

Local voluntary sector learning consortia

A NIACE BRIEFING PAPER



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A ... (voluntary sector) ... consortium approach can benefit the LSC by providing a single contracting and reporting point, assuming responsibility for day-to-day monitoring and quality assurance on its behalf. Many local offices have made clear to the sector their preference for this sort of arrangement. **(‘Working Together’)**

This publication:

- Reviews the history and development of local voluntary sector learning consortia to date
- Describes the main roles and functions that consortia fulfil
- Raises issues to be considered in the future development of current and new consortia
- Considers how the needs of black and minority ethnic voluntary and community organisations can best be addressed by consortia

At a local level, names such as local learning forum or network may be used in preference to consortium, often reflecting different organisational forms or priorities. For convenience, in this guide the terms ‘consortium’ and ‘consortia’ are used.



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Introduction

Voluntary Sector Learning Consortia have been in existence since the late 1990s, but have been thrust to the forefront of skills and learning policy development as a result of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) consultations on its strategy for working with the voluntary sector (Working Together).

NIACE has played an important role in sustaining and supporting the development of consortia through the Consortia+ programme. Until recently, consortia have been established as a result of initiatives by the voluntary sector itself. Increasingly local LSC offices are initiating or sponsoring the development of local consortia and this trend is likely to increase as a result of the new LSC strategy.

Consortia have the potential to bring benefits to statutory agencies, the voluntary and community sector, and most

importantly the local communities that they support and work with. This guide looks at current good practice and considers how the benefits of consortia can be extended to ensure the active inclusion of all sectors of the voluntary and community sector, particularly black and ethnic minority organisations.

It will be of interest to anyone involved in promoting widening participation in learning and the development of skills in the voluntary and community sector, including:

- Local Learning and Skills Councils,
- Government Departments,
- Learning Partnerships,
- Local Strategic Partnerships,
- Regional Development Agencies,
- Local Authority Community Education Services, and
- Voluntary and Community Organisations.

Development of consortia

Origins of voluntary sector learning consortia

The genesis of voluntary sector learning consortia can be found in the 1990s when interest in accredited learning (i.e. learning leading to qualifications) for staff and volunteers in the voluntary and community sector was stimulated by projects such as 'Sharing Credit' and 'Project 2001'. Until this time, training for the sector at a local level had been provided mainly by local Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) and was usually based on non-accredited short course programmes.

It was recognised that the development of more sophisticated programmes of learning for staff and volunteers in the voluntary and community sector, particularly those leading to qualifications, required collaboration between CVSs and other partners. Early consortia such as Learning Curve and Voluntary and Community Alliance across Norfolk (VOLCAAN) were established as a response to this need.

Voluntary sector learning consortia have been a good example of the type of collaborative approach between voluntary sector infrastructure organisations that is now being promoted more widely as part of the Infrastructure strategy.

These early developments illustrate two key issues that are still relevant today.

1. The role of consortia in promoting volunteer and staff development within the voluntary and community sector

Much of the policy development encouraging voluntary sector engagement in learning has been around the widening participation agenda. However, consortia have an important contribution to make in developing the voluntary sector workforce, both paid and voluntary.

2. Ownership of consortia by the sector

By establishing consortia, the sector has been successful in raising the profile of the voluntary and community sector and in creating a relationship of equality between itself and other more established providers such as colleges. It has also ensured that resources flow directly to the sector and that there is appropriate support for, and focus on, the needs and priorities of the sector.

The arrival of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC)

The creation of the LSC presented enormous opportunities and challenges for the voluntary and community sector. As the first body responsible for all aspects of post-16 learning and training (except higher education), with a budget of nearly £6 billion, it was clear that the LSC would need to work with a diverse range of partners and that the voluntary and community sector could potentially have a significant role in influencing, supporting and delivering learning and skills training.

NIACE and WEA held two series of regional consultations and briefings during 2000 and 2001 around the theme of development of relationships between the LSC and the voluntary and community sector. The final report laid out a series of recommendations around the need for the LSC and the voluntary and community sector to work together strategically. A key recommendation related to the support for local learning consortia:

Resourcing for the development and co-ordination of local infrastructure and networks. This should include stable funding to support the emergence and consolidation of learning/training-based consortia. This is necessary in order for them to function strategically in relation to the LLSCs and LLPs, and to fulfil their mentoring, facilitating, and quality improvement role in relation to local voluntary and community bodies.

Funding to support the effective co-ordination of the work of these bodies with that of other networks such as the Regional Voluntary Sector Networks, Black and Minority Ethnic Networks and Councils for Voluntary Service, would help to rationalise the sector's engagement with learning and training issues and clarify the points of intersection with key local bodies such as LSCs, Local Learning Partnerships and Local Strategic Partnerships.
(‘Moving On: The Learning and Skills Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector’)

The value of consortia was also recognised in the Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation Workforce Development Plan.

