

Working Together: Learning and  
Skills Councils and the voluntary  
and community sector

Final Report & recommendations

June 2002

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## **Introduction and summary of recommendations**

This Report summarises the main issues and recommendations arising from a series of regional seminars for the voluntary and community sector on the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). These were delivered by the WEA and NIACE on behalf of the DfES.

The meetings took place between January and March 2002 and were intended to build upon consultation events held in each of the previous two years. Both earlier series were delivered prior to the LSC's formal emergence and played an important role in encouraging preparation within the sector, particularly in the areas of strategic planning and quality assurance. The summary reports were a means of informing the LSC, nationally and locally, about key issues for the sector and of making a number of recommendations for future action. These are available from both NIACE and the WEA.

With the LSC now underway, this third series offered an opportunity to incorporate much stronger sub-regional and regional dimensions to reflect more local issues and practices, as well as an overview of major general developments. The latter included interim lessons from the Adult Learning Inspectorate's (ALI) adult and community learning pilot inspections and the developing agenda around learning for neighbourhood renewal.

All local LSC was invited to contribute. The intention was offer participants current information about local developments and an opportunity to meet key local LSC staff - 46 of the 47 agreed to participate. Equally, it was hoped that these conversations would be useful to the LSC by providing a forum to discuss areas of mutual interest and concern with voluntary and community sector delegates.

Each event also included speakers from the local voluntary and community sector and from the Government Office for the Region (GOR) who were asked to outline developments around learning and regeneration and the wider strategic links between key local bodies.

Discussion was central to each event and although the issues raised were often rooted in local circumstances there were common underpinning concerns, observations and questions. These are outlined in Section B. To complement the regional meetings, NIACE/WEA convened a national seminar for voluntary and community sector learning and training consortia. An account of this meeting is given in Section C. Recommendations arising from the whole series are listed in Section D. These are based on ideas canvassed at the meetings but extended to take account of current developments and opportunities and to incorporate other perceptions including those of both the WEA and NIACE.

## Summary of recommendations

The following is a summary of the recommendations outlined in full in section D.

1. Periodic mapping and collation of examples of effective practice between local LSCs and the voluntary and community sector; and distribution of the findings via quarterly briefings to local LSCs and sector organisations and networks.
2. Further development of effective communication channels between voluntary and community organisations and the LSC – ranging from simple administrative changes to more strategic responses based on collaboration.
3. National quality improvement support programme for voluntary and community sector providers, based on various local LSC capacity building initiatives and the DfES funded Quality Improvement Support Programme for local authority adult and community learning.
4. Local LSC staff training and support opportunities developed and delivered in collaboration with voluntary and community sector organisations.
5. Guidelines on good practice developed through consultation and building on existing local LSC memoranda of understanding and compacts with the voluntary and community sector and the government's national Contact.
6. Improved communication around funding opportunities and links with the (DfES convened) Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Issues Steering Group and the forthcoming guidance for funders from the Treasury review.
7. Periodic collation of the results of local and regional mapping of learning needs and provision within the voluntary and community sector.
8. Improved resourcing for regional voluntary and community sector networks and their emerging work around learning and training.
9. Meetings for sub-regional sector learning and training consortia, regional networks, and so on – this is the focus of a forthcoming NIACE (DfES funded) initiative.
10. National learning forum for the voluntary and community sector to promote engagement with government policy and the LSC at national level.

## Section A: Acknowledgements and event details

### *Acknowledgements*

The WEA and NIACE would like to thank the following people for agreeing to make presentations or to facilitate discussion. Their support ensured that each event and the series overall were successful.

#### **London Region: 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2002**

London Voluntary Resource Centre, Holloway Road, London

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Sue Gardner (Chair)	NIACE London Regional Agent
Richard Wragg	Government Officer for London
Ray Phillips	London Voluntary Sector Training Consortium
Ian Perkins	London Central LSC
Marcella Del Pino	London South LSC
Yvonne Folkes	London East LSC
Ayser Orhan	London North LSC
Sanja Stevic	London West LSC

#### **South Eastern Region: 29<sup>th</sup> January 2002**

Charity Centre, Stephenson Way, London

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Sarah Grylls (Chair)	NIACE South East Regional Agent
Jacquie Parry	Government Office for the South East
Sue Lampley	Regional Action and Involvement South East (RAISE)
Simon Bowes	Hampshire and the Isle of Wight LSC
Heather Gray	Kent and Medway LSC
Susan Jones and Alexa Wilkinson	Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire LSC
John Thompson	Berkshire LSC
Geoff Marshall and Anne Tompsett	Surrey LSC

This seminar had to be cancelled due to anticipated travel difficulties caused by a rail strike

#### **Eastern Region: 31<sup>st</sup> January 2002**

Peterborough Professional Development Centre, Cottesmore Close, Peterborough

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Carolyn Daines (Chair)	WEA District Secretary Eastern District
Mervyn Stokes	Government Office for the Eastern Region
Andrew Cogan	Community and Voluntary Forum for the East Region (COVER)

Sally Creedy	Hertfordshire LSC
Ian Feekins and June Shimmin	Bedfordshire and Luton LSC
Susan Maitland and Sue Anderson	Cambridgeshire LSC
Graham Fretwell	Suffolk LSC
Jyoti Vora	Essex LSC
Alison Mackway	Norfolk LSC

This seminar was cancelled due to a clash with key local events including the final submission deadline for Co-Financing bids.

**North West Region: 1<sup>st</sup> February 2002**

Alston Hall, Longbridge, Preston

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Jane Ward (Chair)	NIACE North West Regional Agent
Nigel Burke	Government Office for the North West
Barrie Morton	West Lancashire CVS
Marilyn Houston	Cheshire and Warrington LSC
Ray Begley	Lancashire LSC
Paula Edwards and Karen Brownbill	Greater Merseyside LSC
Fiona Hilton	Greater Manchester LSC
Pauline Greenhough	Cumbria LSC
Terry Rowe	Cumbria CC on behalf of Cumbria LSC

**North East Region: 5<sup>th</sup> February 2002**

St Aiden's College, University of Durham

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Jim Soulsby (Chair)	NIACE Development Officer
Helen Steadman	Government Office for the North East
Ray Cowell	Voluntary Organisations Network North East (VONNE)
Helen Bashford	Tees Valley LSC
Dan Connelly and Jane Kendrick	County Durham LSC
David Turnbull	Northumberland LSC
Colin Waters	Tyne and Wear LSC

**East Midland Region: 12<sup>th</sup> February 2002**

Catalis Conferencing, London Road, Derby

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Russell Gent (Chair)	WEA District Secretary East Midland District
Gary Bryant	Government Office for the East Midlands
Mike Lloyd	Derby Council for Voluntary Service
Michael Aldridge	Northamptonshire LSC
Colin Chinnock, Sue O'Hara and Rachel Croft	Leicestershire LSC

