

# **Moving On: The Learning and Skills Council and the voluntary and community sector**

## **Final report and recommendations. WEA and NIACE**

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## **Final report and recommendations**

### **Introduction**

This Report summarises the main issues arising from nine regional seminars for the voluntary and community sector on the Learning and Skills Council. These were delivered between November 2000 and February 2001 on behalf of the DfEE by NIACE and the WEA and were intended to build upon a successful earlier consultation series held in the Spring of 2000. A final report of the issues and recommendations arising from those meetings is available from either the WEA or NIACE

This second series was more regionally focused to reflect local as well as national developments towards the Learning and Skills Council. At each event, speakers from the local voluntary and community sector and either the Government Office for the region or the local Learning and Skills Council contributed their perception of the local picture. NIACE/WEA gave an overview of national issues.

Discussion was a principal component of each event and although the issues raised often reflected local circumstances it became clear that certain questions and concerns were common to voluntary and community organisations across the country. These are outlined in Section B. To complement the series the DfEE invited NIACE and the WEA to convene a meeting of voluntary and community sector consortia involved in adult learning. An account of this meeting is given in Section C.

Recommendations arising from the regional series and the consortia meeting are listed in Section D. Whilst these are largely based on ideas canvassed at the meetings, the recommendations have been extended to take account of current developments and opportunities and to incorporate other perceptions including those of both the WEA and NIACE.

## **Section A: Acknowledgements and event details**

Incorporating a regional perspective into each event required the assistance of many people. NIACE and the WEA would like to thank the following contributors for agreeing to make presentations and to answer questions as part of a panel forum. Their experience and local knowledge were major factors in the success of the series.

### **Eastern Region**

Name	Position
Carolyn Daines (Chair)	WEA District Secretary Eastern Region
Nicki Napier	Government Office, Eastern Region
Andrew Cohan	Community and Voluntary Forum, Eastern Region

### **East Midland Region**

Name	Position
Russell Gent (Chair)	WEA District Secretary East Midland District
Bob Little	Government Office, East Midlands
Neil Lambert	Nottingham Council for Voluntary Services

### **North West Region**

Name	Position
Greg Coyne (Chair)	WEA District Secretary Cheshire, Merseyside and West Lancashire District
Paul Holme	Executive Director, LSC Greater Merseyside
Edward Murphy	Chief Executive Liverpool Council for Voluntary Service

### **Yorkshire and the Humber Region**

Name	Position
Sam Herman (Chair)	WEA District Secretary Yorkshire North District
Margaret Ogilvie	Standing in for Government Office of Yorkshire and Humber
Jenny Mills	Chief Executive, Hull Council for Voluntary Service

### **North East Region**

Name	Position
Jim Soulsby (Chair)	NIACE Development Officer
Michael Gilbey	Government Office, North East
John Jewitt	Board Member Voluntary Organisations Network North East

### **West Midland Region**

Name	Position
Richard Copley (Chair)	WEA District Secretary West Mercia District
Leonara Castledine	Government Office, West Midlands
Jane Slowey	Birmingham Voluntary Service Council

**South West Region**

Name	Position
Richard Escolme (Chair)	NIACE Development Officer
Laurence Leader	Government Office, South West
Karen Kendall	Training Officer, Exeter Council for Voluntary Service
Tim Ward	Director, Learning Curve

**South East Region**

Name	Position
Jim Soulsby (Chair)	NIACE Development Officer
Nick Wilson	Executive Director LSC Surrey
Rob Woolley	Director, 'RAISE' – Regional Voluntary Sector Network

**London Region**

Name	Position
Cheryl Turner (Chair)	NIACE Development Officer
Peter Pledger	Executive Director LSC West London
Elizabeth Ladimeji	Chief Executive Lambeth Voluntary Action Council

We would like to thank members of staff within both organisations whose administrative efforts ensured that this complex exercise ran smoothly, notably Vera Tuncel and Celestine Harris. We would also like to record our appreciation of the contribution of the staff in the Regional Government Offices who helped us to contact the speakers.

