



# Building Learning Alliances for Personal & Community Development Learning

## Background Paper for an Open Agenda Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 22<sup>nd</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2006

*Krysia Hudek, Open Agenda*

### Welcome

We are delighted to welcome you to this confidential ideas-building event. We're especially delighted that Phil Hope, MP, Under-Secretary of State for Skills will be joining our discussions.

This is one of those events which covers an enormous amount of ground. It is about learning that can be of benefit to every individual and every community both in itself and for different ends.

There will be those amongst us who are much better qualified than I to promote the tremendous value of adult learning. One of the foremost and persuasive proponents of its value is, of course, Alan Tuckett, Director of the National Institute for Adult & Continuing Education (NIACE). In a recent article in the Times Education Supplement, Alan argued:

*"On the one hand, the need for adult learning has never been clearer. Two in three jobs in the next 10 years must be filled by adults, because there are just not enough young people entering the labour market to replace baby boomers who retire. At the same time, more jobs require high levels of skill. The Government's skills strategy recognises this and offers people with low skills the chance to get them, alongside an entitlement to free tuition for literacy, numeracy and English language.*

*There is recognition too that learning helps in other ways. The national mental health strategy highlighted the importance of adult education in promoting positive mental health: the neighbourhood renewal strategy noted the importance of learning for communities seeking to overcome social exclusion.<sup>1</sup> The Wider Benefits of Learning research centre at London University<sup>2</sup> has shown that taking part in learning increases racial tolerance, gives you a better chance of*

<sup>1</sup> The inter-departmental 'Together We Can' Action Plan also highlights the importance of learning in passing more power, control and influence from the centre to local communities. For more information access the Home Office website

<sup>2</sup> Wider Benefits of Learning Research, Report No.17, Cathie Hammond & Leon Feinstein, February 2006

*giving up smoking, and prolongs your active life in retirement. All in all, the case for adult learning is a powerful one."*

This event is not about arguing against the case Alan puts forward – even if anyone felt inclined to do so! Nor is it (however tempting) a platform for lobbying for more public investment in adult learning. Not to imply that there isn't a strong case to be made for more money: of course there is.

However, our focus for this event is to agree our priorities and a framework for investing public investment in learning with the funding we do have available outside of that which we *broadly* describe as skills for work.

Let's be clear up-front that there can be no tidy delineation of the purpose that drives people to learn. Recently, I met a young black offender who has day release from prison to attend a floristry course. The vast majority of her fellow students attend the course for their own interest and self development. She is learning in order to start her own flower arranging business.

So let's avoid going down the path of trying to define what are employment or career progression skills and what are personal and community development skills.

Our goals for this event are to:

- identify the high level objectives that we want learning that is aimed at helping personal and community development to work towards
- firm up our thinking about the ways in which learning alliances can achieve these objectives, such as through inter agency and provider co-operation at local level
- confirm the Personal and Community Development Task Group's immediate priorities, and identified a number of different types of effective local partnerships able to achieve the

high level objectives we feel we should be aiming for.

In our discussions to achieve these goals there are bound to be some very strong opinions amongst us: but we hope that this won't stop us at least considering others' viewpoints. We ask everyone joining the event to be prepared to be as open minded as possible, and to accept that we are engaging in areas of debate in which there is **no one solution** and that **no one can be certain of the best way ahead**.

This can sound risky to some – and feel even riskier as we go through the process – but the great pay-off is that it really does give us the opportunity to break new ground in our thinking.

An important aspect of this event will be to keep our goals in mind – while we're breaking ground in such rich terrain. It will be very easy to stray into discussions that are important in their own right and **do** relate to the goals we're seeking to achieve, but don't help us to break new ground and get closer to our goals. Nor do we want to get so bogged down in the detail of our ideas and proposals that we run out of time before we've had a chance to explore all key challenges that face us.

Those of you who have worked with Open Agenda before also know that we don't go for set speeches or pre-arranged working groups.

However good, opening speeches – even those delivered by Ministers! - they encourage the 'us and them' habit, with one or two people being expected to produce all the answers, and the rest of us lobbing in questions and indulging in the sport of picking holes in their arguments! We want to begin this event as we mean to continue – with a fast flowing informal discussion, in which we **all feel that we have a responsibility to put forward ideas** and, in doing so, **take risks** in breaking new ground.

