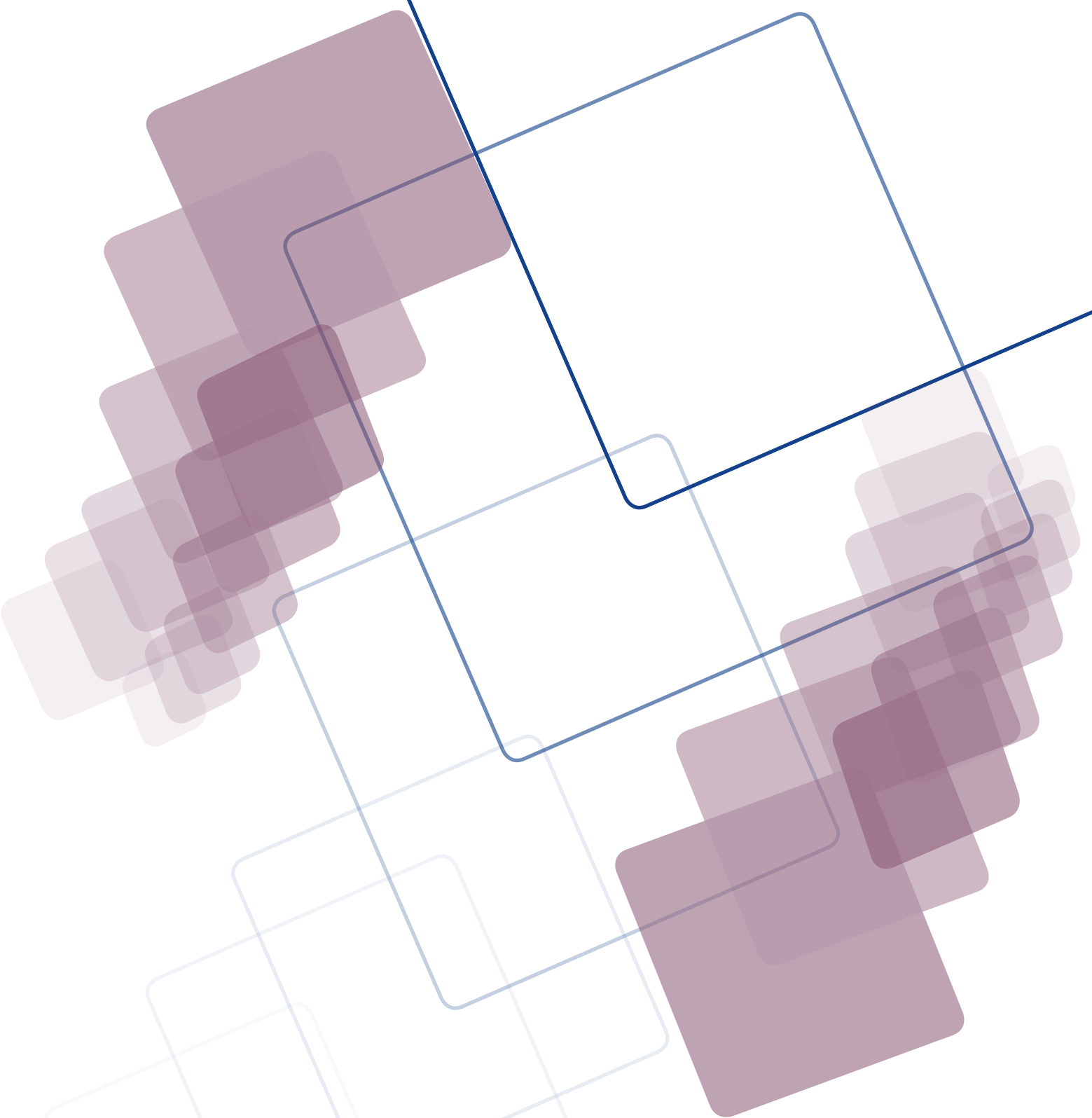


Norfolk Unites

- the one start shop for Norfolk Third Sector learning & Skills



Norfolk Unites



Norfolk Unites Learning Consortia Survey:

*An exploration of issues and practice in Third
Sector learning and skills consortia*

This report sits within wider development work of Norfolk Unites. This project was part funded by the LSC and through ESF funding

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- 11) How do you ensure members are aware of and keep to quality responsibilities and what quality requirements/eligibility criteria do you have?
- 12) Please describe your quality process - relationship of core and members etc. and how do you implement standardised systems to organisations 'already established'?
- 13) What MIS do you use and why? How does it work in your consortium?
- 14) What methods of recording soft outcomes do you use; do you track learner progression into employment due to course etc?
- 15) Do you support/get involved in accreditation of members' training and what awarding bodies do you use, what types of qualifications are delivered (e.g. full qualifications, smaller units, NVQs etc.)?

Finance/legal

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- 16) How did you fund your start up, how much did it cost and how long did it take?
- 17) Financial viability – in order to allow us to understand financial viability of our potential consortium, please could you give us the following (where commercial confidentiality permits):
 - Accounts
 - Business plan
 - Turnover
 - Annual running costs
 - How these costs are met
 - Any membership fees or charge for services provided – e.g. TNA
- 18) Of total bids made in the last 12 months:
 - a) How much was available?
 - b) How much of that did you go for?
 - c) What was your success rate?
- 19) What is your staff and legal structure?
- 20) Risks re: members and accountable body. Assessment of eligibility for contracts and corrective action – e.g. claw back where outputs have not been met

Other thoughts

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Summary

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1. Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following organisations for their contributions to this survey:

- Learning Plus
- The Learning Curve
- Learning Together Cheshire and Warrington
- South London Learning Consortium
- GMCVO (Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation)
- VOCOLLS (Leicestershire Voluntary & Community Sector Learning Consortium)
- Poole CVS
- ACER (Association of Colleges for the Eastern Region) by way of response from an ACER Approved Project Manager overseeing a current ACER contract.

The information received in the survey has been invaluable in informing and shaping the development work of Norfolk Unites.

2. Executive Summary

Community Connections was the lead body for 'Norfolk Unites' – development work towards a Norfolk Third Sector learning consortium.

As part of this work, Community Connections facilitated working groups across the various areas perceived as needing detailed exploration to support this development:

- Communication & Engagement
- Model
- Finance & Legal
- Quality & Systems.

Each working group proposed a set of questions which were then compiled into one questionnaire which was then to be used to survey established Third Sector learning consortia. The responses to those questions, and the key findings, are recorded here.

3. Key Findings

1. If a consortium is to manage a contract, there needs to be very robust processes in place – the Third Sector cannot just accept potential providers because they are a fellow Third Sector organisation. Needs to be on a business-to-business model – who will best help you meet the targets?
2. Capacity building of members is difficult unless suitable specific funding can be brought in for this – management fees from contracts achieved only pay for the management of those specific contracts.
3. No non-Third Sector consortia members recorded here but capacity for some as Associate.
4. A strong identity is required – e.g. clear Terms of Reference.
5. Generally no membership fees – membership agreements/provider contracts signed if members deliver on contract.
6. Organisation accepted as members on contract need, for those consortia holding contracts – no recruiting for thematic/geographic 'gaps' in terms of wider awareness raising.
7. Members only area on websites reliant on contract – don't let the competition see what's going on. Perceived to be no real need to have members only area if general information.
8. Regional shift, e.g. South West consortia coming together for regional applications and East Midlands Learning Consortium being created by several learning consortia coming together.
9. 50% of Third Sector learning consortia achieved a contract in the Open Competitive Tendering environment. This figure does not include those consortia that held a Community Grants contract as this was for Third Sector providers only.
10. One consortium who did not hold a contract in the current OCT arena was seen to evidence £900,000 worth of additional funding being achieved by members due to consortium awareness/signposting work.
11. Flexibility in allowing members to go for multiple bids – informal partnership working accepted.
12. A majority have members as board/steering group, but recognised a need for one organisation to lead on the work.
13. 67% of consortia who did not hold contracts in the OCT arena were lead body, 100% of those who did hold contracts in the OCT arena were a separate legal body.
14. LearnerTrack recognised as most used MIS.
15. Consortia did not ask for soft outcomes of providers to be monitored unless stipulated on the Programme, otherwise it is extra, unrecognised work that the commissioner does not 'need.'

