

Diversity and Inclusion Roadmap for National Highways Supply Chain

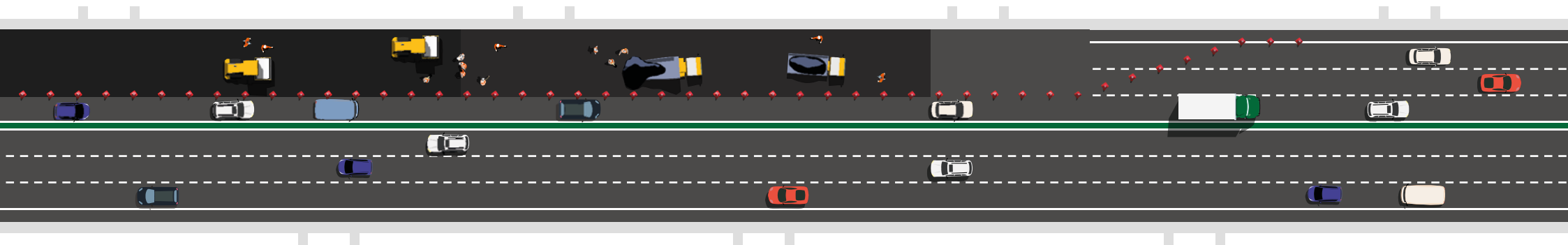
Using this roadmap

This roadmap is for all National Highways supply chain partners to use to enhance the workplace culture and performance on publicly funded highways programmes and projects.

It compliments the Fairness, inclusion and respect approach used by the Supply Chain Sustainability school. It provides useful guidance and tips throughout the lifecycle of a road construction or improvement project.

It is to be used alongside the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Toolbox containing templates, guides and case studies.

The Roadmap is based on research evidence from a collaborative research project between National Highways, the University of Leeds, Balfour Beatty, Costain and Skanska.



Jump to individual sections by [clicking on the headers along the road](#) or by [clicking on the navigation bar](#) at the top of the following pages.

With increasing recognition that inclusive workplaces are not only fairer but also more productive, we have a clear opportunity and responsibility to embed diversity and inclusion into the heart of everything we do.

This Roadmap and accompanying Toolbox are the result of collaboration between National Highways, the University of Leeds, and Tier 1 contractors: Balfour Beatty, Costain and Skanska. This academic research provides evidence that enhanced diversity and inclusion interventions such as clear supportive leadership, diversity and inclusion ambassadors, active bystander and allyship training on live infrastructure projects can measurably improve workforce morale, cohesion, and overall performance.

This Roadmap is a practical resource. It is designed to be flexible, adaptable, and effective.

We encourage Tier 1 and Tier 2 suppliers, and all other partners across the highways supply chain, to embed this Roadmap within their standard operating procedures from project inception through to close-out. It can be used in alignment with existing diversity and inclusion strategies and shared with smaller partners.

By using this Roadmap as part of everyday practice, we are not just meeting policy expectations, we are building better teams, and shaping a sector where everyone feels respected, included, and empowered to thrive.

Andrew Stephenson
Procurement Director, National Highways



Foreword

Background and approach

National Highway commissioned the University of Leeds to conduct a research project on Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) and performance in the highways' construction supply chain.

Key principles

The key principles of the interventions were that D&I initiatives work best when they seek to change organisational systems and processes rather than individuals, and when they:

- Have buy-in from leadership teams
- Dedicated personnel to deliver initiatives
- A focus on an integrated bundle of activities
- Seek problem solving and engagement from the workforce, addressing issues that matter to them

- M25** M25 Junction 10
- A1** A1 Birtley to Coal House
- A428** A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet

Working with major Tier 1 suppliers Balfour Beatty, Costain and Skanska on three major infrastructure projects, D&I measures were developed and implemented as an integrated package of activities, backed-up by academic evidence. These 'interventions' were designed and agreed with the Tier 1 companies specific to each site.



The final report of the research gives hard evidence that enhanced D&I initiatives on highways' construction does indeed improve performance. You can read a summary and the full report of the findings here:

[Full report →](#)

Approach

The research team took a new and innovative approach to D&I in the context of site-based construction and a commitment to inclusive practice, designed to engage all workers, and mindful of the needs of minority groups and the majority workforce, i.e. white men.