This approach reflects the aim of St. George's House to create an atmosphere of trust in which well-informed people can bring fresh thinking to key

issues that will have impact on our future. The House is **NOT** the sort of place where delegates with badges listen to speeches. It **IS** a place where free spirits can try out new ideas without fearing the consequences.

We will be welcoming a number of you to St. George's House for the first time, which is why we'd like to forewarn those booked into the House that when you arrive, you will find that you are not offered a key to your room.

This is quite intentional, and is because the Dean, Canons and Warden welcome you to the House, as their home.

We hope that you'll feel that you can enter into the spirit of the place as a safe and welcoming environment, and that the experience will be both creative and enjoyable. We very much look forward to welcoming you to St George's House on 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

## **Key Timings and Contact Numbers**

On pages 3 – 4 are outlined our key timings for the two days. If anyone needs to contact you urgently whilst you're attending the event, the 'phone number for St. George's House is **01753 848848** and the fax number is **01753 848849**. The report of the event will be posted on the Open Agenda website by

When you arrive, you will find your name badge on a table in the Patricia Hotung Room, on the ground floor of St. George's House. We are just putting first names on badges to make it easier to see each other's names, and also to spare us what can be the 'creeping death' of introductions.

We are very keen to create an informal atmosphere during our time together, and we have found that making a point of using each other's names – instead of saying "*I agree or disagree with the person over there, who's name I can't remember!*" really does help people to relax and spark creative discussion. Please don't think we're being over familiar!

## Agenda

Thursday, 22 <sup>nd</sup> June from 3.30 pm onwards	Arrival at St. George's House
4.15 pm	Tea, sandwiches and cake
5.15 – 6.00 pm	Sung Evensong in St. George's Chapel for those who would like to attend.
6.10 pm sharp	<p><b>Opening Session</b> Welcome and confirmation of our goals for this event and ground rules for discussions. Sharpen up our goals for <b>investing public funding</b> in learning that fosters individual and community development. Who are the beneficiaries and what are the benefits or outcomes that we want them to gain?</p> <p>Explore what we feel should be the <b>governing principles</b> for the investment public funding - focusing on the Learning &amp; Skills Council's contribution through its Personal &amp; Community Development Learning fund as our starting point.</p>
7.45 pm	Pre-dinner drinks
8.10 pm	Dinner in St George's House Dining Room
9.45 pm	Private Tour of the Chapel led by Andrew Carter, Warden of St. George's
Friday, 23 <sup>rd</sup> June, 9.15 am	<p><b>Second session</b> Drawing on the principles we've sketched out the previous evening, identify possible barriers or show stoppers to applying these principles and begin to sharpen up different models or approaches of ways these might be overcome.</p>
10.45	Short break
11.00am	<p><b>Third session</b> At this stage in our discussions we want to explore how we can move forward in constructing a framework that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>builds on</b> operations and partnerships that are already working well;</li> <li>➤ is <b>flexible</b> enough to be locally responsive;</li> <li>➤ <b>widens access and take up</b> of learning opportunities, and</li> <li>➤ <b>enables impact</b> to be measured locally, regionally and nationally by different stakeholders for different purposes.</li> </ul>
12.15 pm	Lunch
1.15 pm	<p><b>Fourth session</b> Picking up on our discussions before lunch, we will have the opportunity to work through particular tough issues that we feel we want to try and crack during our time together, before beginning to shape a time line for the actions that we feel will be needed to build new learning alliances</p>

Friday, 23 <sup>rd</sup> June cont/d. 2.30 pm	Short break
2.45 pm	<p><b>Final session</b> : Sharpen up the priorities that the Task Group should consider tackling over the next 6 – 12 months to maximise the impact of the Learning &amp; Skills Council's approach to funding Personal and Community Development Learning.</p> <p>Before ending, we will draw out from participants what for them, personally, has been of the most value in this event how it has helped sharpen up any actions they will now take</p>
No later than 3.30 pm	End of event

## Our approach to the event

At an event like this you might expect to begin with a 'round robin' of introductions, followed closely by two or three opening presentations outlining the context of our discussions and the key issues we want to tackle.

But as those of you who have worked with us before know we adopt a different approach.

