

Evidence from Jane Lewis, Regional Partnership Manager, South West and Mid Wales RLSP

History

The South West and Mid Wales Regional learning and Skills Partnership was established in 2007, originally to bring together training providers and ESF funded projects together to deliver a skills programme for the region that would increase the number of people with higher level skills and encourage people with no skills at all to participate within the programmes available.

In 2015 the partnership re-established itself as an employer led organisation working with Further Education, Work Based learning, Apprenticeship and Higher Education, Careers Wales, DWP, Third Sector and the City and Growth Deals. In 2016 the new governance was established for the Board and Industry Cluster groups were established across 7 key sectors for the region. A private sector chair was appointed, Paul Greenwood, Teddington Engineering and employer numbers on the Board increased to 13 of the 21.

The RLSP is a voluntary partnership working through Carmarthenshire County Council as the financial accountable body all of the partners have signed up to the Terms of reference and code of conduct of the Board which was used by Dr Greystone in his review as a model of good practice.

Is the data and evidence being used by the Regional Skills Partnerships timely, valid and reliable? Have there been any issues?

The data used by the Regional Learning and Skills Partnership (RLSP) is gathered from a number of sources:

Welsh Government data – this is the data source that the RSP's are encouraged to use as baseline data however the data is often over 18 months out of date and it is not received by the RSP's until at least May which only allows the RSP's 2 months to use the data to support the writing of the main report that is submitted in July. This data is also out of date because the information that the providers have is far more time sensitive. The colleges also use EMSI data to inform their provision, this is a tool that can provide the latest data on the skills needs across the region which can help with planning of courses as well as providing economic data of where certain sectors are growing. The RSP's need access to this system and we understand that Welsh Government are currently investigating the provision of this system for partners across Wales.

Other data sources that we use is through the engagement and on line surveys with the businesses across all sectors. In 2018, the RLSP engaged with over 525 businesses to gather real time information. The RLSP also works with Industry sector bodies including CITB (construction); FSB (small businesses); ECITB (Engineering); Chambers of Commerce; Tourist Associations etc. All of this data is up to date and brings to the report a clear understanding of what is required in terms of skills training and support for recruitment of staff.

How well do the partnerships engage with and take into account the views of those who do not sit on the partnership boards, and how well do they account for the views of the skills providers themselves?

The RLSP Board is driven by the Private sector with an Industry chair leading the Board and supported by the chairs of the 8 industry cluster group, industry representatives for the Swansea Bay City Deal; Mid Wales Growth Deal and the two Enterprise Zones.

The purpose of the cluster groups is to gather specific information from each of the sectors on what the areas of concern are on training and skills development in their sector. The Chair of each of the cluster groups represent the views of their sector on the main RLSP Board. The group representatives are encouraged to share information about the work of the Cluster group and to get other businesses to join or to work with the RLSP by completing the on line skills and training survey. This survey is circulated to over 10,000 businesses across the region through the database that the RLSP holds; through working with the Regional Economic Development officers within the Local Authorities; through the membership bodies e.g FSB, ECITB, CITB, Chambers of Commerce; Health Board partnerships etc.

The RLSP officers also attend a number of business events across the region to inform business groups who have not previously engaged about the work of the RSP's and to gain information from these companies on the skills issues.

The RLSP engages with schools at the annual careers Fairs across the region with over 8,000 children attending Fairs in 2018 in Ceredigion, Powys, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Neath and Port Talbot and Swansea. During these events the school pupils are asked specific questions on their understanding of apprenticeship; the opportunities available to them through the local FE and HE colleges and career pathways into the key sectors in the region. All of this information is used to inform the annual Employment and Skills Plan.

Finally, the RLSP engages with all of the Employability programmes operating across the region including Cynydd, Workways+, Communities4 Work; Cam Nesaf etc to share the information from businesses on the skills requirements of businesses and in partnership to develop career pathways to help young people who are classed as NEET's; or the Economically inactive or unemployed to get into work.

How do the key City and Growth Deal roles of the RLSPs influence their Welsh Government remit?

The remit of both roles is clearly defined, the RSP's role in publishing the annual Employment and Skills Plan involves gathering information to inform the provision of skills training over a 3 year period (current reports) by working with Industry and the providers to map out what is already being provided and what needs to change to meet the needs of the businesses across all sectors in the region.

The City and Growth Deal role will compliment this role but will be specifically looking at skills requirements for the 10 projects in relation to the City Deal and these will be longer term skills (15- 20 years) and will potentially be skills that are currently not being delivered in the region or possibly in Wales. The role of the RLSP here will be to work with the 10 projects, the Universities and the Colleges across the region to ensure that we can provide this training and what needs to change within the current provision including the upskilling of teachers/lecturers and training providers. This work will also need to involve the schools and the RLSP has already been working with Head Teachers across the region to identify the best way of achieving this. This will be imperative to ensure that we can enthuse the young to consider the pathways that will give them opportunities to work in the region and potentially to gain the necessary skills and training in the region too.