Local Voluntary Sector Development Agencies (England) should explore the advantages of developing local consortia of learning and training providers for the benefit of their members, building on existing good practice.
(‘Voluntary Sector Workforce Development Plan 2001’)

Local initiatives

In April 2001 the LSC set about two tasks: integrating staff from the Further Education Funding Council and a large number of local Training and Enterprise Councils into a new organisation, and taking on new responsibilities related to areas such as adult and community education and school sixth forms. It is little surprise, therefore, that progress on developing new relationships was slower than anticipated. Despite this, there were positive developments at local level, often relying on the initiative of local voluntary sector activists and/or local LSC staff.

These local engagements have gathered pace, with exciting examples of partnerships and joint initiatives between the LSC and the local voluntary and community sector providing evidence of the value of these arrangements. From the LSC perspective, much of the work has been driven by its agenda of widening participation and meeting the national Skills for Life targets. However, there has also been innovative work under the workforce development agenda, such as Cumbria Learning links.

Cumbria Learning Links is the new name for the Cumbria Voluntary Sector Training Network, which has brought together 80 voluntary and community organisations to pool ideas and information about developments and training.

It will work to support the development of local organisations, through co-ordinated activities and strategic partnerships, applying for funding and managing delivery contracts for member organisations. A regular programme of meetings and conferences will cover topics such as funding, standards and quality, links with training providers and with regional and national bodies.

Other funders and agencies have also supported these developments, for example regional development agencies and local authorities as well as funding from the Lottery Community fund and from trusts such as the Nationwide Foundation.

'Working Together', the development of a national LSC strategy

In 2003, the LSC published its consultation paper '*Working Together: a Strategy for the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Learning and Skills Council*'. The report has been the basis of very wide consultation and the final strategy document and implementation plan was completed in June 2004.

In relation to consortia, there are two key aspects to the strategy.

1. There is a welcome acknowledgement of the broader role of the voluntary and community sector beyond the important one of contributing to widening participation:

There are four key roles that define the sector's relationship with the LSC:

- as provider of learning opportunities;
 - as employers;
 - as a source of expertise and intelligence for planning; and
 - as a channel for networking and communication.
- ('Working Together')

2. The LSC acknowledges that consortia serve a number of purposes and offer a number of benefits to both the LSC and the VCS such as:

- a single point for contracting and reporting;
- a swift and sensitive means of communication with a range of voluntary organisations;
- a vehicle for supporting capacity-building (for both the LSC and the VCS);
- through lead bodies in consortia, simplifying funding routes and facilitating the sharing of information, ideas and skills;
- helping with quality assurance and staff training, undertaking analysis of the 'gifts' and assets of both learners and consortia members; and
- providing a strategic voice in developments affecting the sector locally, regionally and nationally.

Whilst the LSC acknowledges that consortia arrangements may not be appropriate for all VCS organisations, faith networks for example, clearly, the LSC strategy is an important stimulus for the further development of existing consortia and the establishment of new ones. It is timely, therefore, to be considering the potential and the limits of consortia arrangements.

Consortia and current policy developments

Consortia can make important contributions to a number of Government policy areas. This includes key learning and skills priorities and also other policy concerns.

Skills Strategy and workforce development

Development of staff and volunteers within the voluntary and community sector is a key objective for most consortia. The skills strategy recognises that developing the workforce includes developing the skills of those employed in the sector. In recognition of this, organisations such as Norwich Voluntary Services employ a specialist Learning and Skills Development Officer. NVS have been working with the local LSC to develop a sector skills plan for the local voluntary and community sector.

Some consortia are already engaged in the employer training pilot schemes which are the precursor to the plans for a general entitlement to free training to Level two and some Level three qualifications. In addition, consortia are also contributing to work-based learning for young people, including entry to employment and modern apprenticeships.

Learning Curve Swindon and Wiltshire has produced a directory of voluntary sector placements and services for young people on entry to employment. They have also produced and distributed a leaflet promoting the benefits of modern apprenticeships for voluntary sector employees.

Widening participation

Consortia are contributing to the learning and skills agenda by developing innovative and flexible learning provision. The voluntary and community sector is recognised by the LSC as a key partner best placed to engage non-traditional and excluded learners. Consortia have been particularly effective in supporting smaller voluntary and community sector organisations which have a particularly close relationship with disadvantaged communities.

In addition, voluntary and community activities are an important stimulus to encouraging adults to engage with learning, and this activity is significant. The Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation (VSNT0, 2004) estimates that there are over 150,000 registered charities plus 300,000 not-for-profit groups collectively

making a significant contribution to the gross domestic product with billions of pounds and billions of hours. Many of these organisations will be directly involved in education, training and skills development.

Skills for Life

The Government has ambitious targets to help 1.5 million adults in England with literacy, language and numeracy difficulties by 2007. Consortia are contributing to the achievement of this target, for example by capacity-building voluntary and community sector organisations to deliver or support basic skills learning.

The Humberside Learning Consortium was proud to host their first Basic Skills Resource Day for the Community and Voluntary Sector. The all-day event was held at the Quality Royal Hotel and included guest speakers, exhibitors, free resources and most importantly, the chance to network.

The event gave community and voluntary organisations the chance to hear about the successes and challenges in delivering basic skills projects and training. Local basic skills providers from both the North and the South Bank were on hand to offer advice and guidance, and to show some of the resources that are available to support basic skills learners.

