



Building Learning Alliances for Personal & Community Development Learning

**Report of an Open Agenda Event at
St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 22nd – 23rd June 2006**

Our focus for this event was to agree the purpose and principles for investing public monies in learning which falls outside of what is broadly described as for 'employment and work'. Having agreed our broad principles, we then explored how we should apply them locally, regionally and nationally. As a key part of our discussions, we sharpened up what we felt were the priorities for the Personal & Community Development Learning Task Group to consider in distributing and maximising the impact of this Learning & Skills Council budget strand.

This report begins with a brief outline of our views on the purpose of personal and community development learning, and the four main principles we felt should govern public funding of this broad area of learning (pages 1 – 4).

It continues by highlighting how we felt personal and community development should be fostered and supported at local, regional and national levels (pages 4 – 6). We end with a brief aide memoire of the key issues raised during our discussions which we were keen should be considered by the Personal & Community Development Learning Task Group in shaping their approach to how this budget might best be invested (page 7).

As with all Open Agenda reports, we aim to reflect the ideas and action points put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions endorsed all of the ideas included.

Nor should this report be viewed as a policy statement on behalf of the Department for Education & Skills, the Learning & Skills Council, or anyone else! Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

The Purpose of Community & Development Learning

Our starting point was to define what we felt is the purpose of learning for people and communities, outside of that generally associated with moving into and staying in work. It became clear very quickly that we view the purpose through two different 'lenses': *"the individual and the collective."*

Some were comfortable with the approach of different regions summarising the purpose or goals in ways that broadly reflect those in Every Child Matters. Others were less so. They felt that this way of expressing goals is *"somewhat patronising"* and *"fails to capture the relationship between the collective and the individual."*

It was strongly argued that "*the relationship between individual learning and community development needs to be expressed in the goals we want to achieve.*" Goals that focus narrowly on the individual will fail to capture "*the power learning gives to communities.*"

Four Governing Principles for Public Investment

We felt that finding the right balance to support individuals in their personal development in a way that also strengthens communities should be at the heart of our governing principles for public investment.

There is "*no tidy way*" of achieving this; nor is there a single solution. That said, four principles were put forward that it was strongly advocated should govern public investment in personal and community development learning, whatever its source.

i. Getting the balance right between targeting funding to achieve national goals and a permissive approach

Naturally, public investment in personal and community development learning has strings attached to it – whatever its source. Government Departments need to achieve their Public Service Agreement targets and will invest in different types of learning in order to do so. However, we recognised that this "*top down approach*" often misses its mark. This can be because of the way funding is distributed or because what the "*public sector wants to achieve through learning isn't viewed as a priority by the people*" on whom the funding is targeted, either individually or collectively.

Of course, we recognised that there needs to be "*some boundaries set on how public funding can be used.*" For example, we didn't feel comfortable about publicly funding learning associated with extremist groups or that advocated extremist views.

But we did feel that "*the public sector needs to be brave enough to permit people and communities to choose*" the learning that they wish to be partially or wholly funded through the public purse. This will involve funders becoming more trusting in communities about "*their ability to invest taxpayer's money ethically, and ways that maximises value for money.*" It will also mean putting in place the right checks to ensure that "*it is not just those with the loudest voices that get what they want.*"

It was proposed that communities of different types ("*defined by geography, life experiences, aspirations*" and much else besides) should have "*an entitlement*" of some sort that enables them "*to define their own programmes and outcomes.*"

We recognised that the tough issue is determining how much of an entitlement communities (or as some people preferred: collective groups) should have in deciding how public funding is spent on a broad range of learning activities within their communities.

We didn't envisage any sort of national or regional formula in getting the balance right. We felt that it is far more about the messier business of developing relationships with different types of communities and collective groups. The challenge is also about how we can target public investment on communities that are bound together by something that has gone wrong or been less than successful in their lives in a

way that helps them move on to feel that they are part of "*a culture of learning that is about success and fulfilment.*"

ii. Ensuring those who have least get most

When asked: "*least, what?*", the quick response was "*least education . . . least benefits from our economy . . . least POWER!*" There was a broad agreement that public investment should be targeted on "*addressing inequalities.*" One of our goals must be to help create "*an equitable and just society.*"

We recognised that the big question is how? How can we be confident that we are reaching those with least? The answer many felt is, in part, through a greater "*dynamic interface between voluntary and community sector organisations, learning providers and funders.*" It was argued that in order to do this, funders, such as the Learning & Skills Council, need to embrace the idea that "*people don't always know that they are learning, let alone know what they might need or want to learn!*"

