

# ENGAGE AND ENABLE

## Project Evaluation

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**European Union**  
**European Social Fund**  
Investing in jobs and skills



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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose of the Report**

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the extent that the Learn East ESF Technical Assistance project, Engage and Enable, has met the outcomes and outputs agreed with funders, the extent to which it has added value and the impact that it has had.

NIACE was commissioned by COVER on behalf of the Learn East consortium to carry out this evaluation.

The work took place during the lifetime of the project, commencing in June 2010 with the final report being submitted in November 2011.

### **Methodology**

The evaluation activity comprised a number of activities:

Meetings and events:

- participation in Regional Third Sector Learning and Skills Advisory Group meetings;
- participation in Regional Learn East events;
- participation in informal meetings with the Skills Strategy Manager and Learn East members.

Desk research:

- scrutiny of minutes of meetings;
- scrutiny of quarterly reports from representatives of Learn East member organisations;
- scrutiny of evaluations of Learn East events.

Websites:

- review of websites of each Learn East member organisation on three separate occasions over the lifetime of the project.

On-line surveys:

- development and analysis of on-line surveys of:
  - external regional and local stakeholders;
  - members of Learn East member organisations;
  - recipients of bursaries.

Interviews:

- interviews with the lead officer of each of the Learn East member organisations;

- interviews on two occasions each with six case study organisations selected by Learn East member organisations.

Conclusions and report:

- reviewing and analysing the information obtained from the activities listed above;
- preparing the final report.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

### **National context**

In May 2004 the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) published its Working Together Strategy. This was a sector-specific strategy for the third sector (at that time referred to as the voluntary and community sector - VCS) which drew together the themes of social inclusion, personal skills development, widening participation and workforce development. A key message within the strategy was the desire for the LSC to increase the amount of learning provision delivered by the third sector to meet LSC targets around hard to reach learners. The stated preference of the LSC was not to achieve its aims by increasing the number of individual third sector providers holding contracts but by working with small third sector providers through learning and skills consortia covering specified geographic areas.

### **Regional context – Working Together**

In late 2006 and early 2007 the LSC East of England worked with a small group of third sector organisations to develop a revised regional Working Together Action Plan. The aims of the Plan, which was published in March 2007, were to develop existing relationships and structures to enable the third sector and the LSC to work together more successfully in a manner designed to offer equity of opportunity and to recognise and respond to diversity. The LSC identified regional funding to take forward the LSC / third sector Working Together Development Project designed to increase third sector readiness and capacity in the region to bid for and deliver LSC mainstream and ESF work through the negotiated and tendered commissioning rounds from January 2008 onwards. The activities of the project, which ran from April 2007 to July 2008, included strategic planning, developing contract delivery capacity, developing communication channels and VCS workforce development. A further ESF Technical Assistance-funded project permitted this activity to continue until October 2009. Its aims were to assist in the development of robust third sector consortia with fit for purpose quality assurance, financial and data management systems and with staff whose qualifications meet the national requirements for delivering learning and offering learner support.

The above projects led to the establishment of six sub-regional third sector learning and skills consortia / partnerships in: Bedfordshire and Luton, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. These organisations worked together under the umbrella of a regional consortium – Learn East, managed by COVER the regional third sector infrastructure organisation. The consortia worked hard to build the capacity of their members, to develop communications channels, to establish systems and protocols and to begin to support their members to work in partnership to submit funding bids for both prime contractor and sub-contractor status. They achieved improvements in communication, collaboration, trust and cohesion and moved learning and training up the agenda within the third sector. They made valuable contacts with mainstream providers, gained the

respect and support of key local organisations, including local authorities, and achieved greater understanding within the LSC of local third sector activity.

However, during the lifetime of the above projects the third sector had to substantially change the way it operated within the learning and skills arena. Traditional mechanisms for securing grant funding to deliver learning changed with the introduction of Open and Competitive Tendering and Pre-Qualifying Questionnaires (PQQs). Although there was general agreement that it would have been anti-competitive for the sector to be given preferential treatment in relation to these processes, many maintained that a system where small third sector organisations have to compete for funding alongside large mainstream and private learning providers did not offer equity of access to funding. In addition an almost universal requirement for regional bids was introduced, accompanied by a restriction to a single level of sub-contracting. The negative impact of this development was felt widely across the sector by the many third sector organisations with a strong record in, and considerable reliance on, the delivery of small to medium-sized ESF contracts. Most of the sub-regional consortia / partnerships which had set out with the aim of achieving prime contractor status were forced to reconsider their missions and put in place mechanisms for more effectively managing the process of becoming involved in a subsidiary role in bids led by others. With the benefit of hindsight some recognised that a focus from the outset on the development of a regional learning and skills consortium might have offered more immediate benefits than those available to a strategy focused on the development of sub-regional consortia.

