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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP22

Evidence from: Mid Wales Regional Skills Partnership



Mid Wales Regional Skills Response to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee on Apprenticeship Pathways

Mid Wales Regional Skills Partnership have consulted with a number of key businesses and stakeholders in the region who currently employ an apprentice as part of their workforce. They were presented with a series of preset questions from which the RSP was able to draw out the challenges for the current pathway.

Below is an executive summary that provides an overview of the responses from businesses in Mid Wales. Appendix 1 provides further details of responses.

Executive Summary

Pathways Between Apprenticeship Levels

Businesses in Mid Wales are encountering difficulties in creating clear career routes through different apprenticeship levels. This challenge is particularly evident when transitioning to degree apprenticeships, leading to uncertainty and hindering career progression for apprentices.

Sector and Recruitment Challenges

The consultation highlighted several sector-specific recruitment challenges. In engineering, the absence of degree apprenticeships limits local opportunities, potentially leading to a skills gap. Mechanical and welding fields suffer from a scarcity of Level 2 apprenticeships, while electronics apprenticeships are virtually non-existent due to a lack of teaching resources. Additionally, the revised four-year plumbing and electrical qualification has been criticized for not meeting industry needs and being too long.

Financial constraints, exacerbated by changes in National Insurance rates, further complicate the recruitment and retention of apprentices.

Attracting Apprentices

Businesses are eager to attract more people into apprenticeships, but the lack of degree apprenticeships in the region affects career progression and diminishes the appeal of apprenticeship programmes.

Service Industries

Particularly those in high paced office environments, find it challenging to integrate apprenticeships into their operations. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) struggle

to balance the immediate demands of their business with the long-term benefits of apprenticeship programs, often due to limited resources and time.

Course Availability and Distance

In rural Mid Wales, businesses face significant challenges related to course availability and distance. Suitable courses are often located far from the businesses, forcing them to send apprentices to other regions. This issue is compounded by delays in course start dates, which do not always align, causing further disruptions.

Local Authority Challenges

Local authorities in Wales face several challenges with apprenticeship pathways. There are fewer degree apprenticeships available compared to England, and accessing training in rural areas is difficult due to travel distances. Additionally, differences in apprenticeships between England and Wales complicate the transfer of apprenticeships. Funding constraints also limit the creation of new vacancies and the support for apprenticeship routes.

Progression Routes

A lack of clear progression routes from one apprenticeship level to the next is a common issue. Businesses struggle to find providers for certain apprenticeships, and there is often a lack of follow-on qualifications, forcing apprentices to switch providers. This inconsistency hinders the development of a seamless career pathway.

Customising Learning

Local apprenticeship provisions often do not offer the comprehensive and versatile learning experiences needed for a well-rounded education. Learning to cover all necessary skills is seen as beneficial but is not always available.

Social Care Apprenticeships

While some social care apprenticeships, such as the pathway from Health Care Support Worker to registered nurse, have clear routes, others face significant challenges. For example, mapping out career routes for domestic care workers into social care roles is difficult. One health board highlighted the lack of funding for new vacancies and the operational costs associated with supporting apprenticeship routes as major barriers.

Sector-Specific Challenges

Certain sectors face unique challenges with apprenticeship pathways. Engineering and manufacturing, despite strong regional employment, continue to struggle. In

construction, apprentices often leave for higher paid jobs after initial training, discouraging companies from taking on new apprentices. Advanced manufacturing suffers from inconsistent higher education provision, and technical support roles are particularly challenging. Environmental health degree apprenticeships are available in England but not in Wales, and social care and therapy roles face low uptake due to low wages.

General Support and Challenges

Feedback on the support for engaging with apprenticeship programs is mixed. Some businesses feel supported, while others experience limited communication from training providers and find the recruitment process disjointed. Local authorities express a need for more guidance on providers and qualifications, as well as resources to promote apprenticeships.

Accessibility

Accessibility to apprenticeship pathways is a significant issue, particularly in rural areas. Poor public transport networks make it difficult for young people to access workplaces or colleges, especially for late evening classes. Apprenticeships are often perceived as a second choice compared to A-levels and university routes, and efforts are needed to change this mindset. The availability of apprenticeship pathways is also less in rural areas compared to urban centres.

Additional Barriers

Further barriers include the inability of FE providers to deliver courses to small numbers of learners, the lack of part-time provision in Mid Wales, and transport issues for non-drivers. These challenges limit the range of apprenticeship options available to young people in rural areas.

Welsh Government Role

Although policies have supported apprentices across the region, many of the businesses and communities in rural Mid Wales still face the same challenge of travel and access to provision. Rural businesses (SME) raise the concerns relating to resources required to support apprenticeships and the lack of incentives to recruit apprentices. Additionally, the longevity of contracts in the current economic climate, particularly in the construction sector is also a barrier.

The role of Welsh Government alongside Medr and the RSP creates a strong partnership that engages meaningfully and provides a platform from which business feel heard. This partnership also has the ability to make meaningful change. It is

imperative that businesses within our region can see the impacts of their engagement therefore feedback from Welsh Government through the RSP of developments and changes are key to building confidence and developing a stronger economy.

