

Date: 09 March 2026

Leeds Manufacturing Festival

Leeds Manufacturing Festival returns - as employers step up to tackle skills gap and rising youth unemployment



Manufacturing and engineering employers across Leeds are stepping up efforts to tackle the sector's ongoing skills shortage, as youth unemployment reaches a 10-year high.

The Leeds Manufacturing Festival returns for 2026, kicking off with a sold-out launch event this week and showcasing an expanded festival programme designed to connect businesses directly with young people and offer clear routes into careers through T Levels and industry placements, apprenticeships and graduate recruitment.

With the unemployment rate for 16-24-year-olds climbing to 16%, the highest in more than a decade, at the end of 2025, festival organisers say there has never been a more crucial time to link young people with employers who are actively recruiting and investing in future talent.

The festival is backed by a growing network of manufacturers and engineering firms, including some of the biggest names in manufacturing, as well as many smaller firms, all of whom are opening their doors to students, parents and teaching staff through site visits, careers panels and hands-on experiences. The aim is to help employers build a strong pipeline of skilled workers, while giving young people a better understanding of the vast range of career opportunities available in modern manufacturing.

Award winning Leeds firms including textiles manufacturer AW Hainsworth, medical technology businesses Brandon Medical and Kirkstall Precision Engineering, branded workwear manufacturer Involution and Normanton-based Bensons Panels are among the employers backing this year's



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festival, joining forces with a host of smaller companies in the drive to attract high quality younger candidates to the industry.

Verity Davidge, director of policy and public affairs at Make UK, which supports and champions UK manufacturing, will be the keynote speaker at this week's launch event. "Manufacturing offers diverse, rewarding, and well-paid careers, with average wages around 8% higher than across the economy as a whole," said Ms Davidge.

"Initiatives like the Leeds Manufacturing Festival have been shown to be incredibly effective in getting that message across to young people. Make UK is really pleased to be involved again this year with the festival, which goes from strength to strength in its scope and ambition. At a time when youth unemployment is rising it is more important than ever to get that message out there."

Ben Wilson, managing director of MPM Group and festival spokesperson, said: "Leeds Manufacturing Festival is about changing attitudes to manufacturing, bringing employers and students together, giving young people first-hand experience of the industry, and helping businesses connect with individuals who are keen to learn, develop and build a career.

"With employers facing a shortage of new, skilled people and young people themselves finding it more difficult than ever to secure viable and sustainable careers, it is vital that we make those connections and show that there are high-quality, long-term career opportunities available right here in our region."

In addition to Verity Davidge, speakers at Wednesday's launch event will include Elisa Henderson, early careers co-ordinator at engineering firm RSE, which has two manufacturing facilities in Leeds; and Hannah Wilson, principal of specialist engineering college UTC Leeds.

Joining them will be an industry panel featuring younger employees working in the sector: Kshamyia Mittal, a degree apprentice in IT data analysis at Schneider Electric's Leeds; Matthew Sadler, a T level student at UTC Leeds, and Leeds Beckett University graduate Matthew Kay, now head of design and marketing at packaging firm Greyhound Box.

Highlights of this year's festival include careers showcases that will enable students to meet employers, as well as company visits for FE teaching staff. A two-day STEM Fest, supported by the festival this summer, will see 2,000 students from schools across Leeds attend and the ever-popular Leeds Manufacturing Festival Awards take place in June, celebrating some of the outstanding younger people working in the industry.

For more information and the full Leeds Manufacturing Festival 2026 programme, go to www.leedsmanufacturingfestival.co.uk