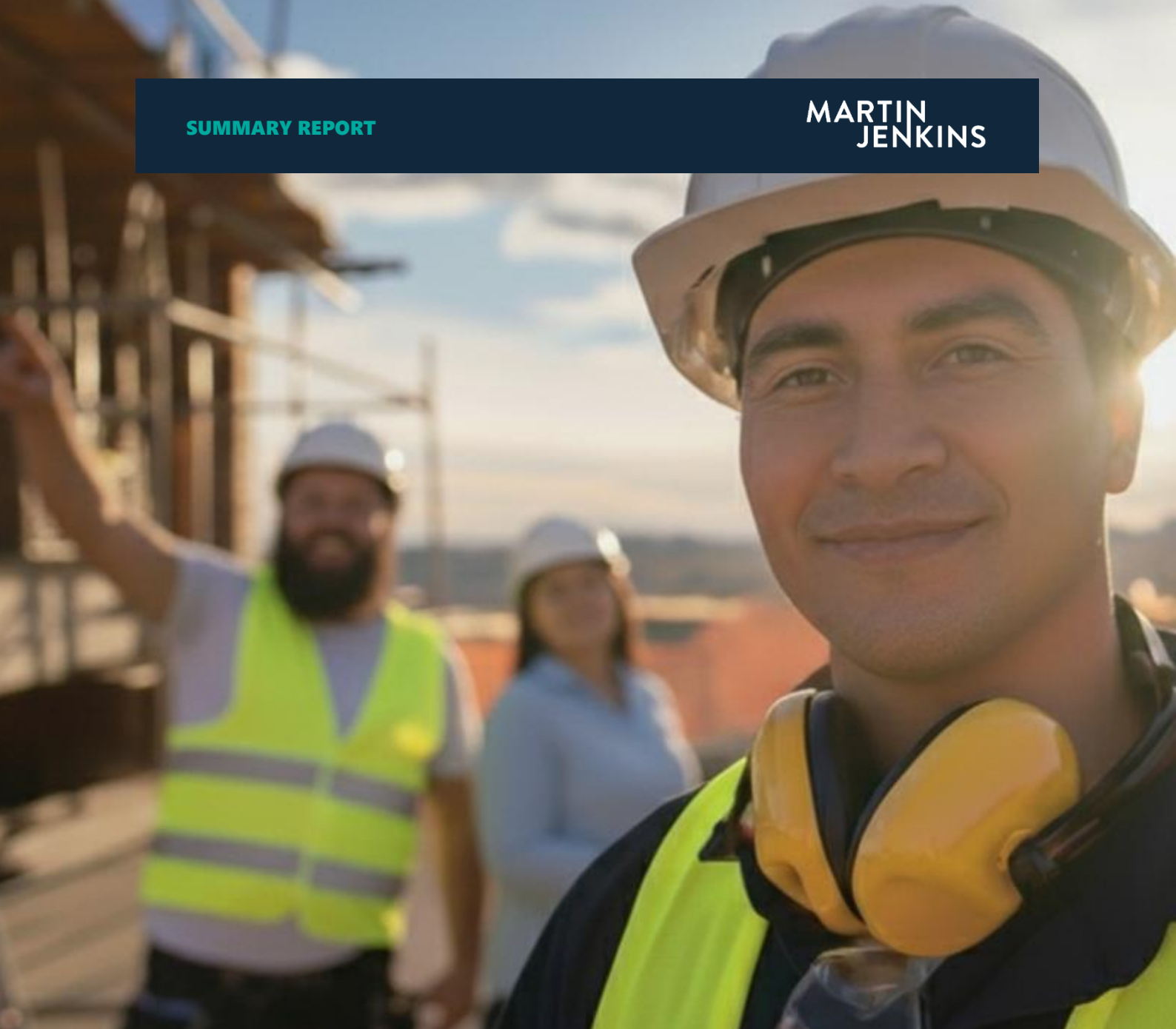




Advancing pastoral care and needs-based support in the construction and infrastructure sector

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WAIHANGA ARA RAU
Construction and
Infrastructure
Workforce Development Council

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed their time, insights, and resources to this research. The generosity and openness of the individuals and organisations who participated in interviews and shared their experiences were instrumental in shaping the depth and relevance of this work.