Rachel Jones and John Pastor	Lincolnshire and Rutland LSC
Terry Laws	Derbyshire LSC

### **Yorkshire and the Humber Region: 14<sup>th</sup> February 2002**

Dennison Centre, University of Hull

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Sam Herman (Chair)	WEA District Secretary Yorkshire North District
Jacqui Lewis	Government Office for Yorkshire and Humber
Jenny Mills	Humberside Learning Consortium
Claire Atkinson and Christine Davis	South Yorkshire LSC
Stephan Deathe	West Yorkshire LSC
David Windle	Humberside LSC
Sue Maggott and Joan Palmer	North Yorkshire LSC

### **South West Region: 27<sup>th</sup> February 2002**

The Cleve Hotel, Wellington

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Simon Mauger (Chair)	NIACE South West Regional Agent
Rodger Fowler	Government Office for the South West
Karen Kendal Tim Wardl	Exeter Council for Voluntary Service The Learning Curve (Wiltshire)
Julie Bird	Gloucestershire LSC
Tony Burgess and Susan Weall	Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole LSC
Jan Downie	Wiltshire and Swindon LSC
Sally House	Somerset LSC
John Morrison and Ralph Togneri	West of England LSC
Chris Roberts	Devon and Cornwall LSC

### **West Midlands Region: 6<sup>th</sup> March 2002**

Wolverhampton Science Park, Wolverhampton

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Janice Nichols (Chair)	Director Regional Action West Midlands
Chris Eade	Government Office for the West Midlands
Chris Bonnard	Regional Action West Midlands
Owen McFarlane	Embrace – West Midlands
Angela Baker and Mary Jones	Black Country LSC
Anthony Bamsey	Staffordshire LSC
Dawn McCracken	Birmingham and Solihull LSC
Kate Makepeace	Herefordshire and Worcestershire LSC
Sophie Thompson and Surinder Sandhu	Coventry and Warwickshire LSC
Sue Marston	Shropshire LSC

We would also like to record our appreciation of the staff team whose hard work and patience ensured that this complex exercise ran smoothly. In particular, we would like to thank Mark Walton and Sally Finlinson at NIACE for making the practical arrangements, and Vera Tuncel from the WEA for her support at each event.

A final thank you goes to the participants whose hard work and enthusiastic engagement ensured that the series raised many important issues and useful ideas for the future. We have tried to reflect these in the following report.

## *Aims and Programme Outline*

Each event had identical aims and followed a similar format:

### *Overall Aims:*

- To offer an update on key developments around the Learning and Skills Council, the provision of adult learning, and the wider strategic framework including the role of the Government Offices
- To facilitate the effective engagement of voluntary and community organisations with local LSCs, Government Offices and other important bodies
- To outline the local situation, to share emerging responses and effective practice, and to highlight local and national issues for debate and action
- To strengthen voluntary and community sector infrastructure with a focus upon learning and training.

### *Programme*

<b>12.00 Noon</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
<b>1.00pm</b>	<b>Presentations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Welcome and introductions from the Chair</li><li>• National picture: input from NIACE/WEA representative</li><li>• Regional Picture: input from the Government Office</li><li>• Local voluntary and community sector perspective</li></ul>
<b>2.15pm</b>	<b>Workshop discussions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants join the relevant local LSC Group</li><li>• Local LSC input offering an overview of current/planned engagement with voluntary and community groups in their area</li><li>• Facilitated discussion</li></ul>
<b>3.15pm</b>	<b>Plenary Session</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feedback from workshops</li><li>• Summary from the Chair</li></ul>
<b>4.00pm</b>	Tea/coffee and depart

In total, 513 people registered to attend the seminars. All participants received a pack of information that included: a strategic overview; a discussion paper on 'Community Capacity Building and Neighbourhood Renewal' (Cheryl Turner); a list of sources of

further information and advice; 'Neighbourhood Renewal: Skills and Knowledge Programme' (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit); 'Targets: getting smarter' (LSC); 'Proof Positive: Learners' views on approaches to identifying achievement in non-accredited learning' (NIACE); and supplementary material from local presenters. Participants in the national meeting for consortia also received copies (only then available) of 'Self-assessment and development planning: for adult and community learning providers' (LSDA/NIACE) and 'Listening to learners' (LSDA/NIACE).

## **Section B: Common Issues**

Many local issues were raised during the plenary and workshop sessions and these were usually noted by Government Office or local LSC staff for later action. The following section synthesises the issues that arose across most of the events and that were of widespread interest. These were often associated with determining how the voluntary and community sector and local LSCs could build positive working relations and develop effective community-based approaches to delivery.

Throughout the series, delegates and presenters were enthusiastic about exchanging information and perspectives and learning from the discussions. Issues and concerns were linked to a shared ambition to further the interests of learners through the delivery of high quality, appropriate and accessible learning.

### ***Knowledge and capacity***

As was the case in the previous two series, the seminars exposed a consistent concern over levels of knowledge within the voluntary and community sector about increasingly complex national and regional developments. This included access to information about the strategic interplay between agencies, key people in the GORs, LSC, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) local Learning Partnerships (LPs) and so on, the detail of planning cycles, and different policy areas with associated targets, funding streams and initiatives.

Inevitably levels of understanding were variable, with some organisations, for example the more established consortia, already functioning as key regional and sub-regional players, whilst others were struggling to maintain a broad overview of local developments.

These differences are linked to degrees of engagement with adult learning and its role in the achievement of core organisational purposes. However, there was a widespread desire to see more effective circulation of useful knowledge to offset recurrent problems of insufficient short and long-term information. The former includes bidding possibilities and planning and consultation deadlines, whilst the latter refers to quality assurance requirements (including the outcomes of the ALI pilot inspections and changing performance review arrangements), the transition to the LSC funding formula, and the assessment procedures and criteria for approving new providers.

This is an aspect of capacity but it also reflects a need to address methods and systems of communication between the relevant bodies (see below). Difficulties with information include both deficit and surfeit. Lack of access to the net and to relevant circulars and consultation and policy documents is a barrier for some voluntary and community sector bodies. Research suggests that smaller organisations in particular are affected by this. Conversely, access to large amounts of unmediated information that is directed, on the

whole, towards further education institutions and local authorities was also seen as problematic in terms of identifying key messages.

LSC staff reported a parallel difficulty in maintaining their understanding of voluntary and community sector structures, purposes, issues, aspirations and capacity. On the whole they were cultivating links with particular organisations and networks to build their knowledge base but they were aware this was delivering a partial view of sector interests and potential and that longer-term, more broadly connected strategies were needed.