Information, advice and guidance

The voluntary and community sector is involved as a partner in both the Connexions service and in the delivery of information, advice and guidance services for adults. Consortia have been involved in delivering training and capacity-building services, facilitating communications between agencies and the voluntary and community sector and providing information and advice on learning to staff and volunteers in the voluntary and community sector.

Enable (the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Voluntary and Community Sector Learning and Skills Consortium) has been running a project to develop the capacity of voluntary and community sector organisations across the county to provide information, advice and signposting services in relation to learning and work. Activities included:

- accredited training in Information, Advice and Guidance delivery for front-line staff;
- training to enable staff/volunteers to identify a basic skills need;
- funding for backfill, travel and child care for organisations and groups participating;
- up to £500 of resources per organisation or group;

- support to attain the Matrix quality standard;
- networking and awareness-raising events.;
- awareness training in the Nottinghamshire Opportunities database;
- opportunities to enable voluntary sector development agencies to be able to deliver IAG training to local groups.

Infrastructure strategy

The Infrastructure strategy is intended to strengthen the support available to the voluntary and community sector and encourage the development of community and voluntary activity. Consortia have an important part to play and should be considering how they can best contribute at a local level to the development of the strategy.

This can include training and development activities, but in addition there should be recognition of the role of consortia in improving the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to deliver a key public service namely learning and skills.

Neighbourhood and civic renewal

Consortia are in a prime position to make real the visions of empowering community and civil activists by equipping them with the skills and knowledge that they need. At a local level, consortia can mobilise the skills and resources of the voluntary and community sector to provide focussed, relevant learning for community activism.



Functions and roles of consortia

The key aim of a consortium is to enable organisations in the voluntary and community sector to play a full and equal part in the development and delivery of learning to the benefit of their constituencies – including their volunteers and staff, their members and/or their target communities.

VCS consortia arrangements are becoming more prevalent, as increasing numbers of local LSCs build positive and proactive relations with them. Consortia differ considerably in their stages of development, composition, status, degree of formality, roles and ways of functioning. Some chose a different term for themselves, such as a 'Learning Forum'

(**'Working Together'**)

As noted in *'Working Together'*, there is no standard template for the functions and roles of voluntary sector learning consortia, as each has evolved according to the voluntary sector local needs and preferences. To some extent this has also been shaped by the LLSCs and the shape and nature of the local learning infrastructure.

A voluntary-sector learning consortium can potentially provide all or some of the following functions:

Information and communication

Includes provision of:

- information to the voluntary and community sector on learning opportunities for staff, volunteers and/or members and service users (*example: Ladder4Learning*);
- information to the wider community on learning opportunities provided by the voluntary and community sector (*example: Learning Curve Directory*);
- a communication channel between the LLSC and the local voluntary and community sector, particularly allowing the LSC to communicate effectively and efficiently with the sector;
- a focus for information to the sector on funding opportunities for learning and training.

Advice and support

This can include:

- help with designing and delivering learning programmes;
- training needs analyses for staff and volunteers;

- guidance on how learning and training (such as basic skills learning) can be integrated into the wider services offered by the voluntary and community sector organisation to its members or service users;
- help with funding bids;
- signposting to learning and training opportunities suitable for staff, volunteers, members or service users.

Training

As part of capacity-building, consortia may provide training directly, or with partners, on such topics as:

- quality and Inspection requirements of ALI, LSC, accrediting bodies and others;
- funding applications and meeting funders' administration requirements;
- equality and diversity;
- widening access and improving retention;
- initial and ongoing teaching and training skills;
- specialist skills such as Basic Skills, Advice & Guidance.
- Some of this may be accredited by the consortium, by consortium members or by external partners such as OCN, HE institutions or local colleges.

Sharing good practice and skills

As well as formal training, consortia can provide the opportunity for individual consortium members to learn from each other through group activities, peer support and mentoring.

Most consortia also encourage the sharing of information between members on topics such as course design and delivery. Consortia members also often have specific expertise that they can share – for example disability groups advising on accessibility issues.

Many consortia are also active at a regional level and share good practice between consortia. As noted earlier, Consortia+ also provides an opportunity for this to happen at a national level.

There is also the opportunity for consortia to share good practice with, and learn from, partners from other sectors such as colleges and adult and community learning.

Capacity-building

Training and sharing of good practice all contribute to developing the capacity of voluntary and community sector organisations to deliver learning and access funding. In addition, consortia will work with organisations individually.

Capacity-building may have a number of (non-exclusive) aims:

- improving the general business processes of the organisation (often done with in partnership with a CVS or other generalist infrastructure organisation) – for example in relation to core processes such as business planning, fundraising, health and safety or accessibility;
- ensuring the organisation has the skills to design, plan, deliver and evaluate quality and effective learning and training programmes;
- supporting the organisation to meet the quality and administrative requirements of the funder (such as the LSC) either on its own or as part of the consortium.

Quality

Consortia usually try to achieve improvement in the quality of services provided by their members through capacity-building processes and/or through providing direct support (such as help in completing self-assessment reports).