Developing a roadmap

As an outcome of the research collaboration, this Roadmap has been produced in consultation with key industry stakeholders. It is expected that Highways' construction supply chain partners will use it in conjunction with their existing initiatives, some of which will be specific to each company. In addition to the Roadmap, there is a Toolbox of useful templates, guides and case studies that represent best practice across the industry. Each page below indicates what resources you can find in the Toolbox.

You can access the Toolbox here →

An aim of this Roadmap is that the large Tier 1 and 2 suppliers will cascade this approach throughout their supply chains by including the smaller companies in the activities and training that they set up.

“

What works in implementing Diversity and Inclusion in organisations is highly contested and depends on context. National Highways' primary purpose for doing research with the University of Leeds was to establish whether enhanced Diversity and Inclusion initiatives on the Regional Investment Programmes can bring about measurable performance benefits throughout the highways' construction supply chain.”

Belinda Blake

Senior Policy Advisor, Diversity and Inclusion (Supply Chain), Human Resources Directorate, National Highways



Scoping



One of the major learnings for me was the need to embed the company policy on Diversity and Inclusion right at the start of an infrastructure project, including bringing this into early culture and the full lifecycle of the project starting with the recruitment process and then implementing training prior to construction actually commencing on site. Work relationships and standards are formed in those early days.”

Jo Hitchen

EDI and Social Value Manager, Costain



Project start-up

At the start-up of a new highways’ construction project it is important to get the key stakeholders together to establish the baseline: where you are now and the key challenges you may face with respect to D&I, given the context. The context needs to take into account the companies involved on-site, the geographic location, the demographics of the workforce, the characteristics of the local economy and the nature and size of the project that is commencing.

Scoping exercise

In order to understand the starting point projects should bring the key stakeholders together and discuss:

- Where are we now?
- What are the key challenges?
- What are the project values and behaviours we want to embed?
- What do we want to achieve with respect to D&I?
- What are the key components of our strategy?
- How will we implement the strategy?

This scoping exercise can be done in a number of different ways:

- A stakeholder workshop bringing everyone together in one place
- A series of small focus groups
- Individual conversations with key stakeholders

Who should be involved?

The scoping exercise might typically include:

- Project Director
- Supply chain Project Directors from T1 and T2 companies
- Lead Company(ies) Supply Chain Head(s)
- Head of Human Resources
- Head of Recruitment
- Employment & Skills lead
- Performance lead
- Works Directors (person responsible for sections of the development)
- National Highways lead as part of an integrated team
- Other direct workforce supervisory roles

Consider how far down the supply chain to go with the Scoping Exercise. You may choose to organise a separate Workshop or Discussion Group with the smaller supply chain partners.

Make sure to have someone take notes and write up a paper on the key topics and the outcomes and actions to be taken.



Toolbox

➔ A suggested format for a Workshop.

Leadership, communications and engagement



‘Inclusive’ is one of our project values which is actively promoted by our leaders and everyone on the A428 highways project. Working with this EDI project and the University of Leeds research team has helped us drive and clearly communicate the importance of inclusion and diversity as key elements in our People Engagement strategy.”

Sarah Hough

Head of People and Legacy –
A428 project, Skanska



Inclusive

everyone is valued and has a voice

Aims

To make sure that our leaders throughout the construction supply chain are fully on-board with our D&I strategy.

To have clear, unambiguous and powerful messages from our leaders, communicated throughout the supply chain so that the workforce understands the importance of D&I and together we make highways construction a fair, inclusive and highly productive sector.

To establish better links between corporate and site-based colleagues so that different work environments are the focus and beneficiaries of D&I action.

Why

- Good communication from confident leaders within the supply chain can be transformative and inspire positive change that leads to better delivery of goals, a happier workforce and good staff retention
- The messages (as well as the actions) of organisational leaders strongly influence the culture of a workplace and set the standards of what is expected and what is acceptable behaviour
- Communications are two-way and the views of colleagues on issues such as inclusive culture, diversity in leadership, skills and conditions for work are important
- Good communications signal support for D&I initiatives that are being delivered on the project
- Good internal communications and open conversations create a sense of belonging and enable employees to feel valued and respected

