

## **The Learning Curve's Response to the Highlight Report**

Simon,

Thank you for a useful summary of the meeting. While the meeting was helpful and I there was general support for closer collaboration, I am not sure that there was consensus on all the points referred to in your notes and this perhaps reflect the lack of specific detail about the aim and makeup of any future collaborative arrangement. Can I also correct one error of fact please? ViSTA, Learning Plus and Learning Curve do not just operate at a sub-regional level and between them are already active in supporting and funding the delivery of funded learning in the sector in six of the seven sub-regions in the SW.

I would particularly like to challenge the idea that there was support for a 'neutral' managing agent. The concept of 'neutrality' seems poorly defined but in my discussions with you I understand this to mean that the coordinating body is not involved in delivery. This desire for 'neutrality' seems to stem from poor experiences from main contractors who promise collaboration but end up delivering the majority or all the provision particularly in DWP programmes. I should explain that I have studied and supported learning consortia across the country and have written the definitive guide on developing learning consortia. In my experience, it is quite wrong to believe that a consortium lead can only act in an inclusive, ethical and appropriate manner if they are not directly delivering.

Virtually all the voluntary sector learning consortia take responsibility for delivering some provision as well as supporting and funding other voluntary organisations as partner deliverers. This applies to VOLA for instance, where the consortia leads have delivered a large proportion of their learning programmes. This is also the model with Learning Curve. This actually allows a more inclusive approach as the lead has the skills and capabilities to support and capacity build smaller and new providers and can take risks in engaging these providers as the lead can step in to fill gaps in provision if the new or smaller provider finds itself unable to deliver. Learning Curve, for example, has had to do this twice recently when partners have ceased trading because of financial problems. This model is also more sustainable and cost effective as the lead is not just relying on top-slicing funding to meet its operating costs before passing the balance to partners.

Following your meeting I had a discussion with Helen France at the SFA and have a better understanding of their aims and aspirations in relation to this initiative and have discussed the implications of this further with ViSTA and Learning+.

You will know that the three SW learning consortia, ViSTA, Learning+ and Learning Curve have made many efforts to build effective regional collaboration in relation to learning and skills delivery. There has been some degree of success but progress has been inhibited by the funding agencies failing to

provide additional follow-on funding for learning once commitment to collaborative working was achieved in the sector.

It is clear from my discussion with Helen France (and my knowledge of the support that she gave as LSC Merseyside Regional Director to the establishment of the VOLA consortium) that we have an historic opportunity to really make progress in achieving collaboration across the region and thereby strengthen the role of the sector in funded learning and skills.

However my discussion with her highlighted two points which were not brought out in your consultation meeting last week which I think change the context and nature of the debate:

1. While the SFA are keen to see closer and more strategic collaboration within the sector and between the sector and SFA, they do not have a prescriptive view of how this can be achieved. For example, they would be open to more than one consortia or managing agent in the region operating across several sub-regions rather than a single one working across the whole region.
2. It is also clear from my discussion with SFA that they are expecting that current direct contracts with the existing SW consortia should form part of the deliberation, if not immediately, certainly in the short to medium term. They are seeking an inclusive and comprehensive strategic approach from the sector because they are separately looking at specifying minimum levels of contract value and so want to reduce the number of direct contracts they manage. This has very serious implications for the three consortia and their forty-plus delivery partners in the sector.

The three learning consortia have written separately to SW Forum with a practical proposal for taking this agenda forward in a more collaborative manner rather than SW Forum developing the detail on its own as has happened up till now.

Finally I do want to reiterate our commitment to closer collaboration in this area and these comments are offered as constructive criticism with the aim to ensure that we come to the most effective solution which is sustainable, effective, inclusive and avoids reinvention or duplication of existing arrangements.

Regards

Tim

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## **Community Council of Devon's Report**

Thanks Simon,

I've read through the Highlights Report and also through Tim's comments. My overriding view is that this 'debate' is very useful in helping us identify alternative approaches to developing collaborative working and hopefully delivering improved outcomes.

Particular comments on the Highlights Report:

4.1 I think 'requires' has the wrong emphasis. Whilst we ought to be able to demonstrate the advantages of such a vehicle it is unrealistic to suggest that it is essential; programmes continue to be delivered without it.

4.2 Slightly echoing Tim's comments; I see the advantages of having a Managing Agent that doesn't deliver outputs, but there are equally a number of disadvantages. I feel that either model (MA or Lead Bidder) should be workable and could be supported.

4.10.v It's a big job to be the Single Point of Contact for skills and learning in the South West. I don't see the proposed MA having that role.

5.1 It may prove unrealistic to establish a Managing Agent in time to meet SFA deadlines this year; but it could be that the model would be appropriate for other funding bids (not necessarily ESF) in the future.

Best wishes

Greg Davies  
Community Council of Devon