

## Evidence from Sasha Davies, Chair, North Wales Regional Skills Partnership

### Background

The North Wales Regional Skills Partnership was originally established in 2013 and brings together employers, Further Education, Work Based Learning and Higher Education training providers, the Third Sector, Local Authorities, DWP and Careers Wales. It was recognised as the Skills and Employment work stream of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board to inform and drive the skills agenda in North Wales, and was later recognised by Welsh Government (WG) as a Regional Skills Partnership (RSP).

The North Wales Regional Skills Partnership reviewed its governance structure in 2017 to become employer focused and align itself closer with the skills needs of employers in the region. A private sector chair was appointed in 2017 and employer membership widened with representation from key and growth sectors.

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

North Wales RSP gathers its data from many reliable sources, which include both quantitative and qualitative research.

The main sources of data for North Wales RSP is data and intelligence provided by Welsh Government, Office of National Statistics, Annual Population Surveys and Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES). These sources are reliable, but there is an issue with the timing of receiving the data in relation and the cycle of producing annual skills plans, and in some instances the data can be a few months out of date. Some of these sources are also on an all Wales level, which does not adequately show the situation on a regional level.

Some RSP partners use data harvesting tool EMSI which is a labour market analytics system that provides an up to date and reliable sources of information to help with their planning. FE colleges and Careers Wales in particular use this tool and discussion have taken place with Welsh Government about RSPs investing in this tool which will further strengthen our data.

In addition to the baseline data provided, North Wales RSP routinely use partner data analysis amongst providers in North Wales and cross-border area which includes CITB workforce data, GwE Regional Education Consortia Data, West

Cheshire & North Wales Chamber of Commerce Quarterly Employer Survey, Career Check data from Careers Wales and other business surveys produced on a regional level.

The RSP also gather information through feedback and meetings with employer groups and other stakeholders.

This year, for the first time, the North Wales RSP will also undertake a Skills Survey which will be shared with all partners and more broadly in order to glean primary information from industry/ private sector. This is part of our new employer engagement framework to strengthen our data and ensure that it's up to date.

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

The North Wales RSP have established links with a number of employer cluster-groups within the region, and have used the wider membership base of our partner organisations. We value the input, and access of employer representative bodies such as FSB, North Wales & Mersey Dee Business Council, West Cheshire and North Wales Chamber of Commerce who we routinely engage with outside of RSP meetings.

Access to these networks enables us to engage directly with companies across North Wales, from single entrepreneurs and micro businesses, through to SMEs and to the 60,000 registered businesses across North Wales to collectively support and influence curriculum planning by partners.

However, whilst undertaking an internal assessment of the work of the RSP in the last few months, we have recognised the need to reinforce our employer engagement, and more importantly, to ensure that our skills and employment plan responds to the needs and gaps identified by industry in North Wales. As such, we have now produced an Employer Engagement Framework which will give further clarity on how we engage and involve as many employers/ industry voice as possible.

Hand in hand with this, we are revising the membership of the RSP to include representatives from employers and industry, as we do recognise that this does need to be strengthened further. This is also part of our Employer Engagement Framework.

As previously noted, the RSP will be launching a skills survey as part of our employer engagement strategy, which will be shared widely amongst the

business sector in North Wales. This will ensure that we can reach a wider audience, and glean information from interested bodies.

Whilst developing our skills plans, we undertake an extensive consultative and feedback workshops which targets a number of other organisations to include industry cluster groups, work based learning and private providers, Pre-16 Education providers including GwE, Headteachers and Curriculum leads and post 16 providers.

We also attend business events, and careers events on a regular basis where we make links with businesses, organisations and individuals who are interested in our work.

In addition to working with partners across the region, we continue to routinely and regularly engage with national partners such as the Princes Trust, Learning & Workers Institute, Colegau Cymru, Qualifications Wales, NtFW and other to promote North Wales issues and development on behalf of the RSP.

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

As a dedicated sub-group of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board (since 2013), the Regional Skills Partnership has been actively involved in both contributing and supporting the development of the Growth Vision and Growth Deal for North Wales.

