

Enterprise and Business Committee

APP17

Inquiry into Apprenticeships

Evidence from BRC

ENTERPRISE AND BUSINESS COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO APPRENTICESHIPS IN WALES

BRC RESPONSE

SUMMARY

The British Retail Consortium (BRC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Enterprise and Business Committee inquiry into apprenticeships in Wales.

The retail sector strongly supports apprenticeships, recognising the clear value that they provide to both employees and employers. To ensure the greatest possible uptake, apprenticeships must be flexible, fit-for-purpose and be able to adapt to changes in the economy, in technology and in the labour market. It is also important that red tape and bureaucracy is kept to an absolute minimum and funding is simple, clear and effective.

ABOUT THE BRC

The BRC represents the whole range of retailers, from independents through to large multiples and department stores, selling a wide selection of products through centre of town, out of town, rural and virtual stores. Membership includes the major multiples, a range of small and medium sized retailers plus various sector-specific and small business trade associations.

RETAIL EMPLOYMENT IN WALES

Retailing is at the heart of Welsh cities, towns and villages and is vital to the health of the Welsh economy. One in every eight households has someone working in retail and with millions of consumer visits every year, retail is unique in serving and shaping communities.

The retail sector provides employees with broad career and development opportunities across all levels and parts of the companies concerned. The sector also gives valuable flexible working opportunities to people with diverse requirements. This includes people who have been long-term unemployed, caring for children or other dependents, studying, whose religions require certain hours working, and whose health prevents full-time working and who would in other sectors have been compelled to leave work.

Just under a third of employees working in retail are aged between 16 and 24. This illustrates the crucial role which the sector plays in providing first working opportunities for young people, who are generally underrepresented in the UK workforce. This is particularly important at the current time when youth unemployment is a particularly strong concern.

Despite the economic downturn, many retailers have maintained their commitment to job creation and providing extensive skills and training opportunities for employees. A significant proportion of retailers have announced further substantial intakes of new staff and apprenticeships where circumstances allow.

RETAIL APPRENTICESHIPS

The retail sector strongly supports apprenticeships, recognising the clear value that they provide to both employees and employers. In the past year, many retailers have committed to increasing the number of apprenticeships they offer; helping give more people the opportunity to gain a recognised qualification and the opportunity to progress their career. Alongside the growth in the number of retail apprenticeships, our members are committed to ensuring the quality of the schemes they offer.

To ensure the greatest possible uptake, the BRC believes apprenticeships must be flexible, fit-for-purpose and be able to adapt to changes in the economy, in technology and in the labour market.

RED TAPE AND FUNDING

It is important that red tape and bureaucracy is kept to an absolute minimum as complexity within the system can deter businesses from taking on apprentices. Specific consideration should also be given to the support offered to small and medium size businesses.

It is also vital that funding of apprenticeships is simple, clear and effective. BRC members have noted that the funding system in Wales, whereby funding is provided through training providers, can be challenging for employers. This system is particularly difficult for larger retailers who work across the UK. One BRC member, for example, has noted that the current system means they do not take on as many apprenticeships in Wales compared with England where they can have a contract directly with the Skills Funding Agency. BRC members would therefore find it beneficial if it was possible for large employers to access direct funding for their apprenticeship schemes, giving them more flexibility and ownership over what training they are able to offer.

BRC, April 2012