## *Aims and programme*

Each event had identical aims and followed a similar format:

### Aims:

- To offer an update on developments around the new Learning and Skills Council and other important bodies such as the Local Learning Partnerships
- To outline the local, regional situation including progress with the transition arrangements for setting up the Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs)
- To highlight the experiences and responses of the local voluntary and community sector
- To strengthen networking within the local voluntary and community sector and links between the sector, the LLSCs and other important bodies

### Programme

Welcome from the Chair

LSC implementation: the national Picture

LSC implementation: the Regional picture

A view from the voluntary and community sector

Group discussions:

- To develop issues raised in the plenary session
- To identify key areas for partnership and consortia
- To identify questions for the panel

Panel discussion

Closing comments from the Chair

In total, 706 people registered to attend the seminars, which were mostly heavily oversubscribed. In order to allow as much time as possible for local presentations and participant involvement a substantial amount of information was delivered in a pre-seminar mailing. This included information about the LSC structure and transition plans, details of local and national membership of the LSC and the new Executive Directors, and contact details for local Learning and Skills Councils, Regional Government Offices, Local Learning Partnerships and voluntary sector umbrella organisations.

All participants were encouraged to complete an evaluation form assessing the quality and usefulness of their event and to rate it on a simple scale between 'very good' and 'very poor'. The overall outcome was a 93% rating of either 'very good' or 'good' (60/30) with strong consistent approval for the openness and quality of the discussion and the emphasis on regional matters. The most significant source of criticism was the absence of clear answers to certain specific questions. Whilst this is a feature of an evolving process and therefore partly unavoidable, the frustration it causes is very understandable. This is particularly the case for those voluntary bodies that are keen and ready to engage with the LSCs but who are concerned that access will be difficult and delayed.

## **Section B: Common issues**

Where an issue of a particularly local nature was raised, the Government Office or LSC representative usually noted it so that a response could follow. The account below synthesises the range of general issues that emerged in most, if not all, of the events.

### *Knowledge and Communication:*

- The seminars revealed highly variable levels of knowledge and understanding amongst participants about the new LSC framework. This was seen as a barrier to participation in two ways: deficit and overload.
- A substantial number of organisations felt they existed outside the relevant information networks and therefore found it difficult to maintain a sufficient understanding of even major developments. This was linked to the use of technology. Whilst the Internet was recognised as a valuable source of information there was concern that there is a growing assumption on the part of key agencies that everyone has ready access to the Web. In time, Government initiatives such as the UK Online programmes will help to ameliorate the situation but voluntary sector research demonstrates that currently a significant number of particularly smaller organisations lacks access to email and the internet.
- Participants also identified the converse as a problem. Those with easier access to relevant documents mentioned the difficulties of dealing with a surfeit of undigested information which might (or might not) be important to their work. Keeping up to date with both broad policy developments and emerging detail was seen as crucial but problematic for organisations with limited resources.

### *Openness of LSC activities and perceptions of the sector*

- The regional events were welcomed as an effective means of gathering information about the LSC and offering views on its development but there was a perceptible sense of 'consultation fatigue' amongst delegates. This included an explicit questioning of the purpose of voluntary sector involvement in consultation exercises. Participants were doubtful of the value of investing scarce resources in activities that appear ultimately ineffective in terms of their impact on the position of the sector. The sheer scale of the consultation process and an apparent absence of clear benefit have thrown the equation of time/money versus outcomes into sharp relief. The possibility of disengagement should be a matter of concern to the government, particularly as participation by the sector in local LSCs, Learning Partnerships and Local Strategic Partnerships is seen as critical to their capacity to fulfil their different roles.
- Access to the national and local LSCs was another consistent, major issue. Inevitably, the composition of the local and national committees and boards, and the backgrounds of the Executive Directors, had been scrutinised for signs of knowledge and understanding of the sector. Whilst recognising that this is an imprecise science, participants were concerned about the apparent lack of experience of the voluntary and community sector reflected in the new structures and the potential consequences of this for their work.