As with other aspects of the LSC planning process, base-line evidence is needed to support appropriate interpretations of the learning needs and provider potential of voluntary and community organisations. Various mapping exercises have been conducted within the sector (Wiltshire, Northamptonshire, East Midlands, and so on) and more are being funded, but significant gaps in our knowledge remain.

The LSC has a potentially important role in developing and maintaining this information at sub-regional, and possibly regional and national levels (see Recommendation 7). For example, Vlearning Net (Devon and Cornwall voluntary and community sector learning and training consortium) has tendered to its local LSC to map the scale and reach of learning in and from the sector, including delivery to staff in the private and statutory sectors and informal learning amongst excluded groups. It will also identify those organisations with the potential to deliver or to expand their capacity to deliver learning over the longer term.

Coventry and Warwickshire CVSs, Warwickshire Rural Community Council, Warwickshire County Council, Coventry City Council, the Learning Partnership and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) are commissioning research into the sector's capacity building needs both as a significant workforce and as an important provider of learning opportunities in the sub region. Funding is from Coventry and Warwickshire LSC through Co-Financing (COF) and Warwickshire County Council. The research objectives include

- map the full range of support, capacity building and learning and training provision that is provided by the sector highlighting gaps and examples of good practice
- map the full range of workforce development provision, highlighting gaps and examples of good practice
- assess the impact of this provision on management committees, paid staff, volunteers and service users
- identify how sector providers track learners and monitor learning outcomes at an individual and organisational level.

The research findings will help to shape the ways in which local voluntary and community organisations become further involved in the learning and skills agenda and the potential role of CVS, consortia and other local development agencies, local LPs and the LSC in that process.

The capacity of voluntary and community organisations to respond to LSC requirements, once known, continues to be an important issue. Delegates across the series expressed concern about the resources and training available to sector providers to build their knowledge and skills around self-assessment and development planning, preparation for external inspection, data management, and organisational quality improvement processes (see Recommendations). This was seen as a particularly severe problem for black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations that are dealing with a legacy of disproportionately high levels of under-resourcing and reduced capacity.

A more coherent approach to capacity building would support sector providers who are keen to engage with the issues and also the LSC in fulfilling its remit to improve quality, raise retention and achievement levels and widen the provider base (see Recommendation 3). This would benefit from periodic mapping of local LSC support and of local research into sector needs. Both would inform the design of appropriate responses. As in all areas, there are examples of enlightened practice emerging from the LSC to draw upon (see Engagement).

Birmingham and Solihull LSC has been developing a capacity building initiative with a consortium of seven black-led voluntary sector training providers based in the Handsworth and Aston areas of Birmingham. The providers are currently delivering a range of New Deal and FE contracted programmes to predominantly African and Caribbean young people and adults in the community.

The consortium, or 'Service Provider Network' (SPN), has secured £190,000 over two years from the SRB4 CAN programme, LSC LIF and SRB2 Core Skills funding through a partnership project involving SPN, Birmingham Voluntary Service Council and the local LSC. The aims are: to support the LSC in diversifying its provider base through a programme to develop the capacity of SPN members; enable SPN members to gain additional contracts with the LSC, FE, Job Centre Plus, amongst others; and to meet the needs of their local community more effectively.

The programme will be developed and managed by a newly appointed co-ordinator on the basis of a training needs analysis for each organisation. The training will be available to staff, tutors, managers and committee members and include various qualifications, such as teaching in basic skills and NVQ5 in management development. Consultancy support around management information systems and financial procedures is also available. SPN members will complete a new provider self-assessment application in the autumn to determine how far they have progressed towards meeting the LSC's quality standards and their future developmental needs.

### ***Engagement***

Across the series there was a clear recognition by the LSC of the important role of voluntary and community organisations in widening participation in learning. This includes offering guidance, referral and support for adults moving towards some form of

learning (formal and informal), and the provision of more informal, 'first step' learning either implicitly or explicitly incorporated into work with poorer and more disadvantaged communities. This was welcomed by sector bodies as an important acknowledgement of their value but with the caveat that this provision is part of a wider potential contribution to lifelong learning.

Understanding of this more complex role was variable amongst LSCs. This reflects a number of factors including historical links between the sector and former TEC staff, local infrastructure, local LSC capacity, their knowledge of voluntary and community organisations, their interpretation of the priorities for their sub region, and the scope within this for sector providers.

A notably strong culture of collaboration is already apparent in some areas, with sector representation on LSC Boards and sub groups and substantial amounts of funding being directed towards voluntary and community organisations. Local Initiative Funding (LIF) or a combination of LIF and Co-Financing (COF) were the most commonly cited sources of LSC money during the series but substantial sums had also been secured through Workforce Development Funding for employee and volunteer training (see Section C).

Consultation around COF had been particularly strong in some regions, supported by meetings and collaboration with the relevant sector umbrella groups.

In the West Midlands, all the local LSCs are now working as Co-Financing Organisations (CFOs) for the European Social Fund (Objective 3). In many cases, both locally and regionally, the voluntary and community sector is a key player and is working closely with the CFOs to identify local priorities, particularly around social inclusion. The regional sector group for European issues, West Midland European Network, has played an important role in brokering these arrangements.

In other areas, voluntary and community sector organisations reported positive measures by local LSCs to cultivate new providers, for example through the use of LIF to build capacity, consolidated by possible targets for movement from LIF to mainstream funding.

Greater Merseyside LSC has commissioned NIACE and LSDA to develop and run a capacity building programme for voluntary and community sector adult and community education providers. This is in recognition of the challenges facing smaller providers with less trained professional staff (including few or no specialist quality improvement staff), rudimentary management information systems, and learning programmes that may well be an adjunct to other activities. Similar to the DfES funded Quality Improvement Support Programme available for LEA adult and community learning, this will offer training and support around the Common Inspection Framework, self-assessment and development planning, programme review, learner feedback, benchmarking, session observation, report writing and planing.

In contrast, other voluntary and community bodies, both individual providers and consortia, reported mixed responses from the LSC. A number of organisations currently

operating under franchise arrangements expressed concern about their anticipated exclusion from direct funding after August 2003. This reflected their ambition to extend their work independently but also concerns about diminishing income from current arrangements where local colleges were signalling an unwillingness to continue. In some cases delegates reported an apparent reluctance, even refusal, by the local LSC to consider new providers, whilst others pointed to substantial minimum thresholds in terms of students numbers and units. This raises a number of issues for the LSC and the sector: managing expectations raised by the inclusive language of early LSC documentation; developing clear communication around priorities, strategies and voluntary and community sector provider potential; and widening the provider base in order to satisfy unmet learner needs and aspirations.

Overall, there was a general sense that whilst local LSCs were interested in (and in some cases, strongly committed to) exploring future work with the sector, this seemed increasingly unlikely to include direct funding arrangements with many individual organisations. The emerging consensus was that local LSCs would look to build work with groups of organisations or with more formal consortia that could serve a strategic role locally, engage in delivery (in some cases) and function as managing agents for other, smaller organisations.

