

Cumbrian students get construction insight from M6 team

Highways England – the government-owned company which operates, maintains, repairs and improves the country's 4,300 miles of motorways and major A-roads – is working to ensure there are enough engineers to help build the roads of the future.

And as part of its support for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in schools and colleges, Highways England staff based in Penrith have been running 'construction schools' to coincide with its package of work which includes resurfacing, a new noise barrier and roundabout improvements along the M6 north east of Carlisle.

Almost 60 students from Lakes College in Workington and William Howard School at Brampton near Carlisle, attended the events with a key focus on construction site health and safety and an insight into highways engineering.

Highways England project manager Jobert Fermilan said:

The current shortage of around 200,000 workers with STEM skills is set to double during the next decade and it's vital we play our part in encouraging children and young adults to look at engineering as an interesting and rewarding career. Without projects like this we risk not having enough surveyors, designers, drainage experts, bridge builders and other skilled construction workers to maintain and improve the strategic road network of the future.

As a regional STEM ambassador and project manager for the M6 scheme I was keen to offer local students the chance to come and talk about a career in our industry and take a look at a real-life scheme in progress. It was great to meet the construction specialists of the future and to pass on what a rewarding sector it can be to work in. There are lots of routes into the industry and the sector is expected to need about 1.3 million new recruits by 2024.

During the two events – hosted by civil engineering and tunnelling firm AE Yates – the students also got to meet construction partners in Highways England's supply chain. Companies like traffic management supplier HW Martin, road marking specialists WJ North and resurfacing contractors Aggregate Industries – who demonstrated an impact protection vehicle, robotic road marker and resurfacing paver and roller – will have their own demands for STEM-skilled staff in future years. Students were also taken on a drive-through of the M6 roadworks between junction 44 and junction 45.

Demonstration of a robotic road marker.

Lakes College Placement leader Rachel Melton said:

Our students really got a lot out of the visit, especially seeing the real-life application of skills they are developing at college. We look forward to working with Highways England and its contractors in the future.

Year 10 students from William Howard attended a second event with a 'women in engineering' focus underlining the message that engineering jobs are not just for men. The students also got a chance to see how technology is helping improve the safety of road workers – by getting their hands on GPS controlled road painting machine.

Teacher Simon Ling who led the school's visit said:

Our students are still talking about the trip. They all came back enthused about the day, what they had learned. For some it has helped cement in their minds the career path that they might follow after leaving school.

AE Yates project manager Ruairi Flynn added:

It was really good to see how keen and enthusiastic the students were to learn about civil engineering. We emphasised a lot on health and safety and explained how people need to be appropriately trained to work in our industry. We also explained the benefits of choosing a career in construction and how rewarding the construction industry can be.

The work along the M6 started in April with resurfacing and major roundabout improvements at junction 44 already delivered and only the installation of a new noise barrier around Todhills left to complete.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.