

**Virtual Work Experience (VWEX)**  
Enriching modern work placements

**MORGAN  
SINDALL**  

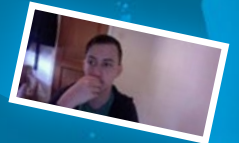
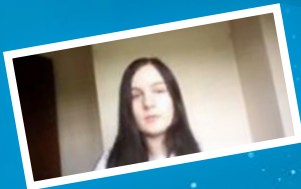
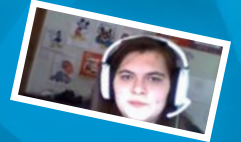
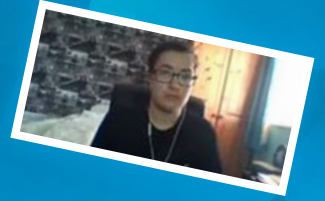
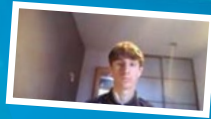
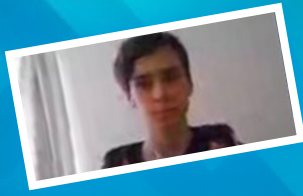
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**CONSTRUCTION**

# Delivering Virtual Work Experience

Enriching work placements  
through digital media





The story of a work experience programme that continued to prosper in the East of England by moving online, whilst keeping the foundation purpose of enriching young people by **shining the light on what is possible in construction careers.**

*Written and produced by Morgan Sindall Construction*





# CONTENTS

Page 4	<b>Foreword – we’ve come a long way from back then...</b>
Page 6	<b>Against a backdrop of adversity</b>
Page 8	<b>Why a diverse and content-rich approach is so important</b>
Page 10	<b>A way forward – that digital flex</b>
Page 11	<b>An emotional finish</b>
Page 14	<b>Linking it to lighthouses</b>
Page 15	<b>What we learned – top ten takeaways</b>
Page 16	<b>Our commitment continues</b>
Page 17	<b>Sources and references</b>

# FOREWORD

– WE’VE COME A LONG WAY FROM BACK THEN...

It’s 1994, Year 10 in secondary school, and I’m sitting in the headteacher’s waiting area at Hethersett High School. It’s usually an unnerving place, and the stillness in the air heightens the sound of a large clock whose ticking sound mocks those waiting to see the towering Mrs Chapman.

But not this time. I’m sitting here awaiting my first appointment with a careers advisor. An occasional visitor to the school from an organisation I’ve never heard of before, but it’s prompted my first real thoughts about what the future might hold for me work-wise. Outside of being a professional footballer that is.

Anyway, I’m called through to the office and sit down opposite a lady, whose frizzy, wild hair is dancing in the sunlight, matched only by a beaming smile and a glinting name tag that reads ‘Jane, Careers Advisory Lead.’

After a bit of small talk around how school is going, Jane opens her computer and starts asking me a few questions about what I like.

“PE, English literature, art and biology”

I reply. These were definitely my favourite subjects. If that’s all school entailed, I’d be delirious.

“And what about those subjects where you secure your best grades?”

“The same...I think,” I mumble quietly.

Jane continues typing away at her computer and after a few more questions about me and my prospects, she advises that we’re all done.

A small ‘chip-and-pin’ style machine next to us starts whizzing away and Jane scuttles over to collect the results. A long receipt is ferrying its way out of the printer, until she rips it off and hands it to me.

Puzzled, I look down at the paper to see a list of three jobs, at the top of which was floristry.

Wide eyed, quizzically, I look back at Jane...

“Based on everything you’ve told me today, these are the most suitable careers for you”

and she reaches down into her bag to get some leaflets out about the next steps...

“...This brochure also just gives you an idea of what you might want to think about doing in the future. We’ll work with your head of year to see if we can get you some work experience in the spring with one of these types of employers.”

The bell rang. Break had started and my 15 minutes were over. I collected the leaflets and walked towards the playing field, somewhat puzzled with the advice I’d just been given and wondered how that would fit into work experience later in the year. By the time I reached my group of mates, I’d stuffed the leaflets in my bag and the meeting became a distant memory.

