

2023 to 2025 CITB Brickwork Upskilling Closure Report

For Publication

15th August 2025

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1. Overview

The purpose of this report is to review and consider key learnings arising from the initial delivery and ultimate early termination of the 2023 to 2026 Brickwork Upskilling contract between the CITB and The Association of Brickwork Contractors (AofBC).

2. Project Summary

The AofBC initially entered into a funding agreement with the CITB through its 'Flexible Fund' in 2020 to support a 3-year project to develop and deliver the established 16 Short Duration training standards as part of the 'Brickwork Upskilling Programme'. This agreement was with the AofBC's training subsidiary, 'The ABC Assessment Centre Ltd' (subsequently renamed as AofBC Skills & Education Ltd in 2025).

The key objectives of this project were to further the career opportunities of young people wishing to learn a new lifelong skill / trade as well as address a well-documented skills gap within the construction industry. After the successful completion of this 2020 project and following an open tender process, a new 3 year contract was awarded to the AofBC's training subsidiary by the CITB in 2023.

This new agreement was intended to support a range of additional KPIs and targets around the original 16 training standards. Subsequently, and separate from this contract, an extra short duration training standard was developed and published by the AofBC (making 17 in total) as a value adding element to the Brickwork Upskilling Programme.

The AofBC covered all learning outcomes for each specified standard, with trainers using a variety of teaching methods to engage different types of learners. Theory content was delivered through interactive PowerPoint presentations, supported by AofBC's own installation videos, product samples, targeted questions, group activities, and supplementary handouts to reinforce learning. Practical training simulated a realistic site environment using the AofBC's unique training frames, which were set up either indoors in a workshop environment or outdoors, depending on the college facilities.

During the term of the contract the AofBC delivered all 16 contracted and specified courses (plus latterly the additional course) to various colleges located across the England and Scotland over the 5 academic years 2020 to 2025. This was achieved utilising contracted specialist tutors and bespoke training frames and materials held in-situ at all locations.

Under the new 2023 contract, the AofBC was targeted to reach 1260 new, unique learners over a period of three academic years from 2023 to 2026, with a further 500 learners targeted in an optional fourth year should the project have delivered all its contracted objectives. The 3-year CITB contract commencing in September 2023 had a total potential value of £643k with 90% of this being directly related to recruiting the new, unique learners in colleges across the country. The balance of this contract value was effectively a contribution to the overhead of running the courses.

As part of a Train-the-Trainer programme and to further extend the upskilling objectives, the AofBC also aimed to reach 40 new college tutors as part of the new contract.

3. Introduction

- i. The AofBC training company, (known as “The ABC Assessment Centre” at the time) successfully delivered a three-year CITB Brickwork Upskilling Project from 2020 to 2023, with the subsequent award of a new contract, via an open tender process, through to September 2026, with potential to extend this by one year.

Launched in 2018 with CITB’s support, the AofBC established The Assessment Centre specifically to raise standards in bricklaying through employer-led, accredited training and robust, practical qualifications. The Upskilling initiative responded to a critical shortage of bricklayers in the homebuilding sector, as identified in the Construction Skills Network 2023–2027 data, aiming to support workforce retention, enhance new entrant training, and boost productivity.

As a CITB-approved training organisation, the AofBC developed the 17 industry-relevant courses—co-designed with contractors—through partnerships with employers across the UK. These courses were embedded in existing curriculums within colleges located around the UK, enhancing employability by exposing learners to current industry practices and technology advances. With significant CITB funding and support from major product manufacturers, the programme provided learners with high-quality resources and simulated site conditions, ultimately ensuring a skilled and job-ready future workforce.