16. Framework for Excellence needs to be on the radar for providers.
17. Examples of additional services potentially offered by a consortium include the Support for Excellence, whereby the consortium is commissioned to deliver a CPD programme to support members, creating additional functions of the consortium to serve members beyond the dependence of holding LSC delivery contracts.
18. Learning Aims Database is where the LSC funding is – unless learning is on here, unlikely to be funded. There is a move towards a new Qualification and Credits Database, though, which may enable smaller unit learning to be accepted.
19. £500,000 average development money for established consortia, delivering larger (mainstream) contracts, over 2-3 year period.
20. Withdrawal of Prefer Provider Status and into Open Competitive Tendering has forced a shift to regional focus – needs effective partnership working across larger areas.
21. 15-20% management fees reported by consortia – FE average is 37%.
22. If the consortium holds a contract, seen to need a Quality Manager and Admin worker as minimum, with a CEO/lead person as a consortium manager to be the strategic lead and seek further funding opportunities.
23. ACER employ staff on basis of contracts achieved, on a contracted daily rate. This reduces resource pressures in terms of having to win contracts to pay for permanent staff.
24. Claw back is a major issue re: contract management. Paperwork needs to be correct and risk needs to be passed down – % up front and % upon successful completion.
25. Six week procurement cycles mean it is vital to get expertise and partnerships in place beforehand.

4. Introduction

Community Connections was the lead body for 'Norfolk Unites' – development work towards a Norfolk Third Sector learning consortium. This was part of a series of Third Sector learning consortia development that occurred in the East of England between Autumn 07 and Summer 08.

As part of this Norfolk work, Community Connections facilitated working groups across the various areas perceived as needing detailed exploration to support this development:

- Communication & Engagement
- Model
- Finance & Legal
- Quality & Systems.

Each working group was composed of individuals from Norfolk Third Sector organisations (and other interested parties) who wanted to contribute to the development phase of Norfolk Unites. Each working group proposed 5 questions that related to information in their area which they would like to know more about. These were then compiled into one questionnaire with which other established Third Sector learning consortia from around England were surveyed.

5. Aims and Objectives of the Research

The survey was conducted to:

- Map service provision of existing learning consortia
- Collate examples of good practice and to benefit from expertise and knowledge of learning consortia specialist staff
- Record examples of problems experienced in the course of the consortia and receive advice on how to avoid/overcome such future scenarios
- To feedback findings from this survey to the working groups to explore development potential for Norfolk Unites

6. Methodology

Each of the working groups proposed a set of questions which they felt would inform their decision-making process across the various, specialised areas. These questions were then compiled into one questionnaire from which learning consortia were to be surveyed via telephone.

Learning consortia who had volunteered their contribution were e-mailed this questionnaire one to two weeks in advance of their telephone interviews to enable them to prepare responses and to source any required information.

One hour interviews were then conducted via telephone with those individuals and their responses are recorded here.

These responses were then taken back to the various working groups to help inform discussion and to make decisions within the wider Norfolk Unites development work.

7. Interviewees

Contributions were requested through the Consortia+ network (network of Voluntary and Community/Third Sector learning consortia) and other consortia were also contacted directly through website research. From these, the follow learning consortia agreed to support us in this work:

- Learning Plus – Devon and Cornwall learning consortium
- The Learning Curve – Wiltshire learning consortium
- Learning Together Cheshire and Warrington – Cheshire and Warrington learning consortium
- South London Learning Consortium
- GMCVO (Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation) – the lead body for the Greater Manchester Voluntary Sector Learning Consortium
- VOCOLLS (Leicestershire Voluntary & Community Sector Learning Consortium) – Leicestershire learning consortium

Additionally, the following organisations also contributed a response:

- Poole CVS
- ACER (Association of Colleges for the Eastern Region) by way of response from an ACER Approved Project Manager overseeing a current ACER contract.

To enable honest responses to be recorded consortia responses are labelled by number not by name.

8. Survey Responses

Overall brief profile of consortium

Consortium 1

- Originally started in 2005 with LID money.
- Difficulties in trying to accommodate all needs – agendas from individual organisations stunted progress.
- Changed to a lead body (us) to drive it on.
- A membership prospectus and business plan prepared on basis of there being LSC Preferred Provider Status, but this does not exist now. OCT (Open Competitive Tendering) has resulted in us having done all that work and not being able to really use it.

Consortium 2

- Started in 2001, from 2003 as now.
- We have 35 members, 15 we fund as providers.
- We deliver about £1 million FE mainstream funding.

Consortium 3

- Started off as informal network in 2000 based on a cross-cutting review, an LSC report for the VCS.
- Steering group formed with TEC legacy money, funding a development worker.
- LID fund of £40,000 in 2003, using consultants from the sector in Yorkshire who had worked on learning consortia before.
- In the 'Working Together' strategy we were held up as a good example of how to set up a learning consortium.
- We also had £200,000 through ChangeUP.

Consortium 4

- Was an ESF project from 2005.
- We are a CIC with about 107 members, delivering Train to Gain under mainstream.
- We deliver IAG, ESF, Skills for Jobs, Entry to Employment and other LSC work to support other consortia in our region.

Consortium 5

- Originally set up in 1998 but did exist as a training network previously.
- Learning consortium is part of what we do.

Consortium 6

- Started in 2000, 2002 with funding on development.
- Working with FE, private, training workshops etc.

ACER

- Originally a member organisation for Eastern Region Further Education Colleges.

Other

VOCOLLS also reported being part of the East Midlands Learning Consortium – Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Northants, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire have combined over the last 18 months, 2 years. They take turns to lead, going for regional contracts, such as the Winter/Spring 2007/8 ESF round.

Communication & engagement section

1) Communication and marketing strategies. Could you send us a copy of your strategies for us to discuss or, if not, could you let us know the main areas?

Consortium 1

- In business plan. This was required by the LSC for all consortia who wanted to work with them.

Consortium 2

- We don't have a communication strategy written down, as demands always outstrip funding.
- Our greatest challenge is to manage expectation. A lot of VCS organisations do not understand that we don't have bottomless funding. They are also unaware of the level of quality required to deliver.
- Communication is important, both internal and external. Website based for information.
- We have Matrix for internal and external, which is unusual but which externally validates our processes.

Consortium 3

- We communicate through our Website, e-mails – ensuring meet on a regular basis initially bi-monthly now quarterly (a funding issue).
- Our marketing is based on needs.
- We hold annual Strategic Review and Planning days which include staff and directors and we gather feedback on a regular basis.
- We obtained the matrix accreditation which assures the information and guidance we give is good quality.
- We have currently undertaken an impact assessment of the information we provide and the opportunities maximised by members – this is being collated and will be used to produce marketing material to go out to external bodies. Information came in from 40 of our 90 members – a positive return. It has produced some really useful information. For example, for those members they have benefited to the tune of 900K in terms of funding attracted.