- Similar concerns were raised over the current membership and approach of local Learning Partnerships. Whilst there are some excellent examples of local Learning Partnerships working constructively with voluntary organisations to support their involvement (for example, in Cheshire and London) many were viewed as having little effective engagement with the sector and insufficient commitment to achieving this. There was a recognition that this is partly historical, arising from the way these bodies were originally constructed, and partly due to a lack of knowledge about how to engage with such a diverse sector. A significant cultural shift was seen as essential if local Learning Partnerships are to deliver on the key tasks of facilitating co-operation between providers, encouraging coherent planning, and providing a place for learners' views in the post-16 framework.
- The transparency and accountability of LSC decision-making processes was a consistent issue. This included the question of whether Board meetings were to be held in public and whether there would be an appeals procedure against decisions about particular provision. The role of the national LSC in arbitrating sub-regional discrepancies was raised as requiring explanation, and the issue of publicly available performance indicators was seen as needing urgent attention.
- Whilst participants welcomed the growing understanding of the importance of the sector to the widening participation agenda, they urged the LSC to recognise voluntary and community organisations as small and medium sized enterprises. One in 50 people in England are currently employed by the sector and the number is increasing. There was a concern that the experience of voluntary and community organisations in this area, and their potential contribution to policies and targets relating to staff and volunteer skills development and work-based training, were in danger of being overlooked.

### *Capacity Issues*

- Participants raised the question of whether their capacity to deliver learning funded through the LSC could be undermined, not by the quality of the provision itself, but by the information and data management requirements. The need to collect robust data was recognised but there was a concern that the practical burden of this would be prohibitive for some small organisations that might otherwise perform well against the LSC's quality assurance requirements.
- There was a perceived lack of understanding amongst LSC staff of the range and type of provision offered by the voluntary and community sector and of the issues such organisations face in developing and sustaining this work. Participants argued that staff transferring from TECs to the LSC had limited experience of community-based work and as a consequence little empathy with it.
- Linked to this was the important issue of capacity building within the LSC. The creation of a single entity with responsibility for post-16 learning outside higher education brings massive challenges in terms of ensuring that LSC staff appreciate the range of providers, learners and contexts their remit covers. Appropriate staff development was seen as a critical issue for the future enrichment of adult learning and particularly for ensuring a proper understanding of the disposition of learning that occurs through the voluntary and community sector.

## *Funding*

- The new funding framework met with broad approval among participants. In particular, the opportunity to secure funds directly from the LSC was seen as a major advance. The LSC's remit to widen participation and promote social inclusion was welcomed and participants saw these as areas where voluntary and community organisations have a distinctive contribution to make.
- Participants acknowledged the need for a smooth transition into the new LSC framework and recognised the logistical and cultural challenges this entails. However, there was widespread disappointment that those organisations currently ineligible for direct funding from either the FEFC or TECs will probably be unable to access LSC resources for at least a year. There was concern that this delay will seriously disadvantage such organisations on the basis that resources will be largely pre-allocated by the time these groups are in a position to apply. This has implications for the capacity of the LSC to achieve the ambition in the *Remit Letter* of drawing upon the skills and knowledge of new providers to widen as well as increase the participation of adult learners.
- Organisations that operate at national as well as regional and local levels were concerned over a lack of clear guidance on how they are to be funded. In particular, the possibility of having to seek money through 47 local LSCs (LLSCs) was seen as presenting major planning and budgeting difficulties and also as posing a significant threat to quality assurance and policy developments that are led nationally rather than locally. Alternatives were discussed, such as the use of a 'lead' LLSC or integration into the National Contracting Unit, but these were seen as problematic. Resourcing for organisational infrastructure was a linked issue and in particular funding for the development and training of scattered staff and volunteers, notably in relation to quality assurance and preparation for inspection, provider review and self-assessment. There was an overall concern that the LSC was not aware of how many voluntary bodies were in this position or how diversely they would be affected.
- Similar concerns arose around organisations operating across LLSC boundaries. Whilst this was seen as particularly acute in the London region where most participants anticipated offering provision spanning more than one LSC area, the issue was raised at every event. In this context there was also a mixed response to the idea of a 'lead' LLSC. It should be noted that these difficulties were set against broad approval for the aim of promoting local provision by operating at a sub-regional level.
- There was strong endorsement of the LSC's commitment to fund provision that does not lead to external qualifications or accreditation. This was seen as supporting the development and delivery of flexible learning programmes that build the confidence needed to enable progression to further study, as well as providing some protection for the 'liberal' tradition of learning for its own sake. However, there was an equally strong concern over the lack of clarity about both the criteria for funding such provision and the proportion of LLSC funds that would be allocated to it. There was a consistent recognition of the need to apply quality assurance mechanisms to all forms of LSC funded provision, including the most informal, community-based learning.

