QPID

QUALITY and PERFORMANCE
IMPROVEMENT DISSEMINATION

Learning Partnerships

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**QUALITY and PERFORMANCE
IMPROVEMENT DISSEMINATION**

DfEE

**Department for
Education and Employment**

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In June 1999 the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) published a White Paper - Learning to Succeed a new framework for post-16 learning – which set out proposals for the creation of a single body to oversee national strategies for post-16 learning, the funding to provide the focus needed and the emphasis on quality to lever up standards.

1.2 A new national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) will replace the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs)[1] from April 2001. The new Council will operate through local arms that will be responsible for co-ordinating area plans building on the work of local Learning Partnerships.

1.3 The proposals in the White Paper envisage Learning Partnerships having a key role in providing the local intelligence to ensure provision meets local needs, driving forward improvements in the quality of provision and bringing greater coherence at the local level.

1.4 This study was commissioned to look at how Learning Partnerships are preparing to assist local Learning and Skills Councils by having available good quality information on local learner needs and provision as well as employer skill requirements. In particular it focused on:

- what arrangements are in place to enable Partnerships to provide the local Learning and Skills Council with local information on 16-19, adult and community learning needs;

- how is the Partnership ensuring there is synergy amongst local learning providers;

- how are Partnerships gaining an understanding of local employer needs;

- how are Partnerships working with National Training Organisations (NTOs)?

The studies findings should therefore help to promote good practice, highlight concerns and generate recommendations for future developments.

Background

1.5 The Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced on 26 November 1998 plans to ensure that strategic lifelong learning Partnerships would be put into place during 1999. The intention was to have in place a single strategic body in each area that would bring together all existing local partnership arrangements covering post-16 lifelong learning. There are now 101 voluntary local Learning Partnerships in place, with representation from local authorities, TECs, colleges of Further Education (FE), careers services, as well as other organisations with an interest in post-16 learning, involved in their development.

1.6 The focus of Learning Partnerships is to bring coherence and co-ordination to local post-16 learning, in particular:

- identifying gaps and duplication in provision and developing strategies to address these;

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1. Throughout this report the term TEC or TECs is used to represent both Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and/or Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTEs).

- by setting out proposals for raising standards and improving the quality of provision in a local learning plan; and

- by developing local learning targets and driving forward action towards meeting them.

There are a number of areas where Learning Partnerships are expected to lead local action. These are:

- the Learning Gateway – where they have an important role in ensuring that Learning Gateway plans are consistent with their own plans;

- Student Support – where Learning Partnerships have a role in ensuring the development of local student support and transport arrangements are part of a coherent local strategy to meet learning targets and widen participation; and

- Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for adults – where all Partnerships have submitted plans for the development of local IAG services for adults.

Learning Partnerships also have an important role in co-ordinating local arrangements for Adult and Community Education.

1.7   Additionally Learning Partnerships have a key role in taking forward the Government's social inclusion and regeneration agendas. They are adding value by developing more coherent learning provision to meet the needs of young people and adults and the skill requirements of employers. They are identifying and addressing gaps in provision and working to eliminate duplication and pull together different strands of activity for young people and adults.

1.8   The "Learning to Succeed" White Paper reinforced two key complementary roles for Learning Partnerships in support of the Government's reforms of post-16 learning. These are to:

- provide the local arms of the Council with information on youth, adult and community learning needs and on employer skill needs. Intelligence they will have obtained by consulting with local people and local employers to find out their real needs; and

- ensure that gaps in local education and training provision are filled and that duplication is avoided by co-ordinating local curriculum planning and staff development. They will also provide a forum for collaboration, enabling local providers and others to work together to ensure education and training provision is as efficient and cost-effective as possible.

1.9   Learning Partnerships are in a pivotal position to know and understand local conditions and identify local solutions to local problems and ensure that everyone is encouraged and has the opportunity to participate in learning. They are working with Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) to ensure employer involvement in learning is real and effective.

1.10   Partnerships and local Learning and Skills Councils will be distinct but complementary. This enables them to provide the local Councils, which will generally cover a much larger geographical area, with a good understanding of local labour and learning market needs.

1.11   In order to bring coherence and co-ordination to post-16 learning, Learning Partnerships have not only identified local targets which underpin the post-16 National Learning Targets, but will also make proposals for raising standards and improving the quality of provision.

