



Rural learning demand and provision

East of England
Development Agency

Summary report
July 2008

1 Background and Methodology

Introduction

- 1.1 In March 2008, The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and CFE were commissioned by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) to undertake a project to investigate the true nature of rural demand for workforce skills provision and the barriers to providing this.
- 1.2 The research builds on the work EEDA has carried out with the East of England Rural Forum (EERF) and the East of England Skills and Competitiveness Partnership (EESCP) to review the skills profile and participation rates of the workforce in rural areas.
- 1.3 The research brief was to explore workforce skills provision across rural areas and to develop proposals to address current challenges through initiatives that would help those living in rural areas access to the full range of provision.
- 1.4 The findings presented in this report are focussed entirely on research undertaken in rural areas. No comparisons with urban areas can be made as such research was out of the scope of this project.

Aims and Objectives

- 1.5 The aim of the research was to investigate the true nature of rural demand for workforce skills provision and to look at the barriers to providing this.
- 1.6 The research was designed to provide an overview of the cost of rurally-based workforce skills provision on both the learner and provider incorporating:
 - n Courses which are delivered;
 - n Courses for which there is an underlying demand but no current provision because it is seen as uneconomical.
- 1.7 The research has informed the development of recommendations and suggestions for potential projects to address the current challenges faced in rural workforce provision.

Methodology

- 1.8 The research was carried out in four main stages:
 - n Stage 1 – Desk Based research
 - n Stage 2 – Qualitative research with:
 - Employers

- Employed non-learners
- Unemployed non-learners
- Training Providers

n Stage 3 – Stakeholder Consultation events

n Stage 4 – Final Report

1.9 Three Local Authority District areas were chosen as the focus for the research. One district from each of three counties across the East of England was selected to ensure a regional spread and to explore issues in areas of the East of England with differing rural characteristics. The three areas chosen were;

n Maldon (Essex)

n Fenland (Cambridgeshire)

n Breckland (Norfolk)

Stage One: Desk research: literature review and data analysis

1.10 A review of current literature on rural workforce skills demand and provision was undertaken. The focus of this review was on research and analysis that illuminate the nature of demand for and supply of skills among employers and individuals in rural areas, and in particular on issues relating to those rural areas where low levels of skills and qualifications remain prevalent among the adult population.

1.11 Statistical and other data on the economic, social and educational characteristics of the three study areas was also reviewed, to provide background and context for the field research and recommendations. Data was accessed from a range of sources including Office of National Statistics, East of England Observatory, Nomisweb, Learning and Skills Council and Commission for Rural Communities.

Stage Two: Qualitative research with employers, employed non-learners, unemployed non-learners and training providers

1.12 Qualitative research was undertaken with employers, employed non-learners, unemployed non-learners and training providers to explore current workforce skills provision, demand and cost.

1.13 Focus groups were held with employers from a range of sectors that represented the make up of the employment base in the respective areas. In total 16 employers were involved across the three areas.

1.14 Focus groups were also held with individuals who were currently in employment but had not participated in any learning in the last two months. The term ‘employed non-learners’ has been used in this research to describe that study group.

- 1.15 Within Breckland it was decided to focus this strand of the research specifically on migrant workers, who were recruited through the Keystone Development Trust¹. The group included individuals from six different countries and from a range of employment sectors.
- 1.16 The views of unemployed non-learners were gathered through one to one interviews. Recruitment of this group was undertaken through Jobcentre Plus (JCP). Interviews were conducted with JSA claimants face to face within the Job Centres in Breckland and Fenland. In Maldon there is no Job Centre, so JCP staff identified suitable candidates and asked for their consent to be contacted. Telephone interviews were then undertaken with this group.
- 1.17 In total 18 unemployed people were interviewed across the three areas. Our sample included a good cross section of claimants by gender, age, duration of JSA claim and length of time since learning.
- 1.18 We carried out four in-depth telephone interviews with training providers in each of the three areas. This enabled us to speak to a range of public, private, small and large providers that have responsibility for providing training and provision across the East of England.