Spring of that year came around fast and the careers team has secured me a placement with a local estate agent, as this was the only option available for me. Despite being advised that floristry was my most suited career, I spent a week answering the phone, photocopying, filing and visiting the occasional property to help secure the odd ‘for sale’ sign.

At the end of the week I received a bag of goodies and felt thoroughly grateful for the confidence I had built during that week.



**Sitting here now in 2020,** I look back at mine, and my friends’ career guidance, and can’t help but feel we missed out on an opportunity in time to truly have the sort of engagement, support and guidance necessary to find a career we love. I count myself incredibly lucky to have fallen into a career that I love, but I know many of my friends haven’t been so lucky.

And that’s why now, more than ever, I feel like the partnership between education and business is one of the most important things for our economy, our communities, the inspiration of our next generation and our social mobility. Because it is at this early-years stage that we can help set young people on the pathway to finding their cause, their passion, and their opportunity to achieve.

I feel lucky to have been involved in the sorts of work experience programmes and partnerships that Helen Clements offers through Morgan Sindall Construction. As I hope you’ll see in this paper, they are richly engaging, founded with an unwavering social purpose and deliver incredible experiences that are helping to feed our talent pipeline.

Thank you, Helen. Long may it continue.



# AGAINST A BACKDROP OF ADVERSITY

Enriching young peoples' lives by shining the light on the what is possible in construction careers is the purpose of our educational engagement programme. It is founded on equality, inclusion and social mobility, to make sure every individual has the opportunity to reach their potential.

Over the last three years, Helen Clements (Community Investment Advisor, Morgan Sindall Construction in the East) has delivered a comprehensive educational engagement programme in the East of England that has inspired 22,501 students through educational engagement activities such as work experience, careers days, site tours and interview and CV workshops.

This has been developed in partnership with local authorities, local employment partnerships, careers advisory units and education providers, schools and colleges.

The cornerstone of the engagement has been through a richly filled work experience programme that gives opportunities to local students to spend a week with various experts in the business, helping them to navigate the design and construction of a sustainable building.

Amidst career talks and site visits, the week helps showcase the diversity of roles and career options available, so that when they leave, it neatly points them towards the next steps for apprenticeship, trainee and graduate employment schemes.

As we write, there are a number of challenges that our industry faces. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) predicts that based on an average projected growth of 1.2 per cent and an average annual recruitment rate of 2 per cent,

**24,550 new workers will be needed in construction in the East of England alone.**

This stark figure is the second highest in the UK. Unemployment as at December 2019 sat at 3.7 per cent, with construction representing 7.4 per cent of the people employed locally (ONS).

However, in one fell swoop, coronavirus changed our lives and business in ways we could never have imagined, and the effects are being felt the most by the country's next generation of talent. As more people become unemployed, the opportunities are even more difficult to secure and those hit the most is our young adult population.

A study by the Institute of Student Employers (ISE) in May 2020 revealed that more than a quarter of employers (27 per cent) said they are reducing their number of graduate recruits and 23 per cent will cut apprenticeships and school leaver programmes. Around a third of firms revealed they were uncertain about their hiring plans going forward.

The same study also exposed the brutal

**reality that 68% of employers completely cancelled their work experience and short-term insight opportunities.**



**+24,550  
new workers  
needed in construction**

The figures are stark, and the picture doesn't get any easier to view when you look at the demographics. In the East of England alone, secondary school places are predicted to rise from 383,973 to 446,636 by 2026. This means that even more young people will be reaching an age where careers engagement is vital.

At the turn of 2020, our careers engagement programme mobilisation was in full swing, with a diverse cohort of individuals signed up and ready to take part. Even though coronavirus changed everything, one thing we were unwavering on was that we had to find a way to keep our commitment to engaging, inspiring and providing opportunities for young people in our industry.

The future was still in our hands, and we had to grasp it.