Consortium 4

- Based on 2 areas – to our members and then to our members we sub-contract.
- Open communication strategy – it is our duty to let them know of changes in the learning environment.
- Train to Gain marketing at groups – private, employers, volunteers, VCS organisations – different approach for each segment of the market.

Consortium 5

- Not written down, variable at present.
- Regular quarterly meetings, Quality newsletter – the rest is ad hoc, e.g. when funding opportunities arise.

Consortium 6

- Keeps evolving, website and e-mail, as signposting site.
- We put information up, both VCS and non-VCS.
- Regional LSC has commissioned work for a regional consortium communication strategy, through consultants. This communication/ marketing strategy will feed into a regional website, which LSC has also paid for.

ACER

- Marketing strategy drawn up about a year ago re: website and events. 4 page document overview.

Summarising comments:

50% had explicit marketing and communication strategy written down and ACER also had a recently drawn up marketing strategy. Those who didn't have explicit communication strategies had this implicit within Terms of References. Impact of communication of information seen in one consortium to enable £900,000 of additional funding being attracted by members being made aware of specific opportunities.

2) What Membership Agreement do you have and how is this enforced?

Consortium 1

- In prospectus – members sign up to whole contents.

Consortium 2

- Members pay £30/year, plus VAT.
- Our Terms of Reference state no member can do anything to detriment of the consortium, although it recognises members in their own right. Transparent.
- Partners are encouraged to work together, which is not detrimental to the consortia activity. Flexible, informal working together.
- It is in the contracts where specific details of engagement are laid out.

Consortium 3

- We decided not to have a membership agreement as we wanted to be inclusive.
- Members do not need to be working at a minimum level to be included in the network.
- A recent LSC contract has ensured that we have tightened up procedures – we have introduced a ladder of intervention in addition to the contract agreements we use with member providers which include targets.

Consortium 4

- Internal quality process of providers.
- Performance based contracts.
- No fee for members for general info.

Consortium 5

- It was a CVS project, and then when it went into a charity, we had members. Now, anybody can be a member as long as they support the aims of the charity.
- If deliver, they have a partnership/contract agreement.

Consortium 6

- Terms of Reference, reviewed every 12 months, stating purpose, membership, delegation.
- Had experience of one member not 'playing fair' so no longer a member.
- Organisations see the benefit of a consortium – don't have tendency to try their own thing in bidding on those contracts.

ACER

- Pay to be members, about £1,500 a college.

Summarising comments:

1 (17%) had a nominal fee, 5 (83%) had no fee, with ACER charging larger amounts (about £1500 per FE college) which help sustain that organisation.

33% organisations had a membership agreement as Terms of Reference, 17% as a separate, full membership agreement and 50% had none, with Provider contracts ensuring rigorous procedures are adhered to when delivering.

3) How do you manage non-VCS relations with your consortium? Different levels of membership? Do you also have different levels of VCS members involved?

Consortium 1

- VCS only – as yet no non-VCS associates. Even larger VCS organisations can only be accepted as Associate – none yet.
- For organisations who can't go it alone.

Consortium 2

- Our rule is 3rd sector only – the VCS and social enterprise.
- A close relationship with adult education 'Linking to Learning.' Not partnership working as yet, but are open to it. Work closely with the learning partnership and FE in that.

Consortium 3

- Just VCS – written into Memorandums and Articles.
- Some social enterprises are members, not for profit.
- We do share relevant information with 'interested parties.' We also have a communication framework with the County Council.

Consortium 4

- Two members – general member and contractual member. Started with idea of different levels, not just VCS. Gone out of the window, although we do have good relations with the private and FE sector.
- We have a two-way relationship with FE.

Consortium 5

- One level – member or not. Only 3rd sector orgs are allowed to deliver – funding is a precious resource.
- When individual projects, may work with FE, private etc.
- We don't do capacity-building with non-VCS.

Consortium 6

- Informal membership at the moment.
- There is a strong 'learning partnership' with colleges.

ACER

- Individual franchising agreements.
- At present, no VCS on board re: decision-making.
- Some adult ed. is members, e.g. Norfolk Adult ed. but not on the board re: decision-making.

Summarising comments:

No non-VCS members, though one had facility for associate members as non-VCS (although no actual sign-ups). 67% reported strong relationship with FE – all share info/work with non-VCS.

4) How do you communicate with members/ what don't you communicate to non-members? E.g. password protect on website for specific information?

Consortium 1

- No separate website, e-mail bulletins used.
- Occasionally full member meetings.
- Now hold Community Grant contract, member meetings with this.

Consortium 2

- Password protected for internal communication – contract details – info specific to the member. It is proposed that areas of our new web site will be password protected, for access into learner information etc.

Consortium 3

- Meetings are for members only, though we do invite external agencies to present at part of the meeting to share appropriate information. Members wanted the meetings to be held this way to ensure they could talk openly about issues.
- Minutes are confidential and for members only.

Consortium 4

- Setting up a members' only area: more downloads, contract documents, examples of Individual Learning Plans, best practice documents etc.

Consortium 5

- Members' area – internal, e.g. admin forms

Consortium 6

- Everything is open – no password protect.
- Contract information not on website.
- Send information to appropriate bodies.
- Open meetings.

ACER

- 'Members' area,' password protected, e.g. meeting minutes, contracts, bids, Train to Gain, network groups.

Summarising comments:

67% hold members only areas, with protected information being linked to specific contract information.

5) How do you engage/attract other members and to what extent do you represent your learning consortium members?

Consortium 1

- Attract through network meetings.

Consortium 2

- We will be applying to the County Infrastructure Partnership.
- Also represents members on county Skills for Life partnership and Regional Infrastructure Partnership.
- Recognised in ToR that organisation can lobby on behalf of members, e.g. petitions to the LSC, info disseminated down.
- This is the constant challenge, which we try to achieve – we could always do better, no complacency.

Consortium 3

- Organisations self select into the network and a lot of members come to us by word of mouth, originally from road shows/consultation.
- Usually funding pulls people in.
- We don't try to recruit for 'gaps.'
- Also go out and about, presentations etc. Promote through CVS newsletters.
- We work regionally, and are very visible.
- It is difficult to engage with the Regional Development Agency. They do not appear to want to engage with the sector.
- We work closely with the SSC, Skills for Care – who have a lot of funding for workforce development – lots of potential for partnership and collaborative working.

Consortium 4

- Apart from a little bit of IAG delivery, we don't do any delivery. We have more than enough to do.
- We don't actively recruit – discern who can provide on funded provision.
- Can signpost.
- In large urban areas there are more people, more providers.

Consortium 5

- We don't actively recruit – aiming to work in other geographic areas.
- Development worker in those areas promotes the possibility of consortium working.
- We have different representative roles – no formal process at sub-county although we are the main contact in the area re: LSC.
- Regional work, work closely with his regional VCS forum, on behalf of the sector. This work is quite important.

Consortium 6

- Network other partnerships, attract other people. Let people be aware, but not everyone engages.
- Represent at sub-regional and regional level, e.g. DWP, Regional Development Agency, Jobcentre Plus, and LSC – if passionate, individual members can go. We are a wider voice.

ACER

- Each regional has a regional FE organisation, but ACER is quite strong, widespread engagement.
- Regional meetings, Train to Gain, Regional Skills Partnerships – represent the FE sector.
- ACER only have two full-time members of staff and they are very visible, aiming to impact upon the contracts that come out of EEDA, LSC etc.

Summarising comments:

Representational role seen to be important. No consortia recruit for 'gaps' unless focused on a particular contract and need a specific target group for that contract.

