



Working Together **– the first year**

July 2005

This report will be of interest to the full range of individuals and organisations that are interested in, or involved with, voluntary and community sector engagement with adult learning.

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Aims and context of the strategy

Background

The *Working Together* strategy was launched in May 2004, following extensive consultation. Through this strategy the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) intends to build upon existing good practice and maximise the contribution of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to post-16 education and training for individuals, employers and the wider community.

Key achievements so far

Working Together, with its agenda for greater collaboration and understanding between the LSC and the VCS, was generally welcomed in the sector. Some of the strategy's notable achievements so far include:

- publication of a Toolkit, *Working Together in Practice*, to promote best practice
- staff contact for the VCS in each of the 47 local LSC offices
- establishment of regional and local compacts setting out shared principles
- local LSCs collaboration with regional VCS workforce development advisers;
- support for regional and local VCS consortia; and
- a £2 million capacity-building fund.

A toolkit for the strategy

In January 2005 the LSC published *Working Together in Practice*, Volume One of a toolkit intended to help the LSC, the VCS and their partners deliver the best practice and key actions identified in *Working Together*.

This was added to in July 2005 with Volume Two, which offered a mixture of information, guidance about suitable approaches, 'next steps', and case study examples. The main theme of Volume Two was 'working smarter' and utilising the benefits of partnerships and collaboration to make the most of scarce resources. Copies of the toolkit can be obtained from <http://www.niace.org.uk/>

Benchmarking and action plan

Benchmarking exercises are being carried out by local LSC offices at regional level to assess the sector's current level of engagement with the LSC and provide a firm baseline for work going forward.

Following this, each local LSC office will prepare an action plan to explore with the VCS opportunities to develop further partnership working and collaboration. Agreed programmes will be included in the local LSC offices' business plans.

The emerging regional dimension in the LSC usefully parallels regional VCS networks, and both of these can link with strategic bodies such as Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Government Offices.

VCS as provider of learning opportunities

Capacity-building fund of £2 million

The *Working Together* strategy provided a £2 million capacity-building fund for the VCS towards workforce development, infrastructure, quality and responsiveness. £200,000 was allocated to each of the nine English regions with the balance provided to the Prince's Trust (£150,000) and the Federation for Community Development and Learning (£50,000).

The purpose of the capacity-building fund was to support *Working Together* by enabling local LSC offices to work with VCS organisations to develop their performance and capability, with a particular focus on BME groups. This included activities such as:

- mapping and benchmarking exercises to measure current levels of engagement between local LSC offices and the VCS
- building a communication strategy with BME groups (for example, websites, workshops, publications)
- training and development of VCS staff; and
- the formation of local consortia to enhance partnership working.

The fund also offered new opportunities for training and development, and promoted partnership working, as well as other collaborative activities, while the learning consortia that was formed to deliver the Prince's Trust programme helped to enhance the VCS's role as an employer and provider of learning opportunities.

A full evaluation of the work carried out through the capacity-building fund was published in May 2005 by ERS consultants. This showed that local LSC offices and their VCS partners considered that the capacity-building fund provided genuine added value and had gone some way to meet the high level of support needs in the VCS.

To view the ERS evaluation report please click:
<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Documents/SubjectListing/CorporateandStrategic/PartnershipWorking/ers-evaluation.htm>

Contracting, reporting and funding

In summer 2005, the LSC will begin work revising its procurement strategy in line with the Home Office's *Compact Code of Good Practice for Funding and Procurement*. Some of the proposed measures are designed to help funding and procurement in the VCS through:

- early consultation on policy and procurement strategies
- wider publicity for availability of contracts, training and support
- focus on results and outcomes rather than processes; and
- reduced jargon and bureaucracy.

Quality assurance

While the VCS is a significant provider of valuable accredited and qualification-based learning much of its provision is non-accredited and non-qualification bearing. This provision can still be highly motivating for learners and can help prepare them for pathways to further learning.

During summer 2005, the LSC will work with the VCS and partner organisations to explore the potential for developing a national programme of quality improvement support for learning and skills provision by VCS funded by the LSC.

The VCS has helped pilot a new five-stage quality system for non-accredited learning (Recording and Recognising Progress and Achievement). Full details about RARPA can be obtained by clicking here:

http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Partners/PolicyandDevelopment/AdultandCommunity/welcome_rarpa.htm

A new body, the Quality Improvement Agency, will be established in April 2006 to drive forward quality improvement across the learning and skills sector, including the VCS by clicking here: <http://www.qia.org.uk/>

VCS consortia

VCS consortia have been formed as independent and active partnerships of VCS organisations. They have different structures and ways of working but they all offer a single point for contracting, capacity-building, quality assurance and mutual support. In particular, they make possible a coordinated VCS voice for collective, strategic engagement with the LSC.