Study Objectives

1.12   The study's objectives were to:

- gain an understanding of how ready Learning Partnerships are to engage with local Learning and Skills Councils in providing information on youth, adult and community learning needs, as well as employer skill needs;

- provide information on how Learning Partnerships are working with National Training Organisations, training providers, Local Authorities and the voluntary sector to identify skill needs and the capacity available locally to deliver training and learning;

- examine mechanisms Learning Partnerships are putting in place which will enable them to ensure that Council funded provision complements that which is delivered by other organisations;

- identify and document good practice and identify obstacles which are preventing Learning Partnerships moving forward.

Methodology

1.13   The fieldwork for the study was undertaken during August and the first part of September 2000 and involved visits to 20 Learning Partnerships across all 9 English regions, as well as all Government Offices (GOs) (see Annex 1 for further details of those who took part in the study). The selection of case studies was undertaken by York Consulting who has been contracted by DfEE to evaluate Learning Partnerships over a 3-year period. The following criteria were used to try and ensure a wide cross section of Partnerships were seen:

- urban/rural mixed;

- regions;

- coterminous/not coterminous with Council areas;

- size (in terms of number of partners on Partnership Board and number of Further Education representatives);

- number of LEA areas included;

- pre-existing partnership/no pre-existing partnership.

Additionally the following key issues were considered:

- TEC led Partnerships;

- employer representation/involvement;

- structures (thematic, geographical sub-groups etc);

- aims, delivery, objectives and partnership development issues addressed in the Learning Plan.

1.14   Face to face interviews were conducted with key personnel in each Learning Partnership as well as staff in GOs who were responsible for oversight of the regions Partnerships.

2.   SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Overview

2.1   It was clear from the discussions with all the Partnerships involved in the study that some real benefits were beginning to emerge from being able to bring a wide range of local partners together: for example, in one area it had been possible to agree a common fees policy and a common approach to funding learner travel costs.

2.2   Generally Learning Partnerships are not yet in a position to provide local Learning and Skills Councils with information on the learning needs of all sections of the community. Most are just beginning to put in place arrangements, which will enable them to obtain the views of both the learner and the non-learner. However, it is likely that come April 2001 the majority should be able to present good information to the Council.

2.3   Partnerships are generally finding the mapping of existing provision to be difficult, particularly adult and community learning, as well as training, which is delivered by employers.

2.4   Most Partnerships have given little thought as to how they might work with providers to identify development needs and new opportunities to work together to help ensure the efficient and cost-effective delivery of learning opportunities. A few are tackling this in a small way by co-ordinating the dissemination of good practice amongst local learning providers.

2.5   Local skills information is largely coming from TECs at present and although Partnerships often have access to information from other partners this is not generally being collated to inform supply. Consequently the lack of employer skill needs analysis is making it difficult for current or potential gaps in provision to be identified.

2.6   Several Partnerships expressed concern as to their long term future once the Learning and Skills Council becomes fully established, particularly those that are presently heavily reliant on TECs for help and support

Partnership Development

2.7   Partnerships are at various stages in their development with a number either having in place, or in the process of recruiting, a full time co-ordinator/manager. The quality and calibre of the manager is seen as crucial to the success of the Partnership and it was suggested that thought needs to be given to the personal development of these individuals.

2.8   Most Partnerships have a broad and representative membership, although in some areas significant key partners are absent, in particular employers, trade unions and private providers. However these organisations will often be involved with sub-groups.

2.9   All Partnerships visited as part of the study are organised into sub-groups or task groups, most of which are thematically based. The larger Partnerships also generally have geographically based groups.

2.10 Whilst links with a range of local bodies are generally good, links with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) are less well developed, although there are some notable exceptions.

2.11 Very few Partnerships have links with National Training Organisations either at a regional/ national or local level, with TECs presently being the main providers of sectoral information and data on Advanced and Foundation Modern Apprenticeships.

2.12   Several Partnerships have been successful in attracting additional funding over and above core funding in some cases in excess of £1m. Many of the organisations also receive assistance in kind from partner organisations.

Arrangements in place to provide local Learning and Skills Councils with details of learner needs

2.13   Only a few Partnerships are well advanced in the collection of information on learner and non-learner needs from all sections of the community. Several are making use of information collected by other organisations such as community networks and local colleges. However, analysis of this data is proving difficult because of the variety of different ways information is collected.