In addition, where the consortia contracts on behalf of its members with funders such as the LSC, it is normally required to retain ultimate responsibility for monitoring quality. Consortia may discharge this responsibility directly, or with members, through such activity as monitoring visits, teacher observation, learner questionnaires and self-assessment reporting.

Administration

Consortia may assist members with administration of learners, particularly in relation to LSC or ESF programmes and similar. To enable smaller voluntary and community sector organisations to access learning, consortia often try to take some of the administrative burden from members, for example by adapting MIS forms to be easier to complete and by taking on responsibility for the processing of MIS and making returns to funders.

Funding and contracting

Many consortia contract with the LSC and/or other funders and distribute the funds to their members. This has the advantage to the LSC of simplifying administration and making it easier to ensure quality of provision and effective management of the funding.

For voluntary and community sector organisations, this has the advantage of making funding more accessible – being easier to gain and administer funding. This has been of particular benefit to smaller voluntary and community sector organisations.

Learning+ is a consortium of voluntary and community sector organisations, working together for the benefit of the sector, to develop

and enhance the training opportunities for the community of Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. We provide quality assurance services, advice and guidance for members on training issues, an access point for mainstream funding and an accreditation service via the Open College Network of the South West.

(‘What is Learning+?’)

Representation and advocacy

Consortia have been able to provide voluntary sector representatives with the necessary educational or training expertise to make an effective contribution to local consultations and discussions around learning. Consortia have therefore tended to take the lead in representing the voluntary sector in the learning agenda on behalf of the wider sector.

Consortia are often also very active in championing the interest of the voluntary and community sector in terms of local policy and funding allocations. *Enable* (the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Voluntary and Community Sector Learning and Skills Consortium) illustrates well the purpose and functioning of many consortia nationwide.

The aims of Enable

To establish a countywide infrastructure for effective **collaboration** within the voluntary sector and as equal partners with others in order to meet the learning needs of the diverse communities of Nottinghamshire.

To **advocate** on behalf of voluntary organisations and community groups and their clients with regard to their learning and skills needs and establish formal channels of consultation.

To enable voluntary organisations and community groups to have equal **access to information and funding** to support learning needs.

To enable the **capacity building** of voluntary organisations and community groups in order that they are able to fully engage in the learning and skills agenda.

To work with others to **widen participation** in learning, both formal and informal, and raise retention and achievement levels.

To provide a forum for **sharing good practice** between voluntary organisations and community groups and with other sectors.

To work with the Nottinghamshire LSC, the Employment Service, Learning Partnerships, the City and County Council and others to **monitor and evaluate** their work in relation to the voluntary sector.

To positively **influence** developments and delivery within learning.

To act as a **lead body** with regard to **funding and contracts** for learning where direct relationships with voluntary and community organisations are not available. (Our emphasis)

(Strategic Plan 2002–2004)



Creating an effective consortium

Establishing the consortium

In most cases, the initial development of a consortium has been initiated by and/or been led by the local voluntary and community sector infrastructure agencies such as the CVSSs.

This involvement can be important, because to operate successfully, the consortium has to have the consent and support of the wider voluntary and community sector. Membership infrastructure bodies such as the CVSSs can provide the platform for the initial development stage as development of the local voluntary and community sector is one of their core functions.

It is important that the initial stages of development include a process of consultation to ensure that the consortium has the active backing of the sector and to agree the best processes for involving members in the running of the consortium. Successful consortia have gained commitment from the local infrastructure organisations and then from the wider sector. This process can take time but is an important contributory factor to later success.

Consultation – an example of good practice

Voluntary and community sector learning consortia are emerging nationally and regionally in response to the opportunities the LSC offers the sector. These consortia vary in their form and function. Groups have given their views to the six LDAs (Local Development Agencies) about how a Humber consortium might look and operate. The

response to a consortium was a very positive one and the key themes emerging from the seminars across the sub-region were that groups wanted a consortium to be:

- run *by* the sector *for* the sector;
- democratic;
- representative;
- 'politically' independent;
- accountable;

The messages from the questionnaire were that Humber groups saw a consortium as a vehicle for driving forward learning and skills development in the sector and that it could do this in five key ways:

- by helping groups to obtain funding for their training activities;
- guiding groups through quality assurance frameworks;
- enabling the provision of affordable courses;
- working with existing providers to make training accessible;
- providing information about training opportunities.

The seminars were an excellent opportunity for voluntary and community groups to get to grips with the new learning agenda and consider how the sector and individual organisations could begin to engage with it. There was a recognition that the sector needs to be brought up to speed and that the seminars had been valuable in shedding light on important new developments.

Groups felt that they would like more information on which to base their views and decisions and have requested that the Local Development Agencies return to facilitate more seminars before the consortium is formally established.

This need for consensus is particularly critical where the consortium is to be involved in the channelling of funding to the sector. Some voluntary and community sector organisations may be concerned about losing a direct relationship with the LSC or about competition for funding.

