

Response to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee on Apprenticeship Pathways

The North Wales Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) welcomes the opportunity to provide the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee with evidence to inform its inquiry into Apprenticeship pathways.

The North Wales RSP is one of four partnerships across Wales, bringing together employers, skills providers, and key local stakeholders to better understand employer skills needs at a local and regional level. In North Wales, we have identified nine priority sectors that we are actively working across to ensure skills provision aligns with industry demands, supports economic growth, and helps build a resilient workforce for the future.

The RSP recognises the value of apprenticeships in providing sustainable career pathways, addressing regional skills gaps, and supporting businesses. Below, we address each theme in the inquiry, reflecting on our regional perspective and insights into apprenticeship pathways in North Wales.

Pathways between apprenticeship levels

There are notable challenges in mapping career progression across different apprenticeship levels, and these challenges are more prominent in certain sectors. In advanced manufacturing, the diverse range of sub-sectors, each with its own specific skill requirements, makes it difficult to design apprenticeship frameworks that suit all roles and levels. Similarly, in specialised or technical roles across these sectors, clear pathways for advancement are not always well defined, creating barriers for progression.

Industries with rapidly evolving skill demands, particularly green and digital skills, as well as those with niche roles, often struggle to find apprenticeship frameworks that meet their needs or align with the specific requirements of certain occupations. This misalignment creates barriers for apprentices seeking to progress from foundation level 2 apprenticeships to higher level apprenticeships, including degree apprenticeships.

The time lag in developing apprenticeship frameworks is too long, meaning qualifications often fail to keep pace with employer needs. Adopting a more flexible approach to apprenticeship frameworks, including regular content reviews and the integration of targeted modules, could better address industry needs. This would allow for the inclusion of emerging technology areas, such as green and digital skills, within existing frameworks, ensuring apprenticeships remain relevant and future focused. We look forward to collaborating with Medr in reviewing apprenticeship frameworks to ensure they align with industry requirements.

Higher level apprenticeships (Level 3 and 4) often require apprentices to evidence competence in managerial tasks, but some job roles at these levels don't offer the opportunity to show or develop these competencies. As a result, apprentices are unable to progress from foundation level apprenticeships to higher levels, as the pathway does not align with certain job roles and responsibilities, creating a gap that is too wide.

We welcome the introduction of the new degree apprenticeship in construction, which provides valuable support for non-trade roles in the industry. However, there remains a pressing need to further expand the Degree Apprenticeship offering to address key regional demands, including areas such as Health and Social Care, Net Zero/Green and Leadership and Management.

Economy

By understanding the skill requirements of employers and collaborating with training providers, sector experts, Welsh Government, and Medr, we help shape the apprenticeship programme to address skills gaps and shortages, ensuring that apprenticeships remain relevant, accessible, and effective in supporting economic growth and workforce development.

We are working closely with the Flintshire and Wrexham Investment Zone, Anglesey Freeport and the Growth Deal portfolio to establish a clear skills pipeline into jobs, including apprenticeships. This also extends to projects linked to renewable energy, such as RWE's Awel y Môr and BP/EnBW's Morgan, Mona, and Morven offshore wind projects, ensuring the region's workforce has the necessary skills to support the transition to a low carbon economy, while also creating new opportunities.

Apprenticeships are essential for boosting skill levels, enhancing productivity, and building a diverse, highly skilled workforce that meets modern industry demands. As technological advancements, artificial intelligence, and the transition to a net zero economy drive the need for new skills, apprenticeships provide a practical solution for workforce development. They help employers bridge skills gaps, adapt to industry changes, and equip employees to meet both current and future challenges.

However, the decline in apprenticeship starts, especially in some of our key sectors like construction, health and social care, and engineering, is a growing concern. Apprenticeships serve as a critical pipeline for developing a skilled workforce, and reductions in these sectors could lead to long term skills shortages.

In construction, for example, a shrinking apprenticeship pipeline could delay the development of projects, increase costs, and limit economic growth potential.

Similarly, in engineering and manufacturing, a reduced number of apprentices could undermine innovation and competitiveness, especially in areas requiring technical expertise to address challenges such as decarbonisation and technological advancements.