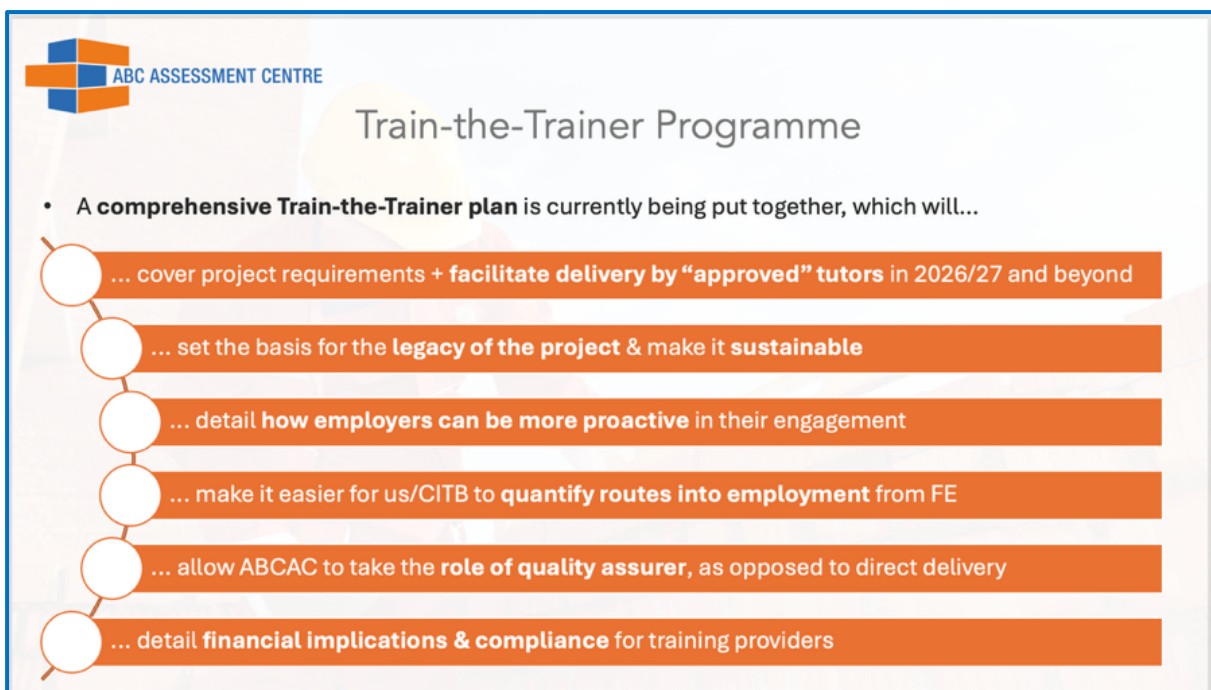
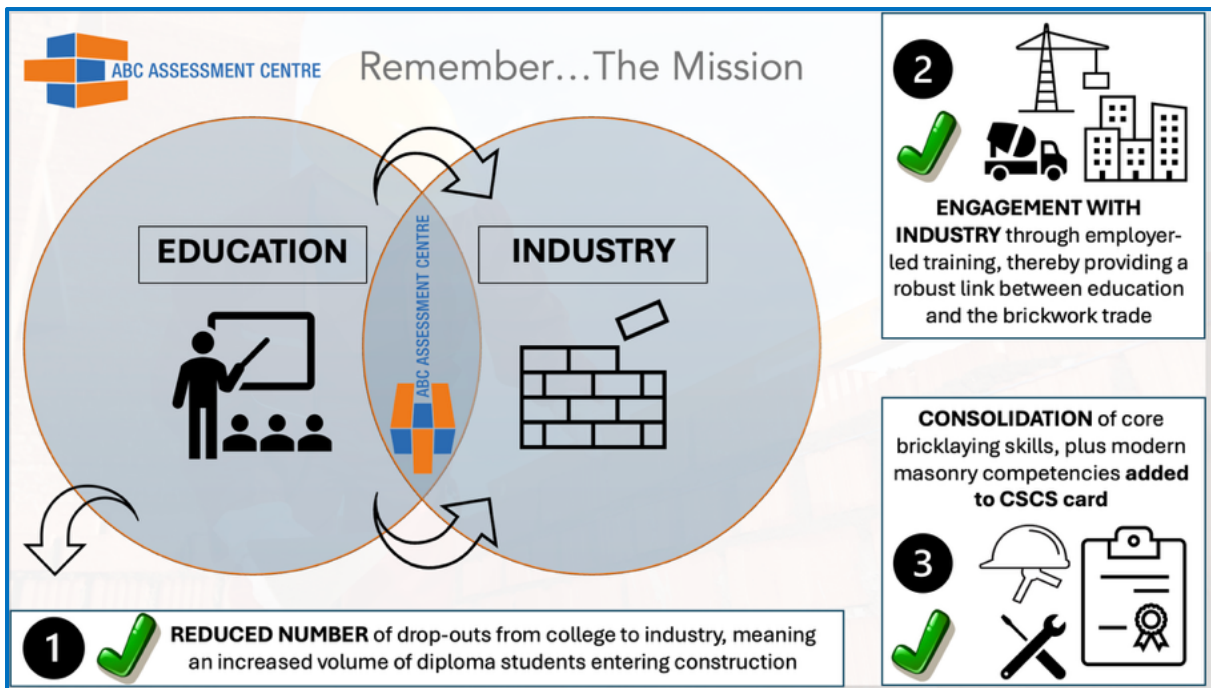
The AofBC invested considerable time and resources in sourcing highly skilled and suitable tutors to serve as designated brickwork trainers. These tutors were suitably placed in appropriate college locations to facilitate effective course delivery. Each tutor was responsible for educating cohorts of up to approximately 20 learners, delivering the curriculum over an estimated 16-week period and covering the entirety of the courses with a high level of attention to detail on purpose-built steel training frames.

