

# **The Regional Learning and Skills Group: Looking to the Future**

*A Report for the Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum*

*David Harbourne*

*October 2006*



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# **The Regional Learning and Skills Group: Looking to the Future**

## **A Report for the Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum by David Harbourne**

*Note: This report has been made possible through a ChangeUp Network Development commission, applied for by the Regional Forum on behalf of the Regional Learning and Skills Group.*

### ***Executive summary***

The Government collectively places a high value on the work of the Voluntary and Community Sector. However, individual Government Departments and agencies have to focus on delivering tightly-defined targets and are often unable to give much attention to developing their work with the VCS. It is therefore essential for the sector to develop its own strategy for engaging with the public sector.

### **The RLSG's relationships with other partners and stakeholders**

There are differing views about the RLSG's role. For some members, the real priority is to support the work of the sector as a provider of learning, only part of which directly relates to the sector's own skill needs. Other members see the sector's skills needs as their main priority.

The RLSG does not represent the whole spectrum of VCOs. However, the group could never be fully representative of all parts of the sector without becoming very large and unwieldy. Other ways need to be found to forge effective links with the sector as a whole.

In some cases, this means accepting that other partners have the lead, with the RLSG playing a supporting role. For example, the UK Workforce Hub has a national remit to monitor the skills needed by people working in the voluntary and community sector and to develop strategies for meeting those needs. The RLSG should support this role, not duplicate it. However, the relationship needs to be symbiotic, and national bodies need to take account of regional needs and expertise, for example in plans for collecting intelligence about the labour market and skills needs. Indeed, some aspects of the Hub's work could be devolved to a regional level (together with the associated resources).

The RLSG needs to develop and maintain a complex web of interlocking relationships with national bodies such as the Workforce Hub and the Skills for Business Network, regional groups such as the Regional Skills Partnership, and local groups such as small rural community groups. Communications need to be regular, but not constant. Accordingly, the RLSG needs a meetings and conference plan to provide structure to the many relationships it needs to maintain. It also needs a plan for ensuring that the voices of smaller VCOs can be heard even if the organisations in question find it hard to attend regular

meetings. Thirdly, the RLSG should work more closely with the Regional Skills Partnership and the SfBN Regional Forum.

### **Meeting the skills needs of the voluntary and community sector**

The Government is committed to funding a reduced range of adult learning. There is a particular focus on numeracy, literacy and the English language (Skills for Life). Learning is also funded when it enables people in paid employment to gain a first qualification at level 2 (or in some cases, level 3). The sector can and should take advantage of these opportunities. In order to access opportunities such as the LSC's Train to Gain programme, the sector needs to be prepared to work with sector brokers including Business Link.

In other respects, the Government believes that VCOs, in common with employers in the public and private sectors, should invest in the skills needed by the people who work for them (whether as paid staff or as volunteers). The Government has made a commitment that contracts with VCOs for the delivery of public services should be funded at full, not marginal cost. This means that (in theory, at least) VCOs should have the resources needed to invest for the future. They will, however, need advice and encouragement to invest effectively in the right blend of skills and expertise.

The RLSG should also work with others (again, including the UK Workforce Hub) to prepare and present the case for greater investment in the skills of the sector, demonstrating how this supports not only the DfES/LSC priorities, but the wider Government agenda on the Third Sector.

### **The sector as a provider of learning**

The sector provides a diverse range of learning opportunities. It is renowned for reaching people who are disadvantaged or disaffected, and helping to overcome barriers to inclusion in the labour market and in society more generally. The sector depends heavily on ESF co-financing made available through the LSC (and to a lesser extent, Jobcentre Plus) to pay for a large proportion of its current provision.

Tailored programmes have been developed to meet the needs of particular client groups. Many of these programmes do not lead to qualifications within the NQF (National Qualifications Framework), but many are accredited by the Open College Network.

However, successive Green and White Papers on adult skills have emphasised the importance of raising skill levels among adults of working age, in order (a) for the UK economy to remain internationally competitive and (b) as a means of improving the economic prospects of people who have few or no skills or qualifications. The result has been a narrowing of priorities (as noted above). Individuals or their employers are expected to bear a growing proportion of the total cost of learning which is outside these priorities.

Some VCOs do deliver learning which falls firmly within the Government's priorities. However, local and regional LSC staff have a tendency to believe (a)

that the VCS is essentially only interested in delivering unaccredited or locally-accredited short courses and (b) that much of this provision is not subject to an acceptable level of quality assurance. Other partners and funders have similar perceptions. This is holding back relations between the VCS and public sector funders.

The LSC intends to open some funds for adult learning to open competition: this is known as “contestability”. The VCS has seen this as an opportunity to secure mainstream funding for learning previously funded through short-term funding streams. However, it is increasingly clear that contestability will offer only limited opportunities for the VCS.

There is no doubt that consortia of VCS learning providers have already enhanced the capacity and reputation of the sector. The LSC’s national office welcomes the further development of sub-regional consortia. Within Yorkshire and Humberside, two consortia are well developed, and have provided support both to each other and to the other two (emerging) consortia.

This work must mesh with the work of the RLSG, or else there is a risk of parallel regional structures emerging. There is a consensus that this would be unhelpful. The RLSG can support the work of the consortia (and indeed other VCO learning providers, including national bodies such as RNIB) by developing its capacity to identify potential funding opportunities from a wide range of public sector bodies, for example by developing a regular dialogue with funders and other public sector agencies. To support this, the RLSG needs to collate and demonstrate evidence of good quality provision, including the ability to achieve consistently high quality standards (eg linked to the Common Inspection Framework). The RLSG should seek seedcorn funding for a new post of Marketing Co-ordinator to support this activity. In the medium term, the post would be funded by VCOs from income generated by contracts won partly or entirely as a result of the work of the Marketing Co-ordinator.

## **Lobbying**

The VCS does not fully support current Government policies and priorities. For example, many VCOs remain convinced of the value of short courses, including non-accredited and locally-accredited programmes, which are currently under pressure as a result of the Government’s focus on skills for employment. The RLSG can legitimately work with others, such as NIACE, to lobby for a rebalancing of priorities in favour of this kind of provision.

## **Rural proofing and the Race Equality Framework**

The RLSG has used tools to assess the extent to which the needs of rural, BME and faith communities are accommodated in its work. There is clear evidence of a commitment to diversity. Equally, however, there is no easy complacency. The RLSG collectively, and its members individually, need to continue to explore ways of engaging more effectively with communities (and VCOs) which are at risk of becoming marginalised.

## ***Recommendations***

### **(a) Meeting the skills needs of people working in the voluntary and community sector**

**Recommendation 1:** in responding to the review of the national hubs, the Regional Forum should (a) highlight the need for effective two-way communications between the hubs and the regions and (b) for devolving some aspects of the Workforce Hub's responsibilities to the regional level, together with the relevant resources.

**Recommendation 2:** the Workforce Hub and SSDA should co-ordinate future research on VCS labour market and skills issues, taking account of the needs and priorities of national, regional and local partners and stakeholders. Account should be taken of intelligence collected by skills brokers (notably, those working with the sector under the Train to Gain programme).

**Recommendation 3:** a regional conference should be held every 12-24 months to review the learning and skill needs of the voluntary and community sector.

**Recommendation 4:** the RLSG should devote one or two meetings a year principally to a discussion of the learning and skills needs of the VCS, inviting representatives of other key partners to attend as appropriate.

**Recommendation 5:** RLSG members should offer a one-off briefing to both the Regional Skills Partnership and the SfBN Regional Forum in early 2007, and suggest that there should be a continuing exchange of information between them, including occasional attendance at each other's meetings. Thereafter, the RLSG should work with the Workforce Hub and selected SSCs to compile evidence of the skills needs of the VCS, highlighting links with key national and regional priorities. This evidence should be presented to the Regional Skills Partnership collectively, and to key partners and funders individually.

**Recommendation 6:** Business Link should be invited to become a permanent member of the RLSG, and information about VCS learning providers should be shared openly with Business Link.

**Recommendation 7:** the RLSG should draw on past experience (eg the placement programme run for the LSC in 2005) to improve mutual understanding between Business Link staff and the VCS.

**Recommendation 8:** the Workforce Hub and SfBN should advise the RLSG on ways to support a co-ordinated effort to encourage VCOs to invest in the development of their paid staff and volunteers.

## **(b) The sector as a provider of learning**

**Recommendation 9:** the sector must collect evidence of provision which supports the LSC's priorities (and the priorities of other funders, such as local authorities and Jobcentre Plus), and present it in a consistent format. The sector also needs to present clear evidence of the quality of provision, demonstrating how it links to the Common Inspection Framework.

