

East of England Rural Forum
Learning and Skills sub-group

Meeting report

The group met at EEDA's Histon, Cambridge offices on Wednesday 17th February 2010. 11 members and three guests were present during the meeting.

Major items discussed as follows:

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

- Harminder Talwar of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) gave a presentation on the features and current status of the QCF. A link to the animated guide is provided here: <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/22623.aspx#>
- The new unitised system is intended to be more flexible in operation, recognising workplace learning and offering a range of sizes and levels of difficulty of qualification.
- Since sign-off by government in November 2008 the QCF readiness implementation programme has developed nearly 3,000 different qualifications with 130 in the Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care sector. Full implementation will be achieved December 2010 although QCDA involvement will be completed end March. Delivery partners remain contracted to continue activity.
- A final job in the implementation phase will be the production of a 'support pack' for learning providers.
- The programme aims to foster interest in training amongst employers, who could potentially register as training providers themselves.
- Clear lines of responsibility were advised during the development of new qualifications between SSCs and learning organisations especially where working cross-sector
- The levels of difficulty in the framework are aligned with HE i.e. level 8 equivalent to PhD.
- QCDA will engage with a 'national learner panel' to establish need.
- A web-based newsletter will be produced - the meeting advised using the BIS FE/skills e-newsletter as a higher-profile communication channel which could serve as an exit strategy from the current phase of work.
- The lack of evidence of engagement with third sector and local authority adult learning was commented on but Harminder confirmed that the QCDA would work with all agencies in its capacity-building programme.
- Trialling of 'individual' funding so that funding 'follows the learner' through a qualification route was taking place and it was noted that the new Skills Funding Agency would need to address questions over funding the system.

Strategic Skills role and the Skills Funding Agency

- David Wall of EEDA skills team presented information on the changes taking place with effect from the winding-up of the old Learning and Skills Council on 31st March 2010.
- A regional SFA team of 25-30 staff led by Laurie Kay will align regional activity with national contracting arrangements (operation still be finalised)
- EEDA to take responsibility for production of a ‘regional skills strategy’ which will direct what provision the SFA is able to fund and form part of the regional over-arching integrated strategy agreed every 3-5 years. The skills strategy will be progressed via an annual ‘statement of skills priorities’ agreed regionally. A ‘mini’ initial version of the statement had been prepared in January at very short notice.
- The new system and strategic lead for the region should have the ability to achieve systemic change, influencing delivery infrastructure to follow demand. At government level there is a real wish for needs-driven provision to tie into the ‘New Industry New Jobs’ agenda.
- Fit of rural issues against the five sectoral ‘Development Implementations Boards’ (DIBs) to be considered. Considered important by the meeting to ensure rural-based sectors have as much influence as city regions, and that small businesses can be engaged in the process so that areas of need can be highlighted.
- Other areas of concern raised by the meeting were over –
 - Perception of ‘top-down’ style delivery
 - Threat over adequate supply of providers
 - ‘Losing’ learners in the system
 - Delivery mechanisms such as T2G will be slow to change
- Engagement plans were being made to include suggested on Local Authority ‘statements of need’ and work with area- and sector-based organisations as well as business-focussed ones. A data-gathering function had been included in the expanded skills strategy team now starting work at EEDA.

It was agreed that it was vital for the group to have input into the development of the strategy and that a meeting be devoted to focussing on this process following the launch of the Rural White Paper and bearing in mind the timeframe for submission.

Rural White Paper

The consultation process and timetable were outlined and the draft outline paper considered by the meeting. In discussion it was felt that skills issues were woven throughout the document although most prominent in the ‘home’ chapter 2. There was a call for case study/statistical information from any source (UK or worldwide) to support the paper.

The group considered some detailed issues for inclusion:

- New approaches to ESOL
- ‘Trainer drain’ in Adult Learning
- Speed of change in rural areas

- Funding availability
- Reducing ‘red tape’ for smaller employers
- Delivery of demand-led learning in rural areas – may still need ‘places to learn’ despite blended/workplace learning approach
- Relative costs/strengths – e.g. training group operation much cheaper than colleges for certain types of delivery
- Need for facilitation of groups – e.g. Young Farmers
- Sustainable Communities Act and Essex ‘total place’ approach to improve efficiency/effectiveness.

Future meetings

It was agreed to meet at 2.30pm on Tuesday 13th April and devote the meeting to the consideration of input into the Regional Skills Strategy.

(Venue confirmed as EEDA Victory House boardroom, Histon, Cambridge).

John Simmons
26/2/10