To ensure the highest quality of training and consistency, Tutors were required to provide regular updates to AofBC management overseeing the project. This included submitting course registers, which enabled accurate logging of Further Education (FE) details into both our internal systems and, from January 2024 onward, the CITB SharePoint platform.

The overall objective of the project was to engage 1500 new Further Education individuals and to upskill 500 existing bricklayers by the project’s end, along with supporting 40 tutors in specific brickwork skills, with delivery established in 20 to 25 colleges nationwide.

Below are two slides taken from a PowerPoint presentation shown at our last standardisation meeting.

- ii. The first slide shows the visual summary of the mission of AofBC, focusing on strengthening the link between education and industry within the brickwork/construction sector, which remained the core purpose throughout the project.
- iii. The second slide outlines the Train-the-Trainer Programme initiative, highlighting the goals and components of a comprehensive plan that was developed and applied throughout the programme.



4. Main Findings

- Following the success of the previous 2020 to 2023 project commission and an open tender process, the AofBC was awarded a contract for three years, with a preliminary projected completion date of September 2026.

The Brickwork Upskilling project was founded due to a continuing demand for bricklayers in the Homebuilding Sector, as per the Construction Skills Network 2023/2027 data. The demand for bricklayers and similar trades was surpassing supply, creating a need for more workers to support

key targets for building new homes (approximately an additional 4,000 per annum). The AofBC's main objective was to expand the delivery of the existing brickwork upskilling programme to retain existing workers, support new workers and college learners, and increase productivity of the homebuilding sector.

The AofBC Skills and Education company is an Approved Training Organisation (ATO), audited by CITB to deliver assured and recognised training products. It also offers construction-based qualifications through the awarding body NOCN. All trainers are either former bricklayers or actively working in the trade, regularly attending CPD sessions to maintain current skills and industry knowledge and are qualified to deliver all 16 CITB standards included in the commission. These 16 courses were chosen and written in conjunction with ABC Brickwork Contractor members and are listed below:

- **Types & Uses of Mortars for Brick and Blockwork**
- **Sills, Copings, Cappings & Junctions**
- **Quality Assurance and Customer/ Client Handover**
- **Materials, Storage & Protection**
- **Masonry Cutting and Drilling**
- **Introduction to Movement Joints**
- **Co-ordinating Brickwork Requirements with Wider Project Team**
- **Cold Weather Working Requirements for Bricklayers**
- **Bonding, Taping and Positioning Insulation Board**
- **Specialist DPC Cloak Systems**
- **Brick Soffit Systems**
- **Installing Fire Barriers and Breaks**
- **Windpost Installation**
- **Masonry Support Angle Installation**
- **Forming Cavities and Correct Installation of Wall Ties**
- **Brick Slip Systems**

A further standard, **Correct Fixings for Bricklayers** was subsequently published and added to the programme through variation to the CITB contract to compliment the overall offering.