# WHY A DIVERSE AND CONTENT-RICH APPROACH IS SO IMPORTANT

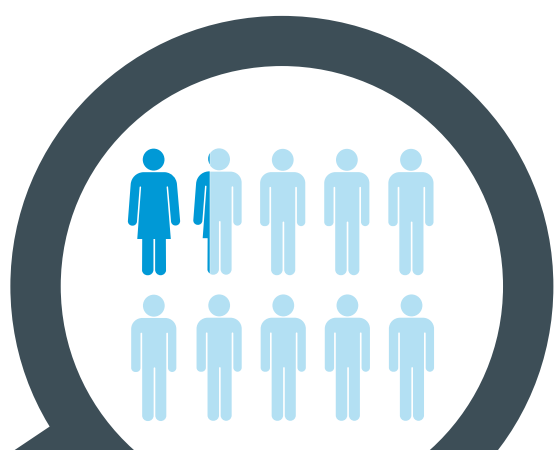
Gender imbalance has become a real focus for the UK. So much so that the UK Government has delivered new legislation which has seen around 9,000 companies publish their gender pay gap data.



Unfortunately, one of the biggest areas of disparity is in construction, with a recent UK economic outlook report from the ONS revealing that women make up just 12.8% of the workforce. Against a UK backdrop 48% of women making up the employment landscape, the current diversity simply isn't good enough.

Over the last three years, Helen Clements has been developing a strategic and targeted work experience programme, which aims at addressing not only the skills shortage in construction, but also encouraging more females to apply for degree apprenticeships.

In 2018, work experience placements were made up of only 7 per cent female students, in 2019 this improved to 17 per cent. Helen's target 50/50 aims to gradually realign the percentage split between male and female applicants for our entry level roles. And there is very good reason to ensure we move toward gender parity in work experience programmes - studies such as those led by Harvard Professor Letian Zhang (of 1,069 leading firms across 35 countries and 24 industries) found **gender diversity relates to more productive companies.**



**12.8%**

**Female workforce**  
in UK construction industry



**Over the last three years, 60 per cent of our entry level recruits had experienced education engagement with us,**

with over 70 per cent of them taking part in our work experience programme. If we can ensure gender parity in our work experience programme, this will feed perfectly through into our entry level talent pipeline.

**This year, the work experience programme had moved from 17 per cent female positions to 40 per cent - something Helen continues to work hard to grow even further.**

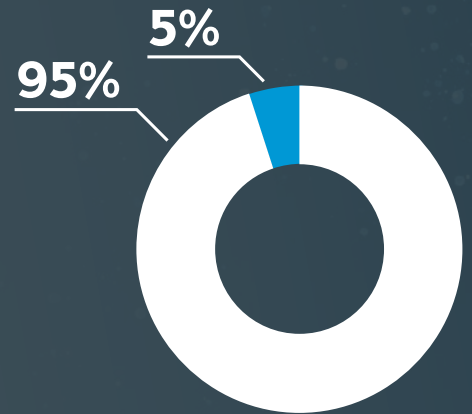
Aimed at giving the students the most realistic and richly diverse experience, their work experience is based upon the DEC! (Design Engineer Construct) Class of Your Own's (COYO) Esteem Pavilion design challenge. Working together, the students take on the roles of an integrated project team and, through engagement with experts in our business and partner consultants, use the week to learn about career pathways, sustainable design, engineering, construction methods and much more.

This really matters, because unlike work experience of yesteryear, this truly opens their eyes to the art of the possible. They experience career journeys, work with teammates they've never met before, experience project and office tours, and ultimately use the knowledge they gain across the week to gradually develop a design solution that's presented to the senior management team at the end of the week.

	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Work Experience</b>	17% women	40% women	40% women	50% women 33% BAME
<b>Apprentice's</b>	100% men	33% women	33% women 33% BAME	66% women 33% BAME

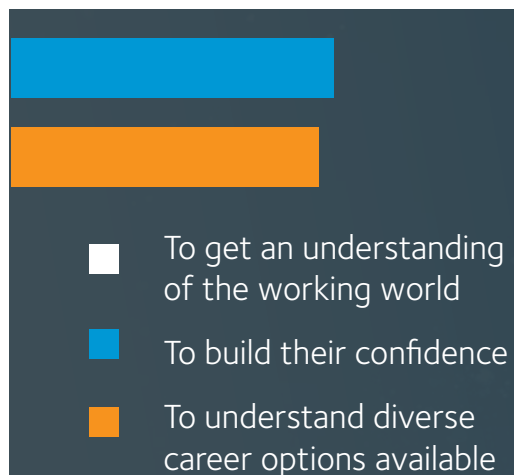
*Results from parent/teacher survey*

How important do you think work experience is for young students?