Some local LSCs were clear that this would not be an exclusive approach and that they would continue to fund individual voluntary and community groups – particularly through LIF. However, there was widespread recognition by all parties of the need to provide stable and identifiable points of intersection between the sector, the LSC and other key strategic bodies.

LSC staff also raised the question of the ‘value added’ of sector providers. In this context, the term was used to refer to the unique or distinctive quality of the sector’s learning offer; the particular dimension that was unobtainable through customary providers or franchise and contracting arrangements via colleges and local authorities. Was this an aspect of the curriculum, the ‘reach’ of the organisation, the context for learning, the relationship between provider and learner, the ethos of the learning experience, approaches to delivery, the contribution to particular targets, or value for money in terms of recruitment and retention levels? This offers a challenge to the sector in terms of distinguishing and presenting the case and to the LSC in terms of its willingness to listen and respond.

### ***Communication***

Communication issues were linked to matters of scale, funding and complexity. Local LSC contributors referred to the sheer number of voluntary and community sector organisations in their areas, the many differences between them, and the daunting prospect of establishing appropriate channels of communication. Who should they speak to if they can’t speak to everyone? Who would have credibility and reach?

For their part, some delegates described problems in identifying and making contact with key staff within the LSC and the GORs, particularly as these bodies organise and then reorganise themselves. Difficulties were reported in relation to obtaining sufficient, relevant and timely information about LSC activities, priorities or plans, and a few delegates spoke of sometimes inaccurate or conflicting versions. One example, cited at several meetings, of how important information can be restricted was the release of the LSC criteria for funding new providers. This was distributed in LSC Circular 01/19, a document that would be read primarily by organisations already in receipt of LSC funding, or with the capacity to trawl for key details.

The evolving complexity of the strategic map including the LSC, RDAs, GORs, LPs, LSPs, and local authorities (LAs) was noted as a cause for concern and confusion by all stakeholders. Delegates and presenters across the series raised the capacity implications of keeping pace with changes within and between all these organisations.

It was recognised that this problem will intensify with the implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's (NRU) Learning and Development strategy later this year. This will emphasise the community regeneration and capacity building dimensions of the sector's contribution to learning and introduce further processes and initiatives for voluntary and community organisations to navigate. This is in addition to the existing Community Empowerment Fund and Community Chests and the forthcoming LSC located Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities Fund. The latter will offer welcome opportunities to enhance the quality of the provider base, including smaller sector organisations.

Unsurprisingly therefore, communication was a pervasive issue. Concerns shared by LSC and sector participants included how best to circulate useful information about the LSC, how to share emerging best practice amongst local LSCs and voluntary and community organisations, and how to ensure that this intelligence feeds into the various iterative planning processes. LSC responses to this included:

- proposed regular newsletters from the local LSC to voluntary and community bodies detailing major current and forthcoming national, regional and local initiatives
- fora for local voluntary and community sector bodies established by the local LSC to build better communication with sector organisations
- consultative and awareness raising road shows of workshops and meetings to discuss the work of the local LSC and to highlight particular planning and funding possibilities, for example in relation to LIF and COF planning arrangement
- investment by the local LSC, primarily through LIF, in sector learning and training consortia in order to strengthen sources of information, support and networking for smaller organisations and to create identifiable point of contact for the LSC and other strategic bodies

Voluntary sector responses targeted both the external requirements of linking with the LSC and other strategic bodies and the internal issues of connecting diverse and dispersed sector bodies. The latter includes addressing the implications of limited

resources, uneven access to ICT, rurality and long travel distances, the opportunity costs for volunteers and part-time workers, a cultural focus upon 'doing' and delivering, the existing burdens of funding (bid writing, servicing the reporting and auditing requirements of multiple funders), and particular barriers and access issues for groups from within the black and minority ethnic communities.

Humberside Learning Consortium has developed a communication strategy in order to increase the effectiveness and inclusive nature of the organisation. There are four main elements to it:

- a bi-monthly training newsletter offering a calendar of training events for sector organisations (with an estimated readership of 30,000),
- a telephone information service that is currently receiving around 100-200 enquiries per week (7,500 calls overall pa),
- a series of conferences and seminars focusing upon specific issues,
- and a network of Local Advisory Groups (LAGs) which meet three times per year and which are open to any sector organisations.

Internal communication was also an issue for LSC staff who appreciated the opportunities offered by the seminars to exchange information with other colleagues. Whilst acknowledging the importance of sub-regional responsiveness, these conversations were clearly beneficial to the development of coherent approaches and ultimately, common standards. Some regions are already developing the architecture of regional co-operation, both thematically - around particular areas of work such as basic skills - and geographically.

However, there is still a question around how connections between local LSCs might be fostered more systematically, particularly in the area of their work with the voluntary and community sector. This potentially links across several LSC agendas and internal structures including basic skills, regeneration and neighbourhood renewal, workforce development, work with young adults, and adult and community learning.

Examples of effective practice around joint LSC/voluntary and community sector work seem to be burgeoning. Nonetheless, concerted approaches to improving communication would help to address recurrent concerns about the transparency of LSC decision making. They might also help to explain and contextualise some of the differences and apparent inconsistencies between local LSCs in their approaches to the sector.

Local relations between the LSC and voluntary and community organisations are clearly dynamic and evolving rapidly. This raises the question of how these might be tracked to the advantage of both (see Recommendation 1). Such energy and commitment at local level also casts a strong light on national links and delegates expressed some concern about an apparent lack of engagement between the sector and the LSC nationally.

There was uncertainty about where and how voluntary and community sector issues were being fed into national discussions and how those perspectives were being formed and articulated. Representation is an intractable issue within the sector but there was a

widespread consensus that a well-connected national sector forum focusing on learning and supported by an appropriate communication strategy and substructure was necessary in order to secure a voice for the sector at that level (see Recommendations).

### ***Funding***

The introduction of a common funding framework for LSC provision was welcomed by participants and seen as contributing towards a more coherent post-16 sector. However, there were caveats.

Participants argued strongly that the methodology should take proper account of the distinctive nature of the outreach provision undertaken by many community-based providers. It was pointed out that this work requires front-loaded resources for development and not just funding for delivery, it runs higher risks of erratic or low retention rates, and can require creative non-paper-based approaches to demonstrating achievement. The funding methodology of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) was seen as ill suited to these aspects and the LSC's framework was expected to support this work more effectively.

Work by NIACE and LSDA on ways of identifying achievement in non-accredited learning was welcomed. Prompt and clear communication by the LSC of its response to this was seen as crucial to the further development of quality assurance processes and preparation for funding, particularly to secure any achievement element that might be in the national formula.