Special thanks to Erica Cumming and Zoë Morgan from Waihangā Ara Rau, Construction and Infrastructure Workforce Development Council, and to Katherine Hall from ConCOVE Tūhura for their constructive input and depth of knowledge, which has significantly enriched the thinking and direction of this work. Their expertise and critical reflections helped shape a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in supporting workers effectively.

This report has been prepared for Waihangā Ara Rau and ConCOVE Tūhura by Natalie James and Jessica Molloy from MartinJenkins (Martin, Jenkins & Associates Ltd). Quality assurance and peer review was provided by Sarah Baddeley.

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Strategic context

There is a critical need to grow New Zealand's construction and infrastructure workforce

Aotearoa New Zealand's construction and infrastructure sector is facing a critical workforce shortfall. While many skilled and capable individuals contribute to the industry, their numbers are insufficient to meet the scale of upcoming infrastructure development. 2025 modelling shows that supply falls well short of demand, with an additional 157,490 workers (a 43% shortfall) needed by June 2027 to deliver the forecast pipeline (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025). Despite successive government initiatives, the gap remains and shows little sign of decreasing.

This constrained workforce is contributing to rising construction and infrastructure costs, with firms competing for fewer workers and facing retention challenges. The costs of onboarding and training new workers further compound these pressures. While increased recruitment of migrant construction labour has partially offset shortages, significant workforce gaps persist. The boom-and-bust cycle of the sector also impacts the ability to strategically anticipate workforce needs.

Despite these challenges, the sector contributes \$54 billion to New Zealand's GDP (16%) and plays a critical role in meeting national ambitions to expand infrastructure and improve value for money (MBIE, 2023).

There is high attrition among apprentices and early career workers

Efforts to grow a domestic workforce are being constrained by high attrition rates among apprentices and early career workers. The five-year completion rate for apprenticeships has remained static at 47% across 2022 and 2023, well below rates in Australia (58%) and Germany (75%) (MartinJenkins, 2025). Of the roughly 55,000 new entrants in 2018, only 23% remain in the industry; the majority (72%) left within three years (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2025). This high attrition means the sector is struggling to replace those leaving at the end of their careers, let alone grow to meet increasing demand.

The sector faces persistent structural challenges that limit workforce stability, productivity, and innovation

Boom-bust cycles contribute to short-term hiring practices and undermine long-term workforce development, making retention a lower priority for many employers. Despite significant investment, productivity has remained stagnant due to reliance on traditional methods, manual labour, material shortages, and inconsistent supervision – all of which contribute to delays, cost overruns, rework, and reduced efficiency (Jones, 2023). Long working hours further exacerbate fatigue and burnout. Innovation is also constrained by a narrow workforce profile, and underinvestment in diversity and

modernisation has limited the sector's ability to adopt new technologies and redesign processes. Women, Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled individuals, and neurodiverse workers remain significantly underrepresented, particularly in skilled and leadership roles (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021). Mental health challenges are acute, with the sector disproportionately represented in suicide statistics, especially among young men. Initiatives like MATES in Construction are helping to address this through awareness, training, and targeted support services (MATES in Construction, 2023).

The strategic case for increased pastoral care and needs-based support

Targeted, needs-based support and pastoral care, particularly as workers transition from training to being fully qualified, is showing strong measurable results in turning these problems around. When workers are supported to navigate practical challenges, they are more likely to complete training, stay in the workforce, and contribute productively on the job. Examples of this potential include:

- Evaluations of initiatives such as Mana in Mahi and the Māori and Pasifika Trades Training Fund have demonstrated that structured pastoral care, including regular check-ins, wellbeing support, and referrals to external services, was a key factor in improving learner retention and success (MartinJenkins, 2025).
- The Workforce Central Dunedin initiative, established to support the Dunedin Hospital build, delivered an estimated \$5.03 in value for every \$1 invested. The initiative included services like onsite health checks, mental health services, and streamlined induction processes (WFCD, 2025).
- The Cooks Brothers Apprenticeship Academy, established in 2020 and supported by a three-year grant from the Provincial Growth Fund (PGF), incorporates pastoral care, mentoring, and structured training support. As a result, they have seen stronger engagement, higher completion, and more productive workers (ConCOVE Tūhura, 2024).
- Research from NZIER found that poor mental wellbeing at work leads to lost productivity through both absenteeism and presenteeism, but proactive, organisation-wide wellbeing initiatives can deliver a return on investment as high as 8.5:1, making mental health support a strategic lever for workforce productivity and stability (NZIER, 2021).