- However, there was a concern about the extent to which inspection and review would take account of the particular circumstances of non-accredited learning and produce quality standards that are 'fit for purpose' in this context.
- The principle behind the co-financing proposals, that a single application for European Union funding is made to a Co-financing Organisation (CFO), was welcomed. In particular, the intention to simplify reporting requirements and to streamline the process of securing match funding was seen as helpful. However the possibility was raised that CFOs, for reasons of administrative efficiency, might be tempted to deal with larger, 'safer' organisations at the expense of smaller, locally based groups and that the varied objectives of European funds might be skewed to fit the more vocational priorities of CFOs. The risk of CFOs preferring to work with organisations with secured match funding, rather than with those without it was noted as a possible perverse incentive within the arrangements.

### *Quality assurance*

- The determining emphasis within the LSC's operational priorities upon quality assurance and improvement was welcomed. Considerable attention is already paid within the sector to quality issues and there is evidence to show that with appropriate resourcing and support, even the smallest organisations will contend with the requirements of an appropriate framework like 'Quality First' or PQASSO. However, the extent to which the requirements of self-assessment, LSC provider review and external inspection will take account of the capacity of voluntary and community bodies and the diverse purposes of the learning was questioned. It was argued that quality assurance requirements might be disproportionately costly for smaller providers, and disproportionately constraining to the character of their provision.
- Questions were also posed around the quality indicators that will be used by the LSC and the inspectorate to identify and assess the outcomes and effectiveness of community-based provision. It was argued that inspection and review should recognise and celebrate the many unplanned and informal achievements that accrue to learners from participation in such activities and that sector providers and umbrella organisations should be involved in the development of imaginative mechanisms to recognise achievement.
- Several concerns were expressed around the use of benchmarking in the context of community-based learning. It was argued that there is a lack of appropriate benchmarks and experience in the use of such material, and that the process would place a significant burden on less well resourced, smaller organisations. Contextualisation was also an issue with consistent reference to the fact that work with socially and economically disadvantaged groups often results in low retention rates purely as a result of the target group involved.

## **Section C: voluntary and community sector consortia**

As part of the consultation series, the WEA/NIACE were asked to convene a meeting of representatives of voluntary and community sector consortia with a focus upon learning. This was in recognition of the fact that there has been a significant recent growth in the number of these groupings stimulated in part by the challenge of the new LSC arrangements.

The aim of the meeting was to provide an opportunity for members of formal and informal consortia to share approaches and experience, clarify major issues and common messages, and to identify further issues and possible next steps. It was attended by delegates from Cumbria, the North East, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, North Lincolnshire, Hull, Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Cambridgeshire, London, Hertfordshire, Basildon, Wiltshire and Cornwall. In addition, there were representatives from DfEE, National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVS), National Lotteries Charities Board, Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation (VSNTO), PAULO, London Open College Network, Sharing Credit and the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre.

The programme included presentations by Cheryl Turner (NIACE) and Marcus Bell (formerly DfEE) and group work addressing common issues, achievements and challenges. The unanimously positive evaluations of the day are reflected in the following typical comment, "Excellent, well informed, stimulating discussion of a wide range of important and complex issues." There was a strong call for further opportunities for consortia members to debate issues of common concern, to identify key messages for policy formulation and to share effective practice.

