

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee
Inquiry into Apprenticeship Pathways

1. Background:

- 1.1 In relation to its skills agenda, Welsh Government is committed to a regional approach. Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) advise Welsh Government on the strategic direction of travel for skills and make recommendations on areas of growth or decline, based on robust evidence and strong engagement with employers and regional stakeholders.
- 1.2 Four Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) operate across Wales (North, Mid, Southwest, and Southeast) and act as a vital interface to represent the skills and occupational demands of employers and deliver labour market intelligence to Welsh Government, setting regional priorities to inform the deployment of employability and skills funding.
- 1.3 RSPs deliver activities which are articulated through a Welsh Government grant funded programme of work. Funding is offered on an 'equal share' basis and regardless of the size of the region (both population and economic output).
- 1.4 Hosted by Newport City Council, the Cardiff Capital Region Skills Partnership (CCRSP) undertakes the role of the RSP across the 10 Local Authorities of SE Wales and workstreams are steered by the CCR Employment and Skills Board.
- 1.5 Underpinning the work of the CCR Employment and Skills Board are a broad range of employer led priority sector cluster groups that are significant to the regional economy. The cluster groups consider the skills needs for the region and make recommendations to the Board.
- 1.6 Launched in November 2022, the CCRSP has produced a 3-year Employment and Skills Plan 2022-25 which is used to shape the skills priorities for employers across the region and influence the provision offered through the FE and Work Based Learning sectors. The Plan has been informed through the triangulation of labour market intelligence, research and employer engagement and has been shaped by the CCR Employment and Skills Board.

2. Introduction:

- 2.1 The CCRSP is fully supportive of Welsh Governments initial ambition to create 125,000 apprenticeships over the Senedd term and the desire to increase opportunities for people of all ages and background to develop transferable skills in the workplace.
- 2.2 Through the Employment and Skills Plan 2022-25, CCRSP has committed to broaden the apprenticeship offer at higher levels by responding to government policy. Here, the CCRSP is:
 - Using evidence to influence the development of new apprenticeship frameworks at all levels.

- Increasing apprenticeship uptake across priority sectors (including Higher and Degree Apprenticeships) and building on the successful Aspire, Y Prentis and Sgil Cymru Shared Apprenticeships models.
 - Supporting an increase in the recruitment of trainers and assessors to ensure capacity within post-16 work based learning.
- 2.3 The CCRSP recognises the value of apprenticeships in providing sustainable career pathways, addressing regional skills gaps, and supporting businesses across the southeast Wales region. The CCRSP welcomes the opportunity to provide the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee with evidence to inform its inquiry into apprenticeship pathways.

3. **Pathways between apprenticeship levels:**

- 3.1 As a result of employer and stakeholder engagement activities we are aware that there are challenges in mapping out career routes through the different apprenticeship levels, from a junior apprenticeship to a degree apprenticeship. This is more profound in certain sectors of the regional economy. Linked to this, junior apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships are generally in their infancy and as a result they are only available in certain sectors. CCRSP has championed the expansion of degree apprenticeships, and particularly into the construction industry, however, there is some way to go before there is full sector coverage.
- 3.2 Although there has been a rationalisation of apprenticeship frameworks, the volume of pathways available to individuals and employers can be confusing and unclear. Sectors like advanced materials and manufacturing can have a diverse range of sub sectors which can make it difficult to develop frameworks to suit all roles and levels. There are also age restrictions in sectors such as care where younger learners can be prevented from engaging in certain activities thus preventing progression. CCRSP is also aware that certain apprenticeship frameworks have eligibility restrictions on entry which may also pose challenges for progression.
- 3.3 CCRSP is aware of challenges presented due to the speed of transformation that is taking place within certain industries, for example, digital technology and net zero. Rapidly evolving skills demands faced by employers, and many niche roles, mean that it is very difficult to ensure that apprenticeship frameworks and pathways have currency. Developing these frameworks and pathways can take a long time and through specialist organisations. CCRSP would welcome innovation to ensure that apprenticeship developments keep at pace with industry need. Adopting a more flexible approach to reviewing frameworks and pathways could help address emerging sector developments and better embrace the needs of industry. Naturally, Medr will have a key role to play in addressing such issues into the future.