- Very important
- Important

Why did you advise your children/students to get involved in this work experience week? (Top 3)



- To get an understanding of the working world
- To build their confidence
- To understand diverse career options available

# A WAY FORWARD

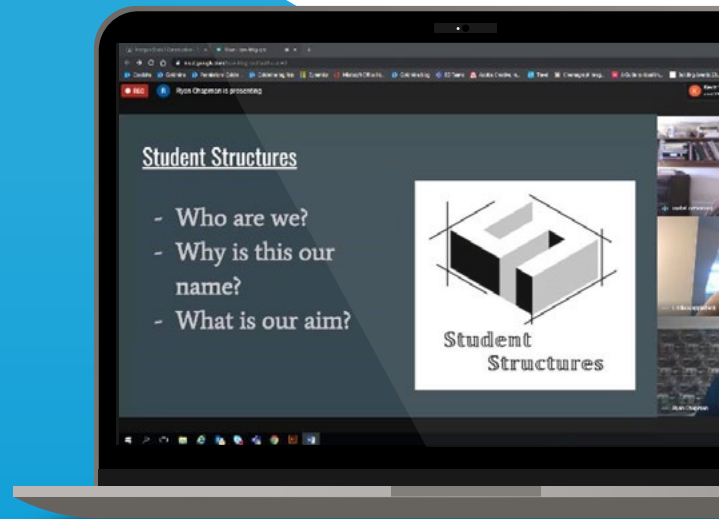
## – THAT DIGITAL FLEX

Plans were in place, students were enlisted, onboarding had begun and the start of our 2020 work experience programme was ready for action. And then, the coronavirus pandemic hit, and forced a huge number of employers to curtail their educational engagement programmes.

But, after engineering a partnership with Speakers For Schools – a charity which helps young people access the top opportunities through inspiring school talks and eye opening work experience – we found the agility and inspiration to flip the work experience programme to a virtual environment.

Using Google Classroom, the entire weeks curriculum was pivoted digitally, containing everything they would have done usually, but in a virtual environment. The Class Of Your Own Esteem Pavilion challenge was set.

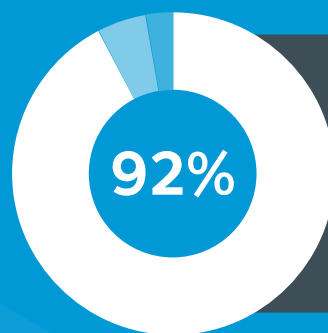
The linear journey began with career talks from site managers right through to the regional managing director, whilst expert engineers, architects and construction managers (from Morgan Sindall Construction, Concertus, MCW Architects and Superstructures) guided students through the essence of how they developed their design, as well as providing drop-in virtual Q&A sessions.



**Google Classroom** provided a series of team meeting rooms for the independent working, and a central meeting room for the drop-in sessions, presentations and technical guidance. There was even a virtual tour provided for the students so they could get the chance to see behind our hoardings from the comfort of their own homes.

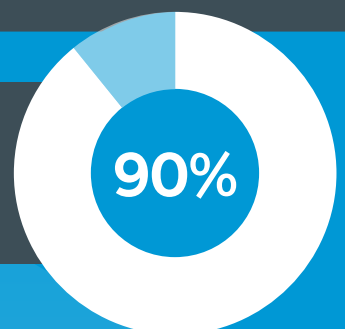
Presentation top-tips sessions then helped develop each team's journey ready for their presentations on Friday afternoon to a panel of teachers, senior managers and careers advisors.

