

Notes for Meeting Community Needs Seminar

Delighted to have this opportunity to hear more about how community learning providers and voluntary sector organisations can work together to meet the needs of very disadvantaged learners.

I work in BIS's VE Directorate which basically looks after Govt funding and policy for FE skills. This seminar is very timely because in the Pre-employment and Basic Skills team we have brought together a wide range of issues to cover what we call social disadvantage. This includes skills support - about which I'll say more in a minute - offender learning, community learning and the skills agenda for ESF ... We did this because we could see synergies we weren't addressing across a number of these areas, lessons and good practice we could we could learn from each other and overarching all these areas the question of whether we are doing enough to address the skills and learning needs of the most disadvantaged?

We have just begun to think through exactly what we mean by social disadvantage and what the issues might be. We don't want to go down a route of purely identifying individuals and communities by group for example certain ethnic minorities, the homeless, travellers and migrants, people with LLDD, care leavers, those without basic skills etc although that is important to explain the types of need we are trying to better address. We also recognise people don't fit into neat boxes and there are many complex and multiple disadvantages we have to take into account including family history, geographical location, previous learning experiences and peer pressure – all factors and more that NIACE mentions in its stimulus paper.

From the BIS perspective our focus is on what we fund and you will know all about the mainstream adult skills budget, the community learning budget and learning and learner support for additional needs. What we want to do now is dig beneath what happens at the moment and find out how these budgets are working for the most disadvantaged learners and whether there are specific issues that need to be addressed.

For example are there accessibility issues about getting on relevant courses and additional maintenance support? Are there information issues about finding out what's available and the sector reaching the most disadvantaged learners in a way that engages them? All issues you all have experience addressing and can help advise us.

We are also in the process of collating data and evidence across disadvantaged groups to identify where we have gaps and where data collation could be more focussed and help inform our policy development. All this work fits into a wider policy agenda within BIS which is looking at qualifications reform and potential funding reform in the future amongst other issues.

Need to be realistic – we are not talking about more money, have to work within the current and planned funding envelope. Nor are we necessarily suggesting we change the way adult skills is funded by ringfencing funding for certain groups or changing the current priorities within the budgets. But we do want to know what works and what doesn't. Are there perverse incentives that mean the most disadvantaged learners don't get a fair slice of the cake or don't even know it exists? How do local and national initiatives fit together? I look forward to hearing more from all of you today

about what works at the moment and what we can learn from you. And how we can work with you on these important issues in the future.

A key theme for today is community learning and we see it as an important part of the wider landscape of activities and interventions to tackle disadvantage and support inclusion. Its flexibility and relative informality is particularly relevant for people who have the most complex needs and are furthest away from learning.

The national objectives for BIS funded community learning , introduced in 2012 require learning providers such as Local Authority Adult Education Services and colleges to use public funding to subsidise learning for the most disadvantaged people in our communities and develop a tailored offer that meets local needs.

In 2012/13 we piloted new approaches to planning and delivering community learning and we know from that work and other commissioned research that consultation with local people and partnership working between local services and business are both critical to identifying priorities and shaping learning provision; voluntary sector organisations are often best placed to reach the most disadvantaged individuals and groups and well trained and supported volunteers can play a key role in engaging and supporting individual learners particular if they share a similar background. We want to draw on these lessons for our wider social disadvantage work and we want your advice and ideas on how to do it.

This new approach to community learning is now being rolled out across England, supported by a NIACE implementation programme and monitored by the SFA relationship managers.

Now is a very good time for VCS organisations to open up (or continue) discussions with their local community learning providers about working together to meet the need of local people.

Conscious I've whizzed very quickly through BIS's agenda and there's much more I could have said about what we are doing the moment, what we might do and how we might do it but I'll save that for the Q&A session and discussions throughout today.