

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a
Sgiliau
Partneriaeth Sgiliau Rhanbarthol
EIS(5) RSP23
Ymateb gan Tyfu Canolbarth Cymru

National Assembly for Wales
Economy, Infrastructure and Skills
Committee
Regional Skills Partnerships
Evidence from Growing Mid Wales

The Growing Mid Wales Partnership (GMW) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NAFW's Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's invitation for views on the role and effectiveness of Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) within Wales.

The GMW Partnership works closely with Welsh Government, and is the regional economic partnership covering the geographical foot print of Powys and Ceredigion. It has a substantial private sector representation together with the two Local Authorities, other regional stakeholders, the voluntary-sector and higher and further education stakeholders.

Context

2019 is a year of significant change in the political and economic landscape, including a marked emphasis on regionalisation by both Welsh and UK Government. Combined with the challenging timescales to develop a Mid Wales Growth Deal, there will never be a more important time to ensure that we have the right skills in the Mid Wales region.

The Graystone Report (2018) on the Governance of RSPs recognised the role GMW plays in setting priorities for skills within the Mid Wales region, and reported: *"The GMW Partnership because of its unique economic and social status wishes to become a separate regional skills partnership. The Mid-Wales region, it is argued, has a number of unique features that make growing its local economy a challenge. These are listed as deep rurality, over-dependence on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and peripherality. The view is that the RLSP regional plan is too focused on the Growth Deal in Swansea Bay. Mid Wales is losing many young people who are migrating away from the area and 'we need to grow our own'."*

Previous concerns have been raised that the employment and skills plans do not provide Welsh Government with the detailed evidence or narrative required to support regional planning and funding recommendations. While GMW agrees there has been some improvement in this area, the level of detail is still not sufficient enough to make fully informed decisions and there have often been

occasions where data has not been broken down to a level which has made it usable and relevant for the GMW partnership. Indeed the evidence base part of the plan is no longer publically available. This has made it difficult for us to engage and provide useful comment.

Both partnership members and elected members from the respective authorities have repeatedly raised concerns about the levels of transparency and engagement, as well as the effectiveness, of the South West and Mid Wales Regional Learning and Skills Partnership in the Mid Wales region. These tensions, issues and concerns are still ongoing, and we are regularly made aware by other parties of activity that the RLSP is involved with that is very pertinent to the skills agenda in Mid Wales. However, we are not directly made aware of the activity by the RLSP itself, or given a chance to be involved. A recent example of this is the Brexit Skills Taskforce hosted By Eluned Morgan AM. Rural skills are very important in the Mid Wales region, and we have repeatedly raised the issues with the RLSP. However, we were not made aware of this forum or given a chance to participate.

Notwithstanding the WG guidance on their role, we have also raised concerns regarding the ability of RSPs to think long term. This is critical given the increased planning timelines regions are now working to as a result of participation in City and Growth Deals. We are all striving to work long-term in line with the ways of working promoted in the WBFGA, but this is being hampered by the short term planning in skills – a critical policy area which has increasingly moved away from our regional influence here in Mid Wales.

Progress To Date

GMW sees a strong case for change. In terms of governance and accountability, decisions and priorities should be made by structures based in Mid Wales that are closest to the communities that they serve and in line with the WG emphasis on joining up and coherence of delivery.

Local Authority stakeholders in Mid Wales are currently in the process of establishing further regional structures - including a Joint Committee, private sector engagement group, and regional programme office - with which to take forward a transformational programme of investments for the region, including a Mid Wales Growth Deal. Skills will form a crucial and underpinning role in this programme, particularly given the wide range of innovative actions seen in the fields of higher education research.

GMW is arguing for the same resources as the three RSPs in order to effectively participate in a Growth Deal on a level footing with other regions. City and Growth

Deals are leading to new responsibilities, reporting arrangements and funding mechanisms from the Welsh and UK Governments, as well as the private sector. RLPs have been structurally aligned to play a fundamental part in the deals already approved – in short, the RLP currently serving the Mid Wales region has fundamentally structurally aligned itself to deliver a transformational economic programme for another region. It cannot deliver the same level of coherence and complementarity for another region.

The first step in agreeing a vision for the Mid Wales region has already been taken, and external consultants have undertaken an extensive baselining and consultation exercise to identify priorities for investment within Mid Wales (please see attached).

Through extensive consultation with regional stakeholders including the private sector, the report has confirmed the need for a dedicated, evidence-based skills system for Mid Wales that responds to the needs of the region's employers. Businesses regularly face difficulties in recruiting appropriately skilled staff, and this is exacerbated by a declining workforce.

The Ask

We ask for regional ownership of our skills agenda in Mid Wales in order to ensure that the capital investments made in the region by the region, in partnership with Welsh and UK Governments, are fully complemented by, and integrated with, regionally-owned skills initiatives in order to maximise the effectiveness and value of public investment.

RLPS are voluntary partnerships who are gaining increasing influence over the prioritisation and spending of approximately £400 million of public funding, including that of the Welsh Government's flagship apprenticeship programme and the work of Wales's further education institutions. GMW as a fellow partnership asks for parity in influencing these funding decisions.

A dedicated Mid Wales system would be led by a regional skills board or strategic group that brings together stakeholders from the public, private and third sectors to address skills supply and demand issues. The evidence based approach will inform education and skills provision from Key Stage 4 through to Higher Education, and will identify clear career pathways to employment for young people in the region. The establishment of such a system would allow Mid Wales parity with economic regions across Wales the UK, who all have dedicated skills boards as part of their regional governance and delivery structures. This allows

them to effectively participate in City and Growth Deals, as well as other economic investment programmes.

However, we also recognise it is crucial to develop new and innovative ways of delivery, as what may work in other parts of Wales fails to be fit for purpose in our predominately rural region that has markedly different economic characteristics.

Both historic interventions and the current structures and processes are not delivering the step-change that the Mid Wales region needs in post-16 education and employment. This is evident in the fact that both total GVA and GVA per head are falling in comparison to other economic regions in Wales, and Powys has the lowest GVA per hour worked of the 174 NUTS3 areas in the UK in 2017 (65.2% of the UK figure¹). And yet student attainment rates are some of the highest in Wales.

The GMW Partnership is committed to driving the economic change that Mid Wales needs. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further with the EIS Committee, and look forward to hearing the Committee's findings.

¹ StatsWales