During 2018 the RLSP prepared a separate Employment and Skills Plan for the Mid Wales Growth Deal area wherein specific recommendations were made to Welsh Government to increase provision in a number of key skills areas following consultation with businesses in the region. The RLSP will continue to support the Growth Deal in Mid Wales work on a similar proposal to the City Deal when the projects have been determined. However the RSP is aware that skills and talent (and the retention of young talent) is a key driver for the growth deal.

The benefit to the businesses of the RSP's working on both areas has to be the information that we are gathering supports both and they are not being asked numerous times for the same information.

The RSP will develop clear protocol to deal with both projects moving forward.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships able to actually reflect current and future skills demands within their regions? What about very specialised skills for which there may be low volumes of demand?

The work that the RSP undertakes is evidence based via LMI data and stakeholder engagement. We can identify the broader direction and the primary issues that each of the sectors are raising but the very specialist skills in the longer term will be more difficult because the industry itself does not recognise some of these needs. Working with the Universities and colleges there is some clear evidence of the type of training needed and some of the more specialist sector bodies e.g CITB; ECITB and Food Industry sector skills board have all identified skills gaps that are not all full time provision skills but more niche specialist skills required in that specific sector.

During the last three years there has been evidence of some change but this is a slow process which requires clear evidence over a longer period of time than the current annual plans require.

Work Based Learning provider have changed provision to meet the needs of the annual plan and aligned their training to meet the changing priority sectors.

There are some specialist skills being developed to meet the future needs including digital skills specifically for specialist companies; construction skills linked to modular home building and marine energy.

Do the Regional Skills Partnerships have sufficient knowledge and understanding of:

a. The foundational economy and the needs of those employed within it

The foundational economy is very important to the South West and Mid Wales region with 67% (272,400) employed within the foundational sectors. The skills requires within this area are very diverse to support the various industries. These needs are identified within the skills surveys distributed by the Skills Partnership and are considered within the cluster groups specifically Food and Land Management; Tourism, Retail and Leisure and the Health and Social Care groups. Brexit is also an area that will impact these sectors and the Skills Partnership is working with employers to demonstrate the demand and the skills gaps.

b. The demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh.

The RLSP works with the Industry to understand their needs for skills through the medium of Welsh and how much Welsh is used within their business. A specific question is contained within the RSP survey and there is discussion at all sector cluster groups on how important the Welsh language is in their businesses. An example of the type of issue that has arisen is the training of health care workers through the medium of Welsh to ensure that there is sufficient number of people trained in this area who can converse through the medium of Welsh as well as having an understanding of the role through the language.

The RLSP is working with the FE and Work based learning providers to ensure that there is sufficient training provision through the medium of Welsh to support the requirements of Industry.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships adequately resourced to fulfil their growing role?

The RLSP works in a cyclical process. Having completed three annual Employment and Skills Plans the process and timelines are planned around consultation, supporting activity and drafting and completing the plan. The RLSP is resourced (£165,000 per annum) to support the majority of the work undertaken, (this funding pays for a small team together with a contribution towards office accommodation and travel and subsistence costs), but this is not sufficient to meet the growing demands.

The need for stronger secondary evidence and data is growing to strengthen the RLSP's ability to produce evidence based plans and it is therefore necessary to have timely secondary data that can complement the primary data gathered by the RLSP and additional funding is required in order to achieve this. The purchase of the EMSI system would help support this additional data to match what the colleges use for their curriculum planning.

The annual agreement received from Welsh Government is also of concern because there is no continuity of contract available for the staff working within the RLSP. An ideal scenario would be a 3 year contract to support the production of a 3 year plan.

The RSP's could also benefit from having a small pot of funding specifically to progress a number of smaller initiatives e.g identifying new practice of working; on short courses; shared models for training and apprenticeships.

Is there an appropriate balance between the work of the RSPs and wider views on skills demand?

The work of the RSP's is done in a two pronged approach. Whilst employer engagement is undertaken to capture primary level intelligence this is then complimented by secondary data sources. We take account of wider views on skills demands via a number of Welsh Government approved reports such as; Employer Skills Survey and the Employer Perspective Survey. These provide intelligence at a regional level on a number of issues and skills challenges facing businesses. The surveys utilised by the RSP's to gather local level intelligence are based on the questions asked within these studies therefore it is possible to make comparisons where necessary. We also look at cross-border skills issues as this can affect the movement of labour and one of the major issues for Wales as a whole – Brain Drain. This involves sharing intelligence between the three RSPs and being aware of skills issues within the English border counties.