In health and social care, the decline in apprenticeships could worsen workforce shortages, further straining services already under pressure. Adding to this challenge, significant workforce demands are expected over the next 3 to 5 years, but budget constraints for some training providers and long waiting lists for key qualifications pose a major regional challenge in meeting these needs.

The tourism and hospitality sector, a key driver of the local economy, could also face significant recruitment challenges, impacting visitor experiences and the region's reputation.

The decline in apprenticeship starts in 2023/24 is a troubling trend that highlights the need for targeted interventions. Without a sufficient pipeline of skilled workers, critical sectors may struggle to meet both current and future demands, hindering economic growth and the ability to adapt to emerging challenges.

In addition, training providers are facing challenges in recruiting appropriately skilled assessors in many areas including digital skills, plumbing and electrotechnical. Providers are experiencing intense competition for talent, as industry salaries are higher than those offered by providers. With limited

funding, training providers are unable to compete with these salary offers, which makes it more difficult to attract and retain the skilled assessors needed to deliver apprenticeships.

Employer

The North Wales Regional Skills Partnership works with employers across our key and growth sectors to understand their skills needs and gaps. We recognise the vital role employers play in developing and maintaining a successful apprenticeship programme. Our employer base includes both larger, anchor companies as well as SMEs. Employers who have engaged with our work have noted that they would like to offer apprenticeship opportunities but are unsure of the process and pathways available for them. Our role is to assist employers by linking them with training providers. We also report on gaps in current apprenticeship provision to Welsh Government. By engaging closely with employers of all size through our employer cluster groups and other engagement activities, we gain valuable insight into their current and future challenges. This intelligence is essential for shaping apprenticeships that effectively address industry needs and support long term workforce development.

For SMEs, apprenticeships are a valuable tool for building a skilled workforce tailored to their specific needs. SME's often face challenges in recruiting staff with the right skills and apprenticeships provide a way to bridge this gap by offering hands on, practical training aligned with the organisational requirements. This enables SMEs to develop talent from the ground up, ensuring apprentices gain the technical skills and workplace experience required to effectively contribute to their needs.

Apprenticeships play a crucial role in succession planning, particularly for SMEs with an aging workforce, by bringing in fresh talent to meet long term skills needs. They offer a cost-effective way for smaller businesses to invest in workforce development. However, many SME's have told us that they struggle to engage with the apprenticeship programme due to limited capacity, resources, or awareness. Many are simply unaware of the available apprenticeship options and who provides them, highlighting the need for targeted support and clearer guidance. In a 2022 employer survey, 86 employers reported that they and their workforce faced barriers to training. Of these, 50 said the high cost of training and the inability to spare staff time as key challenges, while 47 also highlighted difficulties in finding training providers that could offer training at suitable times and locations.

Our newly launched [North Wales Skills Portal](#) aims to simplify this process for employers by providing them with streamlined access to information, connecting them with training providers and ensuring they can take full advantage of the apprenticeship programme. The portal has been co designed in partnership with employers, individuals, training providers, Careers Wales, and other key stakeholders in the region to ensure it meets the needs of both employers and individuals.

Information about apprenticeships

There are some strong examples of collaboration between employers, colleges, schools, and Careers Wales through career focused events, employer visits to schools, and school visits to employer premises, all of which support CWRE within the Curriculum for Wales. While Careers Wales is doing commendable work in connecting employers with schools, many employers, particularly SME's, are unaware of this support and often lack the internal resources to fully engage as they would like to. As a result, we typically see the same group of employers participating, with SME's remaining underrepresented in these opportunities.

A great example of collaboration in schools across Anglesey and parts of Gwynedd is the partnership with Grwp Llandrillo Menai (GLLM), where GLLM handles the health and safety vetting required for learners to undertake work placements. This support eases the burden on schools, which often lack the internal resources to carry out this vetting process themselves. As a result, schools in these areas can offer their Year 10 students a valuable work placement/ experience.

However, one of the challenges identified in our region is the need for better coordination between schools, colleges, and employers. Learners do not always have full clarity on the possible pathways following post compulsory education. In some cases, young people are not fully aware of the apprenticeship options available, or the steps needed to access these opportunities. Clearer, more consistent messaging about apprenticeship routes and career progression pathways is crucial to help young people make more informed decisions about their futures.

The North Wales RSP were able to take part in Dr Hefin David's report into Transitions to Employment and recognise the opportunities to address some of the recommendations made in the report on authentic and meaningful experiences of the world of work and clearer learner pathways.

