

Senedd Cymru

Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig

Ymchwiliad: Llwybrau prentisiaeth

Cyf: AP33

Ymateb gan: Horticultural Trades Association (HTA)

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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP33

Evidence from: Horticultural Trades Association (HTA)



Senedd Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry into apprenticeship pathways – HTA submission

January 2025

Executive summary

1. The Welsh Government has an opportunity to change the perception of jobs in the horticulture sector and address critical gaps. It is important to champion careers in horticulture as vital green growth jobs and green skills that can inspire future generations to pursue rewarding and diverse careers. Gardening and green space engagement in schools should be recognised as STEM subjects and integrated into compulsory education. Additionally, apprenticeships and higher-level qualifications are important for continued study, but increased support and engagement with SMEs is needed to make apprenticeships more attractive and accessible. Ensuring the next generation of horticulturists in the UK is essential to the industry's future prospects.

Introduction

2. The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) represents 85 member businesses in Wales and over 1200 members across the entire supply chain of the UK's environmental horticulture and gardening industry - this includes garden centres, tree and plant growers, landscapers, manufacturers and service providers. Environmental horticulture is a sector of over 90% SMEs and many family-owned businesses, supporting 722,000 jobs, contributing £38 billion to GDP and delivering nearly £8.4 billion in tax revenues. We are the original green industry, and the gardens, green spaces and plants that we grow, nurture and maintain underpin the UK's environmental targets, net-zero delivery and climate change mitigation. There is more information on the sector's contributions and challenges are outlined in our *Environmental Horticulture Growth Strategy: A vision for Wales*¹.
3. The HTA welcomes the opportunity to feed into this inquiry into apprenticeship pathways. In 2019, Wales's environmental horticulture and landscaping industry supported contributions of £1.125 billion to UK GDP, £249 million in taxes to the exchequer and supported the employment of 31,168 people¹. There is huge potential to grow the sector, but to do this it is crucial to address the current shortcomings of the skills system and work with industry to establish the future skills needs of the sector.

Pathways between apprenticeship levels

4. Currently, the offering of horticultural apprenticeships is limited, with some junior apprenticeships being available post-16; however, further investment into degree apprenticeships is required.

¹ Environmental Horticulture Growth Strategy: A vision for Wales (HTA, 2024) <https://hta.org.uk/policy/wales>

Economy and Employers

5. Businesses may not have the work available to support an apprentice full-time or be able to dedicate the time to teaching on the job. Alternative options, such as [flexible apprenticeships](#), could be explored to enable SMEs to access apprentices. This could be particularly valuable for sectors with seasonal peaks and troughs, such as agriculture and horticulture.
6. Apprenticeships have huge potential for the sector, for both attracting new recruits and upskilling existing staff, but are currently underutilised. HTA Wages & Labour Benchmarking Survey [2021] found that apprentices made up just 1% of total people employed by member grower and garden centres in the UK. The majority of our members are SMEs with limited resources and time. Employers require further support and greater access to local training providers to ensure they can provide the most mutually beneficial apprenticeship opportunities.
7. The industry is improving wages and conditions to change its historical perception of being poorly paid. Many businesses are reaching out to schools and colleges to showcase the career opportunities they offer. More businesses need to be encouraged to do the same and engage with local schools and colleges to raise awareness and help students make informed career decisions.

Information about apprenticeships

8. It is important to champion careers in horticulture as vital green growth jobs and green skills that can inspire future generations to pursue rewarding and diverse careers. Gardening and green space engagement in schools should be recognised as STEM subjects and integrated into compulsory education. To increase awareness of careers in environmental horticulture amongst secondary school pupils there is a need to make stronger links between academic subjects and their applications for environmental horticulture. To facilitate this, the government should work with the industry to ensure that teachers are aware of careers in horticulture and how academic subjects are linked to various roles within the sector. Improving interest in working in the sector is crucial to driving interest from students in horticultural apprenticeships. When you search 'Horticulture' in the Careers Wales search bar² there are no results which creates confusion for employers and potential apprentices.
9. Environmental horticulture supports the delivery of 7 out of the 10 UK government's goals in the Environmental Improvement Plan.³ So, for environmentally minded people, a career in horticulture can offer them the opportunity to play a key role in improving the environment. A *Speakers for Schools* survey found that 85% of 15-18 year olds

² <https://careerswales.gov.wales/search/site?keys=horticulture>

³ Delivering the UK's Environmental Improvement Plan through the Value of Plants (HTA, 2023)
<https://hta.org.uk/value-of-plants>

surveyed said they care about an organisation's carbon footprint, and over a third (36%) are planning to research an organisation's green credentials before applying for a job⁴.

