

## **Response from the Regional Skills Partnership (South West Wales) to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee on Apprenticeship Pathways**

The South West Wales Regional Skills Partnership thanks the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee to the opportunity to provide evidence both verbally and in writing into the enquiry for Apprenticeship Pathways in Wales.

The four Regional Skills Partnerships in Wales work with Industry; skills training providers and key stakeholders to develop a clear understanding of employer needs now and in the future. Each partnership works within our own region but the RSP's also work together to share knowledge on the individual regional skills requirements and how these meet with Welsh Government National skills priorities. This joint working enables us to learn from good practice happening across the regions.

Apprenticeships is a key factor in ensuring that we have a skilled workforce for the future, providing a clear pathway for individuals to follow and addressing the immediate skills needs that many of our businesses across all sectors are facing.

The detailed information for this submission has been gathered from our business leaders; through our cluster groups and forums and highlights the support that businesses have for the apprenticeship programme in Wales.

### **Pathways between Apprenticeship levels.**

Recruiting apprentices and availability of apprenticeships that meets Industry needs is a key area of concern for many and there are many reasons why the pathways are not always open to all. The number of frameworks on offer which is often confusing to the individual and to the employer with pathways for development through the levels often not clear.

The advancement of new technologies and new ways of constructing homes and buildings also need to be recognised within these pathways and frameworks need to be updated to meet these changes. Regular rapid reviews of apprenticeship provision and how they meet industry need is a priority to maintain the interest of the apprentices and the commitment of the employer to the programme. There are too many examples of individuals dropping out of the programme to take up work without a qualification, an example of this is the construction sector where so many jobs are currently and will be available as we transition into the Green homes and fully retrofitted homes but individuals are not completing their training because the level 3 is too high and is a barrier for them.

Training through the apprenticeship model should also allow all apprentices to be fully ready for work additional training to make them ready to start work should be included. For example a plumber requires additional qualifications over and above the Apprenticeship training to make him/her to be able to work this used to be available through the Personal Learning Account training but this has now been removed.

Higher level and Degree level apprenticeships are welcomed by Industry and these opportunities for progression through the Apprenticeship route need to be promoted through careers guidance to ensure that everyone is aware of the opportunities to earn and learn and

gain that all important work experience as they progress their education through the workplace.

Barriers that have been highlighted include

**Geographic Barriers:** Apprenticeships are often concentrated in urban centers, making it difficult for young people in rural areas to access placements with the lack of reliable public transport in some regions makes commuting to apprenticeship sites challenging.

**Socioeconomic Barriers:** Financial constraints are a significant barrier, as some apprenticeships offer lower wages than traditional employment, making it difficult for young people from low-income backgrounds to participate.

**Awareness and Perception Issues:** There is a lack of information about apprenticeship opportunities and career progression routes among students, parents, and educators. Additionally, there is a societal bias that apprenticeships are a "second-choice" option compared to university degrees, discouraging some students from considering them

**Employer and Industry Barriers:** Some sectors offer only entry-level apprenticeships, making career progression difficult. Small businesses may lack the resources or knowledge to take on apprentices, reducing the number of opportunities available.

**Educational Barriers:** The requirement for certain qualifications, such as GCSEs or NVQ Level 3, can be a barrier for some young people. There is also a lack of support in schools and colleges for developing interview skills and preparing for apprenticeship applications

## Economy

The Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) works with industry to understand the skills needs and how the workforce of the future can be shaped through the development of good apprenticeship opportunities with clear pathways being developed from school through to further education and potentially on to higher education with the degree apprenticeship. The RSP supports the degree apprenticeship and higher level qualifications and would support the development of further degree apprenticeships in other sectors.

The reduction in funding for apprenticeships and decline in apprenticeship starts in key sectors is a concern and there needs to be a clear message to all potential apprentices and employers that there is a pathway to follow and we need our construction workers to support the new projects that are coming on line in the region including the Celtic Offshore Wind; the Celtic Freeport and other investment opportunities that will be generated as a result of those projects.

There is a need for new apprenticeship frameworks to meet our new energy and green economy and to support the retrofit economy that will be with us for some time to come but many of the current frameworks are not fit for purpose.