### **Regional context - Engage and Enable**

Further ESF Technical Assistance funding was secured from November 2009 to October 2011 to build upon the previous successful projects described above. The main outcomes proposed were to further **engage** and **enable** third sector organisations to participate in the ESF 2010 and 2011 funding rounds and to increase opportunities for delivering learning. This is the Engage and Enable project which is the subject of this evaluation report.

During the lifetime of the Engage and Enable project the learning and skills landscape has continued to change dramatically. ESF and other public funding opportunities which were once available to third sector organisations have undergone process changes, making it impossible for many small or niche specialist learning providers to access funding in their own right. Minimum contract levels, PQQ procedures, ACTOR registration requirements and increased data security requirements have also presented further barriers for many third sector learning providers. They have been obliged to accept the move away from direct competition with mainstream providers, for which they had been preparing themselves, towards collaboration or sub-contracting in an attempt to continue to receive funding to deliver their learning services for their hard to reach client groups. Where ESF and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) funding is concerned this has been a difficult transition, providing a challenge to those small third sector learning providers without the capacity or the skills to meet the sub-contracting demands of larger mainstream providers and / or prime contractors. With support from Learn

East members these organisations are beginning to work together to develop a combined 'offer' to Prime Contractors via a consortium approach.

## **Engage**

The agreed outcomes and outputs of this element of the project are as follows:

- provide a Regional Strategic Skills Manager with a third sector background to coordinate and manage the project;
- provide a regional coordination and support function to Learn East and their member organisations;
- eight Learn East meetings to take place during the lifetime of the project;
- Learn East to secure at least one regional contract;
- research into the contribution that the sector can make as a provider of learning and skills and the production and dissemination of a set of resources to promote this;
- develop and maintain six sub-regional websites linked to a central Learn East web resource;
- seven Regional Third Sector Learning and Skills Advisory Group meetings to take place during the lifetime of the project;
- develop and maintain effective channels of communication with a wide range of strategic stakeholders having an interest in learning and skills and entry to work;
- support engagement with key government skills initiatives.

## **Enable**

The agreed outcomes and outputs of this element of the project are as follows:

- offer practical support to enable and facilitate the delivery of learning contracts secured with statutory bodies and prime contractors;
- provide 40 bursaries of up to £500 for staff and volunteers from third sector organisations to undertake learning support and teaching qualifications;
- coordinate and deliver 10 partnership events / workshops across the region in order to highlight the latest learning and skills initiatives and to provide opportunities to involve cross-sector partners in supporting the sector's aspirations for the future;
- commission an external evaluation of the impact of the Engage and Enable project.

## **LEARN EAST**

The Learn East consortium is convened and led by COVER, the regional third sector infrastructure organisation. Its membership comprises six county-based consortia or partnerships of third sector organisations having an interest in learning and skills. The history, structure, longevity and modus operandi of each of these member organisations evidences considerable variety. Many of them sit within a host organisation and the extent to which their activities can readily be distinguished from those of the host organisation is variable. Some of the Learn East member organisations can be seen as a natural development (or in some cases continuation) of other pre-existing organisations. Others were newly created in response to the East of England LSC's Working Together initiative in April 2007. This makes it difficult to use the same benchmarks to measure the progress and value added by the individual consortia / partnerships.

### **Suffolk Learning Consortium**

Suffolk Learning Consortium (SLC) is hosted by Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations (SAVO). It was established shortly before April 2007. Its aims are to:

- promote the interests of the sector to key strategic and other bodies in the field of learning and skills;
- support the development of third sector organisations as users and providers of learning and skills opportunities;
- promote development and act as the coordinator of collaborative funding bids;
- work towards assuring sustainable funding for SLC backed by a clear, long-term business plan;
- ensure that the sector workforce is fully skilled by the provision of high quality learning and skills opportunities.

Its main activities are:

- provision of information via a website and an e-newsletter;
- information and networking events;
- coordination of funding bids;
- representation of the sector at sub-regional, regional and national levels;
- management of local sources of funding (Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities - NLDC and ESOL MIF);
- provision of information, advice and guidance to members;
- development of on-line toolkits for the sector.

The establishment of SLC has created a trusted and impartial intermediary which acts as a channel of communication between prime contractors and individual third sector organisations and as a catalyst for greater cross-sector collaboration.

The impact for members is that they have had the opportunity, developed the capacity and acquired the qualifications to become more successfully engaged as sub-contractors in LSC / SFA and DWP contracts. Although SLC have not actively supported the submission of any bids for ESF funding they have enabled a considerable number of their members to obtain funding from NLDC and My Guides.

SLC is in receipt of three year funding from the Big Lottery Fund in order to continue to develop the capacity of the third sector in Suffolk to deliver learning. Its medium term future is, therefore, relatively secure although the loss of Engage and Enable funding from November 2011 could reduce opportunities for SLC to continue to represent the sector as actively as is possible at present.

