



Building the workforce for light rail's next chapter



More UK cities are exploring or expanding light rail and mass transit networks. With more government funding available, there's a real chance to invest in trams and public transport, but do we have the people and skills to make it all happen?

The Department for Transport has committed £15.6 billion to Transport for City Regions settlements across England between 2027/28 and 2031/32, supporting investment in sustainable transport, including tram, rail and mass transit schemes. The National Skills Academy for Rail's 2025 Rail Workforce Survey also puts the UK rail workforce at 221,788 people, with up to 70,000 potentially leaving the sector by 2030.

Many of the UK's light rail schemes were built decades ago. With the Midlands Metro currently the only major scheme under construction, the number of experienced professionals who worked on those earlier projects is shrinking. A valuable pool of light rail expertise exists, but that knowledge must be shared to bring standardised, consistent and safe ways of working into future light rail projects.



Meeting that challenge will require more than recruitment alone. The long-term priority is bringing new people into the industry. There's an immediate opportunity to better use the skills already available across transport and infrastructure. Many of the specialist skills and capabilities light rail relies on are not unique to this sector. Engineers, planners and project professionals working in highways, heavy rail, utilities, and wider infrastructure can bring valuable experience in civil engineering, systems integration, infrastructure planning and project delivery.



Recognising relevant transferable skills can widen the talent pool and create varied career paths for professionals. Secondments offer organisations flexibility, providing access to specialists when particular skills are needed, while giving people opportunities to broaden their experience across different sectors.

The partnership between Waterman Aspen and Coventry Very Light Rail (CVLR) shows what this can look like. As the programme has evolved, Waterman Aspen has seconded professionals to Coventry City Council to provide vehicle engineering, track and technical project management expertise, allowing the team to scale and adapt as needed without the commitment that comes with permanent employment.

This flexibility has provided the Council with niche specialisms when they were needed, and the collaborative relationship with Waterman Aspen continues to deliver the project's ambitious targets.

The sector needs clearer routes into light rail and opportunities for people to build long-term careers. Apprenticeships, graduate programmes, professional training, chartered pathways and stronger links with universities and colleges all have an important role in bringing new people into transport and helping them progress.

Secondments will also have a crucial part to play in addressing the skills gap. Waterman Aspen's existing experience across the built environment could unlock a significant pool of untapped talent - from light rail professionals to people with transferable skills in the heavy rail, highways, and aviation sectors. Combined with their focus on long-term client partnerships, this approach could be the answer for those looking to replicate the success of Coventry Very Light Rail.

There is an opportunity to develop the next generation of light rail professionals and make better use of the skills already in the sector. As investment increases, every project can leave behind not only better infrastructure, but more experienced people ready to deliver what comes next.