

“New Challenges, New Chances – Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme”

Response to BIS Consultative Document

Introduction

The Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership works with partners to ensure that those who have missed out on learning in the past have opportunities to learn and to reach their full potential.

Part of its role is to help providers of adult learning to understand what potential learners need and want and therefore what needs to be done differently to engage these. In this way we seek to improve the services offered to learners by influencing the policies and plans of providers and funders.

To this end the Learning Partnership recently convened a meeting of representatives of a cross-section of Surrey adult learning providers and voluntary and community organisations to develop a response to the BIS Consultative Document, *New Challenges, New Chances – Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme*. Those represented included the county’s principle Informal Adult Learning contract holders (Surrey County Council and an East Surrey College), Strodes College (a sixth form college which has developed a very strong adult and community learning offer), the Association of Learning Providers - Surrey, Surrey Community Action (the ‘umbrella’ organisation for the community and voluntary sector) and Surrey Care Trust (a charity supporting vulnerable young adults). The Skills Funding Agency attended as an observer.

The views expressed at the meeting were circulated to a wider audience for comment before preparing this final response.

The response is set out below and, for ease of reference, comments are collated under the key headings covered by the consultative document. Views expressed are set out as ‘challenges’ and possible ‘solutions’. Where a view has been put forward by a specific provider this is indicated.

The future shape of the sector – re-organising to respond quickly to local demand as needs alter

Improve responsiveness of sector by making funding more accessible to 'local' providers

Challenge: Although within the county there is much productive partnership working:

- *For example, East Surrey College holds a contract for east and mid Surrey (with WEA as sub-contracted partner) and this has been very important in building relationships with local groups, individuals and organisations with onwards progression to local FE. Examples in LDD, Construction, IT, Hair & Beauty, Counselling to name just a few. There is a wealth of evidence around partnership working through its contract with local care homes, charities, children's centres, schools, housing associations, young parents groups, Merstham community learning facility, the Arc in Caterham, homeless venues and many others - building communities and extending learning.*

...in the case of larger contracts which are awarded over several counties, the contract holder is not always in a good position to know and respond to local needs. In addition, these contractors and potential sub-contractors tend not to meet in Surrey and it is not easy, therefore, for local providers to gain access to these particular funding opportunities.

Solution: Larger contractors need to offer surgeries, possibly online, for potential local subcontractors. Contracting arrangements must be simpler and clearer than at present.

Provide adequate levels of funding to engage vulnerable adults

Challenge: Funding agencies must recognise that responding quickly to the learning and skills needs of disadvantaged and low skilled adults (entry level) can often be more expensive than for adults with higher skills. In addition, because class sizes are increasing to minimise provider costs, engagement of vulnerable adults is becoming even more challenging. These adults are often more appropriately provided for in smaller group sizes.

- *For example one provider has funded reduced class sizes for LDD and for other vulnerable learners ranging from 4-8 in size and would wish to continue this through realistic funding and appropriate targets that take this into account.*

Solution: Safeguard the funding which can be used flexibly to engage vulnerable adults. Identify the true costs of providing effective learning and training which can improve

employability and progression. The social and economic return will outweigh the cost of the investment.

Respond to future as well as current local demands

Challenge: The demise of regional development agencies means there is a gap in economic data and modelling. This informed providers of long-term skills needs that underpin economic growth. Learning providers need to know about likely new growth sectors and employment areas. This will help shape their offers. The information must be well-researched.

- *For example, one provider sought to provide courses to address retail vacancies. They found that it was not retail qualifications employers needed. Instead it was training for customer service skills.*

Surrey County Council undertook economic modelling to complement its Local Economic Assessment. Local authorities can usefully promote long-term needs with providers.

Currently, however, providers may be looking to the more immediate needs of local businesses. This generates much needed income from training provision. The local enterprise partnerships offer a potential hub for national and local skills agendas. In Surrey there are three LEPs in, or on, our boundaries. This offers opportunity. However, it is unclear whether these business-led bodies will choose to deliver government agendas - and what incentives there are to do so.

Some providers are active in linking to these LEPs.