2.14   Establishing youth and adult fora or in some cases making use of existing arrangements are only just beginning, however, once in place Partnerships see these structures as being an important source of information for the emerging local Learning and Skills Councils.

2.15   The majority of Partnerships are not yet in a position, despite their links with a wide range of local organisations, to collect information relating to those people who are likely to be disadvantaged by way of ethnicity, gender, age group or disability.

2.16   Mapping existing provision is proving difficult for many Partnerships. Most feel they have a good understanding and knowledge of 16-19 opportunities, however detailing adult and community learning is a far more onerous task, with training provided by employers on their own premises particularly difficult to track down.

Getting local providers to work together

2.17   Generally Partnerships are finding it difficult to achieve full collaboration amongst local providers, although all the Partnerships participating in the study are providing opportunities for key players to meet and share experiences.

2.18   There are several examples where Partnerships have achieved a level of co-operation amongst providers that has enabled them to agree a collaborative approach to meeting identified learning needs.

2.19   There is a general acceptance that there is still some way to go before Learning Partnerships have a full picture of all learning and training opportunities in their areas and even in those areas where Partnerships are making good progress keeping information updated is proving a daunting task.

Understanding local employer skill needs

2.20   A number of Learning Partnerships are presently heavily reliant on TECs for their local skills information and as such many have concerns as to where the intelligence will come from when TECs are no longer around.

2.21   A few Partnerships question the need for local skills information, as they believe there should be a regional approach to addressing the needs of employers.

2.22   Generally Partnerships are not yet in a position to identify current or potential gaps between provision and identified need, although there are several examples where Partnerships are working with local employers to address identified needs.

Government Offices' role in supporting Learning Partnerships

2.23   Some GO staff responsible for managing Learning Partnerships are finding it difficult, because of their wide ranging remit, to keep in regular contact with Partnerships in their region, however despite this most Partnerships are pleased with the help and advice they receive from their GO contact.

2.24   A number of GOs are supplementing their own resources by using external consultants to provide them with information on the progress being made by Partnerships and to help with the identification and dissemination of good practice.

2.25   Most regions help facilitate regular network meetings for their Partnerships. These are found to be very helpful when it comes to sharing effective practice and disseminating information.

Other Issues

2.26   Partnerships have been able to see real benefits in bringing together a range of local partners with some tangible benefits resulting.

2.27   There is a general concern as to the future of Learning Partnerships once the Learning and Skills Council becomes established. In particular Partnerships are concerned to what extent local Councils will want to take account of information from voluntary bodies which are variable in size, capacity, quality, representation and influence.

2.28   Some Partnerships have concerns about the level of resources available to them and, as some see it, the amount of bureaucracy associated with running the Partnership.

2.29   Area inspections currently undertaken by the Training Standards Council, OFSTED and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) (from April 2001 to be undertaken by OFSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate) could provide useful information for Partnerships. Presently they are not clear as to how they might be involved.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 National Training Organisations are important strategic bodies working with their sectors within the education and training arena and are likely to be able to help Learning Partnerships in the identification of supplier gaps/needs as well as in the development of sector initiatives. **DfEE,** with **GOs**, should therefore seek to help Partnerships develop relationships with appropriate NTOs and the NTO National Council.

3.2 Most Partnerships are at the early stages of developing appropriate mechanisms for collecting information on local learner needs. Information is available from a wide variety of sources, however the many different ways it is collected make it difficult for the Partnership to interpret. The **DfEE** and **GOs** should provide opportunities for Learning Partnerships to share ideas and good practice.

3.3 The **DfEE** should consider how it might help Partnerships develop capacity to access and collect information, which enables them to readily identify those people who may be potentially disadvantaged.

3.4 It is understood a framework has been developed as part of the Connexions work to enable full mapping of learning provision to be undertaken. The **DfEE** should consider making this framework available to all Learning Partnerships.

3.5 **DfEE** and **GOs** should seek to work closely with those Partnerships that are currently heavily reliant on TECs for support and information, to help them build additional capacity beyond that presently available through the local TEC.

3.6 **DfEE** should clarify as early as possible the expected relationship between the Learning and Skills Council and Learning Partnerships.