The AofBC also implemented a Train-the-Trainer Programme to ensure the sustainability of the Brickwork Upskilling Programme beyond the duration of the 2023 to 2026 commission by equipping FE Brickwork Tutors with the necessary future skills and resources, while maintaining consistently high standards. The programme helped protect future learners from outdated or incorrect instruction and improper application / utilisation of current technical products in the real-world environment.

College tutors were required to onboard themselves as College Trainers with AofBC to access the 17 short brickwork courses, along with the accompanying materials and training frames. This ensured appropriate Quality Assurance procedures were maintained and training content remained up to date with industry standards, thus providing a continuously relevant learning experience.

- ii. Through the significant funding from CITB, the AofBC were able to integrate these courses into college timetables in various UK locations, including Leeds, Liverpool, Hull, Bedford, Canterbury and Glasgow. The courses took the form of “bolt-ons” to Diploma or Apprenticeship qualifications – running alongside normal curriculum delivery and providing students increased employability through them receiving training on the newest innovations in the sector.

The AofBC strived to engage with 25 FE Colleges before the 2023 to 2026 project's end and partnered with large product manufacturers and contractors to supply each of these colleges with materials and resources (mainly on a 'sponsorship' FOC basis) needed to best simulate onsite working conditions, with the end goal of ensuring all learners received the most realistic start to their careers as well as being ready to meet employers needs.

The CITB allocated funding for the delivery of Brickwork Upskilling courses was spread relatively evenly over the three academic years 2023 to 2026, with additional potential funding available for year 4 if the project was extended. This fourth and final year was intended solely for the Train-the-Trainer programme, ensuring the colleges within the programme were able to deliver the Brickwork Upskilling courses independently.

The AofBC allocated these funds over Commercial Delivery, FE Delivery, Recruitment, Project Management and Project Coordination. The total duration of the programme amounted to 16 training days per cohort, broken down into 6-theory only half-day courses (3 delivery days), 2 two-day theory & practical courses (4 delivery days) and 9 one day theory & practical courses (9 delivery days), with AofBC brickwork tutors keeping training timetables and records of delivery for each session. Our tutors were issued with digital copies of our "Training Delivered Form" – an attendance register showing the date, college and course being delivered that day. To comply with GDPR rules, AofBC only collected student's names, DOB, NI Numbers and a signature, which was required for ensuring authenticity.

When delivering onsite training to Experienced Workers, all relevant information was captured within a "Learner Registration Form", as well as filling out a "Training Delivered Form" with signatures on the day. In addition, copies of photographic ID (a requirement for ATOs) was logged. Following delivery, the AofBC produced Training Certificates and uploaded achievements to The Construction Training Register via our ATO account on the CITB portal, all done within 10 days of the training taking place.

To monitor performance of the project, reports were submitted every quarter to the CITB including the number of FE and Commercial Learners attending courses, variations to the project (if applicable), a Summary Report showing an update on financials, challenges and successes, an Output Performance update, Risk Log, Employer information, College and FE Staff information.

Quarterly details were required by the CITB to be uploaded correctly, efficiently and before the given deadline, usually the 15th of every third month.

As well as training standardisation reviews– held at least once per year with all relevant external parties, the AofBC also held internal quarterly meetings to update the AofBC Board on project progress.

- iii. **Against this well-structured and established management backdrop for the project, the AofBC remained fully committed to the purpose and goals of the programme, however, in reality, it became clear early during the delivery phase that the ambitious targets and the practical capacity of many colleges did not align with the programme's primary objectives.**

As with many well intended, large-scale and ambitious initiatives, the AofBC encountered simple (but critical) practical issues very early on such as lower-than-expected engagement from some students (and particularly colleges), regional disparity in demand / interest as well as significant working capital pressures resulting from a minimum three-month lag between tutor payment needs and CITB internal quarterly review and retrospective payment processes.

iv. Noting the regional disparity point above, the AofBC encountered several challenges in delivering services to more remote regions, specifically Scotland and North Wales. While these areas were within the planned scope of the project, successful implementation proved difficult due to the following key factors:

- Most of the available and suitably qualified AofBC tutor staff were based in the Southeast of England, limiting our ability to provide consistent support and oversight in areas further afield both practically and commercially.
- Additionally, the AofBC struggled to establish a new network of trusted tutors (specifically in the Scotland & North Wales regions), which significantly impacted the consistency and sustainability of delivery in these areas. This appeared to mirror the 'southern concentration' of established brickwork skills in the industry.