Data from the Regional Skills Plan has directly provided the contextual evidence required to substantiate baseline proposals for the Growth Deal in North Wales, and RSP partners have been drafted into developments and discussions, to align sector, regional and future needs of the projects.

The North Wales Economic Ambition Board have also commissioned the RSP to scope out projects in relation to STEM, North Wales Health & Social Care and Digital Skills and Automation and Employability, which are included in the Growth Vision Proposition Document (October 2018). A triparty meeting between the RSP, NWEAB and Welsh Government is also being arranged to discuss a Skills and Employment programme which would include a Skills and Information Gateway and Brokerage for employers.

The RSP is aware that they need to evolve and change in light of regional governance structure of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board and the Growth Deal, and discussions are currently taking place in regards to RSP governance issues. (Annex 1 – Governance Map).

Discussions are also taking place on a working protocol between the RSP and the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, which sets out the distinct roles and responsibility of the North Wales RSP and the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, and the inter-relationship between them to ensure effective co-ordination between the Boards and other subgroups such as the Business Leaders Forum (Industry voice of Growth Deal). As part of these discussions, we would like to emphasise a streamlined approach, and we would not wish to see a duplicative skills and employment group being established.

We would also like to seek further guidance from Welsh Government on their views on how the RSPs fit into governance structure of the Growth Deal.

**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 North Wales RSP has seen progress in identifying the current and future skills demands in North Wales region. Both FEIs have worked well in partnership with the RSP and as a region in reaching the optimum level of provision that mirrors the RSP plans and future projections that respond to large scale investments in the area.

Over the last three years, Work Based Learning providers (WBL) have also made huge efforts to focus on the provision in WBL learning for priority sectors and currently 90% of the programmes are aligned to the regional priority sectors.

In broad terms, we believe that we're able to identify the direction and issues that each of our key and growth sectors are raising in the area. Working with national industry bodies such as ECITB, CITB and FMB Cymru for Wylfa Newydd, we identified a shortage of roles and skills in areas such as steel fixers and scaffolders, and broader roles such as carpentry, electricians, bricklayers, etc. due to displacement of labour.

However, identifying specialist skills is proving harder in the long term to recognise. But we are starting to see emerging good practice in the region whereby the RSP has identified the need for a skill provision that is not currently being offered in FE. Recently we have recently seen the introduction of new scaffolding courses in the two FE colleges due to our employer demand. An emerging message from particular sectors is the need for shorter, vocational training rather than full time provision.

The RSP is also currently facilitating discussions on employer clusters and providers in the region in relation to shared apprenticeship opportunities in those

areas where there are specialised skills, low levels of employers or low volumes of applicants and difficulties recruiting.

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

a) the foundational economy and the needs of those employed within it;

In North Wales, where we have identified our three key sectors, and five growth sectors, we have worked with RSP partners, and industry representative bodies to maintain a barometer on current and future trends for skills and employment developments within these sectors – many of which cumulatively, form the foundation economy, which equates to 41% of the current working population in North Wales.

Two of growth sectors in our annual skills plans include the Tourism & Hospitality Industry and Health and Social Care. We are working with an FE colleges to develop a Tourism and Hospitality Centre of Excellence and Tourism Capital project that is part of the Growth Deal for North Wales with the main aim of targeting skills development in this sector of the economy.

We have also worked with the Anglesey Enterprise Zone and Tourism Businesses in Anglesey on 'Discover Tourism' which is an educational resource for primary schools to promote careers in the tourism sector.

We have a representation from Health and Social Care and Tourism & Hospitality on the Partnership.

The North Wales RSP has also supported and coordinated the work of the two FE Colleges delivering full and part-time education and training in the region, to address areas based on the 'Foundation Economy' through Skills Development Fund.

b) the demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh?

In North Wales, 81% of businesses have staff with Welsh language skills and 57% employers rate staff with welsh language skills as important. As such, we understand the demand and need for skills provision through the medium of Welsh.