The key ingredients for success

Our research has highlighted the following critical components of effective pastoral care models in practice.

- Trust is foundational. Effective care starts with trusted relationships built through consistency, accessibility, and empathy. Workers are more likely to raise concerns and engage with support when they feel psychologically safe (ConCOVE Tūhura, 2024).
- Dedicated points of contact make a difference. Support roles like mentors or apprenticeship coordinators act as vital anchors, providing continuity and reducing the burden on both workers and employers to navigate the system (Scarlatti, 2023).

- Culturally responsive approaches are essential to meet the specific needs of a diverse workforce. This means creating workplace environments that are culturally aware, inclusive, and affirm diverse values, worldviews, and practices, rather than expecting workers to conform to dominant norms (Savage, 2016).
- Support must be holistic, moving beyond learning or work readiness needs. Support that helps workers meet practical needs create the foundations for labour market participation and success. However, these supports must be delivered alongside transformational elements, including emotional, cultural, and behavioural support. Holistic models like Te Whare Tapa Whā provide a useful framework for identifying strengths and needs across multiple domains (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024).
- Visible, relatable leaders and mentors, especially from underrepresented backgrounds can help build confidence and support engagement (Scarlatti, 2023).
- Support must adapt over time as workers needs evolve from entry-level to advanced roles, or as personal responsibilities change, to remain flexible, responsible, and relevant at every stage of someone's career.
- Embedding care into workplace culture is key. Building inclusive businesses and networks with strong internal communities, peer networks, and regular opportunities for connection helps reduce isolation and build resilience (Te Awhi Jones, Fieten, Te Kuini Jones, & Takuira, 2024).
- Community connections and referral pathways extend reach. Employers cannot and should not be responsible for everything. Effective care models include strong relationships with whānau, iwi, and local service providers so that workers can access the right help at the right time (MartinJenkins, 2025).

However, there are several capability gaps hindering sector progress

The sector continues to face significant challenges in embedding effective pastoral care and needs-based support. These challenges stem from entrenched mindsets, underdeveloped systems, and limited capability, particularly among smaller firms. Addressing these issues requires systemic change alongside capability-building at the organisational and workforce levels.

Limited understanding of pastoral care as a strategic investment

We heard that many employers still view pastoral care and needs-based support as a compliance obligation or additional cost, rather than a strategic investment in productivity, retention, and business sustainability. This is particularly evident among smaller businesses that are focused on immediate operational pressures. Similarly, we heard that mental health and wellbeing are still seen by some as optional or personal matters, not essential components of workforce sustainability.

Undervaluing of transferrable and interpersonal skills

We found that transferrable skills are consistently undervalued in both workplace and educational settings. While these skills are crucial for success, particularly in team-based and safety-critical environments, they are rarely prioritised or formally recognised. As a result, the skills required to deliver effective pastoral care have become “invisible labour” and are not recognised in formal performance systems (ThinkPlace, 2024).

Employer capability remains a key constraint

Employers and managers often lack awareness of the future workforce and the types of support that different groups may require (Martin, 2024). Employers may expect workers to adapt to the status quo, rather than adapting their workplaces to be more inclusive (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

Many are unaware of available referral pathways for additional, specialist support for their workers. We heard that there is a perception that employers are left to do everything by themselves, and the existing guidelines or materials may be underused without active support. Few businesses have developed formalised policies, business cases, or performance measures to guide and evaluate their pastoral care and worker support efforts (Merelo & Tolooei, 2021).

Worker agency and self-advocacy remain limited

While lifting employer capability is crucial, it is equally important to focus on empowering workers so that they can advocate for themselves, build resilience, and grow the capability to become supportive leaders in the future. However, research shows that many workers lack the tools, knowledge, or confidence to advocate for their own needs or seek help, with power dynamics often making it difficult to raise sensitive issues, even in supportive environments (All is for All, 2024).