Appendix 1 - Detailed Responses.

Pathways Between Apprenticeship Levels

The consultation with businesses and stakeholders in Mid Wales revealed several challenges in mapping out career routes through different apprenticeship levels, from junior to degree apprenticeships.

Sector and Recruitment Challenges

Businesses face broader sector challenges and recruitment difficulties, with specific issues including:

- Engineering: The lack of degree apprenticeships limits opportunities for aspiring engineers to gain necessary qualifications and experience locally, potentially leading to a skills gap.
- Mechanical and Welding: Limited choices for Level 2 apprenticeships.
- Electronics: Absence of apprenticeships due to a lack of teaching resources, making it difficult to offer and sustain programs.

Training and Support

While some businesses find training and support adequate, others, particularly in the plumbing and heating industry, have concerns about the revised four-year plumbing qualification not being fit for purpose. Additionally, changes in National Insurance rates have made it financially impractical for some businesses to take on apprentices.

Attracting Apprentices

The lack of degree apprenticeships in the region affects career progression and makes it challenging to attract apprentices. Service-based businesses struggle to integrate apprenticeships into high-paced environments, and SMEs find it difficult to dedicate time to apprentices due to the immediate needs of the business.

Course Availability and Distance

Businesses face challenges related to course availability and distance, particularly in rural areas. Finding suitable courses within a reasonable distance is problematic, leading some businesses to send apprentices to other regions. Delays in course start dates due to mismatches between career routes and course availability are also an issue.

Local Authority Challenges

Local authorities face several challenges, including:

- Limited degree apprenticeships in Wales compared to England.
- Difficulty accessing training in rural areas due to travel distances.
- Challenges in transferring apprenticeships between England and Wales due to different standards.
- Efforts to formalize informal career pathways with the help of funding.

Progression Routes

There is a lack of clear progression routes from one apprenticeship level to the next. Businesses struggle to find providers for certain apprenticeships, and apprenticeships do not always align with local authority roles. Starting with lower-level apprenticeships and moving to specialized qualifications is necessary, but providers not offering follow-on qualifications require apprentices to switch providers.

Customising Learning

Local provisions often do not offer the full package or versatility needed for a well-rounded learning experience. Customizing learning to cover all necessary skills is beneficial.

Social Care Apprenticeships

While there are clear routes for some apprenticeships, such as from Health Care Support Worker to registered nurse, issues remain in mapping appropriate career routes across multiple counties. These challenges are related to a lack of funding for new vacancies and the operational costs associated with supporting apprenticeship routes, including paid time to study and mentor costs. Additionally, there is a lack of appropriate part-time educational provision locally to support mapping across different apprenticeship opportunities.

Challenges in Different Careers/Sectors

The consultation revealed a general consensus that mapping out career routes through different apprenticeship levels is more difficult in some sectors than others. Respondents identified several specific sectors facing significant challenges:

Engineering & Manufacturing

Despite strong regional employment, challenges persist in mapping career routes. The lack of degree apprenticeships and inconsistent higher education provision are notable issues.

Construction

Apprentices often leave for higher pay after initial training, discouraging companies from taking on new apprentices. This high turnover rate complicates career mapping and retention.

Advanced Manufacturing

There is an inconsistent provision of higher education throughout Wales, making it difficult to establish clear career pathways.

Technical Support

This area is identified as particularly challenging, with businesses struggling to map out effective apprenticeship routes.

Electrical Engineering

Businesses in Mid Wales face difficulties without access to courses out of county, limiting the availability of local training options.

Environmental Health

Degree apprenticeships are available in England but not in Wales, creating a disparity in opportunities.

Trading Standards, Public Health, Planning & Civil Engineering

There is a lack of funded degree-level apprenticeships linked to local authority roles, hindering career progression in these fields.

Social Care and Therapies

Fields like Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, and Radiography face challenges due to low wages and low uptake in social care roles.

Inconsistent Higher Education Provision

This issue is noted across various sectors, particularly in Advanced Manufacturing and technical fields, affecting the ability to map out clear career routes.

Support for Apprenticeship Pathways

Businesses have mixed feelings about how well apprenticeship pathways support their needs and contribute to filling skills gaps in the Welsh economy:

General Support

- Some businesses feel apprenticeship pathways do not support their needs at all.
- Others emphasize the importance of apprenticeships in maintaining a pipeline of talent, especially with an ageing workforce.

Sector-Specific Insights

- **Construction:** Apprenticeships are crucial for passing down skills from an ageing workforce to new generations.
- **Engineering:** Apprenticeships help develop local talent and contribute to the local economy, despite difficulties in recruiting skilled staff.
- **ICT:** Success in recruiting lower-level ICT apprentices who progress to higher qualifications and employment, but struggles in recruiting for higher-level specialist roles.
- **Health and Social Care:** Apprenticeship opportunities play a vital role in meeting the needs of local authorities and health boards. The Joint Health and Social Care Apprenticeship pathway between Pembrokeshire County Council and the Hywel Dda University Health Board is a good example, with all apprentices retained across the local authority and health board.

