and Birmingham city centre and a connection to the West Coast Mainline (at Handsacre in Staffordshire).
- 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.
- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 Section 66(3) requires the report to contain an overall assessment of the costs of training for VQs and who paid.
- 1.7 This is the seventh annual VQ report made under the vires of the Act and it covers the period between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. This report also covers VQs obtained through the former HS2 Phases 2a (West Midlands to Crewe) and 2b (Crewe to Manchester) prior to their cancellation, which was announced in October 2023, midway through the present reporting period. 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.

- 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 and contacted their labour desks directly. The responses were then collated and analysed to inform the findings of this report.

2. Data Collection

2024 Survey dissemination process

- 2.1 The time period covered by the survey was 1st April 2023 – 31 March 2024.
- 2.2 The survey was open for four weeks. It launched in July 2024 and closed in August 2024. It was then extended for a further four weeks to help drive responses and the final closing date for the survey was in September 2024.
- 2.3 The previous survey questions from 2023 were reviewed and it was agreed that the questions would remain the same for 2024 to provide continuity and to aid comparison between the surveys.
- 2.4 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.
- 2.5 Given the voluntary nature of the survey, the 2024 survey maintained the dissemination process from the previous year, using a range of channels to promote the survey.
- 2.6 The communications plan included survey start and end dates, with notifications and reminders for the supply chain and labour desks built into the timeline.
- 2.7 The supply chain was again 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.
- 2.8 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.
- 2.9 Once the survey approached the closing date, we announced a further four-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.

- 2.10 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.
- 2.11 The survey was completely voluntary, which means that the reported number of completed VQs through this method is likely to be undercounted each year. To help mitigate this, HS2 Ltd repeated the previous year's approach of contacting the Main Works contractors' labour desks directly to request the data they held on completed VQs.

Labour desk returns process

- 2.12 The HS2 Labour desk manage and source labour for site-based roles. Each of HS2's Main Works Contractors has a labour desk and there are five or six companies contracted to supply site-based staff to each labour desk.
- 2.13 The labour desks were asked to submit information on the same questions as those in the survey.
- 2.14 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.
- 2.15 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.
- 2.16 For labour desks specifically, an email was sent to a targeted list of labour desks to explain the request, purpose, and context. A meeting was offered to labour desk representatives to discuss any queries they had.

3. Survey/labour desks questions and results

Responses

- 3.1 When the survey closed there were 602 individual responses to the survey, and HS2 Ltd also received additional responses from three labour desks.
- 3.2 Within the 602 individual survey responses, a total of 127 VQs had been completed within the reporting period for 2023/24. The three labour desks reported a further 146 completed VQs in the same year. With the survey results and labour desk data combined, a total of 273 VQs had been undertaken in 2023/24.
- 3.3 Over half of the responses were taken from labour desk data that might not otherwise have been captured, highlighting again the value of this element of the process.
- 3.4 The survey lasted eight weeks and resulted in 602 submissions, compared to 1,196 last year. Despite this significant fall, the number of VQs reported by this smaller group was actually quite similar to last year (127 compared to 148). This suggests that there were fewer 'nil returns' compared to last year.

Survey Questions

- 3.5 The questions in the survey were essentially as follows (slightly abridged below to avoid repetition):

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 2023 and 31st March 2024?

Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?

What topic was your qualification in?

What level was this qualification?

Who paid for it?

How much did it cost?

Did you do another qualification between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024?

- 3.6 In the survey design it was intended that only those responding 'yes' to Q2 would continue to answer questions beyond that point. However, it is apparent from the results that some respondents nevertheless chose to respond to subsequent questions, creating some ambiguity. In order to avoid over-counting, we have only included those responding 'yes' to Q2 in the total number of VQs completed (and in the cost data presented). We have nonetheless reported all respondents' answers in the rest of the data presented in this report.
- 3.7 Data on the same questions as those included in the survey was also provided by the labour desks. The results from both exercises are described below under each question heading, either separately or consolidated where appropriate (though the figures in the tables represent only the data from the survey).

Question 1. Which category best describes your occupation?

- 3.8 The results set out in table 1 below show that of the 602 respondents who responded to the survey, 29.4% reported working as on-site construction operatives, 21.3% reported working in engineering (including civils), 16.8% as a manager, director or senior official and 12.1% in a professional occupation. This covers the large majority of respondents.
- 3.9 The results also show that 6% of respondents reported working in an administrative and secretarial occupation, 4.2% reported working in engagement and customer service and 4% worked in an associate professional and technical occupation.
- 3.10 The remaining respondents reported working as plant operatives, in sales and customer service occupations or 'other'.