Stage Three: Consultation Events

- 1.19 The final stage of the project comprised a consultation event in each of the respective areas on the following dates:
- n Breckland - 31st of June, 2008
 - n Maldon - 1st July, 2008
 - n Fenland - 2nd July, 2008.
- 1.20 The events brought together private and public sector representatives to debate the research findings and discuss potential areas for action. Three scenarios were developed, informed by the research findings, for debate and exploration at the events.
- 1.21 Each of the three events were attended by up to 20 delegates respectively including employers from a range of sectors with small independent businesses alongside large national organisations; as well as representatives from the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), Jobcentre Plus, LSC, local authorities and training providers.

¹ www.keystonetrust.org.uk/

2 Research findings

Findings from the desk research

Literature review

- 2.1 Research suggests that addressing low levels of skills and qualifications in rural areas poses distinctive challenges. Providers face a range of difficulties in delivering learning in the countryside linked to geographical scale and sparseness of populations, which are not currently reflected in centralised funding and planning arrangements. As a result, learners and potential learners have access to a reduced range of learning opportunities.
- 2.2 Alongside limited choice of provision, people living in rural areas may face a range of other barriers which inhibit their participation in learning. Some of these barriers are practical, such as limited access to transport; childcare; information, advice and guidance; and work based learning opportunities. Others are attitudinal, and derive in part from specific social and cultural contexts within rural communities that can serve to discourage participation among adults with low levels of skills and qualifications.
- 2.3 However, the persistence of low levels of skills and qualifications in some rural areas is not simply a result of limited access to provision and other barriers faced by learners. Rather, it must be understood within the wider context of the rural economies and labour markets that exist in such areas. Weak economic performance linked to low productivity, low skills, low incomes and low wages is evident in many remote and sparsely populated rural areas. Evidence of a 'low wage, low skill' economic equilibrium has been identified. Local labour market characteristics and patterns of employment include high levels of self-employment; much part time, seasonal and casual work; high levels of in-work poverty; widespread employment of migrant workers; limited choice of jobs; and restricted access to training.
- 2.4 These features of some rural economies and labour markets are reflected in low levels of demand for skills, qualifications and training among both employers and individuals. It is not clear from existing research that simply increasing the availability of provision would automatically increase the demand for skills. Improved learning and skills opportunities need to be integrated into wider strategies for economic development, including better support services for small and micro businesses, and infrastructure development. More research is needed on the level of latent demand for skills among employers and individuals in rural areas. This project is a contribution towards addressing that gap in knowledge.

Area profiles

- 2.5 The three districts exhibit a number of characteristics in common in relation to their social, economic and educational profiles:

- n All have experienced substantial population growth, linked to migration into the areas by older people and families from elsewhere in the UK;
- n They have levels of adult qualifications and skills that are below those for the region as a whole, and higher levels of basic skills needs;
- n Their economies show a continued reliance on traditional sectors, such as manufacturing and agriculture, with correspondingly weak knowledge economies;
- n Low pay is a feature of all three study area;
- n Data from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation suggest that in parts of each district, residents face considerable barriers in accessing key services.

2.6 At the same time, it is possible to draw some distinctions between them. Fenland and Breckland have experienced high levels of in-migration by migrant workers from overseas. Breckland in particular exhibits classic features of a low wage, low skill rural economy. Fenland, meanwhile, registers lower levels of economic activity and a relatively high proportion of working age people dependent on benefits. Maldon appears to have relatively lower levels of multiple deprivation than the other two areas.

Findings from the field research.

Current provision

2.7 The following issues emerged from the research relating to levels of awareness and sources of information about current provision:

- n Awareness of current provision was generally low for all the study groups.
- n The main routes to accessing information on current provision differed by study group, as summarised in Figure 1. below:

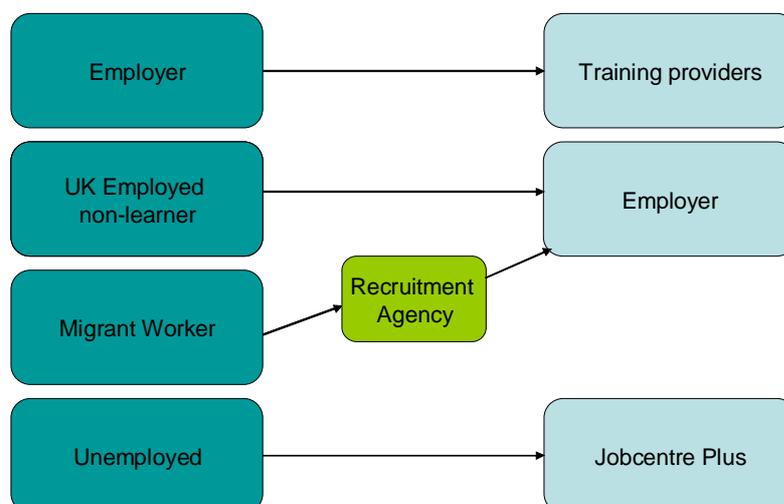


Figure 1. Main sources of information and advice on learning provision.