Challenges and Limitations

- Some businesses struggle to dedicate time to apprentices due to high workloads.
- Apprenticeship schemes only partially address skills gaps, with larger gaps in experienced engineering staff due to historical apprenticeship gaps.
- Availability of suitable courses and travel distances for some courses result in continued skills gaps in certain areas.

Local Authority Perspectives

- Apprenticeship pathways are valuable for attracting young people, but availability and travel distances for suitable courses are issues.

- Easier pathways for lower-level roles, but difficulties in recruiting for higher-level specialist roles, leading to skills gaps in areas like ICT, Environmental work, Civil Engineering, Planning, and Occupational Therapy.

General Observations

- Apprenticeships are seen as key to the workforce pipeline, enabling young people to remain within the county.
- Current apprenticeship pathways cover the basics but could be more detailed to better meet business needs.

Support for Engaging with the Apprenticeship Programme

The consultation revealed mixed feedback from businesses regarding the support they receive to engage with the apprenticeship programme.

Lack of Support

Some businesses feel they do not receive sufficient support at all. The recruitment of apprentices is described as disjointed and not well supported, with costs often placed on the employer, making it challenging to participate in the programme.

Positive Feedback

On the other hand, some businesses feel the support is good and flexible. However, even among those who view the support positively, the process is often seen as long-winded, and providers are not always proactive in their engagement.

Communication Issues

Limited communication from facilities offering apprenticeship training courses is a common concern. While engagement exists, there is a need to make the programme more accessible and exciting for young people in Mid Wales.

Local Authority Perspectives

Local authorities also face challenges in engaging with the apprenticeship programme. There is no regular opportunity for representatives to communicate directly with those developing apprenticeship programmes. More support is needed due to the wide-ranging nature of apprenticeships, and there are unrealistic expectations on teams to know everything about all apprenticeships. Additional support and guidance on providers and qualifications would be helpful, along with resources to promote apprenticeships both internally and externally.

Health Board Example

Pembrokeshire Council offers an adult social care apprenticeship programme and participated in a pilot with the Health Board to establish a Health and Social Care apprenticeship route. However, the joint programme cannot currently run due to funding issues in both the Health Board and Local Authorities, particularly the cost of backfill and paid study time. Additional funding to support these gaps would strengthen the offer and collaborative working between local large organisations and the local authority.

General Observations

Simplifying the apprenticeship programme to make it easier to understand would be beneficial. While some businesses are involved to some extent, there is a general consensus that there is room for improvement in the support provided.

Accessibility of Apprenticeship Pathways in Wales

The consultation explored the accessibility of apprenticeship pathways for young people in Wales, identifying several barriers that affect specific demographic groups and geographical areas.

General Perception

Apprenticeships, once a popular option, are now less talked about unless promoted by organizations due to funding constraints. This shift in perception has impacted their accessibility and attractiveness to young people.

Rural Transport Issues

One of the significant barriers is the difficulty in accessing workplaces or colleges, especially for late evening classes. In some cases, higher education requires up to 90 minutes of travel each way, making it impractical for many young people.

Demographic Barriers in Powys

Many young people in Powys prefer going to Shrewsbury rather than staying in Powys for learning opportunities. This preference highlights a demographic barrier where local options are less appealing or accessible.

Perception of Apprenticeships

Schools often view apprenticeships as a "second" choice compared to A-levels and university routes. Efforts are needed to change this mindset and promote apprenticeships as a viable and valuable career path.

Rural vs. Urban Availability

Apprenticeship pathways are less available in rural areas compared to densely populated areas of Wales. This disparity limits the opportunities for young people in rural regions to access apprenticeship programs.

Location of Colleges

The main colleges offering apprenticeships are limited, with Newtown being a primary location in Powys. This centralization restricts access for those living in more remote areas.

Challenges in Rural Powys

The effective choice of apprenticeship routes is limited due to the location of companies versus schools and colleges. This geographical mismatch makes it challenging for young people to find suitable apprenticeship opportunities locally.

Powys County Council Initiatives

Powys County Council is making efforts to ensure apprenticeship pathways are accessible to all young people. This includes support in the application process and guaranteed interviews for care-experienced applicants. However, transport issues due to poor and costly public transport networks remain a significant barrier.

Ceredigion County Council Challenges

In Ceredigion, fewer apprenticeships are available compared to England, with limited providers. Rurality and lack of public transport create barriers, especially for those who cannot drive. Reliable broadband is also an issue for remote working roles. Limited learners for specific qualifications make it difficult to find training providers, leading to reliance on larger, distant providers and increased costs.

Additional Barriers

Further education (FE) providers in Powys often cannot deliver to small numbers, limiting the range of options available. Part-time provision is not always available in West Wales, particularly for roles within Allied Health Professionals. The lack of local travel provision can be a barrier for non-drivers or those without access to a car.