3.7 **DFEE** should seek to clarify with GOs and Learning Partnerships as to how they might be involved with Area Inspections, which will be undertaken by OFSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate.

4. PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENTS

Structure

4.1 This section looks at the way Learning Partnerships are developing, in particular the working arrangements they have put in place, how they are linking with other bodies in the area and whether they have been able to access funding other than from DfEE.

4.2 The Learning Partnerships involved in this study were at different stages in their development with some having been active since 1997, whilst one of the Partnerships was less than one year old. The most effective Partnerships, as might be expected, are generally those that have a degree of maturity and have been developed from earlier local groupings with similar agendas. A number have not yet put in place full time co-ordinators, although the majority are in the process of advertising and appointing. Where this has not yet happened the Partnerships are being run by seconded staff from one or more of the partner organisations. The quality and calibre of the Manager/Co-ordinator is seen as crucial to the success of the Partnership and it was suggested that consideration needs to be given to the personal development of these individuals.

4.3 Most Partnerships have a broad and representative membership, although in some areas significant key partners are absent, in particular employers, trade unions and private training providers. However, most of these organisations are often involved in task or working groups, but employers, particularly small/medium sized companies are generally difficult to engage. The majority of Partnership Boards meet every 6/8 weeks and in the most active Partnerships the representation has continued to be at Chief Officer level. In some areas Partnerships have taken steps to speed up decision making, for example on bid proposals, by delegating responsibility to key people within each of the partner organisations.

> In one Partnership area each of these key players are networked on e-mail and this is used when it is necessary to get quick decisions when making bids for funding support. This has resulted in a higher level of bidding success and has ensured that everyone is working together and not against each other.

4.4 Sub-groups or task groups are part of the organisational structure of all the Partnerships in the study. Most of the sub-groups are thematically based although some of the larger Partnerships also have geographically based groups. Typically thematic groups might include:

- widening participation;
- basic skills;
- learner support;
- information and advice;
- early years partnership;
- information technology;
- national learning targets.

These sub-groups, which often involve people other than those represented in the Partnership, are expected to take forward issues and concerns appropriate to their particular group.

Links with local bodies

4.5   Links into other local bodies such as Connexions, EBPs (where they exist), Education Action Zones (EAZ), Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) developments and Adult Guidance Networks are generally good, and the Partnership is often providing the lead for learning related initiatives. However, there were some concerns about the demands of engaging with an ever growing plethora of Partnerships and the feeling that people were becoming, as one respondent described, "engagement sick". Links to Regional Development Agencies are much more tenuous in several regions and often it is left to the Government Office to provide those links. However, in one region the links with the RDA are regarded as good with local Partnership Learning Plans playing a key role in the development of the RDA Skills Action Plan. This has helped ensure coherence and identified areas where one or other plan had gaps. The RDA Skills Manager also attends Partnership network meetings and regular 'keep in touch' meetings between the GO Partnership team and RDA staff take place.

4.6   A few individual Partnerships have also been able to develop more constructive arrangements via the SRB bidding process.

> One Partnership is using RDA money to work closely with a neighbouring Partnership on the development of basic skills provision. It is also providing help and expertise to assist with the training and development of other partnership co-ordinators within the region.

4.7   Very few Partnerships have considered developing working relationships with any or some of the 75 National Training Organisations[2] in order to collect sectoral information or data on Advanced and Foundation Modern Apprenticeships. They are generally reliant on TECs for information on qualifications, with little evidence that intelligence is being collected, collated and analysed on a sectoral basis. In one region a regional planning event is being organised by the GO, which will involve both Learning Partnerships and NTOs.

> In one area the Learning Partnership had consulted with and involved the Food Industry NTO in a successful Skills Development funding bid to the RDA.

4.8   In addition to core funding a number of Partnerships have been successful in attracting additional funding from a variety of sources, including SRB, European Social Fund (ESF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and FEFC. This money is used for specific projects such as adult learning initiatives, schools links with libraries and basic skills. Some Partnerships have been successful in attracting in excess of £1 million external funding. A number of Partnerships also receive assistance in kind from partner organisations usually by way of staff secondments and use of premises.

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2   The 75 National Training Organisations, who cover 94% of the workforce, are independent employer-led sector organisations, working strategically with their sectors across education and training.