Model

6) What do you do (e.g. CPD, deliver learning for the contracts, just procurement etc.), how many organisations deliver through your consortium and how many outputs/learners are achieved a year?

Consortium 1

- 26 members, none associate.
- Essentially has been set up as procurement, CPD is intrinsic; have training days as and when due to funding, e.g. Quality training, tutor/assessor training.

Consortium 2

- 06/07 800 learners, 07/08 1000 learners.
- This year qualifications offered are NVQs, Business administration and law, Skills for Life, education and training, arts, media, information communication technology, public health and social care, IAG.
- This year we have started to increase CPD to members for WD, deliver NVQs to members for this. Management qualifications, teacher training – have run PTLLS (Preparation to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector) for over a year.
- Have achieved direct claim status with City & Guilds, where C&G say we can sign off our own learners.
- We do some TNA, ongoing; to lead into CPD, look after all MIS, QA, and curriculum development – a very holistic service.
- Membership levels fluctuate – some members don't want to deliver – just receive info.

Consortium 3

- We held Skills for Life contract with the last ESF target 50 learners, but we achieved less than this as we had an issue with one of the delivery members.
- We hold the Community Grants contract as do other consortia in the region and we are supporting each other. This is the only LSC contract we have although we are working in partnership with another lead provider in an OLASS contract working with offenders (brokering for members).
- We have facilitated a range of training workshops, (often fully funded) e.g. PTLLS, H&S, Management and Leadership etc.
- We obtain funding from a variety of sources and bring in training (or use members if they are able to deliver).
- We provide a wide range of information on learning, training, policy, funding and good practice (including Quality).
- We are opportunists and respond to these when they fit our aims and objectives. For example, we recently engaged with the QIA Support for Excellence responding to and supporting members in Peer Review developing QAS systems and progressing members in their learning and training (obtaining £20,000 which was used to support members and both their and our time). We see Quality as vital for future delivery.

Consortium 4

- CPD is difficult unless can guarantee a serious amount of money.
- We help our members with capacity building – flexible for our members – what do they want? We don't share for individual services yet, but may do in the future.
- We do not work with Jobcentre Plus, just LSC.
- We have about 107 members, about a third of which deliver, about a third are developing to delivery and about a third info and referral partners.
- We had 200 learners last year on Train to Gain and ESF – this year about 300.

Consortium 5

- We have about 30 core providers, some small, with about 10-20 others that we use for specific projects. Last year we had 3,000 learners.
- We have been set up as procurement, with infrastructure support, workforce development, delivery, and all the time promoting other people's delivery and promoting opportunities for members. Advice and training for all members.
- We contract manage all contracts.
- Roughly speaking, we deliver about 30-40% of the learning through the consortium, 40% is done by organisations that need no support and about 10-20% is done by organisations that need support – it is in this last bracket where the capacity building and infrastructure support comes in.

Consortium 6

- Core of 19 organisations, 11 working towards delivery.
- TNA is part of the health check, no CPD as not any money. We work on workforce development and capacity building, to get organisations on board and to a level, e.g. CIF workshop. Want to support organisations get qualified staff, fund CPD, IAG qualifications.
- We had about 20 homeless local housing associations together on learning and skills needs of the homeless. Specialist training was in Manchester and London, pooled resources and brought training to the county. Provided venue and catering costs – very successful.
- We had a Workforce development and capacity building contract to support 900 people in 25 organisations, produced 2,200 in more than 50.

ACER

- There are 47 colleges as members. ACER are consultants, do OFSTED preparations – these are for additional charges.
- Facilitate discretionary funds – ESF, Train to Gain, others.
- CPD training, consultancy support, running projects/conferences.
- A representative organisation that supports and holds funding. LSC 'forced' consortium working for Train to Gain in the last two years, with each county having a 'consortium of colleges.'
- ESF Skills for Life contract was 7000 learners across the Eastern Region over 3 years. 1,200 a county, 400 a year per county, delivered by named partners.

Summarising comments:

50% are established consortia delivering mainstream delivery, another 33% hold Community Grants. Where the consortia does not hold a large training contract, they focus mainly on CPD, looking to put on training to meet CPD needs of members, e.g. determining joint training demand of members and then specialist training being brought into the county to meet this need – training which was previously only available elsewhere. 50% reported submitting ESF applications on a regional partnership approach with two or more other learning consortia in their region. The East Midlands Learning Consortium is being set up in response to the shift to the regional climate, linking Third Sector learning consortia in that region more effectively together, promoting joint provision etc.

7) How do you construct the bid/negotiate/manage distribution of funding? How do you manage 'dual role/dual bidding' of organisations possibly also going for bids against a consortium bid?

Consortium 1

- Community Grants programme – an innovative programme for those not normally engaged in learning. Negotiation for contracts not been an issue as yet as not held others.

Consortium 2

- Negotiated year on year – reach minimum levels of performance, it is okay. Can look to increase to a particular provider if they have delivered. If meet on year contract, it won't be reduced for next year to enable organisation growth; we will always ensure that organisations will be offered new contracts based on what they have achieved the previous year, as a minimum. As long as our funding is not reduced by the LSC. If wanted £50,000 and only delivered on £30,000, can only get max. £30,000 next year.

Consortium 3

- N/A

Consortium 4

- Negotiate in advance and split where required. Expression of interest, basic proposal – numbers, qualifications offered.
- As it is Open Competitive Tendering (OCT) some will be part of other bids. Being in multiple bids is natural – no rules have been put in by us on this. If people like the service, they will come to us – otherwise it might put people off. Arrogant and unfair to suggest otherwise – it is a free market. They need to support their service users and will try to get that funding any way they see fit.

Consortium 5

- Core process built on course approval. Have adopted a management approach as the LSC wants this. People have generally accepted this. With the ESF round, people were asked to put numbers forward as appropriate.
- It is not a problem to bid independently, as long as don't bid against us. Can go separate, but not both – very rarely happens. Can be appropriate for an organisation to go it alone or even in partnership with another organisation – it can be a mistake to be seen as the only route – what if it goes wrong? Needs to be commercially attractive – are we more likely to succeed through this consortium or go it alone? People already have networks/partnership – might be prepared to come on board for specific objects. Fairly permissive, but with new regional contracts recognition of buying into a consortium.

Consortium 6

- Sit down as a group, rural versus urban mix etc. – where is the greatest need/provision? Who is best placed? One organisation said they wanted to deliver the whole lot for Skills for Life, but this was negotiated down from 150 to 100 so other members could deliver.

ACER

- No formula is used for this, organised by negotiation based on who is best to lead each contract. Each county then has a lead for each county which feeds into the contract.
- FE doesn't compete against themselves for these contracts.

Summarising comments:

Contracts are negotiated in advance – no 'formulas' used upon contract achievement. Determined who can deliver on the contract and the application is drawn up on this basis.

Dual bidding – with Open Competitive Tendering it is 'natural' that people may want to be part of multiple bids. Is there a need to discern between 'good' and 'bad' potential contract holders? It was felt that individual organisations need to be enabled to seek the appropriate route – by themselves, with smaller informal partnership or as the consortium. Organisations need to be open with each other.

8) How are members involved in the decision-making process/take ownership of the consortium?

Consortium 1

- 'Funding group,' some organisations doesn't see the bigger picture and it means all are losing out.
- Regionally, incredibly difficult as not done previously – mechanics.

Consortium 2

- No members are part of the decision-making process – needs to be independent when it is affecting funding decisions.

Consortium 3

- All directors are members they are responsible to the wider network. We also involve members in decision making by having certain items on the agenda at our regular meetings– no external bodies.