Assessors and trainers are key to the success of any programme and this is an area of concern where we have insufficient numbers to support the growth that we need to achieve and we need to identify ways that we can utilise the expertise of industry in undertaking some of the assessment of students. One of the key barriers in the more rural areas of

Wales is sufficient Assessors and trainers who speak Welsh and are able to deliver training through the language. Health and Social Care is a key sector where many of the apprenticeship opportunities require the individual to learn through the medium of Welsh and this is not always possible.

There were a number of comments from businesses where they felt that there was confusion in what was available and additional support could be given to sectors, the examples given are listed below:

**Engineering:** There are challenges in interpreting pathways between different engineering disciplines. Combined engineering courses in colleges require advice on specialisms and progression.

**Combustible Fuels and Renewable Energies:** This sector faces issues with training new staff, especially in regions with significant outward migration problems.

**Financial Services:** There is a lack of career pathways available for financial advisers.

**Publishing:** Smaller publishing houses are at a disadvantage compared to larger ones, affecting apprenticeship opportunities.

**Scaffolding:** This trade has fewer formal academic pathways and is often perceived as having a linear career path.

**Social Care and Social Work:** The sector face challenges in mapping out apprenticeship routes.

**Child Care and Early Years:** Similar to social care, this sector has complexities in apprenticeship pathways.

**Electrical and Mechanical Engineering:** The baseline delivery in these fields is misaligned with industry needs.

**Digital Pathways:** complexities in apprenticeship routes.

## Employer

Collaboration and joint working is key to a successful partnership and the RSP works closely with employers across the region through our Industry Cluster groups to understand their concerns, the gaps and why some apprenticeship pathways do not align with their requirements. The rising cost of employment is one of the key concerns raised by the smaller employers and their need to keep costs low are a priority. All employers are keen to support apprentices, but barriers often deter them from taking on apprentices. These barriers shared often include:

**Mismatch with Industry Needs:** Many respondents feel that current apprenticeship pathways are not aligned with the actual needs of the industry. They mention that qualifications are outdated and do not reflect current skill requirements, such as sustainability and technology use.

**Lack of Practical Elements:** Some apprenticeships are seen as too theory-heavy and lacking in practical elements.

**Emerging Sectors:** There is a gap in apprenticeship programs for rapidly evolving industries like green energy and advanced digital technologies. These sectors require more targeted apprenticeship programs to meet future demand.

**Higher-Level Apprenticeships:** There is a shortage of Level 4–7 apprenticeship opportunities in many industries, making career progression difficult.

**Employer Engagement:** Some businesses, particularly SMEs, struggle to engage with apprenticeships due to financial constraints, administrative burdens, or a lack of awareness about available funding and support.

**Regional Disparities:** Opportunities are not evenly distributed across Wales, with rural areas facing greater challenges in accessing high-quality apprenticeship placements.

**Curriculum Issues:** The curriculum is seen as failing to meet the needs of the industry, particularly in terms of meeting the needs of NET ZERO and the current job market.

**Requirement for GCSE** – the apprenticeship route requires a GCSE in Maths and English, this is seen as a barrier by employers to individuals following an apprenticeship.

**Funding and Incentives:** Lack of funding and incentives for employers to take on apprentices is a significant barrier.

**Digital Divide:** The digital divide needs to be addressed to enable young people to gain the most from apprenticeships, particularly in sectors like publishing.

**Perception and Awareness:** there is not enough promotion of the benefits of apprenticeships in schools.

### **Information about Apprenticeships.**

There are some good examples of where Apprenticeship collaborations have worked successfully and there is a clear pathway for individuals. The information shared on opportunities through Careers Wales, through the Further Education Colleges and in some schools is excellent but there are many gaps where the message is not available and the

larger companies have the resources to attend events to showcase their opportunities many of the smaller companies do not have that luxury and rely on others to share their information.

The South West RSP is managing a City Deal Skills project and were able to develop an apprenticeship framework for User Experience, this was a gap in the skills landscape in Wales and in 2023 the RSP worked with the Further Education and Higher Education establishments and with Industry to develop and launch the Level 2 – 4 Apprenticeship initially delivered through Gower College and the Level 6 Degree Apprenticeship delivered through University of Wales Trinity St David. This apprenticeship is now available to all colleges in Wales to deliver. This is one example and there are many more.