To help address this challenge, we have been working with Anglesey Council's Education Department on a Careers Pathway pilot programme. The Ynys Mon Career Pathways pilot programme, conducted collaboratively between the RSP, Ynys Mon Learning Service and Youth Service, all five secondary schools, Careers Wales, GwE and Grwp Llandrillo Menai aim was to enhance local career readiness, align educational paths with workforce needs, and bolster economic growth in Anglesey. Through this group, we have also delivered several pilot projects, including [Inspire to Build](#), which was recently run for a cohort of Year 12 and 13 learners across Anglesey secondary schools. These initiatives help bridge the gap between education and employment, providing young people with hands on experience and clearer career pathways. We are in the process of sharing this initiative with other local authorities across the region to encourage them to adopt a similar approach. By expanding this pilot, we hope to foster greater collaboration and create more cohesive career pathways for young people across North Wales, ensuring that all areas benefit from improved coordination.

Additionally, we have developed the [Young Person's Toolkit](#) to bring together various options and pathways available to young people at every stage of their career, guided and steered by their feedback. We continually expand and update the toolkit with new resources to ensure it remains relevant, valuable, and aligned with regional priorities, including the promotion of apprenticeships as a key opportunity.

The Welsh Government's commitment to ensuring apprenticeships contribute to the goals of a greener, more inclusive economy resonates with the work we are doing in North Wales. As we focus on areas such as green skills and digital skills, apprenticeships are a key tool in building the skills base to support these goals.

Equity of support and access for learners:

Ensuring equal access to apprenticeships for all young people is crucial, and we are committed to working closely with training providers, Careers Wales, employers, and key stakeholders to raise awareness of apprenticeship opportunities. With the establishment of Medr, we are confident that career pathways across the entire tertiary system will become clearer, enabling learners to better

understand the opportunities available locally and help them make informed decisions about their futures.

We are very supportive of the Supported Shared Apprenticeship programme running in North Wales through the partnership between Grwp Llandrillo Menai and Agoriad. This initiative provides valuable opportunities for individuals to develop skills and gain meaningful employment, aligning with our commitment to inclusive and sustainable workforce development. We recognise the positive impact this programme has on both apprentices and employers and hope to see it continue and expand in the future.

However, several barriers still exist that limit access to apprenticeships for some people. In rural areas, unreliable public transport makes it difficult for individuals to access apprenticeships and employment, particularly in sectors with irregular working hours or shift work, such as hospitality, health and social care, manufacturing, and food services. This issue also affects apprentices who need to travel to college on a day release basis as part of their training programme.

Additionally, some providers require apprentices to hold specific GCSE grades in Welsh/English and Maths, which excludes otherwise capable applicants. Employers have noted that many skilled tradespeople currently in the workforce would not have been able to access their apprenticeships under these entry requirements.

Currently, junior apprenticeships are not available in North Wales, but introducing them could provide vital early entry opportunities in industries such as construction, engineering, and some areas of social care, all of which are facing skills shortages. These apprenticeships would offer structured, on the job learning from an early age, which could help reduce the growing number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Expanding these pathways would also foster greater equity of access, particularly in areas or among demographic groups where apprenticeship opportunities are currently limited. By ensuring that all young people, regardless of background or location, can access these opportunities, we can better equip them with the skills necessary for successful careers.

Addressing these barriers is essential for creating a more inclusive and accessible apprenticeship system for all learners.

The Welsh Government's role

The RSP plays a vital role in collaboration with Welsh Government and Medr in ensuring the apprenticeship programme meets the needs of employers and the wider economy. We focus on identifying skills gaps, supporting the development and improvement of relevant qualifications by utilising our local labour market intelligence.

Despite policy support, challenges remain in making the apprenticeship programme fully accessible and effective. Some businesses, especially SMEs, are reluctant to take on apprentices due to concerns about administration, funding, or a lack of awareness of available support. In rural areas, transport and connectivity issues can make it difficult for learners to access workplaces or training providers. Entry requirements, such as specific GCSE grades in Maths and English/Welsh, can also exclude capable individuals who may thrive in practical, work based learning.

We look forward to the outcome of the inquiry to help inform development of the future apprenticeship programme for Wales.