Consortium 4

- Self-assessment and policy implementation plan – annual reviews into Quality Improvement Plan. Look at complaints, grievances etc. Our members are directors, representatives of the sector.

Consortium 5

- Initially not that interested – happy to take what they give them. Now, as members of a charity, can influence through board of trustees. Board doesn't make decisions re: funding.
- Funding decisions are formulaic – a clear line between LSC and members. Varies depending on nature of contract.

Consortium 6

- Quarterly consortium meetings, 'Learning Skills Board' – 9 members from city, country, BME, disability etc.
- People especially turn up when there is money.

ACER

- The board is an independent board, legal person, finance etc.
- Strategy lays with the board, but ACER work out the details.
- There are about 20 working groups on Skills for Life, MIS etc.

Summarising comments:

17% consortium reported that no members can be involved in decision-making process, needs to be independent.

83% reported members are board, regardless of activity on decision-making process.

17% consortium reported specific problems with members seeing the bigger picture, which can impede progress.

A need to be independent so that there are no conflicts of interest between the lead body/ consortium and providers but where the consortium was as a lead body (not separate legal entity) there was felt the need to lead on behalf of members.

9) How would you describe the status of your model (e.g. lead body, legal entity, managed network/lead bodies) and have you planned any life expectancy into your consortium? If you have a lead body, do any other lead bodies ever lead on/hold contracts?

Consortium 1

- Lead body

Consortium 2

- Legal entity, we hold all contracts and there is no life expectancy. A charity and registered company, run by a board of trustees. No members can be on board of trustees if holding contracts, otherwise infringing charity law, e.g. solicitors, adult ed., housing, local counsellors. All independent.

Consortium 3

- Company limited by guarantee with charitable aims we are not a charity - being a charity was a long-term aim though this may not be achieved as we act more like a social enterprise.

Consortium 4

- Separate legal entity, as of 23rd July 07. It was a lead (a local CVS). Mostly hold contracts: Skills for Jobs contract – FE College holds that in partnership.

Consortium 5

- Charity, Ltd by public guarantee.
- Was a lead body.
- When it gets to a certain point it needs to be legal.
- We hold all contracts.

Consortium 6

- Lead body through community partnerships. We hold all consortium contracts.
- With the regional ESF bids, a neighbouring regional consortium will hold 2 of those.
- Aim is for a legal independently established consortium.

ACER

- Charity with individual member organisations, contracts held on a lead body's basis.
- In some instances, colleges recognised ACER itself as being best placed to hold contracts.
- Life expectancy will be determined by funding climate, due to regional pots – e.g. Local authorities?

Summarising comments:

Lead body 33%, separate legal entity 67% (four). Of the separate legal entities, 1 was a CIC, 2 were charity and company limited by public guarantee and 1 was company only. Of the 50% of consortia who did not hold larger delivery contracts, these accounted for the 33% as lead bodies and one (17%) in the legal entity. Of the 50% who did hold a larger delivery contract, all were separate legal entities.

10) Do you/how do you manage clusters/thematic sub-groups, informally or formally?

Consortium 1

- Not an issue at the moment

Consortium 2

- Don't try to manage – 3 regions, local regions – they feed into their own networks, not just training networks. We have found that, reacting to local needs is far more effective.

Consortium 3

- Yes, a trainers' network. At moment, no other geographic or thematic groups.

Consortium 4

- Workshops on NEET, disabilities, adult and community learning.
- A large urban area like ours is different – lots more BME, disability groups, representing in many different ways.

Consortium 5

- Not big enough for this. Informally done.
- Have clusters around delivery – e.g. ESOL contract etc.
- Urban areas have more specialist group – rural areas less VCS providers – different scale of capacity and availability.

Consortium 6

- Managed informally, representatives in learning skills board, then onto the networks.

ACER

- Network groups – see q8.

Summarising comments:

83% reported no organisation of clusters – the one which did had a training group. Most consortia relied on members filtering information to their networks, though specialist training for areas such as NEET or disabilities were also held.

ACER have a series of network groups based on those contracts (e.g. Skills for Life) but there are other groups such as finance where the people who deal with those aspects of each contract support each other.

Quality/systems

11) How do you ensure members are aware of and keep to quality responsibilities and what quality requirements/eligibility criteria do you have?

Consortium 1

- Full quality requirements laid out in our project report.
- Haven't held major delivery contracts yet – want organisations to work with the systems laid out in that project report. In practice, it will be quite an interesting challenge.

Consortium 2

- A lot of hard work! 65-70% of our time is spent on this.
- Quality not always in the sector. Organisations don't know what they don't know, e.g. LSC minimum levels of performance, claw back. Damages image of the sector.
- Have own Quality systems/manual.
- Do monitoring visits/observations.
- Need to get members to see it is a good thing – want the money, want to be involved, not always willing to see the holistic Quality approach.
- LSC, OFSTED moan at you if it is not being done right – they don't moan to the members!
- When a new member is brought in, they are inducted, interviewed, looking at current systems and an action plan is drawn up to get to accepted standard. Maybe mentored until into low risk delivery. They need to be open to suggestions, need to have strong contractual agreements.

Consortium 3

- We now request that providers work at a certain standard – we ask prior to writing bids (if they wish to be included) what QAS they have this includes having a QAS policy and the usual policies like H&S, EO, E&D, Confidentiality, Data Protection Act etc.
- We also now ask if they have other capacity commitments or are receiving funding for similar work. Have a set of questions – what quality process do you have, what policies do you have?

Consortium 4

- Used old LSC form – Provider Assessment Form – goes through this assessment process. Finance person audits it; quality person audits that side of things, e.g. lesson observations to OFSTED requirements.

Consortium 5

- Have standard paperwork system, how you will assess etc.
- Specify min. standards of teaching –e.g. PTLLS at min, do observations, organise regular training events/activity, monthly newsletter.

Consortium 6

- We do a health check/track record, and then throw appropriate contracts their way. Includes staffing, venue, learners, qualifications, etc. Nottinghamshire consortium has a CD/DVD with common examples.

ACER

- Infrastructure already exists in FE.
- With the VCS, there are service level Agreements based QA, enrolment, evaluation – 5 or 6 things.

Summarising comments:

Quality is major issue and a lot of work has been done on this, one consortium reported 60-70% of their work is on this. Service includes monitoring organisations to ensure required standards. Due to minimum performance standards, it is critical that the right organisations are ready to deliver to demands – can't take people on if they are not ready due to financial penalties if inability to meet targets. Initial risk assessment of eligibility therefore vital.

12) Please describe your quality process - relationship of core and members etc. and how do you implement standardised systems to organisations 'already established?'

Consortium 1

- As question 11.

Consortium 2

- Use standardised paperwork etc. Look at systems of members – if robust then won't impose them. See question 11 for further info.

Consortium 3

- With the Skills for Life contract, we held paperwork centrally and had a standard to be met for the evidence provided.

Consortium 4

- Standard system, Quality checking process.

Consortium 5

- Have to use our systems/paperwork and record. CIF standards – some use own systems for that.

Consortium 6

- Enabling organisations to improve now check up. Monitor and maybe move contracts.

ACER

- Web-based and paper backup system. Short Record Form needs to be kept on paper for 7 years, but also inputted into LSC database. ESF forms include individual learning plans, Short Record Form, Mentoring Form, end of course, IV reports, certificates and withdrawal forms.

Summarising comments:

Those consortia who delivered contracts have a centralised, standardised system in place and operate the quality checking process, such as tutor observations.

13) What MIS do you use and why? How does it work in your consortium?