There are examples of good practice where Apprenticeship information is shared to encourage participation, this includes Industry groups with the colleges and the RSP's own Industry cluster groups; Careers Wales jobs fairs and mock interviews; work experience programmes to showcase Apprenticeship within industry sectors; employer engagement and mentor initiatives and digital platforms and outreach campaigns.

In our consultation with industry there were a number of suggestions and comments about how the apprenticeship programme had been successful or could be improved/further developed:

**Financial Incentives and Funding Support:** Monetary incentives during the lockdown were also mentioned as effective

**Simplified Administrative Processes:** Reducing bureaucracy and providing clear guidance helps SMEs navigate the apprenticeship system more easily.

**Tailored Training and Flexible Delivery:** Customized apprenticeship frameworks that align with business needs, including part-time and modular learning options, encourage participation.

**Shared Apprenticeship Scheme:** This scheme offers employment security for apprentices and allows 'host employers' to have apprentices without the complexities of employing them directly.

**Good Communication from Government and Providers:** Effective communication and support from government and training providers are essential for engaging SMEs

**On-Site Hubs:** Programs like Cyfle Building Skills Ltd's on-site hub offer ten-day placements with essential PPE and allowances, providing candidates with practical experience and online learning opportunities

**Early Promotion and Preparation:** Schools increasing visibility and promoting apprenticeships from an earlier stage can help students plan their options and choose apprenticeship pathways post-16

## **Equity of support and access for learners**

Equal access for all is important and the RSP works with Careers Wales; Employability programmes; Schools; Colleges, Employers and Industry stakeholders to ensure that the message about apprenticeships is clear including the pathways available to learners. The RSP works closely with Medr sharing information about issues being raised about the training available or sharing good practice.

In South West Wales there is an excellent example of a Shared Apprenticeship model within the construction sector. The Charity is nearing the goal of 1000 apprenticeship starts since setting up in 2012, this model enables learners to gain experience with a number of individual companies across the region and working with the colleges as the programme training providers. There are some exceptional examples of apprentices who have been through the programme and have progressed to higher qualifications for example a female learner trained as a plumber and in 2024 she qualified as a Quantity Surveyor.

Raising awareness of opportunities across the genders is key, barriers still remain in certain industries that it is very much male dominated but there needs to be an improved message that there are opportunities for all. Importantly is raising the awareness of the career pathway through the apprenticeship route to parents is also key and destroy the myth that apprenticeships are a “second choice”.

Supporting disabled learners is a priority, there is a barrier for employers being unaware of how to make the right adjustments to employ people with a disability, the information about support available is shared by the RSP to businesses but there are still some employers who are not aware.

Rurality and educational barriers were also highlighted. South West Wales has very rural communities and it is often difficult for learners to attend college without the necessary public transport and this often limits participation in apprenticeship or attending college. The requirement for GCSE or NVQ level3 can be a barrier for some individuals to access apprenticeship.

## **Welsh Government’s Role**

The RSP plays a role in the partnership between Welsh Government and Medr ensuring that the Apprenticeship Programme in Wales meets the needs of employers; enables learners to achieve their potential and to grow the workforce of Wales by sharing opportunities with the next generation. The Welsh Government and Medr have many key roles from policy making to funding of the apprenticeship programme and the RSP can be conduit between industry and the Policy makers/funders, identifying opportunities to increase the delivery or change options by working with industry and the training providers.

Many employers would like to see an expansion of the apprenticeship programme to levels 4 -7; improvement in career guidance to promote more apprenticeships alongside other ways of learning; improve the frameworks for apprenticeships to ensure they are up to date and meet industry needs; aligning policy and economic needs more construction, healthcare and



engineering apprenticeships to reduce the shortfall in those sectors and create new opportunities through the green economy.

The RSP is committed to work in partnership with Welsh Government and Medr and look forward to learning more about the recommendations of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee Inquiry into Apprenticeship Pathways.