5. ARRANGEMENTS IN PLACE TO PROVIDE LOCAL LEARNING AND SKILLS COUNCILS WITH DETAILS OF LEARNER NEEDS

5.1   The "Learning to Succeed" White Paper specifically referred to the role of Learning Partnerships in helping local Learning and Skills Councils "assemble comprehensive data for their areas on the characteristics of client groups, in particular, rates of participation in learning….". The Learning and Skills Council Prospectus also refers to the relationship between local Learning and Skills Councils and Learning Partnerships and states that "Learning Partnerships will have an important new role in establishing mechanisms to enable feedback from learners to have real influence on the quality of future provision. They will need to draw on effective existing arrangements for obtaining the views of young people and adults." Therefore it is expected that Partnerships will either have developed or are in the process of developing mechanisms to provide themselves and the local Learning and Skills Councils with a range of local information on the learning needs of all sections of the community. The following paragraphs set out how Partnerships are setting about the task of ensuring such mechanisms are in place to obtain the views of both learners and non-learners and whether the information gathered enables Learning Partnerships to identify those who are particularly disadvantaged. It also explores the extent to which Partnerships have been able to map existing provision and the issues and concerns associated with that process.

Learner and non-learner needs

5.2   Only a limited number of Partnerships have begun to gather, in a systematic way, information on local learner and non-learner needs. Several are in the process of commissioning contractors to undertake some of this work, but the cost involved in going down this route can be particularly high. One Partnership has a £20K project in place to research 'the voice of the learner' and another is presently exploring how local cable television might be used in the future for a "wired up community" initiative.

5.3   Perhaps Partnerships should consider the approach outlined in the beginning of this section "….draw on effective existing arrangements….", as some are doing. For example, Partnerships are making good use of community network facilitators, neighbourhood surveys, the Workers Education Association and Further Education college surveys to gather the information they need. Although Partnerships are finding this information very useful, the interpretation of the data received is not always easy, as it is collected in a variety of different ways.

5.4   TEC household surveys are also a useful source of information, but there are concerns amongst Partnerships as to where this information will come from when TECs disappear, although one or two Partnerships are assuming the local Learning and Skills Councils will automatically pick up this activity. Learning Partnerships do not see themselves being able to undertake this work because of the cost involved, although one Partnership, with the help of SRB and ERDF money has just recently undertaken such an exercise, albeit not on the scale of the TEC as the Partnership is covering a much smaller area. In another region four of the Partnerships are collaborating on the production of a questionnaire to mount a household survey on the learning/training needs. They consider that there are key questions which they can benefit from asking, and each will be adding extra questions relevant to their own areas.

5.5   Some Learning Partnerships are in the process of setting up or are able to tap into existing Youth and Adult Fora, which they would hope to use in the future to gather

information from the local communities. One Partnership is presently gathering views via community learning forum and also the youth parliament that is in place in the area. In another area the Partnership plans to share arrangements that the local authority already has in place to deliver its communication strategy and which is based on eight district fora with adult learner sub-groups. Community and neighbourhood strategies are also in place, which include consultation at a local level for example health visitor focus groups supported by neighbourhood workers. The same area will also be making use of detached youth workers to identify non-learners and disaffected young people.

> A Partnership that operates in a rural location has helped fund a community education tutor to set up informal "tea and cakes" meetings of local people to discuss learning needs. Another rural partnership employs an outreach worker operating in rural villages and working with small groups of local people to find out the types of opportunities that would be of interest to them.

5.6   It is likely that Learning Partnerships are potentially in a better position to gather information on disadvantaged groups than are TECs because of the access they have to a wide range of organisations dealing with these groups i.e. careers service, colleges, schools, social services, health services and youth and community workers. However the majority of Partnerships are not yet in a position to provide local learner information that easily identifies those who may be potentially disadvantaged by ethnicity, gender, age group and disability. One Learning Partnership has been able to tap into an FEFC funded project which supports work with hard to reach groups, including women in refuges, travellers and ethnic minorities, whilst another Partnership has commissioned a series of area 'barrier reports' which identify the barriers to inclusion for young Asian females, carers, lone parents and migrant workers. It will be important for Learning Partnerships to work closely with local Learning and Skills Councils and ensure their work complements and feeds into local Learning and Skills Councils equal opportunities strategies.