4. **Economy:**

- 4.1 The Regional Skills Partnerships have a key role to play to ensure that apprenticeship frameworks and pathways align and support the needs of industry. The CCRSP works with employers, cluster groups and key stakeholders to better understand skills needs and this labour market intelligence (LMI) is used to influence the development and deployment of apprenticeship programmes.
- 4.2 Apprenticeships play a crucial role in addressing skills gaps and shortages faced by employers from large multinational organisations to SMEs and micro-organisations. Through apprenticeships, employers and learners gain access to high quality learning and development, accredited qualifications and delivered by quality assured providers. Apprenticeships are an essential component of post-16 education and training and help boost skills, enhance productivity and develop a workforce to meet the needs of industry.
- 4.3 CCRSP is also aware that training providers often face challenges in recruiting appropriately skilled assessors across a range of sectors, particularly those who can operate through the Welsh language. As a result, talent acquisition is intense and competitive. The role of the assessor forms a critical component in the delivery of high-quality apprenticeship programmes.
- 4.4 CCRSP is aware of the challenges presented through budget reductions which is a concern for employers and stakeholders alike, particularly those operating in high demand sectors such as construction, engineering and health and social care. A decline in apprenticeship starts is likely to have a negative impact on businesses as programmes offer a critical pipeline for developing a skilled workforce. Reducing the apprenticeship budget could lead to long term skills shortages within sectors that are already experiencing significant skills challenges.

5. **Employers:**

- 5.1 The CCRSP works with a range of employers across the southeast Wales region, particularly those that operate in key and growth sectors. CCRSP works to better understand skills gaps and shortages and then brokers solutions in collaboration with Welsh Government and stakeholders. It is fair to say that the RSPs play a critical role when influencing the development and deployment of post-16 education and training, including apprenticeships, and on behalf of employers.
- 5.2 The role of employers is critical when ensuring the apprenticeships are industry-led and help address their skills challenges. Within the southeast Wales region, the CCR Employment and Skills Board, and associated cluster groups, have played an important role to support the development and roll out of the successful regional shared apprenticeship schemes including Y Prentis, Aspire and Sgil Cymru. Similarly, the CCRSP has played an active role in broadening the regions degree apprenticeship offer to employers including the recent expansion into construction and rail engineering.

- 5.3 CCRSP strongly believes that employers play a key role in developing and maintaining fit for purpose apprenticeship programmes. In this regard, RSPs conduct an annual occupational trends exercise in collaboration with employers and cluster groups. The purpose of the exercise is to identify job roles that are growing, priority or in decline. This LMI is then used by Welsh Government to inform their investment in National Occupational Standards (NOS) which provide the 'building blocks' for vocational qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks.
- 5.4 The southeast Wales region is comprised of large anchor companies, SMEs and micro-organisations. Many employers actively utilise the apprenticeship frameworks and pathways that are currently available. However, employers often voice a desire to engage with programmes but are unsure of the process and pathways available to them, particularly in fast paced sectors where transformation is constant. Here, the Business Wales portal provides a useful source of information but awareness raising needs to be prioritised and there is a fundamental requirement to ensure that website content is up to date and reliable.
- 5.5 Focussing specifically on SMEs, apprenticeships provide a valuable tool for building a skilled and competent workforce. Apprenticeships provide a cost-effective mechanism to address some of the recruitment challenges faced by SMEs and offer significant opportunities through succession planning. However, many SMEs face significant financial and operational challenges which can negatively impact their ability to recruit apprentices. SMEs can struggle with the cost of employing an apprentice, and therefore, additional funding or targeted support would help small businesses overcome barriers and engage with programmes.

6. Information about apprenticeships:

- 6.1 Within southeast Wales, there are many strong examples of good practice between careers services, schools, colleges and employers in terms of promoting apprenticeships and the provision of meaningful work experience. The CCRSP has produced a range of resources, including priority sector careers guides, to raise awareness of the job opportunities and pathways across the region.
- 6.2 The work of Careers Wales and FE colleges is naturally central when promoting information on apprenticeships, for example through employer presentations, site visits and employer workshops which all support CWRE within the Curriculum for Wales. Careers Wales is working hard to connect employers with schools, however, some employers, and particularly SMEs, seem unaware of the support on offer and lack the internal resources to fully engage. Similarly, work needs to continue to ensure learners acquire knowledge on the pathways available following post compulsory education and to ensure informed choices can be made.

- 6.3 'Building on approaches to careers education, information, advice and guidance to address issues of sector perception and promote key sectors as viable career options' is a cross-cutting theme identified through the CCRSP Employment and Skills Plan. In this regard, CCRSP and Careers Wales have developed a collaborative Action Plan to support delivery. The action plan very much promotes parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways, particularly ensuring young people and their parents are aware of apprenticeship pathways and are supported to access them as appropriate.
- 6.4 CCRSP is fully aware of the importance of meaningful work experience and has previously supported approaches to establish a national strategy for work experience in Wales. CCRSP would support developments linked to the reintroduction of a centralised approach to work experience and has actively pursued discussions with stakeholders. At present, the current approach appears fragmented, and as a result CCRSP would support a targeted offer of tailored work experience, particularly for those at risk of becoming NEET, and as set out in the 'Transitions to Employment Report' (Dr Hefin David, 2023).
- 6.5 Focussing on good practice within the region, the 'Cardiff Commitment' is helping young people to understand the opportunities available to them across the Cardiff area. Led by Cardiff Council, the initiative offers information, experiences, opportunities and skills to support young people progress their careers and learning journey. Similarly, the 'Blaenau Gwent STEM Facilitation Project' has established a coordinated programme of support, centred on industry, within the Tech Valleys. The project, working with schools, seeks to raise the awareness of opportunities among children, young people and wider communities to enhance ambitions.
- 6.6 Sharing information and good practice to promote apprenticeships and meaningful work experience is a collaborative responsibility across a range of stakeholders including Welsh Government, Medr, Careers Wales and providers of education and training. Effective approaches should help learners to access the right advice and guidance to support their apprenticeship journey.