Linked to this, the LSC was urged to adopt a flexible approach to what constitutes evidence of achievement in non-accredited learning, including collective outcomes. Participants were keen to stress that such approaches, if properly developed and applied, were not 'soft options' but rather offered opportunities to identify and record the rich variety of gains, expected and unexpected, that derive from community-based learning. This was associated with a strong sense that the interpretation of the Common Inspection Framework by ALI and the LSC should be fit for purpose and not inappropriately bureaucratic. Delegates stressed that sector providers will need support (access to training and resources) in order to respond appropriately to the findings of the ALI pilot inspections and to the requirements of the LSC's quality improvement strategy.

As was noted earlier, some delegates raised the issue of direct access to LSC funding. The rationale behind the LSC's initial focus upon existing providers was understood but there was an expectation this would now begin to change. Accordingly, limited access to information about LSC assessment criteria; the need for support in preparing for approved provider status; and signals from some local LSCs that they would not consider new providers were all raising concern.

There was some understanding of the local LSC's role in this process - that "Local Councils will decide whether there is a need to seek applications from providers to

deliver provision that cannot be met by existing institutions” (Circular 01/19, para. 83). However, this was by no means universal knowledge even amongst prospective applicants, and some organisations that were aware of the process were concerned about a perceived lack of transparency in this area of LSC planning and decision making.

Considerable attention was given in the meetings to the use of LIF and COF. As this report demonstrates, there were widespread examples of valuable initiatives funded through these means that were beneficial to learners within the sector and to the capacity of voluntary and community providers. Delegates and presenters shared the view that wider circulation of this information would be helpful (see Recommendation 1).

However, voluntary and community organisations were concerned about the discretionary and short-term nature of LIF and were keen that local LSCs should seek to move some of this provision into main stream funding. Monitoring the use of LIF, particularly in relation to other funding streams and types of provider, was seen as potentially useful. Not least, it would help to allay an apprehension that LIF might drift into becoming the primary means of funding sector provision.

Discussions around COF highlighted issues similar to those raised during the previous series. In particular, there was some concern that smaller applications for funding might lose out to larger bids from major providers on the grounds that they are more risky and less cost effective.

As before, delegates raised the funding arrangements for national organisations and providers working across several LSC boundaries. This was a notable feature of the discussions at the meeting for the London region. Several national bodies argued in support of contracting with the LSC at national level in preference to working with either 47 separate bodies or a lead local LSC. They wished to see the matter clarified and settled and publication of the criteria for such arrangements, if indeed they prove possible, would be welcomed. Organisations working across local LSC boundaries also felt that these processes could be tidied and simplified through formal regional contracting arrangements between LSCs.

## **Section C: voluntary and community sector learning and training groups, networks and consortia**

The series incorporated a national seminar to bring together representatives from existing and emerging voluntary and community sector learning and training consortia. A similar meeting was held in February 2001 as part of the second series. It became clear that this aspect of sector infrastructure had developed considerably during the intervening period stimulated partly by the challenge of working with the LSC and partly through the availability of LSC and other funding.

Participants were drawn from organisations in Staffordshire, Dorset, South Yorkshire, Milton Keynes, Lancashire, Nuneaton and Bedworth, Devon and Cornwall, Nottingham, Hull, London, Wiltshire, Derby, and Hounslow. In addition, the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVS), the Federation of Community Work Training Groups (FCWTG), the Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation (VSNTO), the National Association of Volunteer Bureaux (NAVVB), the Community Work Assessment Consortium for the North East of England, and the Charities Information Bureau were all represented, along with regional voluntary sector networks from the North East, East Midlands and the West Midlands.

The aims of the meeting were to gain an overview of current arrangements, share emerging issues and effective practice, identify any key differences between local LSCs and consider future steps and strategies.

### ***Common approaches and issues***

A range of common approaches and issues emerged through discussion between the diverse groups represented at the meeting.

#### ***Approaches***

There was a strong consensus that consortia should offer voluntary and community organisations more than just easier access to funding. Their role had the potential to include:

- capacity building through expertise, information and training
- curriculum development and support with accreditation
- encouragement for smaller organisations to see themselves as part of the voluntary and community sector and as contributors to the wider field of adult learning
- a mechanism for LSC/LA/LSP/LP consultation with the sector and its training providers
- research into learning needs, particularly within 'harder to reach' communities
- information about local provision and examples of effective practice
- support for high and improving standards of delivery through staff development, training and mentoring.

Delegates suggested that consortia would benefit from working more collaboratively (resources permitting), to share experience, skills and knowledge, at national, regional and sub-regional levels. The importance of identifying limitations and boundaries was also noted. It was felt that however well connected, accountable and democratic these organisations strive to be, they should not be seen as ‘representative’ of the sector in all its diversity. This has implications for how consortia project their role so that the LSCs are encouraged to remain open to approaches from less formal and sometimes temporary arrangements within the sector.

### *Issues*

The various informal coalitions within the meeting (experienced consortia, relatively new consortia, regional networks and so on) raised issues that were specific to their interests. There were also a number of common concerns:

- access for organisations from the black and minority ethnic communities to the LSC and associated planning and funding systems and processes
- accountability of consortia and their connection with the wider reaches of the sector
- the tension between demand and supply side pressures – how to remain needs led and simultaneously engage with the LSC’s agenda
- persistent fragility of consortia funding which remains, on the whole, short term
- tailoring support available from consortia to reflect different levels of engagement with learning, ranging from those organisations that simply want reliable advice about appropriate trainers to those that are experienced in delivery but not with the reporting, auditing and quality assurance requirements of funding
- creating a national ‘voice’ for the sector on adult learning issues that is influential externally within the policy and adult learning communities and credible amongst voluntary and community organisations.

### *Emerging links with the LSC*

The diverse ways in which these organisations are now working with the LSC is striking and potentially instructive for all stakeholders. Inevitably, the depth of collaboration reflects stages of organisational development both within the sector and the LSC. Taken together however they reveal a rich picture of joint enterprise and commitment to adult learning, and particularly to widening participation. The following account offers a quick tour of a rapidly changing landscape.

***Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Voluntary Sector Learning and Skills Consortium*** – has received development funding through LIF (September 2001-02). The overall purpose is to build the capacity of sector organisations to identify and meet the learning needs of their members, service users, volunteers, staff, trustees and management, and to establish a rapport with local LPs, the LSC, LAs and FE colleges.

***Voluntary Sector training Consortium, Bournemouth Dorset and Poole (VSTC)*** – has secured LIF to fund a consultancy to design a strategy for the consortium, write a bid for LIF/COF for 2002-03, and begin the process of applying to become a new provider and managing agent for the sector. Dorset Community Action (DCA - the Rural Community Council) is to act as the lead partner. As a managing agent they would provide a portal to smaller organisations that want to access LSC funding, and also deal with MIS, ISR and quality assurance requirements on their behalf. Funding from LIF/CFO and possibly Workforce Development budgets will be targeted to develop this function.