To further illustrate the regional challenge, the AofBC's engagement with a College in Glasgow only lasted three months (January to March 2025) before being discontinued due to tutor resignation. Whilst limited tutor access for this college was fundamentally a source of failure, it is worth noting that ultimately, the somewhat 'rushed' drive to become established in an area with significant resource limitations to deliver the new college requirements of the project was also a contributory factor.

The root cause of this scenario can be best summarised as ***KPI achievement = payment*** (being the primary driver at the time) versus the more appropriate ***sustainable quality delivery = material additional investment of mostly unrecoverable time and cost*** (not really affordable at the time)

Whilst very disappointing, it is important to note that contact was attempted by the AofBC with the Glasgow College after the tutor's resignation to provide reassurance and proceed with recruitment to ensure some kind of continuity, however the college failed to respond to this support.

In the case of a college in North Wales, the rural location presented further barriers, including limited access to local resources and the dominance of Welsh as the first language, posing significant recruitment challenges. The AofBC were allocated funding to specifically translate all 16 of our PowerPoint courses into Welsh (this was completed in January 2024) to ensure we were able to provide appropriate delivery once the initial phases were completed. However, support with frame delivery was heavily drawn out and installation of the steel training frame was not feasible, as we were unable to leverage our usual network of employer members in that region.

Although the two colleges above stand out as clear examples of why the programme was difficult to manage in certain regions of the country, there was also a consistent issue with lack of correspondence from colleges across the country when attempting early stages of delivery. It is difficult to understand why these colleges, who were positively engaged initially and had agreed to facilitate course delivery at some point, became unresponsive once the project was established.

- v. To obtain more real-world insight into the college environment, we approached some of our trusted tutors for feedback on the project. Below is a summary of one tutor's positive experience as a tutor in the North of England:

The tutor observed that the diploma students found the training highly beneficial, as it enhanced their learning experience and encouraged them to consider broader opportunities within the construction industry. He expressed that the training materials were well-suited to the courses, and the rigs provided were adaptable and effective within the practical delivery.

The tutor believes that the programme enriched teaching and learning across colleges, with one provider even receiving a positive mention from OFSTED during an inspection. The initiative also generated strong publicity for participating colleges on social media and attracted interest from other manufacturers keen to explore adaptations of the rigs for their own products.

- vi. The following is a summary of the feedback from another one of our trusted tutors working in the south/midlands of England for the duration of the programme, below is a summary of his feedback:

Overall, the tutor was engaged in the delivery of the courses and enjoyed his role in this. The tutor recognised the benefits of the programme and thought the courses were well written, however could have been slimmed down by merging a couple of the theory ones (for example, Cold Weather Working for Bricklayers & Storage and Protection). The tutor regarded the college staff as being engaged and happy to see him and recognised that the Brickwork Courses ticked a box for their curriculum and work experience.

The Tutor considers the courses to be better aimed at Year 2 Diploma Students rather than Year 1, he states this is due to the Year 1 students having a lack of understanding and trowel skills to accompany the course material. The Tutor also regards the ideal cohort size as being between 5-10 students and expresses that cohorts larger than this were difficult to teach. The steel training frames and supporting items provided by third party specialists were excellent in this tutors opinion, however there was a considerable lack of general builders' materials which were needed for smooth delivery of the courses, and he often found this awkward as a tutor.

The tutor would recommend a small exam at the end of each module to keep the students focused and engaged but overall enjoyed being part of the programme and really saw the benefit for the students.

One criticism of AofBC was the lack of staff support in the form of management or check-ins (shadowed sessions), which was disappointing as he thought the courses and general delivery of the programme could have been improved with more attention.

- vii. Following on from the last point made regarding support from the AofBC, this ties in with our analysis of the delivery in Glasgow, where we recognise that with increased assistance, specifically in the form of physical check-ins the tutors may have likely felt more confident and better equipped to manage the programme's needs. However, it is important to recognise that the AofBC Assessment Centre was at the time of contract signing (and remains) a very small organisation which could not facilitate this level of regional activity, without significant investment in overhead and managerial expertise.

