

minutes



Meeting SKILLS: NOW AND THE FUTURE SELECT COMMITTEE

Date Monday, 14 April 2008 (commencing at 1.30 pm)

Membership

Persons absent are marked with `A`

COUNCILLORS

John Knight (Chair)
Joe Lonergan (Vice-Chair)

Peter Barnes
Jen Cole
Jim Creamer
Philip Owen

A Lynn Sykes
Kevan Wakefield
Brian Wombwell

MINUTES

The minutes of the last meeting held on 17 March 2008, having been circulated, were confirmed and signed by the Chair.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

None.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND WORK PROGRAMME

Geoff George, Economic Regeneration Manager, Communities Department indicated that the government was consulting on proposals to split the Learning and Skills Council's functions between local authorities (for 18-18 year olds) and a new Skills Funding Agency (for adults).

LEARNING AND SKILLS COUNCIL

Stuart Hackett, Economic Development Manager at the Learning and Skills Council explained that the LSC had been created in 2001 to take over the functions of the former Training and Enterprise Councils and Further Education Funding Council relating to over 18s (apart from universities). The LSC now came under two government departments, hence the planned restructuring.

Mr Hackett explained that since 2005, the LSC's focus had shifted from qualifications to employment, particularly sustainable employment, for example supporting people on Incapacity Benefit into work, where the great majority of people needed skills development and pre-employment training before they were ready to seek work.

The Adult Advancement and Skills Service would operate from 2011, with all adults having a skills account from 2012.

JOB CENTRE PLUS

James Busher, District Performance Manager at Job Centre Plus explained that his organisation was an executive agency of the Department for Work and Pensions, and was at the heart of the government's welfare-to-work agenda. Training was a key activity, with employers wanting to take on workers with basic skills, whom they could then train further.

He indicated that Job Centre Plus had begun to work with some of the 50,000 people in Nottinghamshire on Incapacity Benefit, as well as with single parents and ex-offenders. Job Centre Plus would provide training, making use of partner organisations, and ask employers to employ such people.

There was then discussion arising from the two presentations. In response to Councillor Knight, Mr Hackett said that for those already in work, Level 2 was a good starting point, while for people coming from benefits, basic skills were needed. In reply to a question from Councillor Creamer about people with disabilities, Mr Busher stated that Job Centre Plus used a condition management system, to ensure that people's conditions were not a barrier to employment.

Councillor Lonergan asked for Mr Busher's views on the proposed changes to the LSC. He replied that the organisations already worked closely together, and such partnership working would continue under any new structures. Mr Hackett indicated that Connexions could continue to provide careers advice to young people, and possibly adults too, if it won the tender. Councillor Lonergan referred to the Leitch review, and asked for views about vocational training for young people. Mr Hackett believed there should be a sensible package of options, including vocational diplomas and apprenticeships. In reply to Councillor Barnes, Mr Hackett stated that there were significant financial barriers to returning to work, and Mr Busher added that paying wages weekly could help people used to benefits.

Councillor Owen asked what more schools and colleges could be doing. Mr Hackett replied that there was a mismatch between the clients' needs and the activities of FE colleges. Mr Busher observed that it could be difficult to arrange pre-employment training during college holidays. Councillor Cole referred to the value of working with local authorities, which might be the largest employer in the area. Mr Busher said this had been recognised through New Deal. In reply to Councillor Cole, Mr Busher said there would always be a mismatch between clients' skills and employers' needs. The county was more difficult in this respect, with less turnover of people and jobs than the city, and difficulties experienced in re-employing textile workers, for example.

Mr Hackett, replying to Councillor Lonergan, indicated that the budget for adult learning would not change in the next three years, but would be more focused on the needs of employers, with less available for getting difficult people back to work.

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

John Dowson, Head of Policy and Representation, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Chamber of Commerce, gave a presentation on the Chamber's activities in relation to skills and training. The Chamber's members came from the larger employers in the area. Skills and training was one of top lobbying priorities. Research into Train to Gain had showed that one third of businesses had made use of it, but there was unhappiness with the means of accessing it, because of the cost, bureaucracy and time.

FEDERATION OF SMALL BUSINESSES

Jan Stanley, Regional Organiser, Federation of Small Businesses, gave a presentation on her organisation, which drew its membership from smaller businesses, employing up to 100 people. The Federation carried out regular surveys of small business needs, which showed, for example, that they did not make use of Train to Gain, although it seemed to offer what businesses wanted. The surveys also showed that skills gaps were not changing, despite numerous initiatives. Ms Stanley drew attention to what small businesses were looking for from trainers.

Members discussed points raised during the two presentations. Customer care was identified as one of the basic skills sought by employers. Members wondered whether young people were attracted to work in small businesses. Ms Stanley pointed out that schools tended not to talk about careers in small businesses, although someone starting out in a small, growing business might do well. Mr Hackett agreed that schools' careers advice looked towards careers in large firms or the public sector, which missed the exciting opportunities a small business could offer.

Mr George pointed out that there were similar dialogues taking place in different forums, such as the Local Area Agreement. He believed there was a need to ensure that structures met employers' needs, and that as a large employer, the County Council should set a good example. The skills dimension could be reflected in contracts, for example for Building Schools for the Future. He suggested that the select committee might want to ask Children and Young People about their views on young people's attitudes and employability.

The meeting closed at 4.05 pm.

CHAIR

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