Consortium 1

- Held centrally – have MIS based on Microsoft Access.

Consortium 2

- TERMS, though not totally happy. Need good reporting from it – TERMS limited.
- OFSTED want to know what you do with monitoring of data – graphs good. Held centrally.
- On auditing, if they find 10% of a sample is incorrect, it is assumed 10% of learner paperwork incorrect, so 10% of funding clawed back.

Consortium 3

- Not worth investing with small numbers. Ours based on Excel database – when bigger, will have more numbers and will need to use formal MIS.
- A number of other consortia use LearnerTrack but it is costly

Consortium 4

- LearnerTrack, based on volume, is recognised by the LSC – huge mass of information to LSC standards. £5,000/yr for license, then about £5 per learner for whole thing.
- We pay LearnerTrack to do all the inputting etc, enrolment, registration on course and completion. It is their business to get it right and cheaper for them to do it than for us to employ someone of our own to do it. They send reports etc. and we approve them, then sent to LSC. We can pull off management records as and when.

Consortium 5

- Did outsource initially, as that is what the LSC wanted, but there were many problems – the systems were very paperwork heavy, laborious.
- Now, use LearnerTrack system, enrolment forms and specific forms, e.g. employers. It has worked well, members can access via the web. Did our evaluation. Based on whole, does everything re: reporting.
- If we lead regionally, this software will be used.

Consortium 6

- Did have manual paper work, now new tracking system to be shared through the region. LearnerTrack, minimum of 2,500 learners, £2 per head. Nottinghamshire already have it. Input data individually then electronically send on – web-based.

ACER

- ACER have an admin person on each project, registering 7000 learners over 3 years is 2,300 learners a year, which is about 40 learners a week. Need to check all forms as well as inputting and store forms. ESF needs paperwork as well – audited twice a year by LSC.
- Can claw back if necessary, if paperwork isn't correct.

Summarising comments:

Consortia who did not deliver larger contracts had reported using Access and Excel type recording methods. Of those who used MIS, TERMS was used by 1 and LearnerTrack by 3. One consortium decided to use LearnerTrack on basis of an evaluation report comparing various MIS. They also initially outsourced this, but due to the system imposed by LSC, it was very paper-heavy and impractical. One consortium pay for LearnerTrack to also data input all the data – they send completed forms to Learner Track, keeping copies at their end. This worked out as more cost effective for them than having a member of staff to do this.

14) What methods of recording soft outcomes do you use; do you track learner progression into employment due to course etc?

Consortium 1

- Yes.

Consortium 2

- Developing this at the moment, looking at where a successful outcome is a job, for example.
- LSC 'Framework for Excellence' will be the new way in which we will be judged – will take over from minimum levels of performance.

Consortium 3

- Not really applicable on the SfL Contract. However, with the Community Grants contract we will need to capture soft outcomes and case studies. We are producing documentation to capture this.

Consortium 4

- Going to track progress into employment, we record this if that is a hard outcome for a contract.
- LearnerTrack can record soft outcomes through RARPA.

Consortium 5

- No system at moment, only used where a project requirement. We advocate RARPA – if not accredited, how do they achieve?
- Useful evidence for individual providers, but not necessary for the contracts.

Consortium 6

- Soft outcome into evaluations, use for new bids, added value.
- Funders look for it, but not always seen as real evidence.
- Learner evaluations and progression questionnaires, plus loads of additional stuff

ACER

- Only have independent evaluation of course. No formalised structure of tracking soft outcomes, e.g. learners into employment.

Summarising comments:

Soft outcomes only collated if requested by the contract holder otherwise a lot of additional work that may not be recognised. Framework for Excellence seen to be important for the future.

15) Do you support/get involved in accreditation of members' training and what awarding bodies do you use, what types of qualifications are delivered (e.g. full qualifications, smaller units, NVQs etc.)?

Consortium 1

- Not yet – Lead Body is an ILM, NOCN, Educe and Asset approved centre.
- NVQs a difficult one as most members want courses in employability and basic skills.

Consortium 2

- Learning Aims Database is where the funding is – look up the qualifications and then work backwards to see who could deliver that – NVQs etc.
- Only 5-6% of delivery through the consortium is non-accredited. Members allowed 5% of their budget as non-accredited.

Consortium 3

- During the SfL contract we were reliant on the LA to deliver the L2 National Certificate. However, more recently a member has now registered to provide this service (and they use equipment we obtain funding for via LSC/NIACE).

Consortium 4

- City & Guilds, OCR – NOCN not as usable as the LSC don't really pay for it.
- Learning Aims Database (LAD) is our database – work back from the LAD. We deliver what the LSC buy.
- 100% accredited delivery.
- We don't deliver therefore are seen as a 'clean pair of hands' – no rival contracts.
- If it can benefit the consortium to get one organisation able to deliver NVQs then we will support them in that – it is an investment in our future.

Consortium 5

- Give advice or tag onto as approved centre. Use City & Guilds, Edexcel, NOCN. At moment, increasing need for accreditation due to Leith etc. NOCN qualifications, Basic Skills, NVQ, ESOL. ILM no longer a funding priority, neither is ECDL, CLAIT. Priorities change.
- We have about 60/40 split as unaccredited.

Consortium 6

- Will be supporting, but funding needed.
- We don't do accreditation.
- Our widening participation and capacity building contract didn't need it. LAD is sector specific, e.g. Skills for Life.

ACER

- Depends on the project, can be a full qualification, part or 1 day CPD.

Summarising comments:

Learning Aims Database is where the LSC funding is; there were differing responses as to accredited/unaccredited delivery with note that qualifications that are being asked for changes on contracts, so need to be flexible.

Finance/Legal

16) How did you fund your start up, how much did it cost and how long did it take?

Consortium 1

- LID for 2 years - £250,000

Consortium 2

- LSC wanted one entity in the region and we were given a lot of LID money. LSC gave more money as consortium built.
- Need about £1million in contracts to run the core.
- The LID money was received in 2002.
- We have found that, reacting to local needs is far more effective. Speed of development is phenomenal. Ability to change, flexible is key. Can't take an entrenched view.

Consortium 3

- 40k LID money.
- 200K ChangeUP.

Consortium 4

- 2 year ESF fund, extended by one year, mainstream contract for Train to Gain, for £650,000 to set up a consortium attached to hard outcomes, sub-contracted to FE mainstream standards. Some was capacity building e.g. learning and skills, support organisations to deliver.
- This year we have negotiated contract values due to success previously.

Consortium 5

- Two ESF grants - £400,000, a bit of LID, over a couple of years.
- First FE contract of £50,000 achieved that was actually about £100,000 to administer until we worked out effective processes etc.

Consortium 6

- Dribs and drabs of training etc. The local LSC supported it though local learning partnerships. It was cumulative, not one 'chunk' of development. COMPACT money went into learning and skills workshops, but nothing specific to set up a learning consortium, as such.

ACER

- Initially member organisation and money from fees for representation (£1,500 per college), then ESF management fees.
- People who run the contracts are not employed but contracted on a daily rate.

Summarising comments:

Large amounts of LID money (average of about £500,000 each over 2-3 years) have been available to enable those consortia delivering mainstream learning to establish themselves. If the VCS wished to hold LSC contracts and cannot negotiate main tram delivery then it will have to rely on success against FE sector for ESF funds.

ACER maintains financial vitality by only bringing in members of staff on basis of achieving specific contracts.