The challenge for the Learning and Skills Council will be to work with organisations that have experience and understanding of how 'individuals with least' behave, and "*build on what is proven to work well.*" At the same time, those organisations may need to strengthen their strategies for challenging 'people with least' **not** to "*view themselves as victims*" and separate from successful communities. Instead, we want them to develop the confidence and skills to feel that they are members of wider communities and, in time, alongside others invest in their own learning.

iii. Ensuring public investment is part of "*a universal funding framework*"

There was a strong view that while funding should be targeted so that those who have least receive most, that it should be part of a wider framework. Some called this "*progressive universalism.*" By this they meant that our starting point naturally should start with those who have least, but not to the "*exclusion of people and communities who want to learn*". There needs to be a single framework that accommodates self-financing learners and state financed learners and all in between.

We weren't suggesting the adoption of a new national system or, even, a new administrative approach (although some favoured the idea of vouchers or the introduction of a new type of individual learning account). What we felt was important is that public investment is widely understood to be part of a wider infrastructure of personal and community development learning. It should not be viewed as a silo, or in anyway separate to the mainstream.

The principle proposed was that "*funding should reach, not follow the individual.*" It would imply that it is the type and/or the location of provision that would receive public investment, rather than a 'type' of individual. It will be in "*the selection of the localities, teaching style and type of provision*" that will ensure that those with the least receive most.

The rationale for the choice and locality of what type of learning should receive public investment should be widely understood by communities. Where possible, and linking back to the principle of a

'permissive approach', communities should be able to have much more of a say in the type of learning that receives public investment.

iv. Aligning funding

While our discussions tended to focus on the Learning & Skills Council's Personal & Community Development Learning budget, we were conscious that this is a small part of a much wider pool of funding that is invested in personal and community development learning – drawn from the Learning & Skills Council and other public and voluntary sources.¹

What makes the Learning & Skills Council's Personal & Community Development Learning Budget different is that this budget is not expected to contribute directly and explicitly to the Council's Public Service Agreement targets. This is not to suggest that the learning taking place won't contribute to the achievement of these targets: far from it. The difference is that there is greater flexibility about the way in which this funding can be invested. This could give new scope for:

- aligning other types of funding to increase impact;
- leveraging in new sources of funding to "*widen and deepen participation in learning*", and
- capacity building to increase the effectiveness of public investment in learning

National, regional & local interlinked strategies and alliances

The responsibility and roles in getting the balance right between a permissive approach that enables local communities to have a much greater say in the public investment in personal and community development learning and the achievement national goals is complex.

We recognised that it will require planning and action on local, regional and national levels. This cannot be carried out in silos, but through "*networks of relationships at national, regional and local levels.*" (By local we meant grassroots generally rather than simply geographically local.) It will be the sum of the work of these alliances and "*how they influence each other*" that create "*an infrastructure that maximises opportunities and take up of personal and community development learning.*"

NATIONALLY It was proposed that a new National Learning Alliance should be established at the highest level. It was envisaged that the Alliance would include cross-Departmental and Ministerial membership. The purpose of the Alliance would be to "*articulate a national policy, priorities and a framework for personal and community development learning.*" This policy would be jointly-owned

¹ The South East Region shared the two 'butterfly charts' included as an Appendix to this report to illustrate the mix of different funding sources. The actual figures used in these charts carry a 'health warning': they are very much estimates. Nevertheless, the charts are helpful in bringing to life both the complexity of funding learning and the ratio between some of the different sources.

across Government, and be based around the four key principles described earlier in the report. Some were attracted to the idea of developing a new shared Public Service Agreement target on participation in learning as a focus for the Alliance, and as a way of measuring impact.

It was also felt that there should be some key design features in the way in which a national alliance would work, including the use of "*a national language*" to describe this broad area of learning that Ministers, providers and learners can all understand easily; along similar lines to Every Child Matters.