**Recommendation 10:** The RLSG should invite the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber – and perhaps representatives of key funders and partners – to attend their meetings, though this should not be more often than once or twice a year.

**Recommendation 11:** The RLSG should develop a capacity to collect, analyse and disseminate information about learning delivered by the VCS.

**Recommendation 12:** The Regional Forum should seek seedcorn funding for a new post of Marketing Co-ordinator, perhaps from Capacitybuilders, the LSC, or both in partnership. In the medium term, VCOs – principally the consortia – should aim to fund the additional service from income generated by new full-cost contracts with the LSC and other funders. The Marketing Co-ordinator should lead on collecting information and data about VCS provision (recommendations 9 and 11) and should use it to promote awareness of the sector's ability to support the objectives of partners such as the LSC and Jobcentre Plus, and to seek new contracting opportunities on behalf of VCS providers in the region.

## **(c) Other recommendations**

**Recommendation 13:** The RLSG should prepare and publish an annual meeting plan.

**Recommendation 14:** arrangements should be made to consult smaller members of the RLSG between meetings, either through the Regional Forum secretariat, or via other RLSG members. Points made during these discussions should be reported in writing to the RLSG.

**Recommendation 15:** The RLSG should prepare a “lobbying” plan, aimed at influencing future policy and funding decisions in favour of the kind of learning which the sector believes will help engage disaffected and disadvantaged people. The RLSG should work on this in partnership with organisations within the region (eg ChangeUp consortia) and nationally (eg NIACE) that share similar concerns and ambitions.

**Recommendation 16:** The RLSG should explore additional ways to involve rural groups in its work, perhaps by attending occasional meetings of intermediaries such as the Yorkshire Rural Community Council.

**Recommendation 17:** the RLSG should keep under regular review the impact of its plans and activities (and those of its members) on the needs of BME,

faith and rural communities and take active steps to redress any imbalances detected in the level of support given to groups working in these areas.

**Recommendation 18:** members of the RLSG should each work through the rural proofing checklist and race equality framework in the context of their own organisations' aims and activities.

## ***1: Introduction: the project***

Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum invited me to work with the Regional Learning and Skills Group to:

- assess the capacity of members to sustain the network and their own involvement
- map opportunities for the network to influence and engage in regional (and national) skills structures
- help identify the aspirations of the network
- support effective understanding and implementation of the Race Equality Framework and forthcoming rural-proofing tool
- mentor the network and individual members in relation to their influencing role (eg briefings for the Regional Skills Alliance, Regional Assembly, Government Office, Members of Parliament, Ministers etc).
- develop a growth strategy - pulling together the current strands of work currently being undertaken with the LSC (Management Information Systems, Quality, Workforce Development, Agenda for Change etc.)
- support work to scope skills development opportunities in the VCS

This development work has been made possible through a ChangeUp Network Development commission, applied for by the Regional Forum on behalf of the RLSG.

The RLSG's current terms of reference are at Annex 1. These show that the Group has two main aims:

- To develop a highly skilled and qualified voluntary and community sector (VCS) workforce in Yorkshire and the Humber – including volunteers, paid staff and trustees
- To develop and promote the VCS as a key provider of learning and skills

These two aims overlap in the sense that some of the skills needs of the sector are met by providers within the sector. Nevertheless, the two aims are not identical.

Most members of the RLSG are involved, directly or indirectly, in delivering learning and skills both to the VCS itself, and to a wide range of groups and individuals in communities across the region. They can legitimately lay claim to a good understanding of the skills needed by people working as staff and volunteers in the VCS. However, the group does not include representatives of

what might be termed “client” VCOs specialising in (say) the health, housing and social services sectors.

With the Group’s agreement, therefore, I explored the two aspects of their remit separately.

I started by carrying out an initial review of the RLSG’s current role, activities and aspirations. This was based on interviews and discussions with VCS organisations and key stakeholders including the LSC, Yorkshire Forward, Jobcentre Plus, Government Office, Business Link, members of the Regional Skills Partnership, the UK Workforce Hub, and Sector Skills Councils.

I then facilitated a series of workshops with RLSG members to explore emerging issues. One workshop was used to help the network understand the requirements of the Race Equality Framework and the rural-proofing tool. I also attended a meeting with representatives of BME groups in South Yorkshire, and met national representatives of NIACE and the LSC.

Throughout the process, I have developed ideas and suggestions for the way forward, some of which were tested at a seminar attended by RLSG members and a number of key stakeholders on 14 July.

I am immensely grateful to all members of the RLSG for their very active support during this project. They have bent over backwards to help me understand the issues they face, and have been very receptive to new ideas. Not only was this a great help to me in delivering this project, but I believe it illustrates the strength of relationships within the Group itself. This bodes very well for the future success of the Group.

***Disclaimer:** I am a Director of Capacitybuilders. However, the views expressed here are entirely my own and do not represent in any way a statement of the policy of Capacitybuilders.*

**David Harbourne**

October 2006

## **2: Background: the position of the voluntary and community sector in public policy**

**‘There is enormous and brilliant work going on in the voluntary sector. We should break down whatever barriers are necessary in order to liberate some of that energy, talent and potential and achieve the objectives that we all want to see.’**

*Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, speaking at the Future Services Network Conference, 22 June 2006*

The Government places a high value on the work of the Voluntary and Community Sector. In 2002<sup>1</sup>, a Treasury report recommended that the VCS and central and local Government should adopt a shared strategy to develop the role and capacity of the sector. Since then, joint initiatives have brought the VCS closer to both central and local Government, and in May 2006, the Prime Minister created a new Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office. Ed Miliband has been appointed as the new Minister for the Third Sector, reporting to Hilary Armstrong, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

In July, Hilary Armstrong wrote to the Prime Minister about her new responsibilities. She said:

The Office of the Third Sector is focused on enabling the Government and the Sector to work in partnership to achieve common objectives, including fostering a stronger and more cohesive society, empowering people, further improving public services and increasing the contribution of social enterprise to our economy and society.

The Government [intends to] use the full potential of the Third Sector to improve our public services. New measures include a review of the way in which community equipment is procured and delivered; promoting better local partnerships with the Sector through the Local Government Comprehensive Performance Assessment; and the establishment of a Public Service Innovation Team, that will work with the Improvement and Development Agency to highlight and spread innovative approaches in public service delivery. An Action Plan will be published in the Autumn, setting out the role for the sector in helping to deliver strong public services.

As part of the 2006 Budget, the Chancellor announced a review into the future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration in England. This review is overseen by a cross- Whitehall Ministerial Group involving eight departments. Its aim is to develop a renewed ten year vision for the Government’s relationship with the Sector as part of next year’s Comprehensive Spending Review. This includes identifying what the government needs to do to ensure that the third sector can continue to play a full and vital role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an important partner, contributing to a

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<sup>1</sup> The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery 2002 – A Cross Cutting Review

modern, vibrant economy. The review is being overseen by Ed Miliband on behalf of the Treasury and the Cabinet Office.

In other words, Ministers are fully committed to working closely with the sector, as they have been for some years. As a result, other Departments and agencies have been encouraged to develop their own policies on working with the VCS.

Against this background, the Learning and Skills Council developed a national strategy for working with the VCS, "Working Together". This is built around four themes:

- The sector as a deliverer of learning and skills, notably to disadvantaged communities and individuals
- The learning and skills needed by people who work in the sector (whether paid or unpaid)
- The sector as a source of information and intelligence
- The sector as a channel of communication

Other Departments and agencies have also made public commitments to working with the sector. The Department of Work and Pensions, for example, expects a proportion of its new Pathways to Work programme to be contracted out to the sector.

On the other hand, the pressure of multiple objectives, often tied to stretching but quite narrowly-defined targets, makes it hard to move from rhetoric to reality. Many public sector bodies find they have to concentrate so hard on what they see as "mainstream" responsibilities that they are unable to give much attention to developing their work with the VCS. Nor do they always have time to develop joint plans with other public bodies; and they often find it difficult to break out of the straitjacket of inflexible public sector funding and procurement rules.

Accordingly, it would be wrong to assume that the sector will enjoy a privileged position when decisions are taken about budgets and programmes. It is essential for the sector to develop its own strategy for engaging with the public sector. By working together, individual VCS organisations are more likely to be heard and respected, and are more likely to access funds which enable them to deliver excellent services to people and communities locally and regionally.