It is arguable that this issue was already present when operating in the initial 11 colleges, and it would have been significantly heightened had we reached the project goal of 20-25. The absence of this physical management presence as a strategic investment (which is clearly not supported by the notional administrative overhead funding of the project) significantly limited our ability to provide consistent support which may well have impacted the programme's growth potential and target achievement.

- viii. One area of success that should be highlighted is the upskilling of existing bricklayers via employer located training which comprised of 2 short courses with 10 learners attending each session, but outside of the FE environment. The target for the whole 3 years of the project was for the AofBC to deliver this service to 240 new learners, but at the time of termination 363 new learners had in fact been trained via what proved to be a very popular offering of the project. Unfortunately, as with other aspects of this contract, the cost of delivering this offering by the AofBC far exceed the contractual payment made by the CITB.
- ix. As can be derived from the above analysis, a considerable issue faced by the AofBC was that of financial viability of the project. Whilst the overall available funding to be drawn down was considerable at £643k, the reality of both direct costs and indirect investment costs meant that the project could not be delivered without causing significant loss and financial harm to the trade association parent, AofBC.

Following a reorganisation of the AofBC management structure and strategic review of all of its operations in early 2025, it became clear around halfway through delivering the new CITB contract that most KPIs; both financial and qualitative were unlikely to be met for the reasons illustrated previously.

There appeared to be 4 main reasons for this projected gap in delivery:

- The number of targeted 1260, unique new students was unrealistic both generally in the market place and specifically for an organisation the size of the ABC Assessment Centre
- To enable so many new students to be recruited and trained, a significant number of new colleges across the whole of the GB needed to be set up for delivery – at the time of the decision to terminate, only 13 colleges were in operation v 21 targeted and the prospect of recruiting more was almost non-existent indicating potential 'saturation' v the capabilities / willingness of new colleges to join the programme
- Whilst the AofBC maintained very good and reliable trainers in the south and part of the north of England, it became almost impossible to recruit high quality people in Scotland, Wales and the West of England to facilitate further expansion
- The colleges actually engaged and running the programme were generally poor at supporting the quality of delivery necessary

Additionally, whilst not a critical factor, the level of reporting, review and validation of mainly quantitative performance against the contract v generally poor record keeping in the college sector placed an administrative burden on a small organisation such as the AofBC, especially when aiming to achieve national targets.

- x. Finally, and in the interests of complete transparency, it appears that the financial viability of the CITB contract was significantly overestimated by all parties before signing and **unfortunately it became clear it was loss making for the AofBC throughout the term and only ever breakeven at best should all KPIs be met.** Even this was only due to a significant reduction in overhead by the

AofBC in 2025 which if left uncorrected, would have resulted in a serious cumulative (and worsening) loss on this contract.

Clearly there are learnings here for all parties regarding detailed direct and indirect cost / resource assessments before embarking on ambitious, national projects. To this end, comprehensive, confidential details of the financial impact of the contract have been shared with the CITB in full which clearly illustrate that inherent flaws existed in the ability of the AofBC to deliver the CITB contract, especially against a critical backdrop of poor new college interest/engagement and resource/ capability issues in certain parts of the country.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the Brickwork Upskilling project was an advanced and appropriately focussed initiative, which retains a high potential to deliver a necessary provision to the sector going forward.

The programme is both forward thinking and could be extremely effective with the right (and more sophisticated) level of resource investment and triangulation of college engagement nationwide.

Despite the challenges encountered by the AofBC over the two years of delivering the Upskilling project in its second commission, it remains a fact that **526 FE Learners** and **363 Commercial Learners** were successfully upskilled, along with **23 FE Tutors** and **13 participating colleges**. Whilst not achieving the ambitious targets set at the outset of the programme, this should nonetheless be considered a partial success for all parties involved. Similarly, the development and publication of the 17 new Training Standards outlined in this report (which are fully accessible by any ATO across the UK) leaves a significant learning legacy irrespective of any future delivery framework.