### *Consortia*

Whilst various common issues emerged through discussion, the gathering was characterised by the diversity of the groups represented. A range of models exists for consortia reflecting local circumstances, objectives and the agencies involved. Broadly speaking these can be grouped into two 'types'

- Informal associations including many smaller voluntary organisations, local development agencies (e.g. CVS) and other organisations with a strategic role. It is interesting to note that even within these quite loose associations more formal arrangements consistent with the founding principles of the consortia are starting to be explored.
- More formal consortia with eligibility criteria for membership and with a strong focus upon accessing funding, delivering learning and training, and addressing quality standards. For example, the South Yorkshire consortium which has brought around 40 sector learning providers together to access mainstream LSC funding and to develop the memberships' capacity to deliver to a high standard.

Engagement with learning also varied considerably amongst the organisations present. The scope of the offer included capacity building provision, vocational training, basic and key skills, and specialist training (e.g. welfare rights or sign language). It also covered informal and brief learning episodes through to substantial accredited programmes.

Despite their diversity in terms of structure and purpose, a range of common aims for the consortia was apparent from the meeting. These included:

- the development of a more coherent view of the needs and potential role of the sector and a more consistent voice to articulate them
- the creation of structures that will both reflect the local voluntary and community sector (in relation to learning) and intersect with key strategic bodies such as Local Learning Partnerships and the LLSCs
- an enhanced capacity to influence policy makers and funders
- the creation of opportunities to share effective practice and useful information
- the development of better support for smaller organisations and their staff and volunteers
- improved access to resources and more equitable funding arrangements
- the consolidation of existing infrastructure within the sector
- improved ability within the sector to meet quality standards and the requirements of self-assessment, provider review and external inspection.

The consortia reported minimal external support for their development and consequentially their existence was quite precarious in terms of their funding and scope for growth. There were consistent links with local CVS and with the work of Sharing Credit (now concluded), and notable interventions by other agencies such as 'Yorkshire Forward', the Yorkshire and Humber RDA which has supported a significant strengthening of these initiatives in the region. However, the overall fragility of the arrangements should be a cause for concern, particularly given the potential strategic role of the consortia in the LSC arrangements. There was a consistent call from the meeting for sustained funding which would allow for consolidation and development. It is worth noting in this context that this is included in the recommendations of the Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation's (VSNTO) *Workforce Development Plan*.

## **Section D: recommendations**

In the light of the preceding issues and concerns, this report offers the following recommendations.

- 1. Resourcing for periodic digests/briefings for the voluntary and community sector on significant developments affecting adult learning.** These might cover such areas as the LSC arrangements including funding ('How to apply...') and quality assurance, and policy areas such as basic skills, family learning, neighbourhood regeneration; and workforce development. These could be compiled by a national agency and then circulated in a variety of ways to ensure maximum access. This would include dissemination via electronic bulletin boards, news groups, email, on the internet, and mailings to umbrella networks such as the Regional Voluntary Sector Networks (RVSNs), Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) and consortia. The briefings could be used to support and facilitate the work of the proposed 'Local Learning Network Co-ordinators' suggested by the VSNTO's *Workforce Development Plan 2001* (p 24).

The briefings/digests should also link into and complement the more detailed information about funding that would be made available to the sector through the proposed single website giving details about all Government funding programmes relevant to voluntary and community organisations (see *Funding Community Groups: a consultation document issued by the Government's Active Community*

*Unity*, May 2001, paras. 4.1 – 4.4). Together, these proposals would help to integrate LSC opportunities into the wider funding map which would be extremely useful to the sector which has traditionally drawn more heavily upon streams outside the FEFC. It would also be a comprehensive response to the concern underpinning Recommendation 5 of the Policy Action Team report *Skills for Neighbourhood Renewal*, that many sector organisations experience difficulties in navigating the “maze of requirements surrounding various funding programmes” (pp.16 –17).