- *For example, East Surrey College works closely with the Coast 2 Capital LEP and is the Surrey colleges' representative on the Coast 2 Capital Forum (LEP). It also engages strongly with the Gatwick Diamond enterprise area JCP, employers, employers' organisations and sector skills councils to make sure they have the best information possible to inform planning.*

Nevertheless others believe there is a planning vacuum for adult skills since the demise of the LSC and some adult learning providers may be unclear as to which organisation provides forecasts of future skills needs, and the extent to which they, as providers, should be preparing to meet future needs.

- *For example, NESCOL College recognised that it needed to provide IT programming courses to meet the demands of the global computer gaming industry. But there*

may be other future needs which have not been taken into account. It is hoped the LEPs will be part of the solution.

Solution: BIS should promote a culture of long-term planning for skills needs to underpin economic growth including employment growth. It should encourage the sharing of good practice on how providers have acted on modelling future skills needs. It should also encourage providers to engage in local enterprise partnerships. And conversely, encourage LEPs to undertake data gathering and modelling and champion long-term skills and employability needs.

Allow providers to respond to specific local needs

Challenge: Providers of adult learning believe that centralised directives on the courses to be run can be unhelpful. Local FE understands the environment in which it works and can respond promptly. Adult learning providers are constantly actively planning to meet local learning and skills needs.

- *For example one provider has enjoyed strong recruitment for language courses and ESOL in 2011 and also IT, work skills and preparation for work courses. It receives and examines weekly data from JCP on job vacancies.*

They do not see duplication of courses as an issue to be addressed by collaborative planning. If a course is successful others will run it, if unsuccessful it will not run again. Where there are gaps in provision this may often be because the public or employers are not interested in securing training.

Solution: Where the government identifies clear evidence of a skills shortage and yet there is no uptake of the relevant courses, then it should help to stimulate demand. For example, JCP has identified a need for more Adult Social Care workers, but there has been little public demand for the training offered. FE Colleges have looked at information on need and compared the uptake for relevant courses. Often there is no uptake. The government has priorities but local providers must respond to local need.

Develop models of engagement which work

Challenge: It was acknowledged that when providers ask people what is wanted and then respond, people do not always sign up. There are various barriers to learning but there are some approaches to engaging learners which have worked better than others. Success at

engaging in the community has often come from working with Children's Centres, for example, and by developing personal relationships.

Solution: Working in partnership and with organisations such as NIACE, Adult Learning Providers can share and adopt best practices for working in the community. Agencies such as JCP can refer learners to FE for specific training.

- *For example, one provider has seen limited recruitment direct from JCP but 'JCP' learners have self-referred in quite large numbers to the college for training. The introduction of Skills Conditionality should assist here, but it is early days.*

Fee Loan System for FE for Level 3/4 provision for learners aged 24

Clarify how the loans will work

Challenge: The proposed introduction of a fee loan system is of concern to colleges as the burden of applying and associated bureaucracy is predicted to be a barrier. There is potential for a reduction in demand for courses and a feeling that the system will be bureaucratic. It was unclear as to whether the loans would cover short courses at Levels 3 and 4.

Solution: If apprenticeship loans are introduced they should be made transferrable and independent of the employer. If the loans cover short courses at Level 3/4, care needs to be taken over the amount of additional administration required. On longer courses this can be built into the programme more easily.

Reducing bureaucracy and simplifying systems

Focus on short courses and disadvantaged learners

Challenge: Providers are comfortable with much of the paperwork associated with providing adult learning courses. The challenge is when things keep changing. "With each new contract there is a different system. We need to avoid duplicating information for slightly different purposes"..."It's difficult when the outcomes and outputs agreed at the

beginning of the project are changed at the end". Learners cope with paper work except in the case of very short courses.

Solution: Whilst for the 'hard to engage' you can drip feed paperwork – "people are used to forms for the doctors..." it is not appropriate to have heavy paperwork for tasters to encourage people back into learning. Funders need to understand the impact of bureaucracy on engagement and focus on reducing bureaucracy in this area.

Higher Education may create new opportunities for FE

Maximise potential for new opportunities

Challenge: It was thought that there might be a change with higher education provision being introduced to FE and that the government believed it would prove cheaper to finance.