We've found that the problem with introductions is that it's not only difficult to remember who everyone is but also, to some extent, can 'pigeon hole' people as likely to have particular views on the issues we want to tackle. From the very outset, we want to feel that we are 'free spirits' in our discussions, representing no one but ourselves, and **ready to shift in our thinking** if the discussions persuade us to do so.

So, following a brief welcome and confirmation of the ground rules for the event, we want to open our discussions by asking the BIG question:

***What are our goals for investing public funding in learning that fosters individual and community development?***

We're not starting with a blank sheet. Regions across the country have been working on sets of goals that broadly reflect those in Every Child Matters:

- enjoy and achieve
- be healthy
- be safe
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being

It could be argued that the last of these goals is outside of the scope of our discussions, but as I mentioned earlier let's not get hung up about pin pointing exactly where personal and community development learning ends and employment and economic development learning begins!

First, we want to confirm that these are the right goals for the investment of public funding. Are there others? Do we want to define them more sharply?

Once we feel that we've articulated the goals we want to achieve – we want to begin to consider how we achieve them.

Whether we are persuaded by the idea that we should give **some more help than others** to achieve these goals and, if so, who? Or if our instincts are that we should invest public funding on encouraging **more adults across the board**, rather than focus on particular groups of people, how do we set about doing this with a limited budget?

By the end of the evening session, our aim will be to draft a set of governing principles that we can explore applying to shape the investment of public funding.

On Friday, we want to use our time together to test out how we might apply these governing principles and how we might manage any possible show stoppers or challenges that stand in our way.

We will have an opportunity to draw on the work already underway in different regions in developing approaches that:

- build on what is already effective and working well;
- are flexible enough to be locally responsive;
- encourage the buy in of public agencies and the joining up of public policies across different Government Departments, and
- enable impact to be measured locally, regionally and nationally by different stakeholders for different purposes.

We are not looking for a top down approach. What we want to explore is the scope for using a set of common principles to shape and maximise take up of learning by individuals. The sort of questions that we will want to explore at this stage in our discussions could include:

- Where should the balance lie for provision that is partly or fully funded through the public purse? How far should it be through demand?
- What is the case for exercising control over the type of provision funded? If there is a case, how far should it extend?

### **We determine the agenda**

One of the key principles of Open Agenda events is that we determine the agenda as we go, in order to get the most from our time together. This means that, at any stage of our discussions, we can change the structure of a session, if we feel that it

will help us achieve stronger outputs from the event. I say this, with one important proviso.

We find that groups go away far more satisfied with what we have accomplished by the end of an event, if we start off with a commitment to achieving **as much clarity as possible** in our discussions, and really push ourselves in **breaking new ground** and **moving ideas forward**.

During the morning sessions we want to work through **how** we feel we can achieve our goals, both through investing the Personal & Community Development Learning Budget, and more widely, taking into account the public investment in learning made by other Government Departments and their Agencies.

This is the point where we could stray into "*if only*" territory. You know the sort of thing I mean. If only so and so did this, behaved in this way, life would be so much better/easier.

This is not to say this isn't the case. There may well be things that need to be changed outside of our immediate control. But we want to spend most of our creative energy and time at this event focusing on **what we can do**. With this in mind, we will ask you to consider what should be done to build and strengthen learning alliances locally and regionally, as well as nationally, through Government and inter-Departmental leadership.

After lunch, we will build on our discussions and first tackle any important issues that you feel we may have ducked so far, before shaping a timeline for the actions – locally, regionally and nationally – that we feel will be important in building learning partnerships and alliances.

In our final session, we want to draw out from the actions we've proposed, priorities that we feel the Personal & Community Development Learning Task Group should consider over the coming months.

## Working in idea-generating groups

As an important part of the ideas-building process, we will break into 'idea-generating' groups during the event to tackle key questions raised through our discussions.

The purpose of these groups is to focus on sharpening up the issues and developing ideas that we want to pick up and run with. Please use your time in groups to sound out your ideas and do **not** be tempted into trying to develop a group view.

We use these groups because it gives everyone an opportunity to think through different points of view and have their say, when this would be impossible as one large group because of time constraints. As a result, a number of different – even opposing – ideas can emerge from small group discussions.