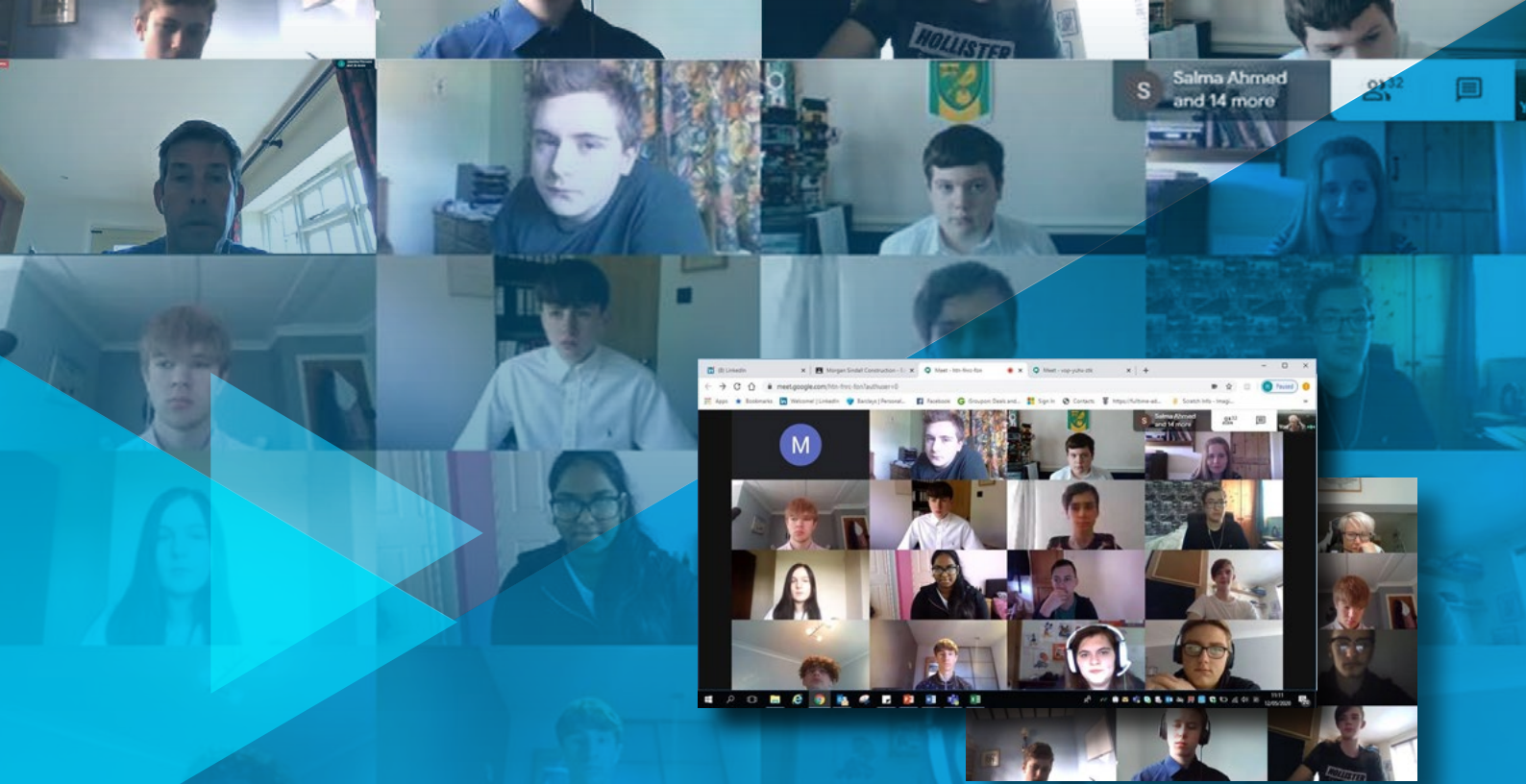
Each team had fully engineered a sustainable design using a fixed budget and a set of skills developed throughout the week in liaison with a panel of expert mentors, and they were ready to present their concepts.



of teachers/parents stated it was **very important** to flip this work experience to digital

of students scored the digital experience **8/10 or above**





# AN EMOTIONAL FINISH

Barely able to fight back the tears, Helen (our VWEX programme lead and community investment advisor) finished the week emotionally:

**“I’m so proud of each and every one of you. The commitment you have made, the way you have worked together, and the work you have produced has been exceptional. I really feel like you’ve been part of my family this week and I couldn’t be prouder.”**



**Helen Clements,**  
Community Investment Advisor

At the outset of the week, 30 students from different schools came together in mixed teams to work with people they’d never met before. And not only that, they faced the challenge of a virtual environment, new technology and a design task they would never have encountered before.