- n The majority of employers looked directly to training providers for information on external training provision. Some relied on website searches.
 - n Employed non-learners were very reliant on their employer for information and workforce skills provision.
 - n This issue was more complicated for migrant workers as they were mainly employed through recruitment agencies and did not have a direct link to their employer. They stated that neither recruitment agencies nor employers acted as a source of information and advice on opportunities for learning and skills development.
 - n Those who were unemployed looked to the Jobcentre as their main source of information on training. Many felt that there was inadequate information available.
 - n Very few individuals in either the employed or unemployed study groups mentioned using mainstream IAG (Information Advice and Guidance) services.
- 2.8 A range of experiences of internal and external training provision were described by employers and by employed and unemployed non-learners. Some of these referred to the quality of provision, whilst others related to preferred approaches to delivery.
- n Employers were particularly positive about experiences of training that were tailored to their needs and delivered by tutors with business experience.
 - n Individuals liked practical learning and some employed non-learners described positive experiences of 'shadowing' as a method of delivery.
 - n Some employers and employed non learners expressed negative views about the quality of course content and tutors on courses they had accessed.
 - n Employed non-learners had a negative perception of the image of training providers and believed that there was a lack of local provision.
 - n These negative experiences meant that some employers and non-learners in the study were not confident that current provision could meet their needs.
- 2.9 Local training providers offered a wide range of courses focusing on a number of different levels and across broad geographical areas. They identified a number of factors that shape the planning, range and focus of their current provision:
- n Employer demand was cited as a key influence on provision. Three dimensions of this were identified: stakeholder engagement; government priorities; and needs/ labour market analysis.

- n There has been an increase in vocational provision, including that designed to support diversification within the rural economy.
- n The volume of non-accredited provision has declined.
- n Local training providers have rural support strategies in place to help combat the challenges they face in operating in a rural area.
- n It can be difficult to recruit tutors to work in rural areas. The inability to recruit sufficient numbers of experienced tutors with business knowledge is a major barrier to providing the specialist/technical training that employers demand.

Demand for workforce skills provision

2.10 Our research suggests that both employers and individuals placed a high value on training and that demand exists for provision to support workforce skills development. However, they stressed that provision needs to be tailored to meet their specific needs.

- n Several employers experienced difficulties in recruiting young people that they felt were employable and in attracting technically skilled staff into rural areas. Because of this employers in rural areas were very reliant on training to develop the skills needed within their business.
- n Demand for the provision of ESOL was high among migrant workers. However, they received little support from their employers to access an adequate level of ESOL training and therefore needed support from other organisations.
- n There was a distinct split between those unemployed people who knew what career they wanted and therefore had specific training needs and those who just wanted to access training that would enable them to get a job. The latter group needed much more support in identifying skills relevant to opportunities within the rural economy.
- n In many cases unemployed non-learners often had clearer ideas about what training they wanted but experienced a range of barriers that stopped them from accessing this provision and needed much more tailored support.

2.11 The following gaps in provision were identified by the study groups:

- n Employers argued that there were gaps in the provision of specialist/technical skills specific to a range of industries. This issue was linked in part to the difficulties in attracting sufficient numbers of qualified tutors in technical subjects to work in rural areas.
- n A number of smaller employers in particular stated that there were gaps in the provision of suitable training for leadership and management. This was attributed to either a lack of provision, or to the high cost of that which was available. The need for this type of provision in rural areas is an important

issue due to the increased number of small/micro employers and the diversification of the rural economy. Providers recognised the existence of this unmet demand, but argued that insufficient funding was available to enable them to address it.