Solution: Provided adequate funding was provided, it was likely that there would be increased demand for level 4 and above apprenticeships.

Would it help with progression? One example of how it might be offered:

- *East Surrey college is in the process of growing its HE and professional offer. There is already evidence of strong progression from college L3 courses in Art, Design and Media and to a lesser extent in Construction. The college works closely with an HEI and introduced a new Foundation degree in summer 2011 with more in development for delivery from 2012. It belongs to the Gatwick Diamond Inspire group to grow the number of local people with higher level qualifications to increase local job prospects.*

Informal Adult and Community Learning

Demonstrate social return on investment

Challenge: Ensuring that the needs of disadvantaged learners are met costs a lot as each learner takes longer to reach accreditation. Should more of the adult learning be focused on the disadvantaged therefore? Providers now need to generate as much fee income as possible.

Solution: The high cost of engaging the disadvantaged does yield tangible benefits and these must be highlighted to make a continuing case for funding. Much work is being undertaken to develop Social Return on Investment measures. Providers must seek to reduce dependency on public funding and obtain funding from a wider range of sources.

- *For example, one provider flexes its IACL funding by using tranches for 'tasters' and inductions for onward progression to fully costed and other funded provision. This has increased working with LDD and Hard to Reach with significant increases over targets and with solid progression routes.*

Enable planning of provision

Challenge: A number of views were expressed in relation to planning of Informal Adult and Community Learning:

- The FE sector is very dynamic and providers undertake detailed planning – collaborative planning happens organically with providers liaising over the courses offered in different places at different times.
- If the 'lead accountable body' concept was to be revisited – there would be a cost in carrying out this function, whether it be by Surrey County Council or another body, which would need to be covered from provider(s) funding.

Nevertheless, some planning issues were raised:

- In one rural area the first port of call for one provider to meet the needs of those suffering with depression was the local community centre, and a range of courses/activities were offered there. Following a loss of a link with the Health sector this was more difficult to accomplish.
- The local authority was perceived by some partner as being highly focused on meeting the needs of NEETs perhaps to the detriment of other adults. This was not borne out by the facts and this highlighted the value of sharing information at networking meetings.
- 'More equitable funding', referred to in the consultative document, was likely to mean re-distribution nationally. Within Surrey there are many smaller areas of high deprivation and large rural areas which need to be catered for. There was concern that this is not always appreciated when considering funding allocations.

Solution: Countywide network meetings provide a useful forum in which to raise planning issues and share information and intelligence to inform planning. However, clarity needs to be provided as to which organisations (local enterprise partnerships, local authorities, etc) have a role in providing planning information.

Literacy and Numeracy

Provide more funding to cater for those with the lowest literacy skills (pre Entry)

Challenge: There is relatively little funding for this to provide what is needed for those who fail to engage. “Businesses do not have the budgets for training these days.” Yet 1 in 7 people have low skills in numeracy and/or literacy. The FE sector tries to overcome funding difficulties by combining numeracy and literacy with other subjects to make it more interesting. They will put a class on “if there is a group of sufficient size” but need to also balance this with quality considerations. Another difficulty faced is the rural nature of Surrey. Classes used to take place in village halls, for example.

Solution: Some have taken a dynamic approach to starting classes with small numbers in the expectation that they will grow. Not only has this resulted in much higher recruitment overall but retention of students has also improved. It is important that funding permits this to continue. Many community venues continue to be used though it must be recognised that not all provide the quality, facilities and IT resources that are generally expected nowadays. There is a need to change the way in which funding is loaded towards larger class sizes. To be effective, funding for 1 to 1 training is needed for those with the very lowest skills needs.

Numeracy and literacy for ex-offenders is well funded and there needs to be more publicity about this as many ex-offenders are not being catered for.

Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership Comment

In collating this response it became clear that several of the challenges raised related to planning issues. Adult Learning providers can be very effective in responding to local learning and business needs, linking with organisations like LEPs, addressing duplication and gaps with partners. However, they need accurate data to inform planning to promote economic growth, for example, and the opportunity to engage with very large contract holders (covering more than one county) who are in need of local partners. We believe this highlights the value of providing network meetings to share relevant information and introduce new partners.

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