System-level challenges make it difficult to embed best practice at scale

The construction and infrastructure sector faces complex, interconnected barriers that hinder the effective implementation of best practices in pastoral care and needs-based support. Overcoming these challenges will require sustained, system-wide efforts to clarify roles, build sustainable pastoral care infrastructure, and extend support to SMEs, ensuring consistent and high-quality worker wellbeing across the sector.

Pastoral care is not well defined in workplace contexts

While pastoral care is a well-recognised concept in educational settings, its definition and delivery in work-based learning or non-tertiary employee contexts remain unclear and inconsistent. Existing regulatory frameworks, such as the Pastoral Care Code, were designed for institutional environments like polytechnics and do not easily translate to the realities of workplace learning. Many workers, including non-apprentices, casual workers, subcontractors, and migrant workers fall outside the protections and supports intended by these policies. Responsibility for pastoral care is often unclear

across the tripartite relationship of learner, employer, and training provider. These issues create significant gaps in wellbeing coverage (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Limited system coordination at multiple levels

The sector is highly decentralised, with 72% of construction firms being sole traders and 84% having fewer than four employees (MBIE, 2024). We heard that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) often lack the resources or incentives to engage with sector-wide initiatives, focusing instead on immediate business survival. The absence of a unified national strategy leaves the sector without clear leadership or accountability for embedding pastoral care consistently (MartinJenkins, 2025).

Funding gaps and challenges scaling local programmes

We heard from stakeholders that sustainable funding for pastoral care remains a critical challenge. Effective pastoral care and wraparound support services are often reliant on time-limited or project-based funding, making their continuation uncertain once grants end. As a result, local and regional initiatives often face difficulties scaling beyond discrete programmes. This creates an environment where innovation and lessons learned risk remaining isolated and temporary (Jones, 2023).

Capacity constraints across the system

Providing wraparound, individualised support for learners can be resource-intensive when needs are acute or complex. Employers, training providers, and existing service providers report being stretched thin, with limited resource capacity to deliver high-quality, consistent support. Mental health support can be difficult to access. Training advisors face high caseloads, multiple site visits, and growing administrative responsibilities. This has led some to call for dedicated support agencies that can work alongside employers to meet learners' needs (Allen + Clarke, 2024).

Opportunity for industry to support businesses build the skills and conditions for meaningful change

There is a clear strategic case for industry to improve the delivery of pastoral care and needs-based support across the sector. Businesses, sector bodies, and training providers are well placed to shape the day-to-day practices, cultural norms, and leadership behaviours that support a more inclusive and resilient workforce.

This research shows that significant progress is possible (and already underway), but further action is needed to embed this progress at scale. Many businesses remain unsure of what good practice looks like, or how to practically implement support systems in the context of a busy, cost-conscious workplace. Clearer leadership, stronger collaboration, and more accessible tools and support mechanisms can accelerate uptake and build momentum across the sector.

Industry has an opportunity to take the lead by:

1. Positioning pastoral care as a strategic investment: Establish and promote the long-term business value of investing in people, including higher retention, better productivity, and improved team culture. Case studies, industry champions, and evidence-based research can help shift perceptions and build buy-in, particularly among SMEs.
2. Redefining the workplace as a site of care and learning: Strengthen the visibility of workplace-based pastoral care by embedding it into everyday practices, training expectations, and leadership development. Shared frameworks, clear roles, and coordinated support systems can help normalise these responsibilities across the sector.
3. Valuing people beyond the job they do: Build cultural capability and inclusive practices that recognise and respond to the diverse needs of workers, particularly Māori, Pacific peoples, women, neurodiverse workers, and migrants. This includes growing cultural literacy, equitable performance systems, and visibility of diverse leadership.
4. Normalising open conversations and support-seeking: Invest in employer training on mental health and wellbeing literacy. Strengthen peer networks, site-based support, and referral pathways to ensure workers and managers alike can access the support they need.
5. Elevating transferable skills as critical to industry success: Formally recognising transferable skills, like empathy, communication, and effective mentorship as essential to safety, teamwork, and leadership. This includes celebrating excellence in pastoral care and embedding transferable skills in recruitment, training, and recognition systems.
6. Building a culture of growth, reflection, and continuous improvement: Support businesses to review and improve their practices through tools, templates, and outcome tracking. Promote a collective, sector-wide approach to building workforce capability, one where investing in people is understood as a shared responsibility and a pathway to long-term industry resilience.