10. Being outside, with access to nature, is known to have many benefits, as demonstrated by the increase in social therapeutic horticulture practices and green care. Awareness of the health and well-being benefits of horticulture is also known by the Welsh public, and the opportunity to work with nature is exciting for many students. For data on the perceptions of the wellbeing value of gardens and green spaces, please see below:

- a. 83% of Welsh adults agreed that gardens and public green spaces benefit their state of mind⁵
- b. 81% of Welsh adults agreed that gardens and public green spaces benefit their physical health⁶

Equity of support and access for learners

11. Due to the geographical spread of learners and horticultural businesses across Wales, it is often too large a distance for students to commute to facilities that offer suitable apprenticeships for entering the sector.

12. The rural locations of many environmental horticulture businesses in Wales, combined with limited public transport and high accommodation costs, means that for many who would want a career in horticulture, the costs associated with one make it unviable. These issues – transport, accommodation and rural location – also impact students' abilities to attend colleges or complete apprenticeships and can act as a deterrent for career changers who would likely have to take a pay cut.

13. Options for apprenticeships in urban horticulture could be explored. It is predicted that in Welsh cities, "peak heat stress on people is expected to increase by 4.5 degrees Celsius by 2080, especially for urban areas exposed to direct sunlight. And the percentage of daytime hours without heat stress are expected to reduce significantly, from 30-80% in 2020 to 10-70% by 2080. The lowest values are paved areas with little shading from trees or surrounding buildings, and the highest values are areas with more shade, such as green spaces with trees or narrow alleys between tall buildings"⁷. The HTA believes that there is scope to increase environmental horticulture education provision in the urban environment and challenge the notion that a career in horticulture is only for those living in rural locations.

⁴ *The latest Green Skills survey reveals that more than half of young people lack guidance on green job options at school* <https://www.speakersforschools.org/news/latest-green-skills-survey-reveals-that-more-than-half-of-young-people-lack-guidance-on-green-job-options-at-school/> (Speakers for Schools)

⁵ YouGov for HTA (1 – 5th December 2023) Base: 193 adults (aged 16+) in Wales

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⁷ New report predicts impact of future heatwaves in Welsh cities <https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/news-and-blogs/news/new-report-predicts-impact-of-future-heatwaves-in-welsh-cities/?lang=en> (NRW, 2024)

The Welsh Government's role

14. The Welsh Government has an opportunity to change the perception of jobs in the horticulture sector and address critical gaps. Hays UK report that 52% of businesses feel the impact of skills shortages in productivity, 48% say it impacts morale and 42% say it poses a challenge to businesses ability to deliver projects⁸. Awareness of the value of a career in the environmental horticulture sector should be raised by increased government recognition for its green credentials and environmental, social and health contributions. Support should also be given to make it easier for SMEs to engage with the apprenticeship system and develop relevant qualifications to ensure the system meets their needs.
15. There is also a need to educate businesses and students on the benefits of horticultural apprenticeships, particularly in the context of SME employers. Apprenticeships are a huge opportunity for the sector but are not as widely used as they could be. SMEs that are facing skills shortages in vital sectors such as environmental horticulture must be supported and prioritised by the government. Further work needs to be done to champion starting an apprenticeship at a smaller business, particularly in a retail or catering setting. Given the size of the businesses listed on the Careers Wales website, how can an apprenticeship at a smaller business be made more attractive to learners?
16. Involvement with Regional Skills Partnerships may be difficult for businesses in the sector, which are predominantly SMEs, due to competing demands for time. Horticulture often does not feature as a regionally significant industry; rather, it is nationally significant, and its value as such ought to be recognised. It needs to be made easier for businesses to feed in their skills needs, with greater care and attention taken to ensuring that SMEs are aware of the opportunities offered by taking on an apprentice and having closer relationships with educational providers.
17. At time of submission we are still seeking to secure some directly relevant case studies, and can follow up with more detail. We would welcome the opportunity to be consulted on this further, please email policy@hta.org.uk

⁸ Hays UK, 2023; Base: 15,000 respondents - Impact of skills shortage