To address this concern, consortia have had to demonstrate how they can add value – for example by the level of support available or because the total amount of funding is increased because of the consortium's existence. Some local LSCs have helped focus the debate by making it clear that on-going funding, such as FE funding, would only be accessible to voluntary and community sector organisations either through the consortium or through franchise arrangements with colleges.

In some areas, the LSC has initiated the debate about the establishment of a consortium. This may well become more common with the publication of the LSC strategy and the need for the LSC to streamline its contract management processes.

Somerset LSC is currently supporting projects to develop the delivery capacity of the voluntary and community sector and wishes to build on this work to support its Widening Participation and Development & Regeneration sub-strategies.

Somerset LSC is seeking to fund one consortium-based project that will achieve the following overall aim:

Build capacity of organisations within the Somerset voluntary and community sector, to deliver actions to help widen participation and achievement in learning and employment for under-represented groups.

(Somerset LSC tender document)

Such support from LSCs is welcomed and can provide a stimulus to developing the collaborative relationships that underpin a successful consortium. At the same time, both the LSC and the local voluntary and community sector need to understand and acknowledge that they will have differing, though overlapping, agendas. Sustainability of consortia depends on their having an intrinsic value to the voluntary and community sector as well as having the capacity to support the LSC agenda.

We are aware that in a small number of areas, LSCs have found it difficult to find appropriate partners for initiating discussions about consortia. This is very much a voluntary and community sector responsibility, and current development work arising from the infrastructure strategy early spend should improve matters in improving collaborative working relationships between local voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations.

Membership and Constitution

Some consortia start as informal associations sometimes based on a lead organisation. There is an increasing tendency to establish the consortium as a legally separate organisation, particularly if contracting is involved. This has the benefit of protecting the lead organisation's trustees from having to accept liability for actions of the consortium.

Establishing a separate organisation raises issues of accountability, and some consortia have a core membership based on infrastructure organisations (for example Learning Curve and the Derby consortium). This is usually intended to ensure that the consortium continues to have a close working relationship with, and contributes to, the wider sector and infrastructure. This has added significance in the light of the infrastructure review and the important contribution that consortia can make to supporting an effective voluntary and community sector through quality training for staff and volunteers.

Voluntary or community groups that deliver, or plan to deliver, learning opportunities can become associate members of the Consortium. An organisation qualifies for associate membership through membership of (the core member organisations) either their local CVS or the Derby Millennium Network.
(Derby Learning & Development Consortium)

In this type of structure, the consortium may have mechanisms to ensure that consortium members (often referred to as associate members) can contribute to policy and other decisions. For example, Learning Curve Network members nominate two trustees to the main Learning Curve Board. Network members also have standing working groups on issues such as quality and diversity.

Other consortia operate entirely as membership organisations with all members being eligible to stand for the board. In some cases there is a quota system to ensure that trustees are as representative as possible. For example, a consortium covering more than one borough may have a quota to ensure that each borough is represented on the Board. Although this arrangement may seem a more democratic approach, there is some anecdotal evidence that continued close involvement of the mainstream infrastructure organisations helps keep some focus on continued engagement with the concerns of the wider sector.

Partnerships and external relationships

Although a key relationship is with the LLSC, consortia have been successful in engaging with other stakeholders and partners. For example, local authorities or Regional Development Agencies have funded some consortia, while others have been established with Lottery funding or funding from charitable trusts.

As noted earlier, most consortia have strong links with sub-regional voluntary sector infrastructure organisations such as CVSs. We are now seeing stronger links being formed at a regional level with the Voluntary Sector regional forums.

The SW Forum Skills and Learning Interest Groups (SLIG) includes all the consortia in the South West as well as other voluntary sector organisations with an interest in learning. SLIG is drawing up a South West strategy and action plan for skills and learning in the voluntary and community sector. It is expected that this strategy will look at how best to engage with the RDA and the new regional structure of the LSC. It will also address how best to support sub-regional voluntary networks in areas where the sector is not yet actively engaged with the LSC and the wider learning agenda.

Inclusiveness

The LSC understands that consortia are independent bodies. Their effectiveness depends on their transparency and inclusiveness, on adding value to existing structures and on providing value for money for members and funders.

(‘Working Together’)

There is some potential conflict between the wider role of a consortium as an agent of the whole voluntary sector and its narrower role as a funded provider, particularly for the LSC. For the former, the consortium needs to be open and inclusive. However for funded learning, the consortium has to set entry criteria, no matter how permissive, because of the external constraints imposed by funders and by the ALI quality criteria.

However, many consortia have addressed this by a two-tier approach to membership, with all members having access to the services of the consortium and contributing to policy development. Those members who wish to draw down funding for learning then have to commit to meeting the administrative and quality criteria applicable to that funding. Consortia can try to make the entry bar to attract funding as low as possible by providing higher levels of support, for example by helping the organisation recruit suitably qualified staff.

Comprehensiveness

Closely linked to inclusiveness is a general concern that consortia have been successful in engaging the more organised part of the voluntary and community sector, but less successful in attracting more informal community groups. No real research has been done on this, so the evidence is anecdotal rather than fully verified. However, this is an area of concern, not least because other

evidence would suggest that this would disproportionately disadvantage black and minority ethnic groups as these tend to be concentrated in the more informal community sector.