### **3: The sector as an employer: understanding and meeting skill needs, today and tomorrow**

#### **(a) The role of the RLSG**

There are differing views about the RLSG's role. For some members, the real priority is to support the work of the sector as a provider of learning, only part of which directly relates to the sector's own skill needs. External pressures – particularly from the LSC – have also pushed the group in the direction of focusing most time and attention on the sector as a provider.

Having said that, some members of the group do see the sector's own skills needs as their main priority. This reflects partly their previous career experience and partly their current work within the sector.

Furthermore, work is currently progressing on what will be the Group's most important contribution (so far) to understanding the skills needs of the sector. Working on behalf of the RLSG, Humberside Learning Consortium (HLC) has been analysing the skills needs of a cross-section of VCOs, based on skills and organisational needs analyses carried out by voluntary sector brokers funded by the LSC in Yorkshire and Humberside. At the time of writing, this work is nearing completion. It will provide a rich source of qualitative data and valuable insights into the learning and skills needs identified by VCOs in the region.

The VCS covers an astonishingly wide range of sizes and types of organisation, ranging from very small, unincorporated community groups through to national charities, and from housing associations to support groups for people with a specific illness or disability.

The RLSG does not represent the whole spectrum of VCOs. Major national providers (WEA, for example) are not represented; nor are non-providers (eg Age Concern, or local charities such as Community Foundations). In reality, RLSG members are drawn essentially from organisations with a significant involvement in delivering and/or accrediting learning and skills, mainly within Yorkshire and Humberside.

Does this affect the RLSG's ability to speak for the whole of the VCS? During meetings and interviews, some people felt that there is a definite problem of perception, and *perhaps* of reality. Broadening membership to include a few additional members might help alter perceptions, but the group could never be fully representative of all parts of the sector without becoming very large and unwieldy.

Another important consideration is the role of other partners, including the UK Workforce Hub and a number of Sector Skills Councils, all of which have an important role in examining and supporting the skill needs of the VCS. This is explored in the next section.

## **(b) The role of other partners**

The UK Workforce Hub is hosted by NCVO and funded largely by Capacitybuilders using ChangeUp funding. Its aim is “to ensure that voluntary organisations have staff, volunteers and trustees with the skills they need”.

The Workforce Hub works alongside five other hubs, which also have some interest in skills – for example, the Governance Hub has an interest in developing the skills and knowledge of trustees, and the ICT Hub has (naturally) an interest in helping people develop the skills they need to make full use of Information and Communications Technology.

The Workforce Hub has recently started work on a two-phase study examining skills gaps and skills shortages in the voluntary and community sector. Phase one of this research study involves a literature review and a piloted questionnaire to be completed by the end of August. In phase two, the questionnaire will be used to survey a large sample of UK VCS organisations, enabling breakdowns to be produced by key variables such as sector, region and size of organisation.

The Workforce Hub works with a number of Sector Skills Councils whose industry “footprint” includes a significant number of VCOs. The Workforce Hub intends that its current two-phase study will help inform research methods, which SSCs will then use in their own research with VCOs in their sectors.

SSCs have each placed a different emphasis on the role of the VCS in their sector footprint. For some, the sector is seen as a top priority, whilst for others, it is a minor part of the overall footprint.

SkillsActive, the Sector Skills Council (SSC) for Active Leisure and Learning, has been assigned lead responsibility by the Sector Skills Development Agency for the Volunteer Workforce Project within the Skills for Business Network (SfBN). As part of the project, several SSCs have appointed Ambassadors, including Skills for Health, Skills for Care and Development, SkillsActive, Skills for Justice and Lifelong Learning UK. These and a small number of other SSCs hold regular meetings, together with the Workforce Hub and SSSA, to exchange news and support the Volunteer Workforce Project.

Working individually, SSCs are required to develop Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) for their sectors. These identify current and future demands for skills and map the provision of training and education which supports this demand. This leads to an analysis of under- and over-supply of learning and skills, and identifies priorities for future provision.

SSCs are at different stages of the SSA process. Four pilot SSAs were developed in the first phase, and a further six SSCs launched SSAs in July 2006. Others will follow later.

### **(c) The story so far: some initial conclusions**

In short, a tremendous amount of activity is currently taking place to identify the skills needs of employers across all sectors of the economy. In the case of the VCS, research is being carried out by the Workforce Hub, individual SSCs with a significant VCS footprint, and in Yorkshire and Humberside, by HLC on behalf of the RLSG<sup>2</sup>. Looking only slightly ahead, brokers working on the LSC's Train to Gain programme will undoubtedly collect further useful information about organisational and skills development needs in the VCS. This ought (in principle) to be captured as part of an on-going process of maintaining an accurate view of the sector's changing needs.

Unfortunately, the various strands of activity do not necessarily join up. The HLC study will provide useful qualitative data, but this will not be compatible with the quantitative data generated by the Workforce Hub study or the findings of research carried out by individual SSCs. Even within the Skills for Business Network, SSCs have taken a variety of approaches to establishing baseline data for their Sector Skills Agreements, and the Workforce Hub study is taking place too late to affect the current cycle of SSC research projects. Furthermore, the Workforce Hub and SSC research plans do not seem to have taken full account of information already available from (or needed by) the VCS in the English regions, including information collected by Train to Gain brokers.

Once again, there are issues of perception and reality here. Members of the RLSG feel it has been difficult to make effective and lasting links with the Workforce Hub or the wider Skills for Business Network. For their part, some people in the SfBN feel that it is hard to engage in an objective dialogue with the RLSG about the sector's future skills needs because much of the Group's agenda is driven by its members' role as providers. Other people within the SfBN simply do not see the VCS as a priority either for their own sector, or for the network as a whole: as a result, it rarely features in regional meetings of SSC and SSSA personnel. Meanwhile, the Workforce Hub has reached out to regional colleagues as far as resources will allow, but cannot commit to standing membership of the RLSG or its counterparts in other regions of the country.

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<sup>2</sup> Research has also been commissioned in other English regions. In the North East, for example, a full labour and skills market analysis was carried out in preparation for the publication in November 2005 of a North East Voluntary and Community Sector Skills Action Plan.

#### **(d) The way forward – working together**

There is no need to comment on how far the issues described here are real and how far they are simply perceived. It needs simply to be stated that improved lines of communication would almost certainly benefit all the interested parties, and that there appears to be a genuine willingness to explore new ways of working together in the best interests of the sector.

A good starting point may well be the review of national hubs commissioned by Capacitybuilders. At the time of writing, the review is under way and decisions are expected in late November.

The Regional Forum may wish to consider making representations as part of the review, recommending that full consideration be given to improving lines of communication between the hubs and the regions. In addition, there is a case for devolving some aspects of the Workforce Hub's responsibilities to the regional level, together with the relevant resources. This would make it easier for the Hub to capture differences in the nature and priorities of the sector in each of the English regions; tailor support so that it better meets these different priorities; and facilitate joint working between the Hub and the Skills for Business Network regionally as well as nationally.

Recommendation 1: in responding to the review of the national hubs, the Regional Forum should (a) highlight the need for effective two-way communications between the hubs and the regions and (b) for devolving some aspects of the Workforce Hub's responsibilities to the regional level, together with the relevant resources.

Researching the skills needs of the VCS both as a sector in its own right and as a series of sub-sets of other sectors of the economy is an expensive exercise. As and when research is repeated in the future, it would be sensible to find ways of connecting national, regional and cross-sector interests in order to maximise the benefits available from a finite amount of time, money and energy. Research methods should be designed to meet the needs of all the various stakeholders and all sources of quantitative and qualitative data should be taken into consideration.

Given that this issue goes well beyond the boundaries of Yorkshire and Humberside, lead responsibility should rest with the Workforce Hub to work with SSDA (consulting the SfBN VCS Steering Group as appropriate) on arrangements for the effective co-ordination of future research on VCS labour market and skills issues.

Recommendation 2: the Workforce Hub and SSDA should co-ordinate future research on VCS labour market and skills issues, taking account of the needs and priorities of national, regional and local partners and stakeholders. Account should be taken of intelligence collected by skills brokers (notably, those working with the sector under the Train to Gain programme).

At the regional level, there should be regular opportunities for the sector as a whole to take stock of current evidence and emerging trends affecting learning and skills within the sector. This could be done through a skills and workforce conference held at intervals of 12-24 months. The conference would be open to all types and sizes of VCO within the region, including representatives of national VCOs operating in Yorkshire and Humberside. Inputs would be invited from the Workforce Hub, SfBN and skills brokers, tailoring their messages to take account of issues of particular importance to Yorkshire and Humberside. There should be opportunities to debate emerging issues in break-out groups before drawing some overall conclusions in a plenary session. Key partners should be invited to attend as observers.