7. Equity of support and access for learners:

- 7.1 CCRSP holds the view that equal access to apprenticeships for all young people is crucial, and we are committed to working closely with Careers Wales, Medr and Welsh Government to raise awareness of apprenticeship opportunities. CCRSP remains committed to supporting an all-age apprenticeship programme which is inclusive to all.
- 7.2 CCRSP has continued to support the successful shared apprenticeship programmes that operate across southeast Wales, and as led by Y Prentis, Aspire Blaenau Gwent and Sgil Cymru. These initiatives provide valuable opportunities for individuals to develop skills and gain meaningful employment and aligned to our commitment to inclusivity. CCRSP recognises the positive impact these programmes have on both apprentices and employers and hope to see them continue and expand in the future.

- 7.3 CCRSP is working to address issues related to parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways and we are fully aware that apprenticeships are often considered an inferior route when compared to formal academic routes, particularly by individuals who have influence over the decisions made by young people i.e. parents, teachers and carers. CCRSP is also aware of issues related to gender imbalance in certain sectors, for example, construction, engineering and manufacturing. More needs to be done to address the gender imbalance that exists across the key sectors of the regional economy.
- 7.4 Supporting disabled learners remains a priority for key stakeholders but employers are often unaware of the support available and the reasonable adjustments that can be made to help individuals find employment. In this regard, the CCRSP operates as an intermediary and cascades information across its networks.
- 7.5 Within southeast Wales, barriers exist in relation to rurality and transport links, and these can limit access to apprenticeships for some. In rural areas, for example those around the heads of the valleys, public transport can be unavailable or unreliable which poses challenges for potential apprentices. The antisocial nature of certain industries, for example, tourism and hospitality or health and social care further compounds this. This can also affect apprentices who need to travel to college on day release to progress their learning. Additionally, the lack of reliable digital connectivity in some parts of Wales further increases challenges, limiting access to roles that offer hybrid or home-working options. It also creates barriers to studying remotely, making it more difficult to fully utilise the blended learning models offered within apprenticeship programmes.
- 7.6 Some apprenticeship programmes may require stringent entry requirements, for example, specific GCSE grades for English and Maths. On occasions, this can exclude capable applicants in accessing programmes. Employers have noted that many skilled tradespeople currently in the workforce would not have been able to access their apprenticeships under these entry requirements. Addressing these barriers is essential for creating a more inclusive and accessible apprenticeship system for learners.

8. **The Welsh Government's role:**

- 8.1 Through an agreed collaborative approach with Welsh Government and Medr, CCRSP plays a key role to ensure that the apprenticeship programme in Wales meets the needs of employers and enables learners to achieve their potential. A broad range of stakeholders also have a role to play to both develop and deploy apprenticeship programmes.
- 8.2 Historically, Welsh Government has responded well to ensure that apprenticeship programmes are fit for purpose, however, the speed of the response can sometimes present challenges for employers. As discussed earlier, the transformation that is taking place within certain industries, for example, digital technology and net zero and rapidly evolving skills demands faced by employers ensures that frameworks and pathways must quickly evolve to maintain currency.

- 8.3 CCRSP would welcome innovation to ensure that apprenticeship developments keep at pace with industry need. Adopting a more flexible approach to reviewing frameworks and pathways could help address emerging sector developments and better embrace the needs of industry.
- 8.4 Into the future, CCRSP anticipates a close collaborative working relationship with both Welsh Government and Medr when responding to the skills priorities for employers. From August 2024, Medr became responsible for the operational policy and delivery of apprenticeships across Wales. This includes transforming the Welsh Government's Apprenticeship Policy Statement into deliverable actions to meet learner and economy needs.
- 8.5 Addressing identified challenges is essential to ensuring that apprenticeships remain a viable and attractive option for skills development in Wales. The CCRSP is committed to working in partnership with Welsh Government and Medr and looks forward to learning more about the recommendations of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee Inquiry into Apprenticeship Pathways.