- n Employed non-learners identified a lack of provision that was practical and vocational in nature.
- n Unmet demand existed among employers and individuals for short, vocational courses. However, providers argued that the lack of funding for this type of provision prevented them from addressing this.
- n For migrant workers, gaps in the provision of ESOL training represented the biggest challenge they faced in advancing through the local employment market.
- n There were clear demands from both employers and individuals that tutors and trainers should have business experience and practical knowledge to underpin their professional practice.
- n Unemployed non-learners were much less likely to identify gaps in provision than the other study groups. They argued that they needed access to a better range of support services to enable them to overcome the complex range of barriers that they face.

2.12 A range of issues were raised by participants in the study relating to their needs and preferences in relation to the cost, curriculum content and delivery methods of workforce skills provision:

- n Training should be practical in nature, delivered by people with business experience and in venues that are within the community or in the workplace.
- n Employers argued that training provision should have as little impact as possible on their working day and be offered at little or no cost to them. This was particularly the view of the small employers included in the study.
- n Employers and non-learners stated that distance learning was not their preferred delivery method. They argued that elements of group interaction, practical learning and the use of local venues would need to be blended into any distance learning programme. Overcoming these challenges should be important in rural areas where wider take-up of distance learning could have clear advantages in reaching a larger number of learners.

2.13 Providers adopted a range of strategies to meet the needs of learners in rural areas, and the main basis of these strategies is the ability to be flexible and adapt to individual need. However, there are higher financial costs associated with these approaches, such as the provision of transport to bring learners together and some innovative methods of delivery.

2.14 Providers identified four key challenges in terms of engaging local employers and accurately assessing their level of demand for training:

- n The large number of small rural employers,
 - n A lack of flexibility in funding, which meant that they could not fund what employers asked them to deliver;
 - n Having to pass the course costs on to employers;
 - n Many employers did not understand the potential benefits of investing in training.
- 2.15 Providers argued that the biggest challenge they faced when engaging individuals across a rural area was the low level of aspiration amongst some sections of the population.
- 2.16 Providers argued that direct links with Jobcentre Plus and subsequent training provision for unemployed non-learners was minimal because it was difficult for them to compete with large national providers who they felt usually won Jobcentre Plus tenders for training provision.

Cost of workforce skills provision in rural areas

- 2.17 Participants in the study groups argued that the rural nature of the areas under review contributed to higher costs associated with the delivery of workforce skills provision. These costs had to be either absorbed by providers, or were passed on to employers and individuals. The following challenges in particular were identified:
- n The dispersed populations of employers and individuals meant that there were lower numbers of learners in any one area.
 - n Transport and travel costs were greatly increased. This included both the cost of moving learners to the provision or moving the provision out to learners.
 - n There are higher costs associated with the provision of IAG.
- 2.18 The following barriers to accessing training associated with higher costs were cited by participants in the study:
- n The actual cost of paying for a course was a significant barrier for small and micro employers, employed non-learners and unemployed non-learners.
 - n The issue of time lost to employers when employees are released for training was particularly pronounced for small/micro employers.
 - n The cost of and access to reliable transport due to the increased distances that learners have to travel in rural areas also contributed to increased financial outlay and the higher time commitment that rural learners had to make. For unemployed people wishing to attend training this was a major barrier.
- 2.19 It is important to recognise the cost of accessing provision for both employers and non-learners includes the cost of the course plus the additional costs of

travel and time. These latter are hidden costs which are increased by the characteristics of the rural areas researched.

3 Conclusions

- 3.1 Our research suggests that any interventions at the levels of both policy and practice that seek to raise the levels of skills and qualifications among the workforce in the rural East of England will need to take into account issues of rurality. Findings from across the three study areas have reflected to a large degree the issues identified in the national research that is explored in the literature review on the distinctive challenges attendant upon both the provision and accessing of opportunities for adult learning and skills development in rural areas.
- 3.2 Individuals and employers within the study areas face a complex range of barriers to accessing learning and skills provision. Therefore any interventions aimed at increasing participation will need to tackle these multiple barriers. For unemployed adults in particular, tailored individual support is required to examine what barriers exist and to establish the most effective way of overcoming them.
- 3.3 Evidence clearly suggests that within the study areas there are greater costs to providers of delivering, and to individuals and employers of accessing, provision, and that these additional costs can be attributed to the rural nature of the districts. For example: travel costs for learners attending and for providers delivering training are greater; the smaller numbers of potential learners within a geographical area mean that providers cannot benefit from economies of scale in relation to class size; and the costs of staff training are disproportionately higher for small and micro-businesses, which make up the majority of employers in the districts. These higher costs appear to act as disincentives for providers, employers and individuals. Providers are reluctant to take on the additional costs, and are not confident that these can be passed on to employers and individuals, so the development of provision is inhibited; individuals are discouraged from participating in learning and skills development; and employers are unwilling to build the levels of skills within the region's rural workforce.
- 3.4 There appears to be a substantial mismatch within the study areas between what employers and individuals say they want in terms of workforce training provision, and what learning providers are currently delivering. However, the research findings also caution against a straightforward acceptance of this notion, which needs further unpicking. Providers assert that they base the development of their provision on an informed understanding of local need, while both employers and individuals acknowledge that their awareness of current provision is low.

