

I'd like to welcome you all to this Third Sector Stakeholder event hosted by Learn East; the network of Third Sector learning consortia in the East of England. We have a very full, but I hope interesting programme for the morning, and I would like to thank everyone who is contributing to the presentations and case studies we will be listening to – it is much appreciated.

Today's event is designed to do several things. Principally, it is about highlighting Third Sector learning provision and the importance of the sector as a learning provider. We will be hearing later about some recent LSC research into the sector's contribution to the Learning and Skills agenda and some of my colleagues in the room will be showing examples of their provision and talking about the factors that contribute to a successful learner experience.

Today is also about bringing Third Sector Providers together with key stakeholders and those who may fund that learning provision, i.e. commissioners and prime contractors. I am hoping the table discussions, included during the morning, will provide an opportunity to share thoughts and experiences and open up dialogue which will help us develop better relationships and a deeper understanding of the additional benefits and added value of Third Sector learning provision.

The event is also an opportunity to tell you about some of the ways in which this region is improving mechanisms for communicating both internally and with our partners and stakeholders, how we are capacity building provider organisations and working together to increase the sector's engagement in Learning and Skills.

In a moment I will be talking briefly about the changes in the Learning and Skills arena and Learn East's role in guiding you through this, and a little later on you will hear from several Learn East members who

will be outlining their roles in supporting learning providers in their sub regions.

What I hope you get from today is a sense of the hard work and commitment within Third Sector organisations for providing learning and development, as well as an idea of some of the challenges that organisations face within the new skills landscape. I also hope you will be left thinking about ways in which we can work better together to continue to offer the kind of learner experience that helps so many vulnerable people move forward with their lives.

Many of you will be aware that since late 2007 I have been leading on work to develop infrastructure support and communication mechanisms for Third Sector learning providers. This has involved supporting the development of 6 sub regional learning and skills consortia/partnerships, who, along with COVER, make up the regional Learn East network.

Learn East is the Legacy of the LSC's "Working Together capacity Building Project". During this project 6 county based organisations developed as lead bodies for the purposes of bringing together organisations keen to develop the sectors role in delivering learning both to beneficiaries in the community and to sector staff and volunteers.

Learn East's role and purpose is to

- Promote partnership and collaborative working
- Champion cross-sector recognition of the third sector's role in engaging target beneficiaries
- Present a single point of contact for third sector learning and skills providers and provision

- Facilitate information exchange between consortia and other networks
- Share resources and improve quality
- Promote the importance of workforce development in the third sector
- Access funding and manage contracts for third sector workforce development and community learning

Learn East feeds into Third Sector Skills Advisory Group – a strategic stakeholder group who meet quarterly to progress the sector’s involvement in the skills agenda. As well as the 6 county partnerships members include, representatives from regional VCS thematic networks, NIACE, EEDA, Jobcentre Plus, LSC (Skills Funding Agency), Skills Third Sector and ACER.

It is unlikely to have escaped anyone’s notice that, as of April 1st 2010, the Learning and skills Council will no longer exist. Instead we will have new agencies responsible for the delivery of learning, the Skills Funding Agency for adult learning and the Young People’s Learning Agency providing overall budgetary control for 14-19 provision via Local Authorities.

Without going into the structures and remits of these organisations here – you can find all that information on the LSC’s and TSNLA’s website –I think it is fair to say that things will be very different from a provider’s perspective.

As far as young people are concerned, Local Authorities will be the commissioners and 14-19 partnerships become the area-wide strategic assessment owned and driven by key stakeholders and delivery partners, which should, include the Third Sector. It is important that Local Authorities are aware of the part that Third

Sector providers play in delivering learning to vulnerable and hard to engage young people. As providers we need to ensure that we have adequate and appropriate representation at strategic level so that we can help inform and shape the correct learning provision for young people in our local areas.

The Skills Funding Agency will be the single contractor for all post -19 education, training and Apprenticeship provision in England outside Higher Education.

So far we know the Skills Funding Agency will be a smaller, more efficient, national body. We are not yet clear what this will mean for us in the way of relationships at a regional/local level.

We have been told that it will operate single account management. Working to a national commissioning framework it will operate negotiated tendering where possible, but also some open competitive tendering. It will demand minimum levels of performance and minimum contract levels, but it insists that it does not want to lose the value of niche and specialist provision and it sees a role for Third Sector provision.

As providers we have new structures and processes to contend with and new relationships and trust to build. We need to make sure that we are well informed and well placed when the call for tenders comes and ensure that we have taken the opportunity to build the capacity of our organisations to be able to demonstrate that we have the staff and systems in place to deliver.

It seems probable that, whilst we would prefer to hold contracts for delivery in our own right, or as Third Sector led consortia, as the contracts get bigger and fewer, it is more likely that we will lose out to colleges, private companies and the very largest third sector

organisations, all of whom may chose to compete for contracts anywhere in the country either on their own or as part of a larger consortia. Leaving smaller providers to decide whether to compete or offer themselves up as sub-contractors.

The role of Learn East, via its sub regional members is to help organisations better understand how to remain engaged and involved in delivering learning and skills. These networks are designed to keep Third Sector providers informed and involved. Each sub regional partnership is set up to support its member organisations and each offers a range of services to help organisations develop their capacity to become learning providers at a sub contractual level.

At regional level the Engage and Enable project will continue to provide financial support for the regional and sub regional Third Sector skills networks and partnerships, through which a range of activities will be promoted and delivered. Engage and enable will provide capacity for representation at regional and national level, help to develop information and resource web portals and host events, such as this one today, at both regional and local level. As part of the capacity building activity, bursaries will be offered to sector staff to enable them to undertake qualifications in teaching, advice and guidance and learner support.

In my role as Strategic Skills Manager for the sector I will no doubt be kept busy trying to keep abreast of the changes, their implications and the impact on organisations across the region. As the link between sub regional, regional and national I will, as far as I am able, make sure that information and opportunities keep flowing to you.

Whilst I know there will be challenges I believe there are definitely opportunities for the sector in the new future of learning and skills,

and, as you will hear later from our case studies, there are some types of provision at which the sector excels, in particular, learning programmes for individuals that cannot and will not be reached by any other provider. Reason enough, I think, to make sure that The Third Sector's role as a provider is given the opportunity to develop and grow. Thank you.

Nikki Bennett

Strategic Skills Manager

COVER