2. **A systematic, periodic review by the LSC of its engagement with the voluntary and community sector.** This should be based upon the development of appropriate performance indicators for example in such areas as active participation in decision-making, links with appropriate bodies and networks, staff development and training around sector issues, and the allocation of resources. The LSC should explore the feasibility of benchmarking LLSC performance and consider mediation by the national LSC of significant sub-regional discrepancies in levels of engagement. A benchmark system is currently being developed in one region which may offer a model for similar action elsewhere.
3. **The national LSC to sign up to the Government’s Compact with the sector and explore the appropriateness of LLSCs developing their own Compacts with the local voluntary and community sector.** Some local authorities and Regional Development Agencies are currently considering this and therefore co-ordination between agencies would be necessary and also potentially beneficial in terms of the development of coherent regional approaches.
4. **A systematic, periodic review by Local Learning Partnerships (LLPs) of their engagement with the voluntary and community sector.** This should entail establishing appropriate performance indicators for example in such areas as active participation in all appropriate forums, links with appropriate bodies and networks, and staff development and training. Benchmarking LLP performance should be addressed.
5. **Resourcing for the development of guidelines/briefing sheets and locally delivered training for LSC and LLP staff to support their effective engagement with the sector.** These capacity-building measures would complement the NCVO proposal for civil-service-wide and local authority training programmes on how to work with voluntary and community organisations (see *A Manifesto for the Voluntary Sector*, NCVO, 2001, p.8). They would help to ensure that key bodies become better informed about relevant infrastructure developments within the sector such as the RVSNs, Black and Minority Ethnic Networks (BMENs) and emerging learning/training-based consortia. This better understanding of the local sector would inform and support important decision making, for example, the proposed selection of an ‘outreach agent’ from within the sector by the Government for each area which would have responsibility for promoting small grant schemes operating locally (*Funding Community Groups*, para 4.9).

- 6. Resourcing for the development and co-ordination of local infrastructure and networks.** This should include stable funding to support the emergence and consolidation of learning/training-based consortia. This is necessary in order for them to function strategically in relation to the LLSCs and LLPs, and to fulfil their mentoring, facilitating, and quality improvement role in relation to local voluntary and community bodies. Funding to support the effective co-ordination of the work of these bodies with that of other networks such as the RVSNs, BMENs and CVS, would help to rationalise the sector's engagement with learning and training issues and clarify the points of intersection with key local bodies such as LSCs, LLPs and Local Strategic Partnerships.
- 7. A national site for voluntary and community sector discussions around learning and training issues.** Whilst this repeats Recommendation 5 from the first regional consultation series, there is still a strong and consistent call for a national body with diverse membership that would co-ordinate the sector's responses to key policy developments. Representation could be drawn from national sector organisations such as NCVO, VSNTO, NACVS, PAULO, WEA, key regional and sub-regional networks such as learning/training consortia, RVSNs, and BMENs, and other major stakeholders such as NIACE, the Learning and Skills development Agency, the Social Exclusion Unit, DfEE and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

Such an initiative would help the sector to deliver the pivotal tasks assigned to it in the development of lifelong learning and widening participation, and in the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (see *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: national strategy action plan*, SEU, 2001, pp 76 – 82). As David Blunkett argued, Voluntary activity is....an essential building block in our work to create a more inclusive society” (Speech NCVO Annual Conference, February, 2001). In order to achieve this, the sector requires opportunities to discuss and respond to relevant strategic matters at a national level.

- 8. Eligibility criteria for funding 'other' provision through the LSC must take proper account of voluntary and community sector views.** An inclusive consultation process is critical to ensuring that the development of the criteria reflects the full range of contexts, purposes and outcomes of non-qualification based adult learning. The LSC is urged to take action on this as soon as possible recognising the levels of concern within the sector about non-accredited learning in particular.
- 9. Common Inspection Framework implementation must be responsive to the work of the sector.** The LSC and Adult Learning Inspectorate must take proper account of the diverse circumstances and purposes of adult and community learning and in particular the delivery of more informal and community-based learning. Issues for particular attention would include standards, data management, benchmarking, the evidence requirement for LSC review, self-assessment and external inspection, and interpreting achievement in non-accredited learning. The LSC is urged to consider ways in which less-well resourced organisations can be supported through the quality assurance and improvement processes.
- 10. The LSC should build upon its current welcome consultation with national voluntary organisations.** The reach of the consultation should be widened to include more organisations and the scope of the enquiry should be extended beyond funding matters to include the impact of the inspection arrangements.

Steps to consolidate this process into a longer-term advisory arrangement need to take account of the wider call within the sector for a national site for discussions around learning and training issues (see recommendation 7).

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**May 2001**