- 3.5 This apparent lack of a common understanding of local workforce skills needs and provision between providers on the one hand and employers and individuals on the other, strongly suggests that current information advice and guidance (IAG) and skills brokerage services available in the three study areas are not performing adequately.
- n Individuals seem to be making little use of impartial IAG services that could help them to make and act upon decisions about learning and work. Such services also act as an important conduit for informing local providers about learner demand, and so can help with matching demand and provision. Inadequate access to appropriate IAG provision has been identified as a particular issue for learners in rural areas. An important step towards addressing non-participation in learning in the study areas would be to increase the availability and accessibility of IAG for individuals.
 - n Similarly, employers appear to be making little use of skills brokerage services that could help to identify their workforce training needs and to work with providers to secure appropriate opportunities for skills development. The use of skills brokerage services by employers, including those running small and micro-businesses, needs to be encouraged as part of wider support for business development.
- 3.6 Notwithstanding their general low level of awareness about current provision, employers and individuals can identify three specific gaps. These are:
- n A shortage of job-related technical and specialist provision linked to local labour market needs, including short courses in technical and vocational subjects;
 - n The need for better access to training in leadership and management;
 - n A demand for more ESOL provision for migrant workers.
- 3.7 The research also suggests that the standard of much teaching and training in technical and specialist subjects, where such provision is available, falls below the standard required by both employers and individuals. In particular, difficulties appear to arise because teaching staff do not have the relevant technical and business background that would enable them to understand and address the specific, practical and business needs of the workforce. For employers and individuals in rural areas, the difficulties in finding suitable training are likely to be greater than in urban areas due to more limited choice of providers.
- 3.8 Our evidence indicates that providers are aware of these gaps and shortcomings in their provision, but are currently hampered in their ability to address them by a number of factors. They have faced difficulties in attracting tutors with the appropriate specialist and technical skills and experience to work in rural areas. A key reason given for this is that in some areas such as agriculture and construction there is a limited pool of individuals with such expertise and, where they do exist, they can earn significantly more working in the industry in question than by undertaking a tutoring role. It was also

suggested that even when those with technical and specialist expertise were prepared to act as tutors they preferred to work in a town or city environment rather than in a rural area suffering from poor travel infrastructure. However, funding presents the major obstacle to addressing the gaps in provision. Providers reason that provision which does not attract public funding, such as short courses and leadership and management training, is too costly to deliver.

- 3.9 This last point on the relationship between provision and public funding raises an important conundrum that will need to be addressed in seeking to raise opportunities for rural workforce learning and skills development in the East of England. Employers and individuals – both employed and unemployed – state that they recognise in principle the value and importance of learning and skills development. However, they have also told us that they wish to secure training at little or no cost to themselves. Providers, constrained by government priorities in terms of the subsidised training which they can offer, are therefore unable to plan and develop provision in the expectation that employers will pay for it.
- 3.10 There is a clear challenge here in the need to effect a fundamental cultural and practical shift in the willingness of employers, particularly from small and micro-businesses, to pay for training, and so liberate providers to deliver what they demand. Policy and practice interventions are needed which will encourage employers to invest in the training of their workforce.

4 Recommendations

- 4.1 Drawing on the findings and conclusions from our research, we have developed a number of recommendations for consideration based around four key areas:

- n Skills information and advice services for individuals and employers;
- n Access;
- n Specialist tutors;
- n The system.