More research needs to be done in this area and consortia would all welcome more advice and guidance in addressing this issue.

Another issue with comprehensiveness is the geographical spread of consortia. Because they have been locally based initiatives they have only been established where there have been local champions – either from the voluntary and community sector or from the LSC or other partners. We may see the LSC take a lead in ensuring a more comprehensive spread of consortia, however this may be difficult where the infrastructure is weak or there is no tradition of collaboration.

The voluntary and community sector itself may need to consider how it can support developments in sub-regions not currently effectively engaged. Perhaps regional forums can address this as part of the current regional mapping of the voluntary and community sector infrastructure. The development of a regional LSC presence may help to support this approach.

Representation and championing

If a consortium is to support some of the wider roles for the voluntary and community sector identified by the LSC, then it needs to ensure that it is perceived as having a legitimate mandate supported by the whole sector. It is important not to be unrealistic about the issues of representation in the voluntary and community sector. A core value of the sector is independence, and no representative can ever feel that they are speaking for everyone in the sector. However, there are some strategies for ensuring that representatives and their constituency can all feel comfortable about the representative role.

- Firstly, there should be an agreed protocol for communication from the representatives and the sector. The representative should be able to report through an agreed channel (for example local CVS newsletters).
- Secondly, opportunities should be made for a wider discussion between the representatives and the sector, perhaps through occasional consultative meetings.
- Thirdly, there should be a link between learning representatives and mainstream infrastructure forums. This will ensure that there are links with the wider concerns and developments in the sector. This should become easier as there is increased collaboration between infrastructure organisations arising from the infrastructure review.

Funding

Some consortia have been approved as LSC providers and are accessing ongoing funding for their members under FE, ACL or other funding streams. This possibility of long-term, stable funding for voluntary sector learning represents a major improvement on reliance on short-term project-based funding.

At present there are few, if any, any sources for long-term funding of the core costs of consortia and most are relying on short-term funding from the LSC and other funders. There is an urgent need for a more stable source, though the LSC does recognise that, unlike colleges, voluntary and community organisations are unlikely to have access to separate funding sources for their core costs. This being the case the LSC acknowledges that including such costs may make VCS bids seem more expensive, but in reviewing funding arrangements with the sector the LSC will take these factors into account.

Consortia accessing mainstream funding (such as further education or adult and learning funding) are normally retaining a proportion of the funding for services such as MIS and quality. However, even here it will take time for the renewable funding to reach a volume where the retained funding can meet all the core costs and in some cases this may never be achieved.

From the member's perspective, the issue of retained funding can be a matter for concern. Most would recognise the value of centralised MIS and similar services. However, few would accept that some of the broader roles (such as representation) should be paid for by taking funding away from the delivery of learning.

Consortia need to be as transparent as possible about the disbursement of funds, and the LSC needs to recognise that some of the benefits of a consortium (such as simplifying contract management for the LSC) need to be separately paid for.

Engaging black voluntary and community organisations

Consortia have tended to emerge from the mainstream voluntary sector infrastructure organisations. To the best of the author's knowledge, there are few, if any, black voluntary sector-learning consortia covering the full range of consortium activities. In response to this NIACE is actively encouraging the involvement of black colleagues from networks, umbrella groups and fledgling consortia in Consortia+ meetings, seminars and residentials.

Black and ethnic minority networks do exist at a local, regional and national level. Examples of regional networks are the specialist infrastructure networks initially set up with support from the Active Communities Unit, however these networks cover a range of issues and do not therefore provide the benefits that are brought by a specialised focus on learning and skills.

Voluntary learning consortia therefore need to ensure that they are adequately addressing the needs of black and ethnic minority voluntary and community organisations. At the same time, black and ethnic minority voluntary and community sector organisations and networks need to be considering how they can best benefit from participation in learning consortia.

The 1990 Trust's recent report '*Black Voluntary and Community Sector Funding*' highlights the problems that black and minority ethnic community groups in particular face when trying to access funding for learning.

It was felt that some funders ask questions to which there are 'key phrases' that need to be used in response and only those 'in the know' would be able to use the correct jargon. For example, a funder looking for innovative learning initiatives asked about accreditation, learning portfolios and learning outcomes. Some organisations might have such innovative learning programmes but be put off by the jargon.

The Trust argues that these types of community organisations need the support of intermediary organisations to access this kind of funding. This is precisely the sort of support that learning consortia can provide. The Trust does however also highlight that:

The evidence points to a concern that minority organisations do not receive the level of support that their activity merits and that they require to operate at a fully effective level.

The evidence is that black and ethnic minority organisations are more likely to be smaller, and more informal community organisations. These are the types of organisations that consortia have been least successful in engaging. Black and ethnic minority organisations also feel that they are not always properly understood by, or enabled for engagement with, the mainstream sector.

Consortia and local LSCs therefore need to look at what positive action they can take to ensure that black voluntary and community organisations can fully participate in the benefits of the consortia approach.