17) Financial viability – in order to allow us to understand financial viability of our potential consortium, please could you give us the following (where commercial confidentiality permits):

- Accounts
- Business plan
- Turnover
- Annual running costs
- How these costs are met
- Any membership fees or charge for services provided – e.g. TNA

Consortium 1

- No membership fees and don't intend to.
- TNA provided as service.
- £120,000 through Community Grant Programme.
- We will look at staffing on a gradual basis – i.e. depending on contracts received. Colleges now competing that didn't used to, since PQQ in 2007. Harder for the VCS to now access ESF.
- A lot of our work was towards 'Preferred Provider' status which has left disappointment.

Consortium 2

- 19.1% management fee asked for, decided in conjunction with LSC as it was 'fair' – average drawdown – the cost for some organisations is much more.
- 20% is the maximum the LSC will permit – can charge more but must justify.
- Now diversified onto other areas – e.g. infrastructure building.

Consortium 3

- Grants e.g. Third sector peer coach, Niace funding; PQASSO mentor – sell expertise. LRN learning resource network, facilitate.
- Management fee for Skills for Life contract was about 15% - FE up to 35% from anecdotes.

Consortium 4

- Turnover- first year £325,000, this year, £800,000 – if successful with LSC negotiation £1.5-1.8 million year start July.
- Annual running costs £200,000, met by top slice for training and core staff. No membership fees, but charges for services, e.g. LSC consultation, £25,000 recently.
- Future builder's investment scheme – successful with bid – underwritten to first couple of years - all helps with financial security.
- Average management fee in the FE sector is 37% - franchising is typically 30-40% - we don't charge anywhere near that – we are not chasing the money. We outsource HR, health and safety, accounting, MIS; policy of re-investing back it into the sector enables management fee to be flexibly low.
- All costs met through contract performance.

Consortium 5

- No membership fee.
- We broke even last year (small surplus), but the last two years before a loss. Need to have a certain amount of core funding to go into a consortium, but we have a relatively small team – other staff there project related.
- Our viability depends on own delivery – 17 staff, e.g. ESOL, IT. Of contracts received, about £600-700k received for delivery – about £300-400k distributed. Reflects a lot of delivery by us.
- The network is split in responsibility – e.g. 1) representation (as a non-deliverer), 2) training delivery body, 3) capacity-building.

Consortium 6

- Was LSC match funded to develop membership. The CVS Community Partnership employs, with this as 'a project.' The LSC pays for the post; intention is to be stand alone.
- It costs £50-60k a year to fund VOLCAAS for 1 ½ posts, match funded with the LSC. This is due to finish end March 08, beyond that will have to run on management fees from contracts achieved.

ACER

- Keeps running costs down as only use people when money is in on a specific project.
- ACER asks for a Management fee for running the regional contract and then there is a fee paid to the County providers for their support.

Summarising comments:

An average of 15-20% reported for management fees, whereas reports that average FE management fee were 37%. Management fees will pay for delivery of that contract, not wider services such as CPD etc. Members of learning consortia previously had benefited from CPD as part of the larger LID funded packages that were available. Unless there is a specific service to be offered by the consortium which is detail in a delivery contract, funds will need to be found from elsewhere to capacity build the VCS.

18) Of total bids made in the last 12 months:

- a. How much was available?**
- b. How much of that did you go for?**
- c. What was your success rate?**

Consortium 1

- Part of a regional Community Grants bid. Liaised with other consortia in the region (based on sub-regional activity).
- Although there is the emphasis on regional working, still needs that activity at local level.

Consortium 2

- Achieved a contract in partnership with County Learning Partnership, FE, and private sector – ‘negotiation stages’ was tough.
- Regionally – gone for a regional bid with other established learning consortia in the region. Difficult to have a regional consortium –e.g. how do you link Swindon to Bristol and St. Ives?
- Instead of 3 competing bids, one was draw up with each doing their own work within that bid.

Consortium 3

- N/A

Consortium 4

- We decided strategy was for negotiated money rather than tenders, OCT is always same providers – FE. On a mainstream FE contract, as are The Learning Curve and Learning Plus – a lot of lobbying was needed for this, on back of a very successful ESF contract. Lots of hard work – a fabulous staff team. A lot of hard work from a lot of good people.
- Your survival is based on contract performance – same as any provider.

Consortium 5

- Quite a high percentage – about 50%, but very picky. We have got better at it. We got in early, access to mainstream funding. Preferred provider status taken away, OCT competes with FE. Might be nothing you can bid for. What are members capable of doing – what do they want to do? What is realistic? What are funders prepared to fund? Will add value to a consortium.

Consortium 6

- We have had a 100% success rate, but that was only on one contract.
- We have recently bid regionally for three contracts with other consortia as the East Midlands Learning Consortium. Contracts are going regional; the future of learning and skills is going regional. Changes foggy re: change of LSC, PCT, and Jobcentre Plus etc.

ACER

- It is decided who is best placed to hold a contract. They recently applied for three ESF bids. If they get all of them, about £5 million (e.g. Skills for Life, regional contracts, 7,000 learners over 3 years).
- Generally very good success rates because position themselves regionally with LSC, EEDA and Regional Skills Partnership. Influence at this level means the right language can be used in bids and that the right bids come out for them. There is a need to have a real, effective lobbying role to affect the bids and the money that comes out of it.

Summarising comments:

Increasing emphasis on the need to effectively line up with regional working as regards applying for LSC contracts – e.g. East Midlands Learning Consortium. ACER use regional influence to effectively lobby LSC, EEDA, Regional Skills Partnership – if the VCS wants to compete against the FE, it would need to consider a similarly effective regional visibility.

19) What is your staff and legal structure?

Consortium 1

- We had a learning consortium manager for 1 year with no contracts - they left after that year. Some work cross cuts, so difficulty to quantify which work 'consortium' is from own work load.

Consortium 2

- 7 staff - £200-250k all costs.
- Company Ltd by public guarantee and charity.

Consortium 3

- Co Ltd by guarantee
- Decided needed 3 or 4 staff, got ChangeUP money to set up and to deliver workforce development. In 2006 the organisation began to operate independently - 3 staff. CO, Skills Broker (now changed role title to Learning Development Co-ordinator) and Information and Communication Worker (now Communication Officer). We have used agency staff for admin and more recently an individual who came through JCP+.
- 2 f-t, 2 p-t

Consortium 4

- CIC
- CEO, 2 senior managers – Quality and curriculum, Finance, and; service administrator, 1 IAG, additional staff in future. Train to Gain.

Consortium 5

- 17 staff, reflects a lot of delivery. 1.5 admin posts – MIS. 0.8 Quality Manager – e.g. tutors observations, systems, processes, and training events. 1CEO, bid writer.

Consortium 6

- 1 – Learning skills manager, ½ Quality development managers.
- If successful with the ESF bids, there will be an extra 3-4 staff in our county alone, 1 admin/MIS, 1 Skills for Life, 1 IAG, 1 all round.

ACER

- There are two permanent members of ACER, doing the job of lobbying, being highly visible as outlined above. With the money drawn in, admin staff has been recruited for specific ESF projects.
- About 6 people are employed on daily rates to manage these projects from a list of about 20 approved individuals – development managers, trainers, advisors etc.
- As regards to your project, each county would require a lead regardless of structure, and would feed into that contract holder. Colleges had to work on a flexible basis re: Train to Gain.

Summarising comments:

CEO, quality manager and an admin worker were perceived to be minimum staff required for contact management in consortia.

20) Risks re: members and accountable body. Assessment of eligibility for contracts and corrective action – e.g. claw back where outputs have not been met

Consortium 1

- Will be really tough – risk as lead body. If incorrect paperwork, a nightmare. Members weren't prepared for risk to be passed down. Some smaller organisations may have spent the money – so difficult to claw it back if not 'performed' – don't want to be responsible for a small VCO being made bankrupt. Very difficult.
- Some small organisations weren't necessarily happy for us to call the shots.