Recommendation 3: a regional conference should be held every 12-24 months to review the learning and skill needs of the voluntary and community sector.

It would be appropriate for the RLSG to oversee plans for each conference, and to draw together and disseminate the ideas and recommendations generated during the conference.

Between conferences, the skills needs of the sector should form a major part of the agenda at one or two RLSG meetings each year. The Workforce Hub, SfBN representatives and Business Link (as generic broker) should be invited to attend these meetings, as should the VCS representative on the Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Skills Partnership (currently Sarah Connell). In this way, significant issues can be fed back to key national and regional partners, and the RLSG can be kept informed of the work of the SfBN, Workforce Hub, generic broker and the Regional Skills Partnership.

Recommendation 4: the RLSG should devote one or two meetings a year principally to a discussion of the learning and skills needs of the VCS, inviting representatives of other key partners to attend as appropriate.

Neither the SfBN Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum nor the Regional Skills Partnership have been briefed by the RLSG on the skills needs of the VCS.

Recommendation 5: RLSG members should offer a one-off briefing to both the Regional Skills Partnership and the SfBN Regional Forum in early 2007, and suggest that there should be a continuing exchange of information between them, including occasional attendance at each other's meetings. Thereafter, the RLSG should work with the Workforce Hub and selected SSCs to compile evidence of the skills needs of the VCS, highlighting links with key national and regional priorities. This evidence should be presented to the Regional Skills Partnership collectively, and to key partners and funders individually.

### **(e) Meeting the skill needs of the sector, today and tomorrow**

Most of what has been said so far concerns “understanding” the skills needs of the sector. But once the plethora of facts and figures have been collected and analysed, can we be confident that this will make a real difference in the level of (effective) investment in learning and skills in the sector?

The Government’s position is that employers should invest in the skills of the people who work for them. There is a perfectly logical case for this, in that investment in skills is likely to lead to improved performance against employers’ own aims and objectives. This applies in all three main sectors – public, private and voluntary – although there are differences in the way each type of organisation’s performance is defined and measured.

However, the Government has acknowledged that there are sometimes reasons why employers might not invest in learning and skills, despite the benefits that might accrue to employees, the wider community, or indeed to individual employers. The Government has therefore made commitments to subsidise certain forms of learning, whilst making clear its refusal to fund others.

In the new scheme of things, adult learning will be fully funded where it helps individuals to achieve a first full qualification at level 2 (and in some cases, a first level 3), or where it helps people improve their numeracy, literacy or English language skills by achieving accredited Skills for Life qualifications. Some other work-related learning will be subsidised, but the expectation is that individuals or their employers will bear a proportion of the total cost – a proportion which will rise over the next few years. A relatively small proportion of total LSC funding has been ring-fenced to support learning for personal development – that is, learning which is not directly linked to the skills needed in the world of work, but which has a social value for some parts of the community.

The VCS employs significant numbers of people with few or no qualifications, who are potential beneficiaries of support for Skills for Life and/or first qualifications at levels 2 and 3. However, the VCS as a whole is not generally regarded as a priority (though some sub-sets may be – for example, people working for VCOs in the care sector). Train to Gain brokers have been appointed to target employers in selected priority sectors in Yorkshire and Humber. The VCS is not in this group, but will receive support via a “generic” broker (Business Link) alongside other non-priority sectors.

From interviews carried out as part of this project, it is clear that Business Link is viewed with mixed feelings by people in the VCS. There is a widespread view that Business Link “does not understand” the VCS, and there is some doubt that this will change in the future. As a result, there appears to be some reluctance to engage fully with Business Link in its new capacity as generic broker.

Secondly, many VCOs prefer to work with learning providers within the VCS, not outside it. This may or may not be justified in terms of the approach and performance of different providers, but it is a definite fact. As things stand today, however, Business Link may not be aware of all VCS providers – so even where Business Link engages with a VCO, successfully diagnoses skill needs and agrees a development plan, it may miss opportunities to make appropriate referrals to VCS providers.

All of this points to a need to build new and effective lines of communication between Business Link and the VCS, and specifically the RLSG.

commendations 6 and 7: (6) Business Link should be invited to become a permanent member of the RLSG, and information about VCS learning providers could be shared openly with Business Link. (This offer has already been made by NIACE, which maintains a database of VCS providers.)  
The RLSG should draw on past experience (eg the placement programme for the LSC in 2005) to improve mutual understanding between Business Link staff and the VCS.

A further potential problem stems from the way in which the LSC tendered for the delivery of learning under the Train to Gain programme. The LSC allowed only a very short time for the submission of tenders, and made clear its intention to award a limited number of relatively large contracts, rather than a multitude of small contracts. This made it very difficult for VCS providers to tender successfully, even as members of consortia.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the tender process, this means VCOs will need to be prepared to consider working with providers outside the VCS if they are to take full advantage of Train to Gain.

Train to Gain is very firmly focussed on helping adults to achieve whole qualifications. Many people in the VCS are concerned that this will be unpopular with employers and individuals alike, who have a tendency to prefer step-by-step learning linked to quite specific training needs. However, a number of people were optimistic that Train to Gain will help raise the sector's understanding and use of NVQs and occupational standards. Equally, the gradual introduction of the Framework for Achievement will make it easier to use units and modules as stepping stones towards the achievement of a whole qualification.

Train to Gain is restricted to paid staff. Volunteers do not qualify. By the same token, the LSC does not provide a blanket subsidy for learning outside its main priorities. This means (for example) that work-based learning leading to a qualification at level 4 or 5 does not qualify for LSC support. This links back to the point made earlier, which is the Government's general expectation that employers will themselves pay for learning which supports their organisational goals. Indeed, there is some evidence that this happens already: for example, a significant amount of ACVO's higher-level provision is paid for entirely by their clients in the sector.

Part of the remit of the UK Workforce Hub and the SfBN is to encourage employers to invest in the skills of their staff. Members of the RLSG should look to the Hub and SfBN to provide the lead in this area. In turn, the Hub and SfBN should advise on the best way for the RLSG to support their efforts at the regional and local level.

A particular consideration is whether VCOs can afford to invest in learning and skills. Public services delivered through the VCS are often funded at marginal rather than full economic cost. Government departments and agencies are being encouraged to agree full-cost funding regimes so that VCOs have sufficient income to invest in their own future capacity.

The issues at stake here are complex and extend beyond the remit of the RLSG. However, assuming full-cost funding increasingly becomes the norm rather than the exception, the RLSG (again, working with the Workforce Hub and SfBN) should make sure VCOs understand that investing in the skills of staff and volunteers will strengthen their ability to deliver high-quality services.

Recommendation 8: the Workforce Hub and SfBN should advise the RLSG on ways to support a co-ordinated effort to encourage VCOs to invest in the development of their paid staff and volunteers.

## ***4: The sector as a provider***

### **(a) What the sector offers; what the LSC wants**

Although the sector accesses funds from a number of sources, it currently depends heavily on ESF co-financing made available through the LSC (and to a lesser extent, Jobcentre Plus). VCOs therefore look to the LSC as a source of future funding. For that reason, this section will concentrate mainly on the sector's relations with the LSC.

The VCS provides a wide range of learning opportunities. The sector is particularly respected for its ability to reach disadvantaged people and communities who might not engage with other forms of provision.

This is reflected in the diversity of LSC and ESF-funded provision currently offered by the sector, which extends from bite-sized taster programmes to full qualifications at levels 1 to 5, from learning for personal development to learning for work, and from alternative curricula for disaffected young people below the age of 16 to adults of retirement age.

An important advantage of co-financing has been its flexibility: performance can be gauged in many different ways, including simple measures of the number of learning opportunities made available. Programmes have been developed to meet the needs of particular client groups. Many of these programmes do not lead to qualifications within the NQF (National Qualifications Framework), but many are accredited by the Open College Network.

Until recently, public policy favoured this approach. It can be traced back to a Social Exclusion Unit report published in the first term of the current Government, which called for an appealing range of learning opportunities (mostly locally accredited or non-accredited) to be offered to people in deprived communities. Widening participation was seen as a means of encouraging social, community and economic inclusion. New learning centres opened in many communities, and metaphorically speaking, a thousand flowers bloomed.

In the last few years, there has been a shift in public policy away from this approach, in favour of more targeted interventions linked to specific national priorities. Successive Green and White Papers on adult skills have emphasised the vital importance of raising skill levels among adults of working age, in order (a) for the UK economy to remain internationally competitive and (b) as a means of improving the economic prospects of people who have few or no skills or qualifications.