How

- Following on from the Scoping Exercise and Workshop, develop the key messages from the project leaders
- Use infographics and well-designed visual materials to illustrate the current position and demonstrate progress on D&I
- Establish regular routes for communication on the project – for example:
 - Weekly or monthly bulletin / newsletter
 - In person meetings and briefings (such as the ‘Inclusion Standups’ which are run by Skanska)
 - Comms on D&I needs to feature across the whole business, not just in HR or D&I focused meetings and documents
 - Emails should be used for a specific purpose; avoiding too many messages that are seen as overload
 - Carry out an Employee D&I Survey at least once a year and with shorter ‘Pulse’ surveys in between. Monitor progress and take action to address challenges, include full circle feedback e.g. you said .. we did
- Messages (in-person and digital) from leaders on the project should be consistent
- Utilise employee voice groups of FIR ambassadors’ feedback



Toolbox



Generic messages for leaders which you may use as they are or adapt to your project needs.

D&I ambassadors



Our D&I Ambassadors were very visible, and we regard their appointment as a big success, particularly as it gave us another route for our colleagues to shout out or speak up if they needed to. Their appointment complemented our work on Right to Respect as well as being a good sounding board for what training colleagues on the Programme would benefit from.”

Will Neaves

Project Director, Balfour Beatty



Aims

To have teams of trusted colleagues to role model the project / scheme behaviours, and who will champion the D&I strategy on-site.

To give our workforce a confidential route to communicate with their employer about matters that may concern them.

To provide another means by which colleagues can put forward something e.g. a good idea for change that will help the project.

To have colleagues who will support the work of our D&I leads throughout the supply chain, thus better embedding the strategy across multiple project partners.

Why

- A team of Ambassadors on-site can significantly help with making everyone feel included and valued working in highways
- There are times when colleagues might be reluctant, for whatever reason(s), to talk to HR or their line manager
- D&I Ambassadors provide an informal route for discussion when colleagues might be reluctant to pursue a formal route
- They can act as a sounding-board, or second opinion to help to get good ideas off the ground
- An Ambassador may act as a ‘trusted friend’ should an employee wish to make a formal report

How

- Set up a team of Ambassadors for your project to work in a voluntary capacity. Allow them time and resources to fulfil the role
- The Ambassadors should be from different roles across the site, including both construction office workers and early career; and senior colleagues
- Hold regular dedicated sessions for Ambassadors to feed back to project leaders and D&I professionals on what is working or not working in terms of the D&I strategy
- Provide a contact for them to feedback sensitive information without breaking any confidentiality
- Support the Ambassadors in providing an important feedback mechanism on D&I issues and the D&I strategy



Toolbox

- ➔ [A guide for a start-up training programme for D&I Ambassadors.](#)
- ➔ [A role description for D&I Ambassadors.](#)

D&I training



Research on the usefulness of unconscious bias training shows it has limited effect in enhancing D&I or reducing discrimination at work. While training may raise awareness that unconscious bias exists, it relies on the person being willing to change their behaviours. As such, the positive effects of unconscious bias training tend to be short-lived. There is now growing support for active bystander and allyship training which focuses on changing the environment and the roles and responsibilities of members of the community for longer term gain.”

Jennifer Tomlinson

Professor of Gender and Employment
Relations, Leeds University Business School

Aims

To make sure that everyone feels that they are treated fairly at work and that they do not face barriers or discrimination because of who they are and where they come from.

To give colleagues the confidence to call out inappropriate, unfair and discriminatory behaviour so that these practices die out and we have better workplaces.

To make sure that our training on D&I issues is valued and seen as a positive contribution to organisational culture. That it is effective in making our workplaces better and does not make minority or majority groups feel left out or undervalued.

Why

- This approach to training (focusing on the environment and not the individual) is relevant for organisations that have a long history of employing particular workers (e.g. predominantly British, white, male workers) and the sort of banter and informality that can entail
- Even low-level, subtle banter or joking can make someone miserable in their job and less productive
- We want to emphasise that D&I is about making everyone feel that they belong and that they will be treated fairly and with respect by their company and colleagues

How

- Look at your company’s existing D&I training provision and consider whether it is giving out the right messages, how well it is received and whether it is effective
- Work with the Supply Chain School to adapt your existing training provision if appropriate or to devise a new training offer covering Active Bystander and Allyship training
- Create a common understanding with regard to what is an acceptable level of workplace banter
- Use D&I Ambassadors to assess what new training might be needed (e.g. Skanska introduced new training offers on *‘Working with neurodivergent colleagues’* and *‘Inclusive Language’*. Costain introduced *‘Active Bystander’* and *‘How to be an Active Ally’*; and Balfour Beatty ran a session on inclusive leadership)
- Engage the D&I Ambassadors to help with the training design, promotion and delivery

This different approach to training has been implemented by Tier 1 suppliers, adapting their existing training offers to this way of thinking. The outcomes of this have been very successful.