The LSC and CFO strategies have already determined the areas where VSTC will assist in the achievement of targets (clients with basic skills needs, staff at levels 2 and 3, and volunteers who are over 50) but this raises the issue of whether these are entirely congruent with local sector priorities. Workforce Development funding in year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2002 (£20,000) has supported a programme of Managing Volunteers and Equality training delivered by DCA on behalf of VSTC. The LSC have supported a bid to the Adult and Community Learning Capital Challenge Fund, via Dorset LEA, to purchase and refurbish an old school that is being developed by DCA for possible use as a base for the new VSTC ‘portal’.

***VOICE (Milton Keynes)*** - has bid for ESF/COF (April 2002-December03) to develop VOICE as the forum for sector training and development in Milton Keynes and to consolidate their current short course programme. Future objectives include developing a Memorandum of Understanding with the local LSC to help frame their engagement with the local voluntary and community sector.

***The Learning Curve (Wiltshire)*** - has functioned since 1998 and become the lead local organisation developing the sector’s response to the lifelong learning agenda. The Director represents the sector on the local Learning Partnerships, the Information, Advice and Guidance Pathfinder project, the UFI Hub, and local LSC strategy groups on basic skills and community learning.

The consortium has been successful with small LIF bids for ICT and volunteer training, ESF/COF (£89,000) to deliver a new management development programme for women in the voluntary and community sector, LIF funding to undertake initial development and consultation around establishing The Learning Curve Network (see below), and £300,000 ESF/COF to support the network and resource the development of basic skills within the sector. They hope to become an approved LSC provider from August 2002 with a view to drawing down LSC FE funding for their own programmes and to act as a managing agent for other voluntary and community organisations.

***London Voluntary Sector Training Consortium (LVSTC)*** - is working in partnership with all five LSCs in London to support voluntary and community providers in applying for ESF/COF and LIF. This is slightly different for each LSC and has involved delivering application workshops in the community, publicising the bidding rounds, helping to link umbrella groups and local LSCs, and finding representatives from the sector to take part in the appraisal process.

***Humberside Learning Consortium*** - outcomes of research into the feasibility of establishing a sub-regional consortium (funded by Yorkshire Forward, the RDA) led to an LSC set up grant of £99,000 for one year, supplemented by a further two year contract (£93,000) from Yorkshire Forward. Working relationships have been established with relevant managers within the LSC in the areas of basic skills, workforce development and ICT resulting in additional contracts. For example the consortium is currently receiving LSC/RDA funding to support the implementation of a quality framework involving over 100 local organisations, Workforce Development Funding for the delivery of the C & G 7307 and an Introduction to Management programme, and funding to build sector capacity to deliver explicit and embedded basic skills. This is additional to existing franchise arrangements with two local colleges.

The consortium is becoming a key local strategic player, raising the profile of voluntary and community organisations in the post 16 sector. This is reflected in the strategic plan for Humberside local LSC. Its objectives include continuing support for the Consortium's Training News, support for the consortium's work in improving quality assurance mechanisms, and an overall commitment to "support and develop the consortium to build capacity, develop quality assurance and engage effectively with the disengaged and disadvantaged". The LSC's commitment to the wider sector involves developing case studies and community based role models and champions, developing staff and volunteer capacity to identify and screen for basic skills and to recognise learning and development issues for individuals, and developing programmes with the sector to meet the needs of disengaged learners.

***The Learning and Development Consortium for the Voluntary Sector in Derbyshire*** - has received LIF funding (approximately £180,000), and Workforce Development Funding (approximately £90,000), both for three years, which have supported the employment of three full-time staff. This has had a dramatic effect upon the capacity of the organisation to invest time and resources in growing its accreditation base (over 100 units on offer), and in developing appropriate quality assurance systems and MIS to meet the requirements of the LSC and the inspectorate.

The Consortium secured two ESF/COF bids through the LSC for Workforce Development, particularly in the area of management training and lifelong learning. There are partnership arrangements with the two adult and community education services in Derbyshire and the overall objective is to achieve approval as a new provider by 2004. Strategically, Derbyshire LSC is using the consortium as a conduit into the sector, for example as part of the consultation process for the local strategic plan. The local LSC has also given strong support to the idea of a regional Learning and Skills post for which funding is being sought through bids into the five LSCs in the East Midlands.

***V Learning Net (Devon and Cornwall)*** - was developed from a partnership between Devon Local Development Agencies Forum (deldaf) Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum (CVSF) and Exeter Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) which conducted research (funded by the local TEC) into an appropriate local consortium model. The research identified that sector organisations were at four different levels of readiness to engage

with the delivery of learning when set against LSC quality assurance requirements. Many were already involved in providing learning to their beneficiaries, volunteers and paid staff but much of this was funded via grants (eg the Community Fund, ESF) and less than 25% funded via franchise arrangements with local FE colleges. The resulting consortium is now funded by the Lloyds TSB Foundation and the local LSC. It has become a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. The Board of Trustees or directors is recruited mainly from the voluntary sector but with additional people with particular expertise (e.g. a solicitor).

VlearningNet is currently working with the local LSC, the Open College Network of the South West, City and Guilds, the British Quality Foundation and key voluntary sector organisations to enable organisations to offer high quality learning to key target groups. A capacity building application, involving all sectors including local colleges and private training providers, is being co-ordinated by VlearningNet for submission to the LSC's COF programme.

### *Models*

There are some common features to consortia development. A number are underpinned by existing training networks, some of which were seeded through the work of the Sharing Credit Initiative (funded through the RSA and completed in April 2001). The trigger for growth is often an injection of resources, for example, from the RDA, the LA, a charitable foundation or the LSC, which precipitates a step change in development and ambition.

However, there are also significant differences between them. This reflects local demand, the agencies involved and historical circumstances. It is clear that whilst consortia may have common principles and shared objectives, they have not emerged from one transferable model – more a range of approaches. Elements of these might be useful to LSCs that are considering supporting these arrangements in their areas, and to local voluntary and community organisations that are starting to think along these lines.

#### *'Loose partnership'*

Voluntary Sector Training Consortium Bournemouth Dorset and Poole (VSTC) currently describes itself as “still evolving” and a “loose partnership” with key partners: Bournemouth and Poole CVSs and Dorset Community Action (RCC). Meetings include other voluntary and community sector organisations and some non-sector deliverers. LIF money is supporting the development of VSTC's strategy to consolidate and expand its role into a managing agent and new provider from 2003 onwards.