As noted in an earlier section, this translates into a commitment by the LSC to fund adult learning which helps individuals to achieve a first full qualification at level 2 (and in some cases, a first level 3), or where it helps people improve their numeracy, literacy or English language skills by achieving accredited Skills for Life qualifications. Some other work-related learning is subsidised, but the expectation is that individuals or their employers will bear a growing

proportion of the total cost. A relatively small proportion of total LSC funding is ring-fenced to support learning for personal and community development – that is, learning which is not directly linked to the skills needed in the world of work, but which has a social value for some people and communities.

Against this background, the LSC has been increasingly critical of learning which does not support its main priorities – so-called “other provision”. This category includes many of the programmes accredited by the OCN. Funding for “other provision” has already been cut quite significantly, and mainstream providers of adult Further Education (mainly FE colleges) have been set clear objectives to increase their provision of work-related programmes leading to awards in the national qualifications framework. The LSC has also signalled its intention to withdraw funding where provision is inadequate and shows little sign of improvement. This funding will then be used to commission provision of a better quality, linked to the LSC’s priorities. This is called “contestability”.

The LSC does acknowledge that taster courses and some leisure-related “other provision” can play an important part in helping people to return to learning after a long gap, or after previous unhappy experiences of learning: in this case, it is called “first step learning”. However, it is assumed that first step learning will lead to further learning (eg Skills for Life or work-related learning), to employment, or both. In practice, the VCS finds it hard to prove that first step learning leads quickly to progression into further learning or work<sup>3</sup>.

A number of LSC colleagues agreed to be interviewed as part of this project. At the national level, LSC staff believe that the VCS can and should play a growing part in meeting the LSC’s priorities. They have issued guidance on ways of strengthening the sector, principally through sub-regional consortia (see section (c), below).

By contrast, local and regional LSC staff tended to believe (a) that the VCS is essentially only interested in delivering unaccredited or locally-accredited short courses and (b) that much of this provision is not subject to an acceptable level of quality assurance. This perception was shared by some other stakeholders, such as local government. Interviewees gave examples (drawn from their own personal experience) of provision which resulted in almost no positive outcomes for learners. Few interviewees were aware of work being led by the consortia to embed the quality standards set out in the Common Inspection Framework (CIF).

In reality, some VCOs have responded to the shift in national policy, and can prove that they are delivering increasing numbers of nationally-recognised qualifications to the standards laid down in the CIF. It is just that this is not yet properly understood within the LSC or other funding organisations.

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<sup>3</sup> Other providers also face this problem. Some people may try two, three or four short taster programmes before they are ready for learning leading to a qualification, or for settled employment. It is almost impossible to demonstrate a linear connection between the very first taster programme and the eventual achievement of a qualification or a job.

Recommendation 9: the sector must collect evidence of provision which supports the LSC's priorities (and the priorities of other funders, such as local authorities and Jobcentre Plus), and present it in a consistent format. The sector also needs to present clear evidence of the quality of provision, demonstrating how it links to the Common Inspection Framework.

Running through this analysis is an assumption that the VCS will continue to have opportunities to provide selected LSC services for young people – chiefly Apprenticeships. More importantly, there is also an assumption that “contestability” will make it possible for the VCS to tender for mainstream adult funding. However, this assumption is open to challenge.

There have been some indications that contestability will have only a limited impact in Yorkshire and Humberside, because most college provision for adults is regarded as satisfactory or better. As a result, where the LSC withdraws funds for a particular curriculum area within a college, it may be transferred to another curriculum area within the same college. Where money is withdrawn completely from a college, the VCS will find itself competing with other FE colleges and private sector learning providers. And at the time of writing, no firm guidance had been issued about applying contestability to budgets previously labelled as “Adult and Community Learning” – that is, learning for personal and community development and first-step learning. In short, there are no guarantees that the VCS will in practice gain much from contestability, at least in the first year or two.

Furthermore, the move by some VCOs to deliver more learning linked to the LSC's priorities is (and will only ever be) partial. One reason is, as already noted, that many VCOs are currently delivering learning under ESF co-financing measures which do not require hard outcomes such as nationally-accredited qualifications. Another reason is that many VCOs simply want to continue to deliver learning which the LSC would classify as “other provision” and/or learning for personal and community development. Where such provision is of a demonstrably high quality and succeeds in engaging disadvantaged people, there is an argument for the LSC to fund it via future ESF funding rounds or through its budgets for personal and community development.

However, LSC budgets will always be finite, and the sector must look for other sources of funding as well.

## **(b) Other funding opportunities**

This project did not set out to catalogue all the opportunities for the VCS to access funding. However, it is clear that many public sector agencies do wish to fund learning delivered by the VCS. For example –

- the Department of Work and Pensions intends that a proportion of the “Pathways to Work” programme will be delivered by the VCS
- the National Offender Management Service has announced a grants programme for VCOs
- local authorities will be commissioning some services for young people, notably 14-19 year olds who are not in education, employment or training
- Local Strategic Partnerships are setting priorities which will be funded via Local Area Agreements: again, there may be opportunities for VCS learning providers to tender for some of these activities
- DEFRA has recently consulted on the next Rural Development Programme for England, which will run from 2007 to 2013
- Sub-Regional Investment Partnerships will continue to support investment in the economic development and regeneration of their sub-regions, linked to the Regional Economic Strategy
- The Department of Health will continue to invest in learning for the health and care sectors including channelling funds to VCS providers via the Sector Skills Councils, Skills for Health and Skills for Care

One issue for the sector is to find out about these opportunities far enough in advance. Sometimes, invitations to tender are issued with short deadlines: if this is the first time the sector has heard about a funding opportunity, there may not be time to prepare a good proposal.

The other side of the same coin is that the sector needs to make sure funders know what the VCS can do for them. The arguments are the same as with the LSC: a number of stakeholders interviewed for this project seemed unaware of the breadth and quality of provision offered by the VCS. We will return to these issues later.

### **(c) The role of consortia**

As noted in section (a), above, staff at the LSC’s National Office propose that sub-regional consortia should have an increasingly important role in enabling the VCS to deliver LSC-funded learning. In April 2006, the National Office sent guidance to regional and local colleagues, stating -

We will encourage local VCS organisations to work through the local consortia organisations to deliver their learning and skills work ... During 06 / 07, it is expected that LSC area offices will support consortia in every way possible to build their capacity to apply for any mainstream funds that might be open to competition in 07 / 08.

More recently, the LSC and Futurebuilders have announced plans to make grants available to around a dozen sub-regional consortia later this year, to help them prepare proposals to deliver adult learning under mainstream LSC programmes. There is also a possibility of joint LSC-Capacitybuilders support for sub-regional consortia, but discussions are at an early stage.

VC Train (South Yorkshire) and the Humberside Learning Consortium are regarded by LSC National Office and NIACE as amongst the most advanced VCS consortia anywhere in the country. They have supported each other's development plans – VC Train leading on data and management information, and HLC on quality and the Common Inspection Framework – and both have provided support and encouragement to the consortia in West and North Yorkshire. Some of this capacity building work has been supported financially by the LSCs in Yorkshire and Humberside.

It is not clear whether (or how) regional groupings form part of the LSC's overall policy on consortia. There have been hints that some LSC staff in Yorkshire and Humberside would welcome moves to bring the four consortia together, perhaps to form a single regional consortium, or two consortia covering (say) West and South Yorkshire, and North Yorkshire and Humberside. However, the four consortia do not feel this is right for them – certainly not at present, given their different stages of development – and in any case there are strong arguments in favour of retaining sub-regional structures.

A key consideration is the role which consortia might play in future relationships with funders other than the LSC. Sub-regions have become an important part of the geography of social and economic development in recent years, as shown by the importance of Sub-Regional Investment Plans to support the Regional Economic Strategy. Equally, sub-regional consortia offer a sense of "localness" which might be lost in a move to a single regional organisation: this could be very important from the point of view of Local Strategic Partnerships and local authorities operating at the district level.

On balance, it would be best to continue to develop the capacity of the four sub-regional consortia separately, at least for the time being. Each can then negotiate delivery contracts for and on behalf of its member VCOs with the LSC and other funders. However, the four consortia are very willing to support each other's development, and there may be opportunities to share some facilities such as a single MI system. This will be considered as part of the RLSG's response to the LSC "Agenda for Change" prospectus.

#### **(d) The role of the RLSG**

The Regional Forum performs a number of roles which are valued by its members and stakeholders. These include providing the secretariat for the RLSG, co-ordinating VCS strategy and policy development, and supporting joint working (e.g. projects funded by the LSC as part of the "Working Together" strategy).