Alongside a national learning alliance, it was also felt that the Learning & Skills Council (with the support of the Task Group) also has a key role to play at national level. While this role will, of course, be primarily focused on the public investment through the Council's funds, it was acknowledged that it will need to look more widely and include investment from our sources to ensure funding is aligned effectively, maximising impact and value for money. At a national level, key functions proposed include:

- developing the capacity to draw together evidence of the impact of a 'permissive approach' at local level.
- creating an objective and transparent system for the distribution of funds. This system should support a 'permissive approach' to investment at local level and "*minimise the transactional costs*" of public investment.
- ensuring that information, advice and guidance, outreach, and capacity building of organisations already working with communities are included as strands within the framework for Personal & Community Development Learning.
- agreeing how to measure and benchmark quality "*without limiting the range of provision valued by individuals and communities.*"
- building new cross agency alliances between the private, public, voluntary and community sector that will support the development of new alliances and collaborative working at regional and grassroots levels.

REGIONALLY At regional level the primary function was seen to be an enabling one: facilitating the development and growth of alliances and "*giving power to local structures.*" We recognised that some organisations are set up in ways that make regional rather than local alliances preferable. That said, it was felt that care needs to be taken that regions do not stifle the growth of grassroots alliances by being too prescriptive. Some felt that regions will need to take a strong championing role to foster a permissive flexible approach to investment at a local level.

At the same time, it was felt that at a regional level there needs to be "*clarity about the direction of travel*" to inform the commissioning of regional plans. This does not need to be a 'top down' approach. Rather, it was seen as a regional role "*interpreting local intelligence and helping to articulate priorities for public investment.*" As part of this remit, it was felt that mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that the "*the learners' voice*" is clearly heard at regional level.

It was felt that the role of Learning & Skills Council's Regional Partnership teams will be of key importance in stimulating the creation of alliances through joining up at a regional level. For example, it was pointed out that "*sport and cultural activities need to be plugged into this agenda.*"

LOCALLY At local or grassroots level it was felt that, as a starting point, the Local Strategic Partnerships have had an important role to play in "*capturing and sharing what is going on, gaps and who is missing*" from the patchwork of learning in their areas. Other data should now be added to this to draw up as detailed picture as possible.

Drawing on this data, local communities, collectives and organisations need to consider where their starting point is in building local alliances governed by the four principles for public investment. In particular, local alliances may wish to consider:

- the type of evidence that is most likely to encourage funders to adopt a 'permissive approach';
- how provision identified for public investment forms part of a wider universal funding framework – and how learners move towards investing in their own learning. For example, one college is considering testing out the idea of "*designing your own course,*" for people interested in self-financing their learning. There could be value in exploring this approach drawing on public investment initially and moving incrementally toward self-financing.
- how the voice of learners and those not interested in the existing offer can be heard more clearly at regional and national level, and
- opportunities and barriers for aligning funding locally.

This information is essential to inform Local Area Agreements, regional and national policy making. However, we were aware that there is a health warning attached to this approach: the more the information reflects the needs of specific groups of people, the more likely it is that it might be interpreted as a lobbying platform!

This is why local learning alliances are needed. They need to bring together different and, sometimes, competing groups for public funds. By agreeing a set of shared priorities for public investment, they are more likely to persuade funders of the value and equity of a 'permissive approach' to public investment.

Aide Memoire for the Personal & Community Development Learning Task Group

Overleaf is a brief aide memoire of the key issues raised during our discussions which they may wish to consider in taking forward a strategy for prioritising and distributing the budgets for Personal and Community Development Learning.

Aide Memoire

Key Principles

- getting the balance right between the achievement of specific goals and a **permissive approach**
- ensuring **those who have least get most**
- ensuring public investment is **part of a universal funding framework**
- **aligning funding**

Key issues

With the four key principles in mind, the following issues were raised as priorities that need to be tackled over the coming months.

Inward facing

- Articulating a goal that captures the relationship between personal and community development – so that **the purpose of public investment** in Personal & Community Development Learning is widely understood
- Agreeing **the guiding principles** for LSC funding by, perhaps, drawing on the above as a starting point
- Ensuring the framework is **informed by what is working well/being developed** in local areas and regionally
- Ensuring priorities are **not just about what should be delivered but also the 'how'**. Include information, advice and guidance, capacity building, community-based learning
- Agreeing a system for distribution that seeks to **minimise the transitional costs** involved in the administration of the budgets
- Agreeing a process that will **open up the market** and enable providers that have yet to contract with the LSC to tender for funding through this budget
- Agreeing a strategy for measuring provision against appropriate **quality standards**

Outward facing

- Putting in place a **communication and consultation strategy** so that the Group is not working in isolation
- Placing PCDL **within the wider spectrum of public funding**, including that provided through other Government agencies and partnerships, the voluntary and community sector, and new seed corn funding, such as City Strategy funding to align and maximise impact