Existing provision

5.7   Mapping of existing provision is proving to be a daunting task for nearly all Partnerships. Most feel they have got a good grasp of 16-19 provision, but far less so when it comes to adult and community learning. One or two Learning Partnerships have undertaken a comprehensive mapping of all provision, although even in these areas there is little knowledge of the level of training undertaken by employers. One Partnership is making use of a local Learning Opportunities database, which was developed through a FEFC/ADAPT funding bid, to identify all local provision by course, qualification, level, provider and sector and in another area a 'Connexions Mapping Instrument' is being trialed. However the task facing all these Partnerships is keeping this information up to date.

5.8   A few Partnerships still have a considerable way to go before they have a full picture of all the training and learning opportunities in their areas and will need to make considerable progress if they are to be in a position to supply local Learning and Skills Councils with this type of intelligence. Most Partnerships, in addition to the problems of keeping information up to date, also face difficulties in the collection of data that arise from:

- the ever changing picture, with some training, particularly for adults often only of a short duration;

- small/informal provision which is generally not accredited;

- employer provision which is often difficult to track down and identify;

- differences in the way some courses are structured and funded.

6. GETTING LOCAL PROVIDERS TO WORK TOGETHER

6.1 This section of the report looks at how Learning Partnerships are able to provide a forum for collaboration where local providers and others can share their planning processes, as well as their plans. How they are working with providers to help ensure that provision is as efficient and cost-effective as possible; that gaps in local provision are filled and that duplication is avoided by co-ordinating local curriculum planning and staff development.

6.2 Generally Partnerships still have some way to go in achieving full collaboration amongst the many local providers although several are involved in providing opportunities for key players to meet, innovate and share effective practice. For example, in one area a 'Beacon College' disseminated effective practice to all partners.

> The local college in one Learning Partnership area has forged strong links with voluntary organisations and is providing their staff with "training for trainers" support on behalf of the partnership.

6.3 In one Partnership area it has been possible to work informally with training providers to try and avoid duplication of provision. The Learning Partnership, after identifying a need for outreach Information Communications Technology (ICT) training, has been successful in getting several providers to collaborate and jointly deliver training. In another area partners have agreed a protocol for managing disagreement about new or additional provision. A further example shows sixth forms and colleges working together in an attempt to widen opportunity and decrease duplication of A-level provision.

6.4 Some Partnerships are using projects to help build relationships amongst the partners. The following examples show how one partnership is developing those relationships through joint strategy and supporting projects:

- the 'workforce development ' task group is seeking employer agreement to a co-ordinated approach to promotion of learning amongst the local workforce;

- the 'young people' task group has developed an added value agenda, supported by DfEE activity funding. Initiatives include extension of a successful pre-vocational programme, extension of a careers education programme, and development of vocational modules to form part of a GCSE programme which includes time spent in further education, with additional inputs from careers, training providers and others;

- an ICT awareness event planned to help workers in the learning industry understand how various national developments fit together, e.g. National Grid for Learning, Further Education/Higher Education Network, learn Direct and to clarify local activity;

- a sub-regional practitioner network for family learning, set up earlier in the year.

6.5 Most Partnerships recognise that there is still someway to go to achieve coherence between the various strategies and plans developed by the range of partners involved at a local level. In some Partnerships statutory bodies and some voluntary organisations are beginning to share information and strategic vision, but the private sector is often under-represented.

> In one Partnership area it is planned to arrange secondments to the local Learning and Skills Council from partner organisations to help with set up arrangements and to help cement relationships.

7. UNDERSTANDING LOCAL EMPLOYER SKILL NEEDS

7.1 Local Learning and Skills Councils will need to be informed on local skill needs and Learning partnerships can pull together information held by individual partners. This section provides information on how Partnerships are setting about gaining an understanding of those needs and identifying priorities.

7.2 The majority of Learning Partnerships are presently relying heavily on the TEC for local skills information, which begs the question of where this information will come from when TECs no longer exist. This is a major concern to many of the Partnerships. Although access to skills information from other partners including local authorities, the Employment Service, colleges and the careers service is usually available, Partnerships are not generally collating this information to inform supply.

7.3 However several Partnerships have been active in pulling together information, for example in one area skill needs have been identified from employers involved in its workforce development group. This has resulted in identified skill shortages across a range of areas, including computing/IT, engineering, marketing/selling and call centre work. The Partnership is now committed to trying to ensure that learning opportunities match the needs of employers.