But, in the truest sense of triumph over adversity, each and every student presented their fully designed concept, in budget, on time and with a series of exciting and innovative sustainable elements that created interested debate amongst the watching panel.

However, this wasn’t the most important thing. For us, it was about how we opened the student’s eyes to the exciting opportunities available and, hoping that along the way, we were able to make a positive change or impact on them.

Quotes from our surveys

"It was an amazing experience that taught me a lot of new skills and helped me develop old ones. I also learnt more about construction and how to get into it. I have had an amazing week and have loved every minute. Thank you so much for organising it and I will definitely recommend it to others."

**Isabel**, student

"This week was inspirational and confidence building, showing what can be achieved through hard work and commitment. I have fostered hundreds of teenagers in crisis who mostly feel they have no hope for the future. This experience could be life changing and literally life-saving - I wish all my children could have this opportunity. The course was delivered with empathy and professionalism. I would like to thank your whole team!"

**Liette**, carer

"Thank you for your kind support during the work experience provided to my son Edwin. It is clear you are a wonderful lady with a golden heart when I accidentally entered my son's bedroom and saw your tears of joy, but sorrow for ending the project. I shall confess this was the time that I realised how much my son was capable of - taking a task and completing it, seriously and thoughtfully. I am so proud of my son and I appreciate your kindness, giving this opportunity to show himself and letting us to know that he is a reliable, positive and honest person. I am so grateful to you and others who were in charge of this opportunity which allowed our children to feel important and precious. It made me, as parent so proud of my son, knowing he is more wise and accountable to conduct his duty."

**Katy**, parent

## Using the Morgan Sindall Social Value Bank, we were able to determine the impact of the week.

It calculated a 128% return on project cost or £8,553 of social value delivered across 70 volunteer hours in just one week.

**£8,553**  
of social value delivered



**£2800**  
fund donated

**23% female**      **77% male**

**X3**  
**SMEs**  
involved

With more virtual work experience planned, we engaged the students, teachers, careers advisors and parents to gather in-depth quantitative and qualitative feedback, helping us generate valuable data that will drive improvement on our up and coming programmes.

# WHAT DOES THE DATA SAY?

## STUDENT SURVEYS - KEY STATS

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree

I better understand the skills employers are looking for



I know what personal qualities employers think are important



I have developed some new skills that employers value



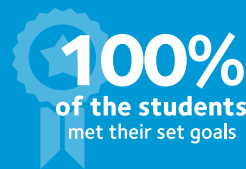
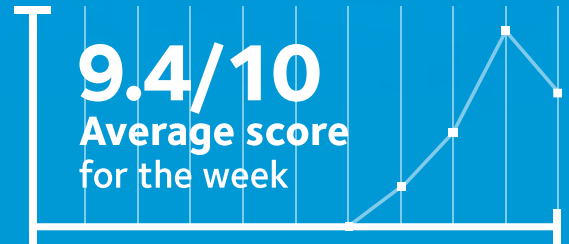
I understand better why it is important to do well at school



I understand better how work places are organised



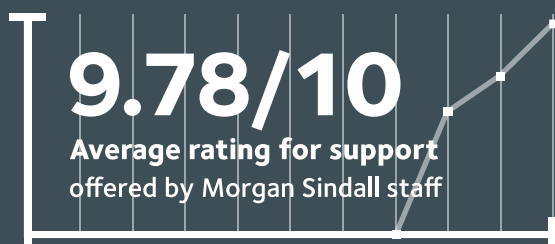
I am clearer about what I want to do in my future education and career



## PARENT/TEACHER SURVEYS - KEY STATS

**100%** said that VWEX had either a 'big' or 'huge' impact

Star rating of **4.78/5** ★★★★★



As a result of the Morgan Sindall digital work experience week, my child/student:



# LINKING IT TO LIGHTHOUSES

Whilst progressing with purpose is vital for anything in life, being able to demonstrate how this programme links to industry and global goals – the lighthouses that steer us on developing these programmes – it extremely important too.