This is what we're after: ideas and not a group view. For those who haven't been in on a Windsor event before, it's worth saying that it really helps us to leave the groups behind, if you make a point of **not** sitting with members of your group afterwards, and agree to outlaw the phrases "we think" or "my group thought that".

"We think" makes it difficult for group members to change their minds without feeling disloyal to their group. Also, "we think" has more authority than "I think" and, completely unintentionally, can make it less easy for others to challenge or discard ideas.

We may also break into groups for longer periods of time to 'build ideas'. In this instance, it is more likely (but not certain!) that there will be agreement amongst members of the group.

What we ask is that when you come to share your thinking with the rest of us, you **just give us the idea**. Please don't feel you need to share the journey your group has travelled in developing this idea! If we are not clear about its rationale, we can always ask questions.

## Going with the flow

We need to manage our time together carefully as one large group, if we're going to develop the momentum we need to move our discussions forward.

Developing ideas needs careful listening. Let's try and stick to the rule that when someone comes in on the discussion, they **follow on** from what the person before them has said, before moving on and starting a fresh train of thought. Please also resist the temptation of making more than one point! As soon as someone says "*I'd just like to make two or three points at this stage in our discussions*" the ideas stop flowing, as we are drawn to recap on what's gone before.

Of course, when we're together as one large group we want **as many people as possible to participate**: brainstorming is not a spectator event! So I'll try and ensure that the more confident, natural talkers amongst us don't squeeze others out.

## Meeting everyone's expectations

I promise we will be arriving at Windsor with very different views about what should be our key priorities for discussion at this event. This whole agenda is up there at there at the top where passions and emotions run high! There are also enormous pressures on some of us to move from policy to practice in a short space of time. Their tolerance of blue sky thinking may, understandably, be at the shorter end of the spectrum.

This is why we should give ourselves some time early on to work through **as a group** the issues we feel are most important for us to tackle during our time together.

Developing ideas is always a messy process, especially during the opening stages! It can be frustrating for those who like to focus quickly on what they feel is **the** key issue that needs to be tackled, and want to get on with sorting it out. The

difficulty with this approach is that one person's key issue is another's back burner!

So, I would like to ask that we all try to be as relaxed as possible in the opening session, and let as many as possible have their say, so that we can build up a head of steam **as a group** in identifying the issues we want to explore in greater depth.

Overleaf are the Conventions of St. George's House for consultations and brainstorming events held here at Windsor Castle. At the beginning of the event, I will ask you if you are happy to adopt them as ground rules for our discussions.

I very much hope that you'll be open to giving them a go, as experience has shown that their application can make an enormous difference to both the quality of debate and the ideas that emerge.

**And given the diversity, experience and expertise we have between us, who knows what we might achieve by 3.30 pm on 23<sup>rd</sup> June.**

Krysia Hudek, Open Agenda  
16<sup>th</sup> June 2006

## St. George's House Conventions

### 1. *Please be open to changing your mind*

We hope that during your time at the House you will see yourself as a “free spirit”, open to the possibility that the opinions you hold most dearly, on the topic under discussion, might actually be wrong. Once we each take that step, we find that it is much easier to persuade others to question their own assumptions, as well.

### 2. *Please do not attribute remarks to individuals after the event*

At all House events, we ask groups to agree at the outset that comments made in plenary or small group sessions will not be attributed to individuals afterwards. We have a firm convention that people should not be quoted without their permission, and commend this to you most strongly.

### 3. *Please take risks with ideas*

The most successful Consultations at the House have been those where individuals feel sufficiently relaxed, and supported by others, to be able to take risks with ideas. This requires a high degree of trust among a group, and we hope that from the outset you will seek to build that trust.

### 4. *Please try and avoid any false consensus*

We hope that if you find a consensus emerging in your discussions, you will check to ensure that it is soundly based. It can sometimes be very difficult for individuals to resist the pressure to agree with their peers, and we hope that healthy debate will not be stifled by a false consensus.

### 5. *Please use “plain English”*

At just about every event, one of the biggest struggles is with the weight of technical language that some speakers tend to use, and others leave unchallenged for fear of displaying ignorance. We ask **everyone** joining a Consultation at the House to avoid using acronyms, and to be ready to intervene in debate to ask colleagues to use “plain English”.

*Andrew Carter*

Warden of St. George's House