Early on in this project, it emerged that the four sub-regional consortia were considering a joint application to the Big Lottery Fund for funds under the BASIS programme. The aim of the proposal was to increase the capacity of the consortia to secure and support contracts for the delivery of learning and skills by member VCOs. The Regional Forum was also considering a BASIS bid, with broadly similar aims.

Concerns were expressed that the bid by the four consortia could result in two regional VCS networks running in parallel (the consortia and the RLSG), both concerned with learning and skills.

This issue helped to expose an important issue concerning the role and remit of the RLSG. The Group's terms of reference (Annex 1) include a remit to "develop the infrastructure of the sector in relation to learning and skills". The consortia see this as their role.

Having said that, representatives of the consortia stressed that they had no intention of undermining the work of the RLSG: indeed, they remain firmly committed to the Group. They value two functions in particular (as do other members of the Group):

- Providing a forum for exchanging information and ideas, and
- Representing the sector's interests to local, regional and national partners.

However, there is also an interest in developing new roles for the RLSG:

- Scanning the horizon for new opportunities to deliver publicly-funded learning and skills, and
- Collating and presenting compelling evidence of the quality and impact of learning provided by the VCS.

The analysis in this report supports this. Many of the issues identified here relate to perceptions of the sector, and perceptions can only be changed if the sector provides the right information, consistently. Equally, the sector needs good quality information about future funding opportunities so that it can deliver learning to its core market by drawing on diverse funding streams.

A number of recommendations flow from this.

First, a colleague at the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber has kindly offered to attend perhaps one or two meetings of the RLSG each year to share any information he has about policy developments, which may include future funding opportunities.

commendation 10: The RLSG should invite the Government Office Yorkshire and the Humber – and perhaps representatives of key funders and partners – to attend their meetings, though this should not more often than once or twice a year.

commendation 11: The RLSG should develop a capacity to collect, analyse and disseminate information about learning delivered by the VCS.

The consortia will be one of the principal sources of information about learning delivered by the VCS, but by no means the only one: the RLSG should also take account of learning delivered in Yorkshire and Humberside by VCOs

which are not part of sub-regional consortia, including national charities such as the Shaw Trust and RNIB. This will make for a more comprehensive picture of VCS provision in the region, and may also open up opportunities for collaboration between national, regional and local VCOs.

The RLSG is not currently funded to provide this service, which would be additional to existing needs (servicing RLSG meetings, preparing position papers, organising conferences and so on).

commendation 12: The Regional Forum should seek seedcorn funding for a new post of Marketing Co-ordinator, perhaps from capacitybuilders, the LSC, or both in partnership. In the medium term, VCOs – principally the consortia – should aim to fund the additional service from income generated by new full-cost contracts with the LSC and other funders. The Marketing Co-ordinator should lead on collecting information and data about VCS provision (recommendations in 11) and should use it to promote awareness of the sector's ability to support the objectives of partners such as the LSC and Jobcentre Plus, and to seek new contracting opportunities on behalf of VCS providers in the region.

## **5: Other issues**

### **(a) RLSG membership and attendance**

As with many groups and committees, some members of the RLSG attend all meetings, and some very few. Those who do not attend regularly typically said either that pressures of other work made it difficult to attend or (in a few cases) that they found the meetings to be of limited value.

This report has recommended that the skills needs of the sector should form a major part of the agenda at one or two RLSG meetings each year; and that representatives of key stakeholders and partners should attend RLSG meetings from time to time to brief members on developments affecting the sector's role as a provider, including future funding opportunities. For those members who find it difficult to attend every meeting, an annual meeting plan would make it easier to decide which meetings are essential to attend.

commendation 13: The RLSG should prepare and publish an annual meeting plan.

An annual meeting plan might also help those members who find some current meetings to be of limited value. For example, members whose prime concern is with the skills needs of the sector would be likely to attend meetings which are specifically about this topic, and send apologies for meetings about the sector's role as a provider.

However, some smaller VCOs may still have difficulty attending RLSG meetings, even when the agenda is directly relevant to their interests. The RLSG must make sure it reaches out to smaller and/or under-represented groups, and must be seen to do so – otherwise, it may not be seen as fully representative of the sector as a whole.

commendation 14: arrangements should be made to consult smaller members of the RLSG between meetings, either through the Regional forum secretariat, or via other RLSG members. Points made during these discussions should be reported in writing to the RLSG.

## **(b) The RLSG's influencing role**

Some public sector partners think the RLSG spends too much time describing the problems facing the VCS, when what they really want to know is how the VCS can help deliver their aims – that is, the aims of public policy. This may or may not be fair comment, but it provides an important clue about the best way for the RLSG to win friends and influence people.

The first step to influencing others is to have a conversation with them. Information needs to be exchanged in such a way that both parties believe the conversation has been worthwhile.

Some of the recommendations made earlier in this report will help make this happen. For example, an annual meeting plan will make it possible for key partners to attend one or two meetings of the RLSG each year, in order to share news and views on matters of common interest.

Conversation helps create a climate of trust and shared understanding. The next step after that is negotiation. Negotiations are the way one party agrees to provide something of value, in return for something of equal value. One party buys; the other sells.

The RLSG is sometimes the buyer, sometimes the seller.

### ***The RLSG as a buyer***

In the context of the sector as an employer, the RLSG is a “buyer”: it wants to obtain resources from the public sector in order to boost the skills of people working in the VCS. But the public sector will only make the resources available if it believes it is getting something of equal value in return.

But what does the phrase, “something of equal value”, mean in this context?

The VCS might well point to the sort of public statements quoted in the introduction to this report. The Prime Minister said –

‘There is enormous and brilliant work going on in the voluntary sector. We should break down whatever barriers are necessary in order to liberate some of that energy, talent and potential and achieve the objectives that we all want to see.’

Ministers including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and of course the Minister for the Third Sector have all made encouraging noises about the vital role of the sector in meeting their goals for social and economic inclusion.

Surely this is enough to persuade the public sector to invest in the skills of the VCS? Well, no, it's not – because decisions on how public sector resources are used locally and regionally are taken not by the Prime Minister or even by the Minister for the Third Sector: they are taken by people in agencies such as

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the LSC and Yorkshire Forward. For their part, they have been given a set of priorities and targets which often look and feel quite different.

The VCS therefore has to present evidence to show that the two sets of priorities are not mutually exclusive – that on the contrary, they are mutually supportive. They have to show that investing in the skills of people working in the VCS will help public sector partners to meet their own targets and priorities.

It is especially important for the VCS to make this case to the Regional Skills Partnership. Decisions taken by the RSP will influence the future spending plans of key partners such as the LSC and Yorkshire Forward.

This fact is not lost on other sectors. Some Sector Skills Councils have a strong track record of influencing the decisions of bodies like the RSP. They do this by showing (a) that their sectors have pressing skill needs, (b) that a failure to meet these needs will hold back the social and economic development of the region, and (c) that investing in these skills will make a positive contribution to funders' aims and targets.

All such statements must be pragmatic, realistic and deliverable. They should openly acknowledge that not all of the sector's skills needs fit neatly into funders' current priorities.

It is not easy to prepare a compelling case that meets all these criteria. Some sectors invest vast sums to develop and present their arguments. The VCS would find it hard to match this. The key is for the RLSG to work with others, not to try to go it alone.

As recommended earlier therefore (recommendation 5, above), the RLSG should work with the Workforce Hub and selected SSCs to compile evidence of the skills needs of the VCS, highlighting links with key national and regional priorities. This evidence should be presented to the Regional Skills Partnership collectively, and to key partners and funders individually.

This work is essential if the RLSG is to succeed in negotiations for resources to improve the skills of people working in the VCS. To repeat the point made earlier, public sector agencies will only provide these resources if they believe they are getting something of equal value in return.

### ***The RLSG as a seller***

Self-evidently, the RLSG “sells” the services of the VCS as a provider of learning. Earlier in this report, the point was made that the sector can and already does provide services which the public sector currently wishes to buy. The main problem is that the public sector seems largely unaware of this.

The RLSG's power to negotiate with the public sector will be significantly increased if a Marketing Co-ordinator is appointed to collect, analyse and disseminate information about learning delivered by the VCS (see recommendation 12, above). Partners are likely to be favourably influenced by hard facts, which will make them more willing to buy learning from the VCS.

However, there is a further dimension to the RLSG's role here. "Sales" and "marketing" are two different things. The RLSG can help the sector to sell the services which the public sector *currently* wishes to buy. But it can also help to create and shape the *future* market for learning.