North Wales is the first region in Wales to have delivered and published a dedicated document 'Welsh Language at Work in North Wales' which brings together the latest statistics on welsh in the workplace, education, training, Welsh

Government policy and regional support for the Welsh language as an employability skill.

The RSP is currently working through a comprehensive action plan following the consultation and launch of the report in May 2018, and is working closely with GwE, and key partners delivering Welsh language training and learning on the region. Dialogue continues with Welsh Government on this agenda.

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

The RSP role has grown and evolved over the last few years and we welcome the growing influence on key policy areas. However, the RSP is resourced via an annual contract (£165k) with Welsh Government, which funds two full time post and one part time post. If we are to intensify our effort in terms of engagement and communication with employers and industry, consideration should be given to additional resources.

Due to the funding being received on a short term (annual) basis, it also means that the RSP cannot look longer term at issues.

If do see an increase in responsibilities, further consideration needs to be made as regards to resources allocated to the RSP.

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

The main driver for the RSP is to ensure that the region is delivering on the WC strategy and policy drivers on higher level skills (Level 3 and above), and reporting on how this is working, or not.

However, in North Wales, the issue is not provision, but attraction and promotion of industry to get young people to undertake studies ad apprenticeships in the industry. FE have worked with the RSP and industry to invest in new facilities, and new provision to reflect this demand, yet this still does not meet demands.

One of the wider views on skills demand is to consider the provision of pre16 learning, and how well this aligns to industry needs and priorities. A large amount of employer surveys and reports note that young people lack basic skills, and 'work ready' skills and this is an area that the RSP are keen to influence, as it's a recurrent issue.

The 14-19 Network and GwE are both members of the North Wales RSP and we would welcome the opportunity to work more closely with schools, especially in light of the curriculum reform and ensure the influence of business community and industry on the new curriculum in Wales.

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?

There are tensions between our regional priorities and Welsh Government policy. The policy and driver by Welsh Government is to increase higher level skills in Level 3 and above. Whilst we agree with the need to drive higher level skills in the economy, on a practical level, the policy doesn't always reflect in learner demand/ progression and the demand by employers for Level 1-3.

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

Partners across North Wales have already begun a process of change and response to previous Skills & Employment plans over the last three years. Response from industry and employers in the region is that changes can be seen, especially with apprenticeships. It's fair to note that FE provision is aligned to RSP priorities, and where there have been gaps, we have worked with FE to plug those gaps. Examples of this include:

- A new Life Science Level 3 started in the North East in September 2018 due to employer demand in the area.
- A new work based learning partnership between a regional FE with Glyndwr University was established in 2018 to deliver higher level food manufacturing training across the region.
- Working with global company SIEMENS in identifying broader skills within the manufacturing sector that will be needed as a result of A.I. and continued advances across Industry 4.0 for North Wales.

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

The change in focus of North Wales RSP in 2017, to align itself closer with industry voice has been key, but, as previously noted, this is something that we as an RSP are keen to develop further. We will continue to lead and facilitate development

in partnership with all key providers, employers, and industry representative bodies across the region to ensure a bridging between industry needs and provision.

The longer term impact of the RSP is something we're eager to consider further, and would welcome further discussions with Welsh Government on how to best measure our success and impact. We are also currently considering the Graystone (2018) recommendations and are eager to improve decision-making, openness, transparency and accountability.

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

As mentioned above, the RSP would welcome a broader remit to include post 16 provision. Currently, we are able to influence FE and Apprenticeship provision in the region, but this does not include looking at the whole post 16 picture which includes A Levels and Higher Education. It would also be beneficial to consider pre-16 vocational provision delivered in school in order to take account of the wider skills demands.

Another issue is that the planning cycle for our plan, as determined by WG, is annually, and as one is completed, work starts on the next. This does not give us adequate time to learn lessons and has not allowed us enough time to analyse feedback as we move into another planning cycle. As such, we are currently looking to develop a three year plan which will allow us to measure impact and success, but will also tie in to the broader Growth Vision for North Wales.