Proposed benchmarking and monitoring of engagement between local LSCs and VSC (to take place from September 2004 onwards as per Working Together implementation plan), will reveal the type and extent of engagement currently taking place with black organisations and enable local LSCs to plan for better engagement where necessary through the production of business plans, reporting on impact measures and the further development of Race Equality Action Plans (and plans for taking positive action)

The Birmingham and Solihull LSC has supported capacity development of learning at a grassroots level through supporting of local community-based 'development agencies'. BME organisations are amongst the eight community organisations involved.

The role of Consortia+

There was some informal networking between consortia in the early days, particularly through networks set up by the Sharing Credit project. However, it was the establishment of the Consortia+ programme that began to give shape to promotion of, and support for, consortia at a national level.

The report from the first series of consultation meetings in 2000, referred to earlier, (*Moving On: The Learning and Skills Council and the voluntary and community sector*, 2001) stressed the need to develop an infrastructure that would enable the voluntary and community sector to play a full and equal part in the development and delivery of learning and training. The report identified the potential role that consortia could play in achieving this outcome. As a result, the second series of consultation meetings included a special national meeting of existing and emerging consortia.

This meeting was the genesis of the Consortia+ programme. Delegates came from Cumbria, the North East, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, North Lincolnshire, Hull, Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Cambridgeshire, London, Hertfordshire, Basildon, Wiltshire and Cornwall. In addition, there were representatives from the DfEE, National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVS), National Lotteries Charities Board, Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation (VSNTO), PAULO, London Open College Network, Sharing Credit and the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre.

NIACE has continued to organise Consortia+ with the support of the DfES. The programme has included regular meetings and workshops together with an email group and other development activity culminating in a residential conference in March 2004.

Consortia+ has been an important focus for the development of voluntary sector learning consortia. It has enabled emerging consortia to promote and share of best

practice. By highlighting those areas where local LSCs and consortia have worked successfully together, it has accelerated the broader acceptance of this new way of working.

As consortia have developed and matured, Consortia+ has facilitated peer support between existing and emerging consortia. It has also provided a focus for informed discussion between consortia and national policy makers around the issues of learning in the voluntary and community sector.

For the future, Consortia+ has a number of potential contributions it could make:

Raising standards by:

- encouraging the sharing of best practice between consortia;
- setting out guidelines for the structures and roles of consortia;
- organising training and seminars around key issues for consortia;
- supporting consortia to engage more effectively with the BME sector.

Supporting the development of new consortia by:

- facilitating skills transfer and peer support between emerging and established consortia;
- organising training courses and conferences to equip potential and emerging consortia with the necessary skills and knowledge;
- producing guidelines on best practice for the establishment of consortia.

Support joint working with LSC and other statutory partners by:

- organising joint conferences between consortia and LSC, RDAs etc.;
- providing training and capacity building for staff from the LSC and other statutory partners;
- creating opportunities for consortia to feed into, and influence, national policy.

Conclusion – the future for consortia

The LSC and other statutory agencies have a finite capacity in terms of their ability to manage relationships with the voluntary and community sector, particularly in relation to contracting. A voluntary-sector learning consortium offers a solution to the local LSC and others to the challenge of working with large numbers of smaller voluntary and community sector organisations.

For the voluntary and community sector, consortia offer the opportunity to engage collectively with the LSC and other partners in a strategic and more equal relationship. Consortia also hold out the possibility of securing additional resources, some of which could be on a long-term basis.

Sometimes it will be more appropriate for individual voluntary and community sector organisations to be funded directly by the LSC or other agency (perhaps where they are targeting a specific part of the sector such as black and minority ethnic community organisations). Even here, consortia can have a role in providing capacity building and other support both to voluntary and community sector organisations and to the statutory agencies.

The LSC strategy for working with the voluntary and community sector will almost certainly maintain the momentum that has built up behind the development of local voluntary sector learning consortia. This is a welcome development. Consortia can make an important contribution to the learning and skills policy agenda.

