

West Midlands Region Building Our Knowledge SfL Event
(Summary input: Geoff Bateson)

1. There are recurring phrases that start at Treasury/government level and which work their way out, through DfES documents, into regional documents and begin to influence the shape that local planning takes. I want to start with some phrases that have been building up in this way over the past few years and which are impacting now:

(a) '2020'

Up to about a year ago much of the learning and skills timescale was being described in terms of progress towards 2010 and securing the 2010 Public Service Agreement targets. The horizon has shifted now to 2020 and a further set of real challenges in terms of Skills for Life. The ambition, nationally, is that by 2020 we will have all but removed the functional literacy and numeracy issue. At least 95% of adults will be managing quite adequately both in the literacy needed for everyday work and community activities (say at Level 1) and in the numeracy needed (say at Entry 3). So the Skills for Life challenge remains as a medium/long term on (... on and on, for at least another 13 years ...).

Puzzle 1: If 2010-2020 is seen as some kind of final drive, to get the job completed, then is a lot of what is going on now (Agenda for Change; ramping up of Train to Gain support as the 'solution' for employed people; introduction of the new employability programme, as the 'solution' for unemployed people; raising the expectations re OLASS etc) a kind of stocktaking, rearrangement of energies ready for ten years of massive delivery of outcomes for disadvantaged people across 2010-2020? If so then as a region are we sure that we are really engaged with the changes being made – and best placed for ramping up levels of outcomes deliverable?

(b) 'Place shaping/place making'

I.e. the idea that there will be a 'location' dimension to our planning and delivery (alongside that of other public services such as health, police, voluntary sector ... via local agreements ...). This presumes that we start to look more closely at data on need, and data on achievement, much more by location – whether this is in relation to cities; in relation to priority wards; in relation to the way small super output areas cluster together highlighting 'hot spots' where provision isn't reducing need fast enough. This might imply that we look more at how all the potential 'solutions' (main provision; learndirect; Train to Gain etc) are pulling together across target locations, all as part of local area agreements across partner organisations.

Puzzle 2: Are we sure where the hotspots of need are (for literacy; for numeracy; for ESOL? Do we have a sense of the

achievement to be secured year on year, in different localities, if we are to get to the 2020 aspirations above – and how we start to use conversations with providers to ask how their Skills for Life ‘offer’ has been matched to geographical spread of needs? Are we convinced that there is a locality aspect to linked provision for different client groups?

(c) ‘Well being’

At a surface level this is simply about health impacts and so, in our terms, it’s about health service workforce development (e.g. numeracy for nursing; literacy for care plan writing etc). Alongside that, as part of the same public sector compact arrangements, we should be ensuring that underpinning Skills for Life are put in place to enable staff in a range of support roles in Children’s Services to achieve Level 2 vocational qualifications (and Level 3 ...) so that they become professionally more confident and competent in getting better outcomes for children (as part of the ‘Every Child Matters’ drive forward) so that our young people feel more socially and emotionally resilient and able to deal with things in their lives.

Alongside this is the idea of health literacy – that community nurses, health visitors etc can, through their normal health activities, help people improve some of their basic communications and calculations. This means seeing improving basic skills as something that can happen in lots of different ways – with LSC provision being just one of these (even if possibly the most important of them). Skills for Life is now part of the role of every team and section across the LSC, but it is also the role of every agency (libraries; voluntary organisations; housing organisations; health organisations etc).

Puzzle 3: How far do LSC provider partners act as intelligent organisations, recognising that others can play a real role (as opposed to seeing other agencies simply as referral agencies/signposts into LSC provision).

(d) ‘Sustainable communities’

This idea, of my four, is the one that has been with us longest. There are things here to do with construction; environmental; recycling industries and the skills these might need (and how literacy, language and numeracy skills get appropriately embedded into any skills updating). There is also the notion of sustainable employability (i.e. not ‘a job for life’ but ‘employability for life’ as labour markets continue to change) which is where those employability skills and work-related basic skills fit in.

There is also a broader set of linkages in current social policy which goes:

sustainable communities ... social inclusion ... high wage jobs ... so that people have money and can make choices about their lives ... jobs which need more/higher skilled people ... with Skills for Life being key (even if the name changes soon to 'functional skills').

Puzzle 4: Once economic development activity ensures that more job opportunities are created across the region, how do we get the employers to expect the right level of literacy/numeracy/ language ... and how do we start to create more of an 'appetite' for numeracy (with some clarity about the kinds of numeracy skills needed for different jobs and how these fit with what we are expecting LSC funded providers to deliver)?

2. Finally, there seems to be a job to be done across all these programmes (as part of the getting them ready for the 'big drive forward'). How can we make sure that all programmes and providers are able to give the best chance of improved outcomes for those most in need? Whether the programme is an OLASS one, or an employee one, or an employability one, or a 14-19 one ... there is the same set of checks that can be made:

(a) Are we getting the right (eligible etc) bodies, from the right locations, in sufficient numbers (across all curriculum levels from Entry Level to Level 2)?

- issues here include what advisers/brokers/key intermediaries are looking for; issues of which hotspots get focused on etc.

(b) Is the quick and effective assessment of needs (in the context of all the other problems the person might have) ... put in a vocational context ... (what job? So what vocational skills? So what underpinning literacy/ language/numeracy skills? ...)

- issues here include the assessment tools available; national work being done to look at these; what assessment gets contracted for etc; issues of can assessment be done quickly and easily at first point of contact (compared with sending someone off somewhere else for an assessment, and losing many of them on the way).

(c) Is there a seamless transition into provision i.e. provision of the right kind, at the right level, is readily available ... or do we have delays whilst provision is set up, or waiting lists, or provision standing empty waiting for clients to be referred in larger numbers?

- issues here may include projections of likely numbers over a 2/3 year period so that providers can do longer-term planning around small numbers/variable numbers

(d) Once in provision there are relatively few issues around really low quality – the issues are more around effective delivery models (especially models of embedding literacy, language and number into

vocational upskilling in ways that leads to dual certification of vocational outcomes and Skills for Life outcomes).

- (e) Do learners get good opportunities to get national qualifications (that are readily recognised by employers as being just what is needed).
- issues here, in terms of Skills for Life, include the extent to which providers offer, as a matter of course, regular (on demand?) national tests, both on-line or paper-based. There are also remaining issues about getting across clear messages around the value of Entry Level learning; the 80:20 approach etc. There are also issues around learners having running records of their progress that can be portable across institutions (e.g. where learning done in one prison needs to be carried on despite short-notice transfer to another prison, or on release into community provision etc).

In summary

There are big challenges. It's a long-term job but we are getting prepared to ramp up delivery of successes. There are some puzzles to be thought about and some jobs to be done across programmes/providers. There are aspects of all of this that has more relevance at national/regional planning level; aspects with relevance at local area planning level; aspects that are relevant for the differing teams across the LSC.

Wherever we are in the overall structure – there is something here for all of us.

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