Toolbox



[PowerPoint slides for training courses.](#)

Career development



Working with the University of Leeds research team has been a valuable and eye-opening experience. By creating a safe space for honest conversations, they helped us better understand how our people feel about inclusion, diversity, and their career journeys. For me, highways construction offers a career-boosting opportunity for everyone—and we have a responsibility to make that experience positive, inclusive, and meaningful. These insights are already informing how we build environments where people feel supported to grow, contribute, and stay.”

Rhys Rawson

Social Impact Manager, A47 Thickthorn, Skanska

Aims

To ensure that projects have good systems in place that support their colleagues through their employment lifecycle – from recruitment, onboarding, development, progression and eventual departure.

To better understand how attitudes to work and personal life have changed; some of that instigated by the Covid-19 pandemic, some of it simply that younger colleagues tend not to have the same attitudes to work or careers as their older counterparts.

To encourage creativity and innovation in how we conceive careers in highways’ construction to give our colleagues the best opportunities for their personal development and the type of career they wish to have.

Why

- We need to better understand the ambitions and motivations of early and mid-career colleagues who are the future leaders of our industry
- We need to know whether the progression opportunities within our industry are perceived to be fair, and open doors for colleagues at all stages to develop and progress as individuals
- We need to accept that sometimes colleagues will leave to pursue other opportunities but also that they might want to return to working for highways at some point in the future
- We need to better understand why and where progression is restricted due to organisational (not individual) factors

How

- Regularly hold employee listening groups on topics such as:
 - Early Career Ambitions and Intentions
 - Career Progression and Development for Mid-Careers
- Engage with Employee Representative Groups and the D&I Ambassadors to explore whether minority groups face barriers to personal development and progression in the workplace, and then look at how these challenges can be tackled in the D&I strategy
- Be innovative and creative about providing new opportunities for colleagues to do something different (e.g. a special project, short secondment) to gain new skills and experience
- Share and promote career opportunities
- Regular one-to-ones and Career Development Plans
- Have a Succession Plan in place for all key roles
- Offer coaching and mentoring
- Review policies and systems for talent management and promotion, and make sure they recognise and reward relevant work (skills needs change over time)



Toolbox



[Discussion group guides and templates.](#)

Retention



The feedback from the focus groups and career intention interviews has provided valuable insight into how our integrated project team feels about inclusion, diversity, career progression, and life on the A428 project. I'd like to thank the University of Leeds research team for creating a safe and trusted space for these open conversations to take place. Retaining talent in our industry means more than just keeping people - it's about opening doors to opportunities that allow individuals to grow, thrive, and feel part of something meaningful. That's what truly makes the difference."

Lee Galloway

Project Director, A428, National Highways

Aims

To address concerns about lack of diversity identified in the Famber Report (2016) which in part stem from the loss of women and minorities at various career stages.

To ensure highways have the required workforce and talent to meet our needs over the next decade and beyond.

To enhance the reputation of the industry as a good place to work where colleagues feel that they belong, are treated fairly and with respect.

To understand why colleagues leave a project mid-way through. It is too easy to assume that they left for better terms or a shorter commute. Could action have been taken to retain them?