These recommendations should be of interest to all partners involved in the East of England Skills and Competitiveness Partnership as well as to future members of the regional Employment and Skills Board. However, they will be of importance to others at a more local level including local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships. Care has been taken to ensure that the recommendations are, where appropriate, capable of alignment with existing and proposed delivery mechanisms. They are also framed so as to be realistic, achievable and to build on examples of existing good practice.

Skills information and advice services

- 4.2 There are a number of agencies involved in providing information and advice on learning and skills development to individuals and employers. The following recommendations could enhance the capacity of these agencies to meet the needs of individuals and employers in rural areas of the East of England.

Support for individuals

- 4.3 A targeted publicity campaign could usefully be undertaken to increase awareness in rural communities of the national on-line and telephone IAG services provided through Learndirect and of the regional Nextstep website and telephone access point launched on August 1. Evaluation of these services suggests that they are effective, and the media through which they are delivered could overcome some of the barriers associated with accessing face-to-face provision in rural communities.
- 4.4 It is recommended that the local library services have stronger links with Jobcentre Plus and Nextstep to provide a visible and local presence to support the IAG needs of local individuals and employers. This is particularly important in areas such as Maldon where there is no Jobcentre Plus presence.
- 4.5 In order to inform the establishment of the Adult Advancement and Careers Service and in line with the national policy direction of integrating employment and skills, consideration should be given as to how IAG agencies such as Jobcentre Plus and Nextstep can work together to best support the training needs of individuals living in rural areas. Particular consideration should be given to:
- n How best to provide 'skills health checks/screening' within a rural location;
 - n Increased signposting to local providers;
 - n Management of a central hub/portal of training related information relevant to those living in specific rural areas.
- 4.6 There appears to be a need for an enhancement of the provision of workforce skills training available to those living in rural areas. This should include a broadening of provision to include:
- n A better fit with the needs of the increasingly diverse rural economy;
 - n Increased relevance of provision to local employment opportunities;
 - n A greater practical element;
 - n Mechanisms to ensure that the level of the course is best suited to individual need;
 - n More accredited training where required.

- 4.7 IAG provision within the community would be improved by the introduction of 'learning champions'. These learning champions would act as a link between individuals and providers, delivering initial IAG and supporting people into learning, as well as working with providers to supply them with information about local learning needs. Successful learning champion schemes have already been established in ten locations across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough with the support of *Investing in Communities* funding.
- 4.8 Recruitment agencies provide a direct link to many migrant workers and strategies should be developed to encourage them to play an increased role in signposting training provision for migrant workers, through enhanced liaison with Jobcentre Plus, Nextstep and the Adult Advancement and Careers Service (when this is established).
- 4.9 Consideration should be given to the introduction of peripatetic 'learning ambassadors' who would provide IAG to migrant workers and play a role similar to that of 'learning champions' within local communities.

Support for employers

- 4.10 Local Employment Partnerships already provide an effective vehicle in relation to larger employers. Consideration should be given to adapting this model to work effectively with small employers in rural areas through developing partnerships that build on existing business engagement activity and will provide a more formal link to employers in rural areas.
- 4.11 A more visible and direct service to employers in relation to skills brokerage could usefully be offered. Exploration of initiatives which could reach employers in rural areas such as the use of a mobile bus with mobile internet access would be helpful in this respect.
- 4.12 The establishment of a website portal which would act as a 'right move' for training or a 'learning shop' could considerably enhance the support available to employers. A sector focus to any information is recommended with the Sectors Skills Councils (SSCs) playing a lead role in providing information for inclusion in the portal.
- 4.13 SSCs already play a key role in mapping the level of training/workforce skills provision available for each business sector. However, there is a need for initiatives at local level to bring together providers and employers in specific sectors in order to effectively meet the skills demands of each sector. The work of LANTRA offers a model of how this can work in practice.
- 4.14 The greater flexibility in the services that skills brokers can now offer to employers through Train to Gain needs to be more widely promoted. Additionally, brokers should also be encouraged to support employers to address all their workforce skills needs, including demand for short, very short and non-accredited training which may fall outside the scope of Train to Gain.