Occupation	Total	%
Onsite Construction Operatives	177	29.4%
Engineering (includes Civils)	128	21.3%
Manager, Director and Senior Officials	101	16.8%
Professional occupations	73	12.1%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	36	6.0%
Engagement and Customer Service	25	4.2%
Associate professional and technical occupations	24	4.0%
Labourers and transport Operatives	17	2.8%
Plant Operatives	17	2.8%
Sales and customer service occupations	0	0.0%
Other	4	0.7%

Table 1 What category best describes your occupation?

3.11 The labour desk contributed data for an additional 146 individuals. These comprised 97 on-site construction operatives, 45 plant operatives and 4 labourers and transport operatives. These latter two occupations in particular were under-represented in the survey data.

Question 2. Did you complete a relevant VQ?

3.12 There were 127 responses to this question in the survey reporting completion of a 'relevant' VQ (i.e. one obtained while working on the HS2 project between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024).

3.13 The labour desk data contributed a further 146, more than doubling the reporting figures.

3.14 In total, we received data relating to 273 VQs within the relevant period.

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

3.15 The vast majority of the respondents to the survey (95.5%) reported that they were employed by an organisation.

3.16 The remainder were either self-employed or sub-contractors.

	Response total	%
Employed	63	95.5%
Self employed	1	1.5%
Other	2	3.0%

Table 2 On what basis are you employed on the HS2 Project?

3.17 Perhaps unsurprisingly, all of the data provided by the labour desks was for employees, which raises the consolidated proportion to 97.6%.

Question 4. Where did you mainly work between the 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024

3.18 Of the responses to this question in the survey, the large majority (76.3%) reported that they worked on site. The same was the case for all of the responses from the labour desk data. This no doubt reflects the stage of the project.

3.19 Of the remaining survey responses, 10.9% said they were office-based and 12.1% worked in a combination of home-based and on site. Less than 1% responded that they were home-based, a significant reduction compared to previous reports.

	Response total	%
On-site	196	76.3%
Combination office based/on-site	31	12.1%
Office-based	28	10.9%
Home-based	2	0.8%
Other	0	0.0%

Table 3 Where did you mainly work between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024

3.20 All 75 of those covered by the labour desk data worked on site, making a combined proportion of 81.6% of all respondents.

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

3.21 This question is included in the survey so that we can better understand the distribution of those completing VQs along 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.

3.22 It is important to note that the Government's decision to cancel Phases 2a (West Midlands to Crewe) and 2b (Crewe to Manchester or West Midlands to Leeds) was announced on 4 October 2023, very close to halfway through this reporting period. This means the effects of that announcement will only have had a partial impact on the survey responses.

3.23 The majority of those who responded (69.5%), worked on Phase One (London to West Midlands). This is to be expected, as Phase One was the most progressed phase of the route. The proportion of people working on Phase 2a was higher than in the previous year, at 27.7% - reflecting the escalating scale of those works at that time.

3.24 Only 2% were working in route-wide roles and a further 0.8% were working on Phase 2b.

	Response total	%
Phase One – London to West Midlands (Fradley)	178	69.5%
Phase 2a – West Midlands (Fradley) to Crewe	71	27.7%
Route-wide	5	2.0%
Phase 2b – Crewe to Manchester or West Midlands to Leeds	2	0.8%

Table 4 Which Phase of the HS2 Project are you working on?

3.25 As regards the labour desk data, all of the 75 responses related to staff working on Phase One. If this is combined with the survey data, the proportion of responses relating to Phase One rises to 76.4% of the total, with 21.5% relating to Phase 2a.

Question 6. What topic was your qualification in?

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

3.27 By far the most frequently chosen topic was construction (71.5%). Construction was also the highest category in the labour desk data (66.4%).

3.28 The other largest categories based on the survey alone, were transport/traffic and logistics (7.2%) – a notable increase on the previous year – plant (6.1%) and engineering (5.7%).

	Response total	%
Construction	326	71.5%
Transport/Traffic and Logistics	33	7.2%
Plant	28	6.1%
Engineering	26	5.7%
Project Management	14	3.1%
Business and Finance	14	3.1%
Health and Safety	13	2.9%
Security	2	0.4%
Rail	0	0.0%
Other	0	0.0%

Table 5 What topic was your qualification in?

3.29 However, when combined with the labour desk data, plant was the second highest category (12.7% of the consolidated total), behind construction (70.3%).

Question 7. What level was the qualification?

3.30 The two most popular answers were again Level 2 (54.4%) and Level 3 (20.3%). Next, were the 9.5% of respondents who had completed a level 4 qualification.

3.31 HS2 Ltd again included equivalency information for UK and EU qualifications, to help improve respondents' understanding when answering this question, and the number of 'don't know' responses has continued to drop substantially (to 5.3%, from 20.5% last year).

	Response total	%
Level 1	7	1.5%
Level 2	247	54.4%
Level 3	92	20.3%
Level 4	43	9.5%
Level 5	4	0.9%
Level 6	20	4.4%
Level 7	17	3.7%
Don't know	24	5.3%

Table 6 What level was the qualification?