Why

- Despite the current downturn, the highways sector faces significant long-term labour shortages with an ageing, primarily white-male workforce, and companies struggling to recruit enough workers, especially in certain key roles
- The highways sector is in competition for talent with other sectors, e.g. energy, water, rail, transport, etc. Hiring replacement staff is costly. For current employees, the workplace becomes pressured and challenging if there are significant labour shortages, especially on-site
- While companies have had successful recruitment campaigns to attract women and ethnic minority colleagues; data shows that they are more likely to leave after a short period of time, relative to men

How

- Ensure visibility of all internal vacancies for all staff
- Consider how you can offer flexible, agile working opportunities
- Carry out individual Retention and Exit Interviews, if possible, via a third-party trusted employee-engagement provider to fully understand why people leave
- Mentoring is often the responsibility of line managers, particularly for early careers. Ensure that line managers have support in this role (e.g. access to training, HR partner contact)
- Offer coaching, shadowing and secondment opportunities
- Be adaptive to employees' personal circumstances (e.g. family illness etc); consider if there are ways to keep them in the workforce when they have personal difficulties (which may be temporary)
- Promote the role of the D&I Ambassadors as a confidential route to discuss situations where a colleague feels they have an issue to raise
- Creating a positive and engaging work environment with a strong company culture is key to job retention

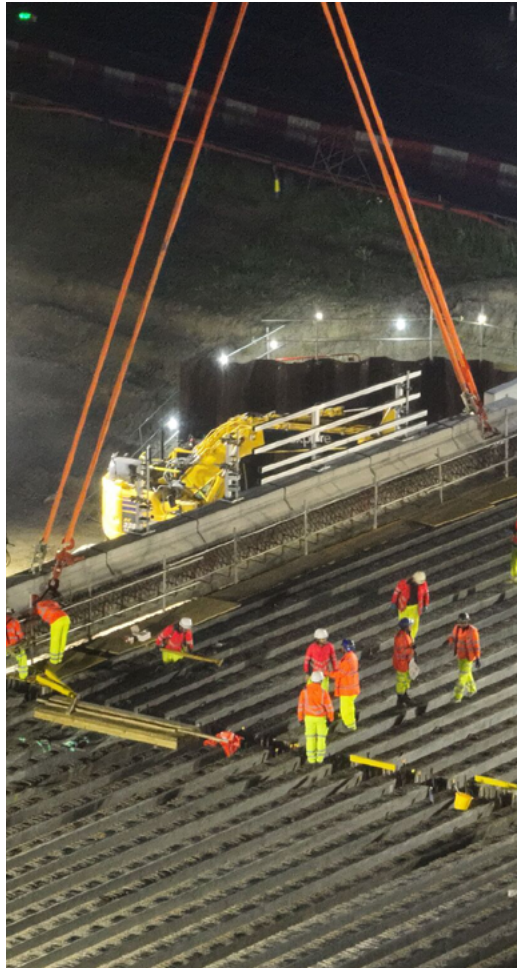


Toolbox



[Retention and Exit interview guides.](#)

Evaluation and reflection



Aims

To ensure that the measures taken as part of this Roadmap have benefited the company and its supply chain partners.

To take forward the lessons learnt during the process to new projects.

To share best practice with colleagues both internally and externally so that the industry, as a whole, can progress.

To help develop our Toolbox as a repository for best practice on building inclusive highways construction sites and ensuring that we have a happy and talented workforce.

Why

- Having data and evidence to back up our initiatives gives confidence and strength to what we do
- Evaluation of initiatives gives colleagues chance to help determine the strategy and suggest improvements
- By sharing information, we can avoid duplication of effort and feel more confident that the strategies and initiatives we have in place will actually work and make a positive difference

How

- Bring together the key stakeholders that were part of the initial set up and ascertain their views of what has worked well. Hold a debriefing meeting/workshop during the final stages of the project

- Collect and examine workforce data especially recruitment, promotion and exit data
- Examine employee survey data for the period of the project and look at trends to see whether there has been an improvement on key criteria
- Use the evaluation data in returns to National Highways
- For key successes write up a short case study and send to the Toolbox (see Toolbox for guidance on writing a case study)
- Bring the Ambassadors together for a debriefing session and feedback their thoughts on what has worked well and what else should be actioned. If possible, share this information in the Toolbox
- We hope to initiate an event/conference that brings together Ambassadors from across the companies and different projects, to network and share best practices as well as hear from inspiring speakers on D&I topics



Toolbox

- ➔ [Guides for Debriefing sessions and Workshops.](#)

If you have found this Roadmap useful or would like further information about the collaborative project between the University of Leeds and National Highways, then please visit our website or contact us via the email below.

The project website →

EDImailbox@nationalhighways.co.uk

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About CERIC

The Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC) is home to researchers who contribute through high quality research, teaching and knowledge transfer to contemporary national and international debates around the changing dynamics and future of work, employment and labour markets.

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