That's why when we embarked upon this educational engagement programme that we sought to ensure it correlated with a number of these 'lighthouses' that guide us in developing any strategy. The following graphic shows how the programme is linked to Gatsby Good Career Guidance standards, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and our own Morgan Sindall Group Total Commitments.



They help provide the same sort of light for us, as we hope to provide for our young people seeking their next steps into the world of work.

# WHAT WE LEARNED

## – TOP TEN TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Progress with purpose** | Start with the students and schools in mind, consider what you'd like them to feel, what do you want them to achieve, and let that be a roadmap for the experience.
- 2 Find a brilliant set of partners** | We're definitely better together, and working with Speakers For Schools, Google Classroom, as well as consultant and supply chain partners means the best in their role, give the best to the students.
- 3 Embrace the digital** | At first we didn't think it was possible, but the virtual experience actually made enrichment rise – students engaged more, asked more questions than ever and their presentations at the finish were incredible.
- 4 A blend is best** | There is still a place for experiencing a site or office in person, but we've definitely seen through the feedback that, when possible, a hybrid approach would be best.
- 5 It's a linear journey** | It might seem simple, but follow the construction journey – start with expert speakers from architectural backgrounds and follow with the engineers, project management journey and beyond.
- 6 Fuel their carbon care** | GenZ really do care about our planet – we were encouraged to deliver more insight into carbon sensitive design and construction.
- 7 Stimulate social mobility** | Make sure you measure and target equality, inclusion and social mobility in every programme. Over the last three years, 60% of our entry level recruits come direct from our educational engagement programme – make WEX diverse and that feeds through into the pipeline.
- 8 Link it to lighthouses** | Make achievement signposting easy – show how the programme links to key reports like Gatsby and UNSDGs – this will help our customers, students and teachers articulate the benefits even more.
- 9 Data is the new oil** | Insight is so valuable – we surveyed before, during and after, across students, teachers, careers advisors and parents. This insight is valuable helping us to improve and it's already fuelling our next programme.
- 10 It's in our hands** | All the challenges we face, are things we can fix, one step at a time. The skills gap, gender parity and social equality. Use the feedback, engage the experts and take the responsibility to make a change. It starts here.

# OUR COMMITMENT CONTINUES



This is though, a journey. And an infinite one at that too. There is no silver bullet that links students with careers. This means we should not stop innovating now, and we continue with the unrivalled purpose of enriching young people's lives by shining the light on the what is possible in construction careers underpinned by equality, inclusion and social mobility wayfinding, to make sure every individual has the opportunity to reach their potential.

As Lord Sainsbury stated in the opening of his Gatsby Good Career Guidance report:

**“Very few people would disagree that good career guidance is critical if young people are to raise their aspirations and capitalise on the opportunities available to them. Yet equally few people would say that all is well with the current system of career guidance in this country. It is especially regrettable therefore that the current situation, in which so many young people are kept in the dark about the full range of options open to them, has been allowed to persist for so many years.”**

Coronavirus challenged us to innovate, and this helped us prove that we should still continue with these strategic educational engagement programmes. Not just for now, but the future too, helping ensure that we continue to put people in the light about what options are available to them, how exciting they can be, and what a difference you can make to people's lives by undertaking that role.

Secondary school places are set to grow, construction skill gaps remain wide, and gender parity remains extremely unbalanced. Therefore, we must keep momentum.

This year in the East of England, we will still embark upon our apprenticeship recruitment drive and will also commit to delivering virtual work experience programmes across the UK, until such time that we are able to deliver an in-person experience.

That said, one of the biggest learnings revealed that 'a blend is best.' Whilst students are still keen to experience sites and offices for real, creating independent learning environments to provide a balance between digital and on-site learning will help ensure the richest stream of support possible.

And that is how we want it to be. The best possible experience for our young people.



## SOURCES AND REFERENCES:

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- ONS labour survey: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/contents.aspx>
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