7.4 A few Partnerships do not see employer skill needs as a local problem, but much more of a regional issue, requiring a regional approach. A number of Partnerships also made the point that local travel to work patterns also need to be taken into consideration, which requires close working relationships with neighbouring Partnerships. This is beginning to happen in several areas, particularly where there is more than one Partnership in a single Learning and Skills Council area.

7.5 Learning Partnerships apparent reluctance to engage more actively in the co-ordination and analysis of employer skills needs is hindered by the lack of employer involvement in a number of the Partnerships. In particular, small employers are difficult to engage and will generally only get involved if they can see something in it for them. Partnerships are trying to overcome this lack of employer involvement by engaging them in sub-group activity, which looks at specific issues which may impact on them, such as workforce development.

7.6 One of the consequences of not analysing employer needs in a systematic way is that a number of Partnerships have made little attempt to identify current or potential gaps between provision and identified needs.

7.7 A number of Partnerships see themselves as gatherers and analysers of labour market information and have used funding coming from the Skills Development Fund (SDF) to do this. In some cases the Partnership has used TEC research resource to bring this together, in others they have engaged outside consultancy. However, in their view, none of the partners have the resource to continue to support this activity and if they are to continue to take this role additional funding will be needed.

8. GOVERNMENT OFFICES' ROLE IN SUPPORTING LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

8.1 Government Offices have a key role in supporting Learning Partnerships within their region and this section looks at how they are approaching this task and sets out some of the activities in which they are involved.

8.2 Overall, Learning Partnerships are pleased with the level of support and help they are receiving from their Government Office, despite the fact that some GO staff responsible for Partnerships have a wide ranging remit, of which Learning Partnerships are just one of a number of priorities. This results in a less regular contact than they would like. Typically GOs are supporting Learning Partnerships through:

- regular network meetings and conferences;

- by encouraging Partnership endorsement of funding bids e.g. Information and Communication Technology;

- by understanding local politics and behaving with sensitivity.

8.3 Several GOs are making use of external consultants to provide them with information on the progress that Partnerships are making and also to help support Partnerships by identifying and disseminating good practice. One region is running internal workshops for its own staff to ensure they are up to speed on emerging issues in relation to Learning Partnerships.

8.4 The regular network meetings run by some GOs are appreciated and are found to be helpful in the sharing of effective practice. Some Partnerships would like to see a more structured approach to networking both regionally and nationally.

> In one region a Partnership network has been in place for over a year with meetings held quarterly. The Chairman and managers attend with the GO providing the administrative support and acting as the secretariat. Agendas are agreed in advance with those attending.

8.5 Some Government Offices regularly attend individual Partnership meetings within their region and this provides them with valuable information on activities as well as providing for intervention/advice as necessary. In other regions there has been a more hands-off approach allowing Partnerships to establish themselves, however these regions now expect to engage more proactively with Partnerships in the coming months to ensure they are moving forward and tackling the key issues.

> In one Government Office Learning Partnerships are supported by a named person who has an open invitation to all Partnership meetings in the region. Within the GO Partnership plans are shared with colleagues in other units and divisions to support coherence and involvement.

8.6 One region is working with its Partnerships to identify common development needs across the region as a whole, and to provide a programme of regional support for Partnerships through workshops and other events. It is intended that five regional events addressing specific issues and identifying good practice within the region will be run before March 2001. As well as being development events the GO is also hoping that the initiative will encourage some joint working.

9. OTHER ISSUES

9.1 Finally a number of other issues/concerns were raised by Partnerships and this section attempts to draw some of them together.

9.2 A number of the Partnerships were concerned about their future role once the Learning and Skills Council becomes established. Some Partnerships sense that the local Learning and Skills Councils may be more likely to work directly with individual partners rather than the Partnership, as unlike TECs they have not been involved in their development and may feel more comfortable engaging directly with local organisations.

9.3 A further argument put forward which makes Partnerships question their future is to what extent will local Learning and Skills Councils wish to take account of information from voluntary bodies which are variable in size, quality, capacity, representation and influence. In other words how will the services and products of the Learning Partnerships be standardised and quality assured?