The Regional Skills Partnerships offer a co-ordinated approach to the development and delivery of skills provision across Wales. There is currently no better or alternative method or vehicle to ensure that the employer voice is heard by Welsh Government. The focus placed on the Regional Skills Partnership by Welsh Government Departments is welcomed by industry as the Regional Skills Partnerships become recognised by Industry as a vehicle for change.

There are models of good practice in the region, specifically around apprenticeship training. The Cyfle shared apprenticeship model has worked getting over 1000 young people into a construction apprenticeship in the region. The RLSP is working with Cyfle and the public sector partners through the Public Service Boards and the City Deal to develop a procurement protocol that would encourage all contractors to employ apprentices for the large scale projects through Cyfle. This is a model that could be replicated into other sectors.

The Greystone review emphasised the transparency of the Regional Skills Partnerships and the cohesiveness and closer working between the three. This is something that each partnership is committed to and approaches have already been amended to ensure that there is greater parity between approaches for the next planning years. e.g same skills survey being utilised by the three so the same information will be used to make recommendations.

Is the level of operational detail set out by Welsh Government for skills provision in higher/further education and work-based learning providers appropriate?

It would be fair to say that this is an area that could be improved. There are limitations to what we can do as an RLSP with the remit placed by Welsh Government to only focus on Full time FE provision and WBL provision. It would

be beneficial to look at the entirety of the learning landscape to include Higher Education and schools level provision. i.e. the whole 14-19 picture. This would be welcomed by both providers and the RSPs. There needs to be a closer alignment between the two policy areas as they are so deeply connected. This would also align to the PCET reforms.

There needs to be a greater commitment provided by Welsh Government to ensure that the level of operational detail provided meets the needs of both providers and the RSPs. This would allow the process to become much more focussed and efficient. The dis-connect between detail provided to the RSPs and the providers can result in challenges and problems arising during the consultation phase which can take away from the task at hand.

If there are any, how are tensions between learner demand/learner progression reconciled with Regional Skills Partnerships conclusions and the Welsh Government preference for funding higher level skills?

Whilst the Welsh Government's vision to increase the number of people achieving levels 4,5 and 6 qualifications is something that we all aspire to achieve in real terms to increase the GVA of the region this conflicts with the needs identified by Industry and Colleges is that the demand is for the levels 1,2 and 3. This is compounded by the high number of students leaving school without the basic skills (English and Maths to a level C or above) or work ready skills which means that colleges have to deliver these skills as well as the vocational skills that the young student has enrolled for. There is a need for an additional vocational offer within schools to meet the demands of students who are not academic to develop a pathway for these young people to gain the higher level skills through an alternative route i.e apprenticeships and vocational training.

Have the Regional Skills Partnerships and Welsh Government been able to stimulate changes in skills provision on the ground to reflect demand?

The feedback from providers and some industry partners is that changes can be seen particularly in the apprenticeship provision. However we need the data from Welsh Government at an earlier stage in order to demonstrate to the Industry partners that their contribution and involvement in the Employment and Skills Plan is making a difference and the provision within FE and apprenticeship is changing to meet their needs.

What, in general, is working well and what evidence of success and impact is there?

Working with Industry has raised the profile of the work of the Regional Learning and Skills Partnership and the opportunities for them to engage and influence the changes that can be made to the provision of skills training. The industry voice through the skills survey and through the Cluster groups has enabled the training providers to work together to make the necessary recommendations to change the provision of training.

The recommendations made in the Greystone review 2018 have already been adopted by the RLSP and we welcome further discussions with Welsh Government on the future of RSP's in Wales following the review of the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee.

Are there any aspects of the policy that are not working well, have there been any unintended consequences, and what improvements can be made?

The current remit of the RLSP is post 16 FE and apprenticeship training however there is a need to widen this remit and have the ability to influence all post 16 training including A level and HE. The A level provision is particularly important when schools and FE play a role in delivering these qualifications.

The Regional Skills Partnership would value an opportunity to have an impact on the curriculum design within Higher Education and what is offered in the region to meet the needs of employers and to support the development of the higher level skills in region.

The RLSP has had more involvement with schools as a result of the work being undertaken with the City Deal and working in partnership with Careers Wales and Industry the RSLP has been highlighting the potential jobs from the City Deal projects and what skills will be required both now and over the next 10 years. We feel that it would be beneficial for the RLSP to play a greater role in influencing the 14 – 16 curriculum and the opportunity to bring forward greater vocational skills to meet the employer needs.