Access

- 4.15 To inform future investment decisions it is recommend that a minimum travel to learn distance and/or time for all adults accessing lower levels of workforce skills provision should be established in each local authority area.
- 4.16 It is recommended that extra support is made available to enable individuals in designated rural areas to travel to training. However, travelling difficulties are not the only barriers to participation. It is important that any such support is introduced as part of a wider package designed to encourage and enable people with low levels of skills and qualifications to participate in learning and skills development.
- 4.17 It is recommended that providers review their approaches to distance learning in order to increase its use in rural areas. However, an approach based solely on distance learning would not be welcomed by learners who already suffer from isolation. There is a need for the development of tailored distance learning packages which offer a blended approach, where one-to-one tutor support and peer support are available throughout the course and with practical elements embedded into the learning.
- 4.18 The use of specialist equipment purchased for the new diplomas for young people should be broadened to include adult learners with more use being made of equipment in local schools. Arrangements proposed at Fakenham High School in relation to their lead role in specialist diplomas in construction may provide a useful model to build upon.

Specialist Tutors

- 4.19 LLUK and sector skills councils could usefully work together to make it easier for individuals with industrial experience (either still in employment or recently retired) to obtain relevant teaching qualifications and thereby to increase the supply of part-time tutors. Although this is not a specifically rural issue its impact would be greater in rural areas where the shortage of such tutors is particularly acute.
- 4.20 There is a need for a campaign to attract qualified tutors to rural parts of the region. At the same time there should be wide promotion to employers and to highly skilled current and recent employees of the social and economic benefits that they can offer to local communities by devising ways of injecting current industrial expertise into local training. The work of employers such as Perkins Engines (in opening their learning centre to the wider employer community) and bodies such as the Engineering Employers Federation (in training peripatetic NVQ assessors) are worthy of widespread dissemination as examples of good practice. Business in the Community already undertakes valuable advocacy work in this respect but a more rural focus to their activity could be of benefit to rural communities.
- 4.21 To overcome the difficulties in recruiting sufficient numbers of qualified tutors it is recommended that providers cluster together to share tutors. These

clusters should build upon other successful examples in the land-based sectors currently in operation in the East of England.

- 4.22 Groups of local businesses could usefully work together to form employer clusters to address their shared training needs. Clusters could commission bespoke training and could be supported to develop qualified tutors and assessors from within the cluster. The work of 'Shaping Norfolk's Future' where clusters of employers have been established in targeted sectors provides a successful model that could be built upon as do the well established Rural Training Groups.
- 4.23 Sector skills councils could play a strong role in supporting the development of both provider and employer clusters. They could help to shape the provision of training across clusters of employers and to identify ways in which industrial expertise could be more widely shared within a training context.

The System

- 4.24 More flexibility in the benefit system to support the needs of unemployed groups would particularly help individuals in rural areas. Regional lobbying would be of value in ensuring that the principles enshrined in the recent welfare reform white paper are taken forward into legislation in the next parliamentary session. In particular a relaxation of benefit rules such as the '18 month rule' on entitlement to training and the '16 hour rule' that limits time available to attend training would enable more unemployed people to access the high quality training they need to enter the workforce.
- 4.25 Funding available to support provision in rural areas needs to be at a level adequate to allow providers to deliver outreach provision in a flexible manner matched to local needs. It will be important in this respect to continue to argue for a rural 'uplift' factor to be included in any funding methodologies associated with learning and skills development for adults.
- 4.26 There are considerable demands for greater flexibility within the funding system to allow employers to retrain individuals who have an existing Level 2 qualification. This is particularly an issue in rural areas where the economy is experiencing major structural change, with the on-going shift of employment to new sectors and a decline in traditional sectors. Some such flexibility has recently been introduced into Train to Gain on a negotiated sector by sector basis. There is an urgent need to encourage sector skills councils to include those qualifications most relevant to rural areas in the priority qualifications lists which are currently under development.
- 4.27 There may be opportunities to make more use of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) in order to direct funding towards more effectively meeting demand in rural areas. In addition increased links with sub-regional strategies that cut across local authority boundaries such as the 'Regional Cities East' model should be explored as vehicles for delivering change to provision in rural areas.

4.28 The East of England Skills and Competitiveness Partnership may wish to consider developing a regional action plan to take forward the recommendations contained in this report.