As noted earlier, public policy in the late 1990s and early 2000s was based on widening participation to reach growing numbers of non-traditional learners. Funding – particularly under ESF Objectives 1 and 3 – favoured this for several years, and "a thousand flowers bloomed". More recently, public policy has moved towards work-related learning and qualifications. In order to provide services which the public sector *currently* wishes to buy, therefore, the VCS needs to expand provision of Skills for Life and qualifications at levels 2 and 3. The VCS also needs to be realistic about its ability to maintain the current levels of so-called "other provision" as current funding streams draw to a close.

However, it is obvious that many people in the VCS passionately believe in the value offering a huge variety of learning opportunities to non-traditional learners. They believe current policies focus too narrowly on the skills of people already in work, and that this will disadvantage some of the people at the greatest risk of social and economic exclusion.

Member VCOs want to offer bite-size learning, taster courses and other non-accredited or locally-accredited courses. They want to be able to give the same people two, three or four opportunities to learn something purely for interest or enjoyment, in the expectation that this will improve their confidence and – ultimately – help them meet their potential. It is therefore perfectly legitimate for the RLSG to use its influence to market this type of provision to prospective funders in the public sector<sup>4</sup>. They might not want to fund much of it right now – but they may be persuaded to fund it (or more of it) in the future.

This means making the case for this kind of learning to –

- Ministers
- Back-bench and Opposition Members of Parliament in the House of Commons and the House of Lords
- Other influential people and organisations, such as charities campaigning for the alleviation of poverty and disadvantage

Again, the case needs to be backed up by compelling evidence. This may be quantitative, but – as noted earlier – it can be very difficult to prove a direct, linear link between someone's very first taster programme and the eventual achievement of a qualification or a job. Evidence is more likely to be qualitative, which means showing how vast numbers of people have benefited from this kind of learning, in their homes, in their communities and at work.

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<sup>4</sup> And to private and voluntary sector purchasers/funders too, for that matter.

commendation 15: The RLSG should prepare a “lobbying” plan, aimed at influencing future policy and funding decisions in favour of the model of learning which the sector believes will help engage disaffected and disadvantaged people. The RLSG should work on this in partnership with organisations within the region (eg ChangeUp Scotland) and nationally (eg NIACE) that share similar concerns and ambitions.

## **6: Rural proofing**

Rural proofing is a commitment by the Government to ensure that all domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs. It was first described in the Rural White Paper in 2000. The Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber subsequently published a delivery checklist which was based on “Rural Proofing – Policy Makers’ Checklist”, published by the Countryside Agency in 2002. The RLSG used the delivery checklist to assess the extent to which rural issues were taken fully into account in the work of the group and its constituents.

Members of the RLSG have links with many rural bodies including parish councils and village halls. Parish councils are mostly used as channels of communication rather than active partners to develop and deliver services. Some district, county and unitary councils support effective initiatives to engage and support people in rural communities, and are keen to work in partnership with the VCS. Examples of effective projects already in place include training to support the preparation of a village plan; ICT provision in village and community halls; child care training and development; and personal development linked to information, advice and guidance.

On the other hand, some local authorities are perceived as concentrating services on a small number of centres in the main towns: it was often difficult for people to travel to these centres if they did not have access to a car or convenient public transport. In addition, some local authorities had not done much to support partnership working with the VCS.

In terms of their own responsibility to consider the rural dimension in their plans, a number of voluntary and community organisations have consulted widely, using techniques including questionnaires, students interviewing people on their doorsteps, and learning champions. There is also a lot of evidence of cross-fertilisation between learning and other provision for rural communities such as child care facilities. Inter-generational links had been successful in some areas.

It is seen as much easier to extend learning opportunities where there is already some infrastructure in place, such as a well-used village hall. The problems are much greater in smaller, more isolated communities. Holderness Community Radio was mentioned as an example of a way of bringing an isolated and dispersed community together. Elsewhere, mobile facilities (eg learning buses) have been effective.

From the RLSG’s point of view, an important issue is maintaining effective lines of communication with VCOs working predominantly in rural areas. For smaller organisations, it is often difficult to attend meetings and conferences.

commendation 16: The RLSG should explore additional ways to involve rural groups in its work, perhaps by attending occasional meetings of intermediaries such as the Yorkshire Rural Community Council.
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## **7: The Race Equality Scheme**

In 2005, the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber published a document entitled "Race Equality Framework and Guidance for Regional and Subregional Consortia", under the banner of ChangeUp. A meeting of the RLSG was used as an opportunity for members to assess how far they were already following the guidance set out in the document.

In discussion, members commented as follows:

1. the Regional Forum had tried hard to engage and communicate with BME groups with an interest in learning and skills issues
2. the Regional Forum was starting to establish diversity benchmarks covering both internal issues (eg staffing) and external measures such as the level of BME attendance at conferences
3. newsletters and other information were sent to large numbers of BME groups
4. membership of the RLSG did not fully reflect the diversity of BME communities in the region
5. BME attendance at conferences was patchy, despite practical steps (eg childcare provision) to make it easier for people to attend
6. the BME regional panel had helped create good working relationships: its meetings around the region had been well received
7. the biggest issue faced by people from BME communities and some faith groups was direct and indirect discrimination in the labour market: there was always more to be done to overcome these barriers
8. the Management and Professional Training Initiative in Rotherham had helped people from BME communities prepare for higher-level jobs, but had been discontinued when the New Deal was launched
9. Humberside Learning Consortium is recruiting a BME link worker to work with employers and the TUC on learning and employment opportunities, and to assess the support needed by people from BME communities
10. Work shadowing and mentoring should be provided by RLSG members to people in the BME and faith communities to support their professional development: a similar scheme already operates in the FE sector (the Black Leadership Initiative).

commendation 17: the RLSG should keep under regular review the impact of its plans and activities (and those of its members) on the needs of BME, faith and rural communities and take active steps to address any imbalances detected in the level of support given to groups working in these areas.

commendation 18: members of the RLSG should each work through  
the rural proofing checklist and race equality framework in the context of  
their own organisations' aims and activities.

## 8: Conclusions

The project brief set out a number of activities and desired outcomes. Perhaps inevitably, the research evidence and other material do not fit easily or neatly under single headings. Conclusions drawn on one aspect of the report affect conclusions drawn on another. Finally, the project has in some ways gone beyond the original brief and has touched on issues for partners other than the RLSG itself. However, it is still entirely appropriate to draw together some conclusions by reference to each of the main headings in the brief<sup>5</sup>. These are set out in the following table.

	<b>Conclusions</b>
The capacity of members to sustain the network and their own involvement	<p>Some members attend all or most meetings. They value the work of the RLSG, and work for organisations which can support the cost (in time and money) of their attendance at meetings. Assuming the organisations in question continue to thrive, there is sufficient capacity to maintain the network.</p> <p>However, some of the smaller and/or less well-resourced organisations represented on the RLSG find it much harder to give time and energy to attending meetings. The RLSG should make sure they are able to make a significant contribution even when they are unable to be physically present at a meeting. This could be done in several ways, including phoning them before the meeting to gather comments on topics to be discussed and/or enabling them to join in part or all of the meeting via telephone conference call or video conferencing over the internet. In addition, meetings should sometimes be hosted at premises used by (or close to) smaller members, rather than mostly being held in Leeds or Bradford.</p>
Opportunities for the network to influence and engage in regional (and national) skills structures	<p>As noted in the main body of the report, there are clear opportunities for the RLSG to exert influence both regionally and nationally.</p> <p>As an employer of people with learning and skills needs, the sector can influence regional priorities through representation on the Regional</p>

<sup>5</sup> There was one other main heading in the project brief: to mentor the network and individual members in relation to their influencing role. This does not (of itself) lead to conclusions. These are covered in any case under the heading "Opportunities for the network to influence and engage in regional (and national) skills structures".