#### *'Layered approach'*

Humberside Consortium grew from work developed by Hull CVS Lifetime Learning Team and consolidated by feasibility research undertaken by local CVSs and Voluntary

Action Centres in Humberside (funded by the RDA). Each of the local development agencies involved has contributed representatives to the Consortium Steering Committee and has established a Local Advisory Group that meets three times a year. The function of the LAGs is to identify any unmet needs, recommend priority action for the Consortium, endorse the nomination of their local Board member of the Consortium, and exchange information about the latest developments involving learning in the community. They are open to any organisations from the sector. The structure is supported by a communications strategy (see Section B). The Consortium became an independent body in April 2002, is registered as a company limited by guarantee and is applying for charitable status. Members of the Management Committee are on all four of the local Learning Partnerships in Humberside, a fourfold increase on the situation prior to the appearance of the Consortium.

*'Network approach'*

The Learning Curve started in 1997 as a specialist training and organisational development unit for the local sector managed jointly by the five CVSs in Wiltshire and Swindon and funded through the National Lottery Charities Board. Further resources from the Adult and Community Learning Fund and UK Online led to the introduction of NVQs in training and development, a distance learning course for sector staff in supporting basic skills, IT training centres in three CVSs, and provision of learndirect online training for staff, volunteers and local communities. Learning Curve has funded a training post in each CVS to support this work and has undertaken research into local learning needs and provision within the sector.

The organisation became a separate charity in March 2002, with the local CVSs still maintaining a central role in management and development. In addition to seeking new provider status for their own work, they are hoping to develop their role as a managing agent for other sector bodies. To facilitate this they are establishing the Learning Curve Network, a membership-based network open to all sector bodies with an interest in learning. Members will have access to funding, direct and peer support, training, information, and an interactive web site for future sharing and exchange. Initial funding for the Network will be through COF, and longer-term costs will be met by retaining a percentage of the FE funding drawn down for qualifying programmes.

*'Full and associate membership approach'*

The Learning and Development Consortium for the Voluntary Sector in Derbyshire came from the Sharing Credit Project that ran until March 2001. The Consortium was formed in January 2000 as a loose partnership arrangement between CVSs and Volunteer Bureaux together with the Rural Community Council. It now has a full membership of fourteen, including the Derby Millenium Network that represents some of the black and minority ethnic groups in Derby. Associate membership is available to all constituents of the full member organisations.

### *'Local authority approach'*

Lancashire Adult and Community Learning Alliance (LACLA) was established and is funded through the Adult Education Service and is embedded in the County Adult Learning Plan. It was set up to assist sector organisations in obtaining resources for delivery under the LSC. Structurally, it includes both a Steering Group consisting of other county council services and people from community and voluntary organisations, and LACLA-net, which is made up of community groups and organisations involved in local learning (sector and private training providers and community enterprises). LACLA-net offers mutual support, a forum for sharing good practice and information, a focal point for quality assurance and staff development, and access to LSC funding. It currently has over 75 member organisations.

### *Defining parameters*

The emerging role of managing agent offers consortia considerable scope for capacity building, particularly if the momentum comes from within the sector itself. At the very least, by acting as the accountable body consortia can absorb potentially off-putting bureaucracy and data requirements. However, as the preceding examples demonstrate, their contribution can be far more extensive. They can support the development of quality standards appropriate to sector organisations, assimilate and share lessons from good practice, cluster organisations delivering similar programmes for mutual support, help to standardise learner and learning support available across the sub-region, and support organisations in creating or customising programmes to meet their particular needs.

Accountability and transparency are both fundamental to the effective functioning of these intermediary structures and this was recognised by delegates throughout the series. The extent to which such bodies can be representative was also raised, with broad agreement that whilst this was not possible within such a diverse sector, good, active connections with local voluntary and community organisations were both feasible and necessary. Appropriately resourced substructures (whether networks or groupings) and communication strategies were pre-requisites for achieving this.

Defining the parameters of these arrangements and identifying strengths and limitations was seen as increasingly essential, particularly as consortia acquire more conspicuous and influential roles in the provision of local learning. In particular, some delegates emphasised the importance of recognising the scope of learning encouraged and supported through the work of community groups and smaller voluntary organisations that might not fit so obviously within the developing niche for consortia. Protecting and nurturing this often more informal and situated learning and giving it a voice in the perspectives that feed through to the LSC was seen as still problematic within the developing infrastructure.

Inevitably, there will be community and voluntary sector organisations involved in adult learning that do not meet consortia membership criteria or which choose not to join these

arrangements. Delegates were concerned that in their enthusiasm to work with consortia, local LSCs might be less open to these bodies either acting on their own or through more informal and apparently more risky coalitions. Implicit in this is the possibility that consortia might inadvertently inhibit rather than facilitate access for smaller and non-member organisations. Additionally, (and rather ironically given earlier comments) some participants raised the possibility that LSCs might focus upon the sector's capacity to deliver workforce and skills development to the detriment of socially purposeful, more informal community driven learning. The need to review and evaluate these dynamics via a wide range of community and voluntary organisations, including but not limited to consortia, was acknowledged (see Recommendations).

This is linked to the roots of consortia development and the need for the developmental processes to be embedded in the needs and aspirations of the sector. Injections of funding from the LSC, LPs or RDAs targeted at consortia construction are very welcome and essential but the resulting structures need to work with the grain of local sector infrastructure and requirements. This means that the time scales behind these capacity-building projects need to allow for proper consultation and eventual ownership of the results. They also need to permit the possibility that the models preferred by the sector might differ from anticipated or desired outcomes – smaller and more local bodies, for example, rather than one structure congruent with local LSC boundaries. Additionally, from the earliest stages the underpinning thinking needs to take account of sustainability and how these processes, once galvanised, can continue into the longer term.

These early perspectives involve high levels of divination - trying to interpret the signs from diverse and evolving practice. This was never an exact science. However, the issues from this meeting highlight the need emerging across the series for some form of monitoring of trends in the type and levels of engagement between the LSC and the sector (see Recommendations). This would support both LSC planning and the capacity of voluntary and community organisations to realise their full potential as sites of learning.

## **Section D: recommendations**

**1.** As this report demonstrates, after a year of LSC operation there are now many encouraging examples of constructive engagement between local LSCs and voluntary and community sector providers. Delegates and contributors across the series welcomed these and suggested that some means of collating them centrally and then circulating them to local LSCs and relevant sector bodies would be extremely helpful.

In such a dynamic field the shelf life of information can be limited. This could be addressed through periodic mapping and distribution of the findings through quarterly briefings circulated electronically and via existing networks, newsletters and digests. These would offer illustrative examples of effective partnership working and a distillation, in easily accessible forms, of key messages about transferable practice.

**2.** As was noted earlier in the report, developing effective communication channels between voluntary and community organisations and the LSC is problematic due to the scale and diversity of the sector itself and the parallel complexity of post-16 arrangements. However, addressing the flow of information emerges as a major issue from the series. Guidelines (see R4) and an awareness of good practice (see R1) would be helpful, and simple steps could also make a difference. For example, whilst it may well be practice amongst many local LSCs it would be helpful if all could ensure that contact people for the sector are made known to key local voluntary and community organisations using sector communication channels such as newsletters, email groups and web sites.