5 Potential pilot projects

A small number of projects have been identified as suitable for piloting some of the recommendations in this report. In some cases these involve simply a new way of working or a new focus to existing activity. In others there will be a requirement for a modest amount of funding to pump prime the activity. There may be some merit in trialling several of these pilots in the same rural area, along the lines of the recent Fens Rural Pathfinder, in order to establish whether a measurable change over time becomes apparent but also to exploit the synergies between the various proposals.

Pilot projects to improve skills information and advice services

Pilot project 1: IAG provision through libraries

To establish a task force including:

- n Jobcentre Plus
- n Nextstep
- n Connexions
- n Library services
- n Business Support Collaboration Group
- n Local Authorities

to explore ways in which IAG services could have a more visible and effective local presence in rural areas to support the needs of local individuals and employers. Lessons could usefully be learned for the Adult Advancement and Careers Service prototypes being piloted elsewhere in the country.

Pilot project 2: Small rural employer partnerships

To develop a model, based on Local Employment Partnerships, to establish formal partnerships with small rural employers based on a tightly defined travel to work area. This would allow a key link to be made between local Jobcentres and employers in tackling the particular recruitment and skills challenges faced by small rural employers.

Interested agencies are likely to include:

- n Jobcentre Plus
- n Business Link
- n Train to Gain
- n ACAS
- n Nextstep
- n Connexions
- n Business Support Collaboration Group.

Pilot project 3: Learning champions

To build upon the successes of IiC-funded schemes already operating in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough by establishing teams of 'learning champions' in rural communities. Learning champions, often trained volunteers, work within local communities to advocate the power of learning, to establish information for providers on local learning needs and to broker provision suited to individual requirements. They have been particularly successful both in the region and elsewhere in reaching those who have not engaged in any form of learning since leaving school, as is the case of the many low-skilled individuals living in rural areas.

To specifically meet the needs of migrant workers and their particular difficulties in relation to accessing mainstream IAG support, by establishing and training teams of peripatetic learning champions who would have a good understanding of the issues faced by new arrivals and new communities and how their learning needs might be met. They would travel around sites employing migrant workers and provide IAG support in the workplace.

Pilot projects to improve access to provision

Pilot project 4: Supported travel

To establish task forces at Local Strategic Partnership level in rural areas to develop and implement support strategies to better enable low-skilled unemployed individuals to overcome the barriers they face in accessing training, particularly in relation to travel. Successful strategies implemented elsewhere have included: making school bus services available to adult learners; Community Transport schemes; and 'Wheels to Work' initiatives. Other approaches transferable from different contexts might include: Jobcentre Plus travel support for incapacity benefit claimants entering employment; centrally organised transport-sharing schemes; and the provision of travel vouchers.

Pilot project 5: Distance learning

To select one sector of particular relevance to the rural economy in which to develop a pilot module to be delivered in the workplace by a blended approach incorporating a distance learning element complemented by regular on-site tutor support, structured peer support and with embedded practical experience where appropriate.

Such a project would require a substantial contribution from the appropriate sector skills council but would also benefit from the involvement of agencies such as Foundation Degree Forward and MOVE which have considerable experience of innovative materials development in vocational areas.

Pilot projects to address the problem of recruitment of specialist tutors

Pilot project 6: Requirements to teach

To undertake a scoping exercise in collaboration with LLUK and selected sector skills councils to identify the most effective and attractive ways to enable those with current industrial experience (either in employment or recently retired) to undertake a teaching role. The exercise would involve the establishment of any necessary training and on-going support required as well as the identification of incentives required to encourage both employers and skilled employees and ex-employees to engage in such an initiative. It would be useful to learn from the successes of similar ventures elsewhere including at Thurrock and Basildon College.

Pilot project 7: Provider Clusters

To establish a cluster of providers operating in a defined rural area. The cluster would work together to:

- n Identify skills gaps and training needs;
- n Identify areas of tutor shortage;
- n Employ peripatetic tutors in appropriate sectors to act as a shared resource.

Pilot project 8: Employer Clusters

To establish sector-specific clusters of employers operating in a defined rural area. These clusters would be an expansion to other sectors of the Rural Training Group model operating within the land-based sector. The cluster would work together, with the support of the appropriate sector skills council to:

- n Identify shared skills gaps and training needs;

- n Commission external cross-cluster training as required;**
- n Identify and train potential tutors and assessors from within the employment base;**
- n Deliver internal cross-cluster training as required.**