VCS consortia are playing a key role in LSC programmes such as workforce development, widening participation, Skills for Life, Information, Advice and Guidance, and Neighbourhood Renewal. Going forward, they offer a strong

platform for maximising funding resources, sustainable working and the promotion of best practice. Two examples of effective consortia are summarised below:

- Derbyshire Learning and Development Consortium includes all VCS organisations in the county. This body pools resources relating to the learning and skills agenda to expand and enhance the opportunities available to the sector's paid staff, volunteers and service users as well as local communities. The Consortium acts as the voice of the VCS in Derbyshire and has established a regular dialogue with the local LSC.
- Hampshire and Isle of Wight Learning Champions Project has collaborated with Learning Links (an educational charity), FE colleges, and other partners to develop a local network of learning champions. They work close to the community to encourage participation by reluctant learners, providing advice and information and acting as mentors/classroom support workers.

Black and minority ethnic (BME) VCS organisations

The LSC recognises that BME VCS organisations are particularly under-resourced. Through *Working Together's* £2 million capacity-building fund, the LSC has begun to develop local and regional BME networks focusing on communication, training programmes and qualifications, quality assurance and access to Level 2 programmes.

A good example of this is the BME Regional Skills Panel commissioned by LSC West Yorkshire aimed at developing a strategic approach to build capacity among BME groups across the Yorkshire and the Humber region.

The Panel has carried out research on the views of BME groups in West, South, North Yorkshire and Humberside on policy planning, support systems, partnerships and capacity-building. The Panel's findings on these and other important aspects these will be explored jointly by the Panel, local LSC offices and other partners in the region during 2005.

E-Learning (computer-assisted learning)

Working Together calls for an expanded role for e-learning within the VCS. Currently the VCS operates 6,000 UK Online centres (half of them in public libraries) providing training in computer skills. Most on-line learning provision (again funded by the LSC) is carried out through Local Authorities, often using VCS providers.

Future priorities will be to:

- map e-learning through the VCS
- determine the potential for e-learning to be introduced into the VCS
- extend good practice in e-learning delivery partnerships
- determine funding and organisational needs; and

- assess potential for collaboration between VCS providers.

VCS as employer

Workforce development

Working Together recognises the importance of the VCS as an employer, and the importance of staff development in motivating staff, reducing turnover, raising morale and improving performance. Supporting VCS workforce development is therefore vital to delivering high-level LSC objectives and is a major area of future work.

Strategically, the LSC works with the Home Office's national Workforce Development Hub to ensure that LSC action aligns with development of regional voluntary sector networks. On the ground, local LSC offices are collaborating with Sector Skills Councils and the national hub of expertise on workforce development to identify VCS training needs and incorporate these into local workforce development plans.

Some examples of workforce development projects are given below:

- Black Country 'backfill' project – this collaboration between the local LSC office and the local VCS Skills Task Force provides an agency-managed pool of VCS administrative support workers to fill in for staff attending training courses
- Creative Leadership Management and Development Project – this is run in the South East of England by a partnership led by SCA Community Care Services and offers formal and informal courses in management and leadership; and
- Derbyshire Learning and Development Consortium – this helps local VCS organisations to achieve the Investors in People quality standard by providing materials, training needs analysis and signposting to low cost learning opportunities.

VCS as source of expertise and channel for communication

Through *Working Together*, the LSC recognises the importance of an effective VCS infrastructure (physical facilities, structures, systems, relationships, people, knowledge and skills to support and develop, coordinate and promote front line organisations).

ChangeUp is a 10-year capacity-building programme for VCS infrastructure, funded by the Home Office and intended to strengthen the sector's capacity to deliver publicly-funded services and enable it to operate with maximum effectiveness at local, regional and national levels.

In terms of communication, effective channels between the LSC and the VCS underpin the success of every aspect of *Working Together*. To this end every LSC local office has nominated a member of staff as a local contact for VCS

organisations. Some local LSC offices have also appointed representatives from the VCS onto their local management councils.

Communication and working relationships

LSC/VCS compacts

In 1998, the Government established a national compact with the VCS. This was to introduce more consistency, stability and trust into working relationships between government, its departments and agencies and the sector. In summer 2005, the Government will consult with the VCS and partners on strengthening the compact's provisions.

The LSC has signed up to the principles of the national compact and local LSC offices will enter into local/regional compacts with VCS organisations. These are either new agreements involving local LSC offices or pre-existing compacts with local authorities and other partners. They include agreements and mutual undertakings on mapping, engagement models, partnership-building and workforce development.

Taking the strategy forward

The LSC and its partners are intent on maintaining the momentum of *Working Together* at national, regional and local levels, while at the same time recognising the need for flexibility in terms of funding and resources.

The LSC will continue to consult with the VCS and other key stakeholders on the *Working Together* initiatives and their continuing development will be publicised through sector publications and a series of major stocktaking events scheduled to take place in January 2006.

Further information

Further information on the *Working Together* strategy can be obtained from:

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