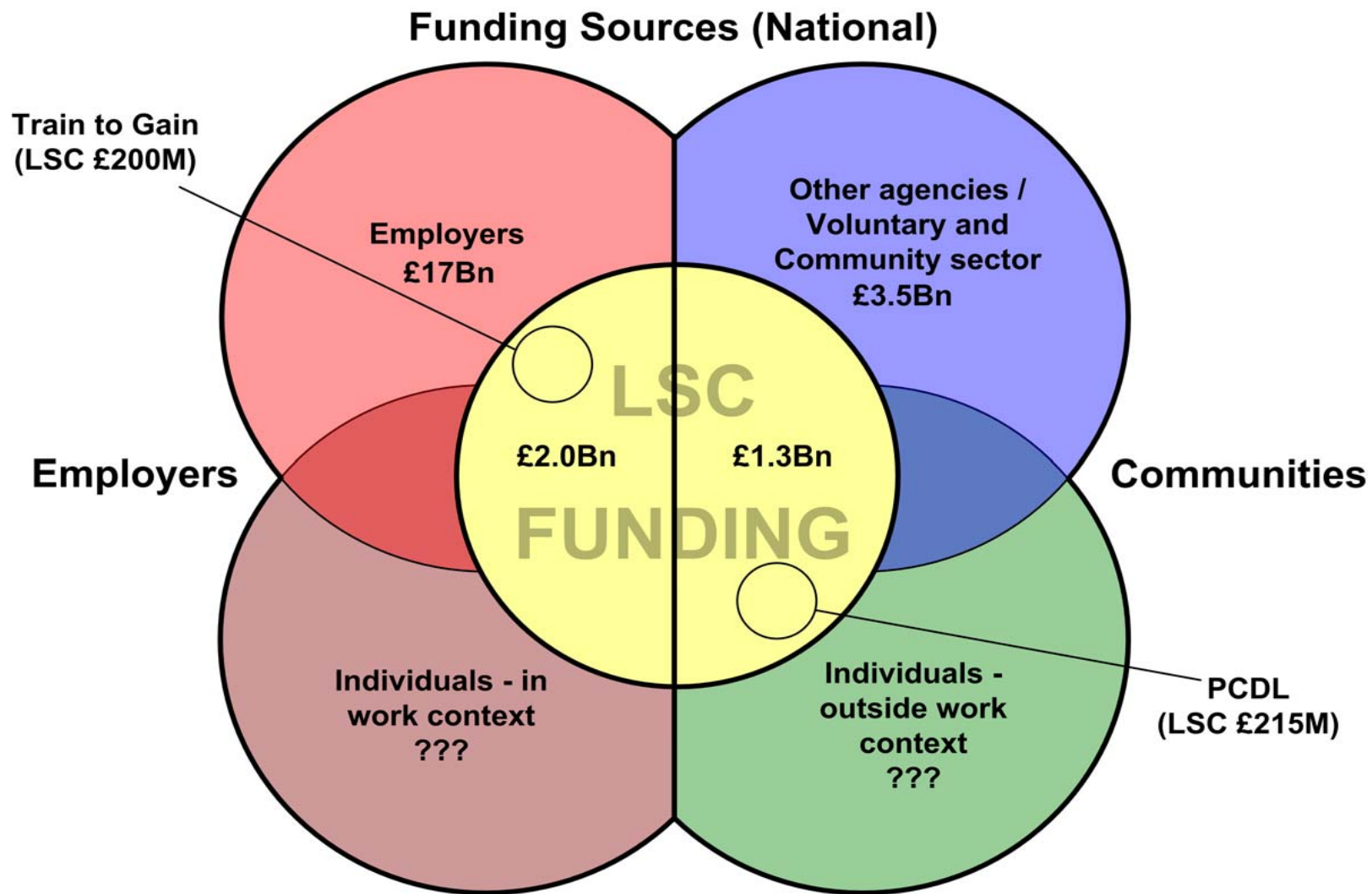
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Appendix

The South East Region: Two 'butterfly charts'

The charts illustrate **one way** of looking at the mix of different funding sources. The actual figures used in these charts carry a 'health warning': they are very much estimates. Nevertheless, the charts are helpful in bringing to life both the complexity of funding learning and the ratio between some of the different sources.



Funding Sources (South East LSC Region)