9.4 Interestingly those Learning Partnerships operating within a sub-region of the new local Councils appear clearer as to their future roles and responsibilities than those which are co-terminus with the local Learning and Skills Council. In these areas Partnerships tend to be focused at a strategic level, therefore cutting across the local Learning and Skills Council, rather than at a neighbourhood level.

9.5 The principal concerns of most Partnerships were:

- shortage of resources available to run effective Partnerships;

- the general lack of appreciation of the time and effort involved in administration; and

- the bureaucracy associated with running the Partnership, for example the GO contracting requirements are seen as too detailed and impose an unnecessarily heavy load on stretched resources.

9.6 Some Partnerships felt the DfEE should be clear on what it wants from Partnerships i.e. does it want a light touch approach, which allows Learning Partnerships freedom to develop their own agendas or does it want to be specific about what it requires and then monitor accordingly. Presently, they believe, there seems to be an uncomfortable mix of the two.

9.7 Area inspections undertaken by the Training Standards Council, FEFC and OFSTED and in the future by OFSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate have the potential to provide valuable information to the Learning Partnerships. It is not clear to some GOs and Partnerships how they might be involved, for example will the Chair or the Co-ordinator be involved in the feedback meetings and will they have access to the final report?

9.8 Most Partnerships have seen a real benefit in bringing partners together and in some areas Learning Partnerships have shown that it is possible to bring organisations who have not traditionally worked in partnership together in order to make real progress.

> Some practical benefits of joint working coming out of one partnership includes getting local providers to agree to a common fees policy and a common approach to funding travel for learners.

10. CONCLUSIONS

10.1 The study has found that the majority of Learning Partnerships, although not ready at the time the fieldwork was completed, are making good progress towards being able to provide comprehensive information on learner and non-learner needs. These Partnerships are therefore likely to be in a position, by April 2001, to fully support the local Learning and Skills Council. However there are a significant minority who are unlikely to be well prepared.

10.2 In a number of Learning Partnerships there is a heavy reliance on TECs to provide information on local skill needs and often the Partnership is not making full use of skills information available from other partners in the area.

10.3 Gaining a full understanding of all learning provision available is proving difficult for many Partnerships. In particular, difficulties arise in determining the extent of adult and community learning available largely because of the short duration and informal nature of many of these opportunities.

10.4 Other issues arising from the study include:

- a need to re-assure Learning Partnerships as to their future once local Learning and Skills Councils are established and during transition;

- to consider how best to put in place appropriate quality assurance arrangements for the services and products available from the Partnership;

- how Partnerships might be involved in future area inspections; and

- a need to help Partnerships develop ways in which local learner information can identify those who may be potentially disadvantaged.

10.5 Partnerships, who are making good progress towards being able to provide local Learning and Skills Councils with local information, have in place some approaches and practices that would appear to be effective. These include:

- some examples of where the Learning Partnerships are working alongside their RDA, particularly in the development of the regional skills plans;

- making use of existing community networks and local authority communication strategies to access information on learner and non-learner needs;

- helping to build provider capacity by using a college to provide training for trainer support to local voluntary organisations;

- engaging employers in Partnership sub-groups, in particular workforce development, and which has resulted in a number of skill shortages being identified. The Partnership is now committed to ensuring that training provision is made available to meet the needs.

10.6 Clearly this study has identified that a number of Partnerships are making good progress towards being able to support local Learning and Skills Councils with a variety of skills and learner information. However, it also shows that there are several Partnerships who still have some way to go if they are to make any significant contribution to the skills and labour market debate within their area.

PARTICIPATING GOVERNMENT OFFICES AND LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

Government Office	Learning Partnership
North East	Northumberland
	Tyneside
Yorkshire and the Humber	North East Lincolnshire
North West	Halton
	North and West Lancashire
West Midlands	Coventry and Warwickshire
	Shropshire
	Telford and Wrekin
East Midlands	Derbyshire
	Leicestershire
East of England	Norfolk
	South Essex
London	Partners in Learning
	South London
South East	Medway
	Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire
South West	Bristol and South Gloucester
	Devon and Torbay
	Plymouth

THE STUDY TEAM

The study team included:

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RSD PUBLICATIONS

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76	Tackling Early Leaving from Youth Programmes	September 1999	QPID76
77	Entry to Work Based Training for Adults	September 1999	QPID77
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