3.32 All responses that came via the labour desk provided a definitive answer, and the results were similar to those from the survey. The highest result was for Level 2 (66.4%), the second highest was for Level 3 (28.1%) and the third was for Level 4 (4.1%).

3.33 When these results are combined, over half (57.3%) of qualifications were at Level 2 and over a fifth (22.2%) were at Level 3.

Question 8. Who paid for the qualification?

3.34 As set out in the table below, the vast majority of respondents (90.1%) reported in the survey that their employer had paid for the qualification.

3.35 Only 7.5% of respondents reported that they had paid for their own qualifications.

3.36 A small number of respondents (2.4%) did not know who had 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. We assume that most people would be aware if they had paid themselves.

3.37 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. These results were very similar to those of the previous year.

	Response total	%
My employer paid	411	90.1
I paid	34	7.5
Don't know	11	2.4

Table 7 Who paid for the qualification?

3.38 According to the labour desk data, the worker's employer had paid for the qualification in 96.6% of cases. Only 3.4% did not know who had paid.

3.39 When the survey and labour desk data are combined, 90.9% of responses were that the employer had paid, with 6.6% reporting that they had paid themselves.

Question 9. How much did it cost?

3.40 Most respondents to the survey (78.7%) did not know the cost of the qualification, possibly because that they did not pay for it themselves. Where the cost was known, the most selected option was £1001-£5000 with 35.4% of responses, followed by 'Up to £500' with 29.2% of responses and '£501-£1000' with 20.8% of responses.

	Response total	%
Don't know	355	78.7%
£1001-£5000	34	7.5%
Up to £500	28	6.2%
£501-£1000	20	4.4%
£5001 or more (please specify)	14	3.1%

Table 8 How much did it cost?

3.41 The labour desk data provided somewhat differing results, with a clear majority of responses (71%) stating the cost was in the '£501-£1000' range, with only 5.3% of responses in the '£1001-£5000' range.

3.42 This meant that, when the two data sets were combined, the most common range where the cost was known, was £501-£1000 (53.8%).

Question 10. Did you do another qualification between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024?

3.43 Over a third of respondents (38.3%) said that they had completed more than one VQ in the same year and were prompted at this stage to fill the survey out again to capture this information.

	Response total	%
Yes	97	38.3
No	156	61.7

Table 9 Did you do another qualification between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024?

4. Overall conclusions and next steps

- 4.1 Within the 602 individual survey responses, 127 VQs had been completed in 2023/24. The three labour desks reported a further 146 completed VQs in the same year. With the survey results and labour desk data combined, a total of 273 VQs had been undertaken in 2023/24.
- 4.2 76.4% of the combined respondents worked on Phase One (the most progressed phase of the route).
- 4.3 The vast majority of respondents (95.5%) reported that they were employed by an organisation (rather than self-employed or other). A large majority (81.6%) were mainly working on site, a further increase compared to the previous year.
- 4.4 The most popular VQs were in construction (70.3%), followed by plant (12.7%). Over half (57.3%) of qualifications were at Level 2 and over a fifth (22.2%) were at Level 3.
- 4.5 The large majority of respondents (90.9%) reported that their employer paid for the qualification. Where the cost was known, more than half of responses (53.8%) were that it cost between £501 and £1000.
- 4.6 The total estimated cost of all the VQs included in this report is between £159,543 and £431,031. This is a little less than last year's estimated cost of between £206,500 and £472,000. As with previous years, the cost was largely met by employers.
- 4.7 As with previous reports, it is likely that these figures are underestimates for a few reasons. First, there are likely to have been some VQs that are not recorded in either the survey or the labour desk returns, given the number of returns is only a subset of the very large workforce on HS2.
- 4.8 Furthermore, the ranges reflect some uncertainty, particularly with regard to the large number of respondents who did not know the cost of their course. In such cases we have assumed £100 for the bottom of the range and £1,001 for the high end (which may be an underestimate). Also, as the cost of courses in the upper band of £5,001 or more is unknown, we have assumed a maximum of £7,500.
- 4.9 The use of labour desks to supplement this year's survey data has again helped us to capture a higher number of VQ completions with less resource and impact on the

workforce. The data has also helped to lower the proportion of “don’t know” responses, enabling us to capture clearer data.

- 4.10 We will therefore aim to build further on the labour desk data in future years. As last year, we only received data from three labour desks. Next year we make further efforts with the aim of securing a higher level of participation from all relevant labour desks. Alongside this, we will consider whether it is the best use of resources to continue to carry out the workforce survey.
- 4.11 The focus of this report, as required by the relevant Acts, is on VQs, but this is far from 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. As noted above, it should also be recognised that these survey results only capture a relatively small proportion of the overall workforce of the project.
- 4.12 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.