Opportunity for the government to work with industry to enable system change

While the responsibility for delivering pastoral care and workforce wellbeing rests primarily with industry, there are clear opportunities for government to play a targeted, enabling role, particularly where there is evidence of market failure, or where public investment can generate strong social and economic returns.

Government is uniquely positioned to bolster strategic momentum, align incentives, and invest in shared infrastructure that would be difficult for individual firms to establish alone. This role need not be expansive or directive but rather focused on strengthening system enablers and creating the conditions for sustained sector-led progress.

Government can support the sector by:

1. Clarifying roles and expectations: Working with industry to develop a flexible, industry-owned framework for pastoral care that clearly defines roles and responsibilities for employers and training providers. Government could also reinforce this by making sure that funding and other incentives are tied to clear standards for worker support, or by elevating a future workplace-based code of practice into official rules, similar to the Education Code of Practice.

2. Exploring options to strategically align incentives: Leveraging policy, procurement, and funding tools to encourage good practice, such as tying a portion of apprenticeship funding to demonstrated support outcomes or using procurement to incentivise wraparound care on public infrastructure projects.
3. Scaling what works: Investing in the expansion of models where there is clear evidence of positive outcomes, particularly in regions or firms with limited capacity or capability. Initiatives such as Jobs and Skills Hubs offer an example of where targeted public investment can amplify efforts that are already delivering results.
4. Building the evidence base: Work with industry to support longitudinal research, improved data collection on underrepresented and diverse groups, and robust evaluation of pilot initiatives to guide future investment decisions. A stronger evidence base will help ensure that public and private resources are targeted effectively, delivering value for money and informing scalable, sustainable approaches to workforce wellbeing and support.

Summary of recommendations

The table below presents the recommendations that have been identified through our research and further developed as part of the gap analysis process. Each recommendation links explicitly to pastoral care and needs-based support in the construction and infrastructure sector. These have also informed the development of the accompanying industry capability roadmap and the companion insights report.

Table 1: Summary of recommendations

Strategic priority	Focus	Recommendation
Positioning pastoral care as strategic	Employer Capability	1 Increase employer awareness of benefits via case studies and evidence-based data. ¹
	System Change	2 Embed pastoral care as a core pillar in workforce development strategies, sector plans, and industry standards.
		3 Encourage industry leaders and associations to champion pastoral care.
		4 Invest in ongoing research aligned to building a strong business case for pastoral care.
Redefining workplace as site of care	Employer Capability	5 Promote practical examples and leadership modelling of good workplace pastoral care including the particular care of those on vocational learning pathways.
		6 Use sector voices to champion pastoral care and increase buy-in.
	System Change	7 Develop a flexible, worker-centric pastoral care framework with clear roles and responsibilities including for those between providers, learners, and employers.
		8 Formalise coordination protocols between employers and training providers; enable flexible training advisor roles. ²
		9 Model contracting and site practices that support diverse workforce needs.

¹ This recommendation is also referenced in the Cook Brothers Academy case study (ConCOVE Tūhura, 2024).

² This recommendation is also referenced in other ConCOVE resources, including Tui Tuia, which explores interventions into the VET Kaiako and training advisor system (Grant, 2024).

Strategic priority	Focus	Recommendation	
Valuing people beyond their job	Employer Capability	10	Develop short cultural competency and inclusion learning modules integrated into training and inductions.
		11	Support employers in equitable performance management, goal setting, feedback, and progression pathways that respond to diverse needs
		12	Partner with iwi, Pacific and migrant communities, and neurodiversity advocates to develop culturally responsive awareness and training initiatives.
		13	Showcase leadership and success stories to broaden inclusion and highlight business benefits of diversity.
	System Change	14	Support and grow peer support groups and networks via industry forums.
		15	Establish initiatives to monitor workforce demographic shifts to inform capability strategies. ³
Normalising open conversations	Employer Capability	16	Promote leadership and train-the-trainer programmes tailored to sector needs. ⁴
		17	Strengthen mental health literacy training; embed in early career development.
		18	Develop region-specific support service directories for employers and workers.
		19	Explore initiatives to support worker agency, including in understanding their rights, available supports, and self-advocacy in workplaces. ⁵
	System change	20	Engage SMEs to identify barriers and design flexible training models.
		21	Explore navigator-type infrastructure for employers to access wraparound support services on-site or locally. ⁶

3 ConCOVE is currently undertaking work (as part of their ConstrucTrend: Vocational Workforce Survey project) to provide WDCs and education providers with better workforce insights, including enhanced inclusion of Māori, Pacific people, and women in data.