The AofBC feel proud of the impact it has made towards upskilling new people coming into our industry via this important contract. However, as it stands today, the Brickwork Upskilling project requires substantial additional indirect investment in an infrastructure scalable and capable of effectively reaching all four corners of the UK FE environment. Similarly, Colleges require a different and cohesive set of pre-investments and incentives to ensure they become the true long term owners of this critical industry supporting commitment.

And whilst the AofBC will now reluctantly step away from this project as it stands, in line with its primary industry purpose as well as the commitments defined within our original CITB proposal, the AofBC will ensure that colleges retain the necessary equipment to enable them to continue the work done to date.

We hope this offer can promote continuous benefit beyond the formal agreement of the programme and support ongoing development of skills within the college's brickwork provision as a legacy of the AofBC's initial involvement.

6. Recommendations

Reflecting on AofBC's experience delivering the Brickwork Upskilling Programme, there are several factors which we'd approach differently if we were undertaking the project from scratch.

One of the most important considerations is to evaluate the contract expectations not only from the perspective of purpose and objectives, but also through the lens of financial viability. While the allocated funding is generous in principle, the cost of actual delivery of the project in terms of payments to tutors, expenses, administration time and resource management is also substantial.

- i. **Recommendation** - AofBC would advise any future organisations and the CITB considering this project, or a similar one (following the same contract format), to conduct extensive reviews of detailed, fully funded business and resource plans to ensure sustainability of delivery and to certify that the committed funding can realistically support the scope of the programme in its entirety.
- ii. **Recommendation** – The CITB could also consider a different structure to the way it engages third parties to deliver this type of contract going forward. As an example, the contract could be awarded in 2 separate stages – firstly the investment required to build and secure the necessary and sustainable resources to deliver a large-scale national programme and then secondly, the implementation and application stage of utilising those resources over a sustained period. The former would require more qualitative measures of success, the latter similar quantitative KPIs and measures to the current Upskilling contract.
- iii. **Recommendation** – The CITB could consider a tri-party contract (or similar structure) between the training provider, the relevant colleges and itself, potentially with some form of incentive to better encourage commitment from the Colleges and their staff
- iv. **Recommendation** - From the perspective of contract administration and data entry, a key enhancement would be to implement an 'audit-as-you-go' approach, rather than relying fully on a large quarterly audit. Due to the volume of data input necessary to sustain the project, the potential for errors in the form of duplicates, signatures, dates etc is relatively high. These can cause unnecessary delays and pressure, particularly when affecting the release of funding.
- v. **Recommendation** – Tutors and trainers should be incentivised through staged / delayed payments or similar, to ensure a full understanding of the expected administrative evidence when it comes to registers, training documents and other forms of required documentation. Tutors who consistently submit incorrect or inappropriate evidence thus delaying audit sign-off and disbursement of funding, should always be affected by these delays. Ultimately it is recommended that robust onboarding of delivery staff is a vital element of successful project management within the Brickwork Upskilling Project.
- vi. **Recommendation** – Noting the success of upskilling existing bricklayers via employer based short courses under the CITB contract, a review of the associated fixed fee structure per learner should be considered to ensure the commercial viability of this popular and effective route of training.

7. Acknowledgements and Key Stakeholders

AofBC would like to sincerely thank primarily the CITB and all those who have contributed towards the Brickwork Upskilling Programme, from its initial conception through to the final stages, albeit terminated earlier than anticipated.

Whilst the relationship has not always been easy, we are nevertheless grateful to those positive partner colleges for their collaboration, continued support and enthusiasm through the programme's delivery. Our gratitude also extends to the dedicated tutors and trainers whose hard work and commitment have been instrumental in delivering high-quality training courses to learners across the UK.

We would also like to acknowledge the efforts of our Management Team, Administrative Staff and members of our Board who have worked behind the scenes to ensure the continued smooth running of the project, despite the practical and financial difficulties faced.

Finally, this programme would not have been possible without collective efforts of the CITB, our tutors and all AofBC's member organisations who donated time, materials and support completely free of charge to the project. The AofBC deeply values the partnerships and relationships we have developed over the course of the project, and we hope to build on these in the future.