Consortium 2

- Everything is high risk – LSC says franchising is high risk. Can be mitigated if proper systems in place and hard work.
- When a large partner goes, it throws the whole partnership into trouble.
- Claw back – has to be independent – no members are allowed part of this process. Members forum – but not in a decision-making entity.
- No other member knows how much the other is getting, otherwise pressures. Confidentiality. Any issues we have had have been with that – e.g. complaint to LSC.

Consortium 3

- We have a Quality checklist. During the SfL contract we paid on outputs.

Consortium 4

- Risk is passed down via the contract. Profile contracts – need to deliver 'X.'

Consortium 5

- Risk passed down – clear and transparent route. Clear in contracts, a clear expectation.
- Contracts now more risky – more results orientated.
- For most, this funding is additional, not core, and many not willing to take the risk.

Consortium 6

- We move contracts across if someone is under their numbers. Effective contract management, taking steps.

ACER

- In service level agreements – money attached to delivery, risk transferred down, but contract holder still reliant on performance.
- Need effective project management, if don't get learners, you don't get the money.

Summarising comments:

It is a big risk as a lead body – e.g. claw back. If the lead body is audited and 10% of the paperwork is incorrect, then 10% of the final payment will be withheld – it is critical that correct procedures are maintained. Need to have a comprehensive process in place, including thorough initial risk assessment of providers. Risk is passed down by contracts to providers. This is reflected in contracts delivered by all contract bodies which are a % up front and a % upon successful completion of outputs. Minimum performance levels oblige this. Contract holding bodies and delivery organisations will need to have stable cash flow – they will be doing work which they haven't yet been paid for.

Other thoughts:

Consortium 1

- It is no picnic. Some consortia have large contracts that are difficult to deliver – a 'nightmare'.
- Consortia+ events are really good, can be quite isolating work otherwise.
- Our work hasn't happened instantly.
- If legal entity and don't get the money in, there is 'a major issue with the maths'.

Consortium 2

- Minimum levels of performance are absolutely vital – overall success rates are based on enrolments and finish only, doesn't take into account small cohorts – if one person drops out, already the success rates can't be met.
- VCS pick up those who can't get to college – minimum levels of performance force you to pick up people who are more likely to complete, not those who could benefit more.
- A lead bodies approach is too disjointed – regionally, quality is a massive issue – do you visit all providers as accountable body?

Consortium 3

- Regionally – concern over 'poaching' on other VCS members' territory in the local region. How you work it out in practice is the key.
- Take opportunities on a case-by-case basis.
- Identity needs to be needs led – we have a good practice model, but can't bring in funding here. Grow.
- Try to get processes in place beforehand – need to be operational as well as strategic. Business plan, marketing strategy ready. As yet, no fund-raising strategy – any time!
- Don't wait for the perfect start – can learn from other consortia. It has taken us 8 years – you are lucky to start with that experience to draw on.

Consortium 4

- Two types of consortia – those that head up VCS training, CPD etc. and those which deliver mainstream delivery.
- Shape should be based on demand rather than creating something for the sake of it.
- Train to Gain is a big market, as is mainstream – everything else is 'irrelevant.' Can use ESF contracts such as Skills for jobs, Train to Gain to move up the ladder.
- LSC wants a legal body to lead in contracts, if not then questions rose over whose interest is it actually in? Our consortium is not a partnership but business-to-business. Business viability, privacy, was it attractive to the LSC? Could we put a strong enough case to get mainstream funding?
- Do it on a business-to-business basis, not on a political pressure basis.
- Need to deliver what other people want to buy, not to provide what one sector wants, otherwise ad hoc. Longer term sustainability has to be built on business case – how do you tick funders' boxes? They are just not interested otherwise – has to be accredited learning.
- Unless you can get a sustainable amount to support core staff, need joint commitment and to pitch in as and when.
- Regional consortia – need to form a viable business offer – is it commercially viable? Political issues, representing at grass roots; the bigger you get, the more detached you are from the community groups.

Consortium 5

- Start small and modestly, progress steadily and grow – don't overstretch. Get infrastructure, relationships in place. Need expertise to be successful in procurement and delivery – seen people come a cropper – overstretch? Lose face with members and funders.
- Need to look at local context, the most successful consortia have been able to establish an identity – needs to allow numbers to grow – e.g. legal as opposed to lead.
- Contracting model is regional – single contracting point, local networks. One bid for all.
- Procurement cycle of 6 weeks – unless relationships and expertise - very difficult to quickly pull it together.
- Can deliver through a lead body if have an identity.
- Rural areas need to work hard across the region – look for economies of scale – e.g. Dorset is going to work under the Learning Curve (Swindon and Wilts) auspices. As long as the lead body is acting in good faith, okay. A consortium can be part of a bigger entity.

ACER

- The percentage of ESF contracts to FE money is minimal – about 10%. An FE College budget can be as much as £40 million – mainstream 16-19 provision is the core. About 10% of this will be discretionary. The LSC's annual budget is £1billion/year. ESF is £100million.
- Will the VCS compete or link? It will struggle to compete with FE unless for regional contracts with county delivery identified within that. The other alternative is to link with ACER.
- Last 10 years there have been a lot of jobs into the civil service, now cutbacks, Gershon report etc. Cut backs at the LSC, EEDA. When the LSC is disbanded and some of that work goes back to local authorities, it won't suddenly go back to individual contracts, will be county wide at least.

Dorset learning consortium - Poole CVS

Dorset decided to link with The Learning Curve in Wiltshire – a fellow organisation in the South West – rather than set up their own consortium.

“Key issues:

- 1) Expertise – a consortium to enable organism to deliver, support – but we had no expertise. Not just LSC, but any kind of training. If expertise exists in the South West, why not use it?
- 2) Who would fund it? Training courses, management fees – need LSC to want to support it.

We decided to go with The Learning Curve as they has the expertise – a development worker is now based in Dorset to try to bring a consortium together. Unless a millionaire came along and said they wanted to set up a consortium we could not get it up and running ourselves.

Key thing is that we are dependent on The Learning Curve – is it an opportunity for them or the local infrastructure organisations? Can we enable Third Sector organisations in the local area to engage fully? We have other fish to fry – training is only part of our work. We are, though, better able to meet the needs of our service users than FE. We are very happy to have The Learning Curve lead on this, to explaining to our members the training practice and procedures needed etc.”

Summary of key final points

- There are two types of consortia – those which deliver and those which support their members e.g. CPD.
- Minimum performance levels are critical which means robust Quality process is essential.
- Identity is essential
- ‘It is no picnic’
- Need to get sound proceeds in place
- 6 week procurement cycles – need relationships and expertise in place
- Will the VCS compete or link with FE?
- Economies of scale re: county or regional working if spread suitably, e.g. Dorset
- Will not go back to individual provision – Gershon report. County size at the very least
- ‘Shape should be based on demand rather than creating something for the sake of it’

Summary

The survey presented invaluable information for work such as 'Norfolk Unites' which was looking at the establishment of a Third Sector learning consortia at the very embryonic/early developmental stages. As such, the key findings were used to inform Norfolk Unites development itself so there would be no 'Recommendations' from this survey aside from 'Use findings presented here to inform Norfolk Unites development work'. It would certainly not be the place of Norfolk Unites to produce Recommendations for other established consortia to take heed of although there may be use in this survey for established and non-established consortia alike in seeing how other consortia operate on a practical level.