4 Also referenced in ConCOVE's Tui Tuia report (Grant, 2024).

5 Also referenced in A Theory of Change for a Bystander culture in the New Zealand construction and infrastructure sector.

6 The recommendation to establish a national network of navigators is also referenced in (Smyth & Mischewski, 2025).

Strategic priority	Focus	Recommendation
		22 Identify and fill regional specialist support gaps (mental health, addiction, housing, cultural).
Elevating transferable skills	Employer Capability	23 Promote the importance of transferable skills with leadership examples and success stories.
		24 Develop recruitment screening for employers and guidance for supervisors and mentors.
	System Change	25 Reflect transferable skills in workforce strategies and career frameworks.
		26 Publicly recognise pastoral care skills through role rebranding, quality marks, and awards.
Building culture of growth and learning	Employer Capability	27 Provide guidance and tools for self-review and pastoral care policy development.
		28 Develop self-assessment tools to track pastoral care practices and improvements.
		29 Promote the narrative of investment in people as a long-term industry gain.
	System Change	30 Set minimum industry expectations and documentation templates, especially for SMEs.
		31 Share impact evaluations to scale effective models and reinforce pastoral care as strategic investment.
		32 Develop an outcomes framework to monitor and improve pastoral care and workforce wellbeing across the sector.

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Appendix 1: Background to the research

This synthesis report is grounded in a robust, evidence-based methodology designed to compile and reflect the breadth of perspectives and experiences across the construction and infrastructure sector. The approach was not to generate new research, but to systematically compile, validate, and present the evidence that has been gathered by Waihanga Ara Rau, Construction and Infrastructure Workforce Development Council, and ConCOVE Tūhura, reflecting their leadership in vocational education and workforce development within the sector.

Targeted document review

We undertook a rapid, targeted review of key documents related to the design, implementation, and impact of best practice pastoral care and needs-based support. This included primarily research and insights produced by Waihanga Ara Rau and ConCOVE. In addition, we included relevant documents and resources provided by other sector partners through our engagement process, ensuring a broader view of emerging practices and on-the-ground realities.

Our review focused on identifying what works at an organisational level, what is required at a system level to embed positive practices at scale, and where gaps and opportunities exist for policy and capability development. This review has informed the development of our findings and recommendations, with an emphasis on practical, scalable, and culturally responsive solutions that reflect the needs of both workers and employers across the sector.

Sector stakeholder engagement

To complement the document review, we engaged directly with stakeholders across the construction and infrastructure sector. This included conversations with 15 individuals representing a diverse mix of employers (both small and large), tertiary education organisations (TEOs), consultants, and policy stakeholders.

The interviews were designed to test the relevance of existing evidence and to surface practical insights from lived experience. Discussions were flexible and participant-led, allowing individuals to highlight areas of particular importance to their roles and contexts. Across all conversations, we focused on exploring the following areas:

- Understanding of pastoral care and needs-based support
 - Participants were invited to define these terms in their own words, reflect on their relevance to the construction and infrastructure sector, and identify the key principles, roles, and responsibilities they associate with effective support.
- Current practice and provision

- We explored how support is currently delivered within organisations, including who is involved in providing it, the structure and consistency of provision, and the types of support available, particularly for priority groups such as Māori, Pacific peoples, migrant workers, and neurodiverse individuals.
- Critical ingredients for effective practice
 - Stakeholders were asked to describe what they see as the essential components of successful support, what works in practice, and what makes a tangible difference to workers and learners.
- Barriers to implementation
 - We examined both organisational and system-level barriers that may limit the implementation or scalability of effective pastoral care. This included practical, structural, and cultural challenges.
- Mindset shifts and sector readiness
 - Participants were asked to reflect on the broader mindset and cultural shifts that may be needed to embed support practices more deeply and consistently across the sector.
- Future directions and opportunities
 - We invited stakeholders to share their views on where future efforts should be focused, including opportunities for system change, co-design, capability development, and long-term sustainability.