	<p>Skills Partnership and via improved links to the Skills for Business Network in the region. The Group also needs to develop closer ties with the UK Workforce Hub, though responsibility for forming and maintaining regional links must rest with the Hub, not the nine English regions each acting independently.</p> <p>The Group's ability to influence decisions, priorities and policies will be improved if an annual meeting plan is put in place which improves the systematic collection of information about skills needs in the sector, drawing on the expertise of RLSG members, other VCOs in the region, research data supplied by the Hub and the SfBN, and intelligence collated by Business Link as the region's generic broker for Train to Gain.</p> <p>As a provider of learning, the sector can improve its influence by demonstrating clear links between learning provided by VCOs on the one hand, and the priorities of key partners such as local authorities and the LSC on the other. Influence will be further enhanced by an improved understanding of the plans and policies of a range of public bodies, for example by inviting key partners (eg GOYH) to attend one or two RLSG meetings each year.</p> <p>In the main, however, this influence will only be effective where the VCS is willing and able to go with the grain of public policy. By demonstrating commitment to supporting the aims of its public sector partners, the VCS will be able to influence the practical details of how programmes are designed and delivered.</p> <p>The sector can still hope to have influence even where it goes against the grain of (current) public policy. The prime example in this report is the sector's conviction that bite-size and first-step learning (in all its forms) is an important means of engaging people who are otherwise at the margins of learning and work. The sector needs to work with politicians and other opinion-formers whose prime concern is with tackling poverty and social inclusion, to show that informal and/or non-accredited learning can play an important part in changing the prospects of some of the poorest and most excluded members of society. A key partner in this area</p>
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	will be NIACE.
The aspirations of the network	<p>The network has set its sights generally quite high. Members are keen to maintain good work currently delivered under short-term funding streams such as ESF. A particular ambition is to access mainstream LSC funding.</p> <p>“Contestability” is unlikely to be the panacea some have expected, but opportunities may grow over time.</p>
Understanding and implementation of the Race Equality Framework and rural-proofing tool	<p>The VCS is itself diverse and as a general rule extremely well aware of the need to consider the needs of a diverse population. Rural, BME and faith issues are often at the heart of the sector’s work.</p> <p>However, the sector is not complacent. By using the Race Equality Framework and the rural-proofing tool, members of the RLSG realised that there were further steps to be taken to ensure that their work is as inclusive as possible.</p>
Growth strategy	<p>As a provider of learning, the sector faces an uncertain future – but then, it has always lived with uncertainty and short-term funding streams. Some hoped that the LSC’s commitment to contestability would provide huge new opportunities to access mainstream funding on a more or less permanent basis. This now looks less likely. However, a number of opportunities do seem to be emerging (Pathways to Work, NOMS, new ESF funding rounds etc), provided the sector has the capacity (a) to collect on-going information about its strengths, to use in influencing overall approaches to tendering and (b) to respond to specific invitations to tender within often quite limited timescales.</p>
Skills development opportunities in the VCS	<p>Work is being carried out by the UK Workforce Hub and by several Sector Skills Councils which will help update our understanding of the skills needed by people working in the sector, either as paid staff or as volunteers. The Humberside Learning Consortium is also analysing information gathered by the outgoing sector brokers for the voluntary and community sector in Yorkshire and Humberside; this will add to the wealth of information and intelligence available to help plan future provision.</p>

	<p>The principal challenge for the VCS is to meet the cost of training and development for the paid and volunteer workforce. In terms of external subsidy for adult learning, the sector benefit from the Train to Gain programme, which will help individuals in <i>paid</i> employment to work towards a first level 2 qualification (or in some cases, a first level 3). The sector has tended to be wary of formal qualifications – particularly NVQs – but there is growing evidence (eg from ACVO) of the added value of formal qualifications to organisations and individuals alike.</p> <p>In other respects, Ministers expect the sector to invest in learning and skills in the same way as employers in the public and private sectors. This is not easy, especially for small organisations: time and money are both in short supply. However, the Government is committed to full-cost contracts for the delivery of public services, which means that VCOs with public sector contracts should (in theory) be able to budget for staff training and development. To do this effectively, they will need advice and guidance on the best way to develop their staff. One source of advice will be Business Link, as generic skills broker for Train to Gain in the region. The sector has mixed views of Business Link’s past performance. Regardless of whether these views are right or wrong, the sector needs to work with Business Link in the future.</p>
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# **Annex 1: Regional Voluntary and Community Sector Learning & Skills Group – Yorkshire and the Humber (February 2006)**

## **AIMS**

To develop a highly skilled and qualified voluntary and community sector (VCS) workforce in Yorkshire and the Humber – including volunteers, paid staff and trustees

To develop and promote the VCS as a key provider of learning and skills

## **Objectives**

To make effective links between regional and sub-regional VCS learning and skills infrastructure organisations;

To promote and develop the significant role of the sector in both social and economic regeneration

To develop training and learning for everyone in the VCS including staff, volunteers, service users and trustees;

To support all in the voluntary and community sector to gain qualifications and other achievements;

To introduce new and innovative ways to remove barriers to learning and training for those who have been excluded;

To contribute to a culture of learning in communities.

## **Role and remit**

A To develop the infrastructure of the sector in relation to learning and skills;

B To lobby on behalf of and represent the sector on key policy, planning and funding areas;

C To share information and communication;

D To act as an interface with key policy, planning and funding bodies;

E To co-ordinate national and regional representation from the sector;

F To ensure the region is connected to national initiatives and bodies;

G To co-ordinate activity e.g. workforce development research, consultations etc.

H To collaborate on joint projects;

I To host relevant learning and skills events e.g. open sessions;

J To provide an advisory role to the Regional Forum on its learning and skills work;

K To operate as an access point for voluntary and community organisations

## **Group Composition**

*RLSG: Looking to the Future*

1) The four sub-regional learning and skills consortia:

West Yorkshire Learning Consortium

VC Train – South Yorkshire

Humberside Learning Consortium

York and North Yorkshire Learning and Skills Network

2) South Yorkshire Open Forum; the Regional BME Skills Panel/BME Regional Network; The Open College Network; Assessment Centre for Voluntary Organisations; NIACE; The Regional Forum; Voluntary Action Sheffield

3) On rotation between the four sub regions, two district nominations agreed for a term of one year by two of the 4 sub regions.

### **Secretariat**

This will be provided by the Regional Forum. The Regional Forum will also actively promote the work of the group through its communications infrastructure.

## Annex 2: Outline action plan

Note: this is for guidance only. It suggests a plan for RLSG meetings and related activities over the next 12 months, including five meetings of the RLSG – 2 focusing on the sector’s own skills needs and 3 on the sector as a provider – plus workshops with the LSC (November 2006 and October/November 2007) and a regional conference for the sector to review skills needs and related policy developments.

	<b>Sector’s own skill needs</b>	<b>Sector as a provider of learning</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>November/December 2006</b>	Contact Regional Skills Partnership secretariat to request an opportunity to make a presentation about the skills needs of the sector.	Seek seedcorn funding for a new Marketing Officer post at RLSG.	Workshop with regional LSC to review annual statement of priorities, contestability (if any) and a forward work plan linked to LSC strategy, “Working Together”.
	Contact regional SfBN forum to request an opportunity to present the work of the RLSG.		
	Arrange meeting(s) (separate or joint) with Workforce Hub and SfBN to discuss future ways of working, taking account of Capacitybuilders’ review of national hubs. This should include agreeing ways of working together to encourage VCOs to invest in training and development of paid staff and volunteers.		
	Agree protocol for sharing information with Business Link (regional skills broker for the VCS).		
		<b>RLSG meeting:</b> focus on VCS as	

		a provider of learning. Members only.	
<b>January/ February 2007</b>	Make presentations to (a) RSP and (b) regional SfBN forum about the RLSG and the skills needs of the VCS.	Assuming funding is secured, appoint Marketing Officer.	Prepare an initial lobbying plan, based on the skills manifesto. Make connections with partners such as NIACE.
	<b>RLSG meeting</b> – focus on sector skills needs, including plans for a regional conference (May – see below)	Agree process for collecting information about VCS learning provision, formatting it and making it available to the sector and external stakeholders such as LSC and Jobcentre Plus.	
<b>March/April</b>			Develop proposals for consulting smaller members of the RLSG between meetings, and for liaising with national VCOs which operate in Yorkshire and Humberside.
		<b>RLSG meeting</b> – focus on VCS as a provider of learning; invite GOYH, LSC and Jobcentre Plus to attend to share news about funding and procurement opportunities and meet	

		Marketing Officer.	
<b>May/June</b>	Host regional conference to review the skills needs of the sector (jointly with Workforce Hub and SfBN)		Review RLSG links with BME, faith and rural VCOs.
	<b>RLSG meeting</b> – review findings from regional conference; consider findings of the review of RLSG links with BME, faith and rural VCOs.		
<b>July/August</b>	Attend Regional SfBN forum to provide update on VCS skills issues.		
			RLSG members each review their performance in relation to (a) the race equality scheme and (b) the rural proofing tool.
<b>September</b>		<b>RLSG meeting</b> – focus on VCS as a provider of learning: prepare for the workshop with the LSC and to review current issues (funding etc) Members only.	
<b>October/November</b>			Workshop with regional LSC to review annual statement of priorities, and develop a forward workplan. (Invite JCP and GOYH as well?)