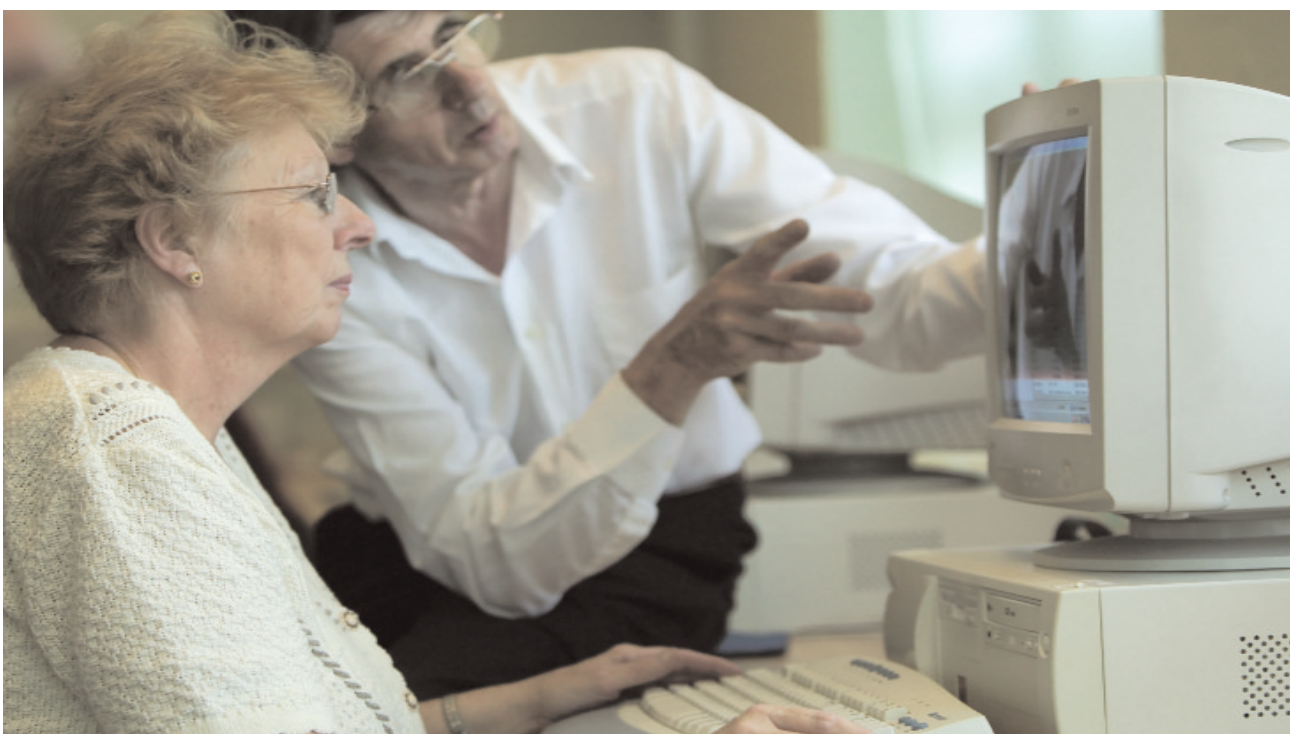
However, it is important that consortia are not seen as a temporary response to a 'funding-led' opportunity. Voluntary-sector consortia existed before the arrival of the LSC because they had real benefits for the voluntary and community sector.

To be sustainable and of long-term value, voluntary-sector learning consortia need to be part of the wider changes taking place in the voluntary and community sector infrastructure as a result of the infrastructure strategy. Consortia need to ensure that their missions and aims are not led solely by current government agendas but are of real value and relevance to the voluntary and community sector and the wider communities they serve.

This point is illustrated well through a recent consultation exercise led by Cheshire and Warrington Voluntary Sector Learning Forum and supported by the local LSC

There were no preconceived ideas about what would come out of this (consultation) process. Many people at the start were worried that the Forum (Cheshire and Warrington Voluntary Sector Learning Forum) was being pressurised into becoming something that didn't feel right. It was linked to that emotive word – consortium – with its connotations of exclusivity and meeting the needs of big groups rather than small ones.

What the process has ended up with is, in fact, a suggestion to do just that – to set up a consortium. But with a difference – this will be a consortium that meets the needs of local groups, that is about working together on a range of tasks, offering a primary point of reference for work with the sector.



References and useful links

There was not room in this guide to include all the examples of good practice amongst consortia in England. The list below includes all those referred to in this guide. The VSNTO website has a fuller list of learning consortia for each English region.

Cheshire and Warrington Voluntary Sector Learning Forum: www.learningtogether.info
 Cumbria Learning Links: www.cumbrialearninglinks.org.uk
 Derby Learning and Development Consortium: www.cvsderby.co.uk
 Enable (the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Voluntary and Community Sector Learning and Skills Consortium): www.enable.uk.net
 Humberside Learning Consortium: www.humbersidelearningconsortium.org.uk
 Ladder4learning: www.ladder4learning.org.uk
 The Learning and Skills Council: www.lsc.gov.uk
 The Learning Curve: www.learningcurve.org.uk
 Learning+: www.learningplus.org.uk
 National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVS): www.nacvs.org.uk
 Norwich and Norfolk Voluntary Services: www.nvs.org.uk
 Voluntary Sector NTO (has useful list of local learning consortia and networks): www.voluntarysectorskills.org.uk



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- Skills for Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills – Focus on delivery to 2007*, DfES, 2001.
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- 'What is Learning+ ?' accessed at: www.learningplus.org.uk
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Local voluntary sector learning consortia

A NIACE BRIEFING PAPER

Tim Ward

This briefing paper examines issues to be considered in the development of current and new voluntary sector learning consortia. It also considers how the benefits of consortia can be extended to ensure the active inclusion of all sectors of the voluntary and community sector, particularly black and ethnic minority organisations.

It will be of interest to anyone involved in promoting widening participation in learning and the development of skills in the voluntary and community sector, including:

- Local Learning and Skills Councils,
- Government departments,
- Learning Partnerships,
- Local Strategic Partnerships,
- Regional Development Agencies,
- Local Authority Community Education Services, and
- Voluntary and Community Organisations.

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