Ultimately, however, more strategic responses, addressing content as well as process and developed through consultation, are needed. Collaboration between local LSCs and appropriate sector intermediaries, which is already strong in some areas, would be helpful in devising accessible and attractive ways of passing on useful knowledge.

**3.** Participants across the series argued that a concerted initiative to provide quality improvement support was essential to ensuring widespread access for voluntary and community sector providers and potential providers. Capacity building projects such as those supported by Coventry and Warwickshire LSC, Birmingham and Solihull LSC, and Greater Merseyside LSC, would offer a strong foundation for a larger, nationally available programme. The highly successful DfES funded Quality Improvement Support Programme for LEA adult and community learning also provides a transferable framework that could be adapted and extended through consultation. The main elements of quality improvement networks, accessible publications on key issues such as self-assessment and development planning, seminars, and individual consultancies were all endorsed by participants during the series.

**4.** Varying patterns of development in relations between local LSCs and the voluntary and community sector reflect responses to sub-regional circumstances and priorities. They also reveal variable levels of understanding of the work and potential of sector providers. This is not surprising in a relatively young organisation like the LSC

and could be addressed, in part, through further staff development and training. With resourcing and collaborative planning, these opportunities could be arranged and provided, at least in part, by local voluntary and community organisations. Options could include shadowing and exchange of staff, training and awareness raising programmes, and (building on existing structures such as joint LSC/sector fora) more 'keeping in touch' sessions.

Such initiatives would support a better understanding of the constraints and aspirations experienced by all stakeholders, encourage coherent and feasible responses, and lead to more detailed joint work around particular policy areas such as learning and regeneration.

**5.** Divergent practice between local LSCs is inevitable and desirable in so far as it reflects a response to local needs. However, it also raises questions about the role of common standards, accountability, and the extent to which differences might be mediated. Publicly available overarching guidelines on good practice developed through consultation and building on existing local LSC memoranda of understanding and compacts with the sector would help ameliorate some differences and external perceptions of their causes. Guidelines could cover recurrent issues such as access for new providers, communication processes, approaches to capacity building and to work with individual organisations, groups or consortia, and access to different LSC funding streams.

The re launch of the Active Community Unit and its commitment to reinvigorating the government's national Compact with the sector provide a framework for this process. It would also need to take account of emerging issues and transferable best practice; local LSC arrangements and agreed principles of engagement; and the outcomes of the Treasury review of the sector. The working groups involved in the latter have raised a number of themes, including capacity, funding, the Compact, service delivery, and the 'value added' of the sector's contribution that have a direct bearing upon the issues and recommendations emerging from this series.

**6.** It is essential to get the funding relationship between the LSC and voluntary and community sector providers right. Currently, problems arise from a lack of understanding of the possibilities beyond LIF, difficulties in securing funding for core and developmental costs as well as delivery, and off-putting levels of bureaucracy. More accessible and timely explanations of the rules would be welcomed and could build on the good practice already developed by some local LSCs, for example, in relation to Co-Financing.

The LSC might find it helpful to link with the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Issues Steering Group (DfES convened). In particular the VCSSISG's enquiry into more equitable and practical contracting arrangements with the sector and its work on embedding the Funding Code in departmental and agency grant practice might be useful. The forthcoming guidance to funders emerging from the Treasury review could also be informative and it would make sense to develop a correspondence between LSC

responses and these initiatives. The DfES Team 'Getting the Best from Each Other' is to act as a distribution mechanism for the guidance.

**7.** Collating the results of the various local and regional mapping exercises of learning needs and provision within the sector would produce base-line data useful to all key planning bodies (LSC, RDAs, LPs, LSPs, and LAs) and voluntary and community providers themselves. It could inform community capacity building and workforce (including volunteer) development, contribute to regional and national target setting and skills and employment action planning, and to the implementation of the NRU's Learning and Development strategy. Furthermore, the information could support understanding of progress and progression within the sector by contributing to a broader picture of the relationship between non-formal and formal learning.

**8.** A number of the regional voluntary and community sector networks are developing a remit around learning and skills. These vary in their approach. ENGAGE (East Midlands) has established a network of providers and Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) has created the role of Learning Project Development Officer. The focus of the post is upon network development, capacity building, information dissemination and the development of a toolkit for smaller sector groups interested in learning delivery. The brief includes engagement with Connexions and Sector Skills Councils as well as the LSC.

The familiar issues are pertinent here also. Not least there is a need to address the question of sustained resourcing to ensure effective communication between these regionally focused initiatives and local groupings, consortia and individual organisations, and also national bodies such as the Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation (and its possible replacement Sector Skills Council). Strengthening this layer of infrastructure and its vertical and horizontal connections through the sector will help to ensure a stronger voluntary and community sector contribution to the RDAs' consultation processes around the Frameworks for Regional Employment and Skills Action, and ultimately the learning agendas developed by the Regional Chambers and Assemblies. This will become particularly important if the VSNTO is not succeeded by a Skills Council for the sector. This issue might also be of interest to the new Sector Skills Development Agency.

**9.** It is clear that over the past eighteen months or so the voluntary and community sector has developed significantly at local, sub-regional, regional and national levels in response to the opportunities and challenges offered by the LSC. This process is likely to accelerate with the implementation of the NRU's Learning and Development Strategy and with strengthened moves towards regionalisation.. There is a need to learn from practice already emerging from these changes, to evaluate its significance and desirability in terms of the principles, purposes and ethos of sector organisations, and to compile useful evidence about what works and how it contributes to adult learning.

The internal and external forces shaping learning through voluntary organisations are still energetic and uncertain and a developmental phase that allows for both review and

reflection is needed. This is the focus of a forthcoming NIACE initiative, funded by the DfES, which will draw together learning and training consortia and networks for a series of national meetings. These will provide opportunities to share and review practice, discuss key policy developments affecting adult learning, initiate wider debate about these and other issues, and to collate information for dissemination to the broader reaches of the sector. Recommendations from that series and its related consultations and debates will also be offered to the LSC at national and sub-regional levels.

**10.** The reports for both the first and second consultation series argued the case for a national learning forum for the voluntary and community sector to promote engagement with government policy and the LSC at national level. The need for such a body has increased during that period in response to the nature and pace of change both within and outside the sector.

As was noted earlier, establishing credibility for such a body in the context of significant diversity is problematic but consultation around composition and remit, a flexible and extensive sub-structure, a communication strategy, and effective monitoring and evaluation processes would go some way towards addressing the issue. Whatever the outcome, the idea needs serious consideration. At the moment, a strong strategic voice for the sector on learning issues at national level is notable by its absence.