### **Hertfordshire Training and Development Consortium**

A third sector consortium existed in Hertfordshire before 2007 and was led by a local College of Further Education. However, it had largely been disbanded by the time the Working Together initiative was launched. Hertfordshire Training and Development Consortium (HTDC) was established in October 2007 and is hosted by Hertfordshire Community Foundation.

The aims of HTDC are:

- building the capacity of the third sector in relation to learning and skills;
- providing workforce development opportunities for the sector;
- supporting the sector to access funding for workforce development and the delivery of learning and skills;
- creating a resource base for the sector;
- Influencing policy and practice.

Its main activities are:

- offering workforce development opportunities;
- providing support for:
  - capacity building;
  - quality improvement;
  - accessing funding via consortium bids;
  - contract management.

HTDC did not exist before the launch of Working Together hence all the above activity is new. It has a membership structure and its aims and services have been agreed following extensive consultation with members. It has also developed a set of protocols governing collaborative funding bids. HTDC has been successful in securing a number of funded contracts and has developed some important new cross-sector relations including recently with social housing organisations.

The impact for members has been a much higher level of collaboration both between and within sectors. A strong and beneficial relationship has been

developed with Hertfordshire County Council which has led to an increase in local authority support for and commissioning of third sector activities from a much wider range of sector organisations than previously. The sector is well-informed, has a well-connected advocate and benefits from annual face-to-face networking opportunities. Engage and Enable funding has enabled the HTDC Coordinator to involve herself in a considerable amount of developmental and speculative work relating to future involvement in ESF and DWP funded projects. This resulted in HTDC being included as providers in tenders to DWP from potential prime contractors. Unfortunately these tenders were not successful. HTDC were, however, successful in bidding for, and delivering, the EEDA Economic Participation programme in 2009-10. HTDC also managed a partnership of 12 organisations to deliver the Routes to Work project, with outputs coming in at 36% above the original target. The training opportunities facilitated by HTDC have considerably increased the preparedness of the sector to deliver learning across Hertfordshire.

HTDC is in receipt of a portfolio of funding streams of which Engage and Enable forms just one. The organisation reviews its financial position on a quarterly basis and is constantly alert to any necessity to change their mode of operation as various sources of project funding come to an end. Infrastructure funding, such as that offered via Engage and Enable is essential if HTDC is to continue to engage in developmental activity and supporting collaborative ventures on the part of other organisations rather than simply delivering concrete project outcomes.

### **Voluntary Sector Training (Essex)**

Voluntary Sector Training (VST) was established in 1999. Its members are Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs), volunteer centres and rural infrastructure organisations. It is a stand-alone organisation. Its aims are to make it easier for the third sector to access high quality and relevant training by:

- delivering training to staff and volunteers from third sector organisations, including trustees;
- offering a limited amount of direct support to the clients of third sector organisations;
- avoiding duplication of training opportunities amongst third sector organisations in Essex, Southend and Thurrock.

Training delivery is the main activity of VST alongside championing the skills of the third sector to a wide range of statutory organisations and networks.

The key purpose of VST has not changed as a result of the launch of Working Together nor of involvement with the Engage and Enable project. However, involvement with these projects has brought about greater engagement with third sector organisations and other key stakeholders across the region, the opportunity to articulate the voice of the third sector in Essex, Southend and Thurrock across the region and the acquisition of a much wider range of relevant information from regional and national sources.

The impact for members has been greater access to high quality and comprehensive information. The access to bursaries made available through Engage and Enable has helped to broaden the support available to third sector organisations and has been a real benefit to them. VST does not assist in the coordination or development of individual funding bids but does offer training on commissioning and procurement issues.

The funding available through Engage and Enable forms only a small element of the overall funding generated by VST. VST have recently established a trading arm designed to generate income in order to subsidise training for the third sector and to move into training markets wider than those simply comprising third sector organisations. However, the fact that this change has taken place shortly before Engage and Enable funding comes to an end is coincidental rather than causal.

### **Partnership Community Forum (Bedfordshire and Luton)**

The Partnership Community Forum (PCF) forms a part of the Learning Partnership Bedfordshire and Luton and the activities of the two organisations appear to be highly integrated. A precursor forum to the PCF did exist prior to 2007 but not in its present form. The PCF now has a formal membership structure comprising full and associate members with differing levels of support available to each. The aims of the PCF are to bring together the network in order to focus on activities related to learning and skills in order to:

- exchange information and share good practice;
- act as a sounding board for new activities;
- build links between partners in order to enable them to access funding.

The main activities of PCF are:

- providing information via a regular bulletin;
- holding quarterly meetings;
- offering briefing sessions on funding opportunities as and when they arise;
- holding capacity building events and workshops;
- offering a partnership brokering service via a newly-launched website.

Prior to the advent of Working Together the PCF acted more as a lobbying body for the sector whereas subsequently it has become more focused on sourcing funding for members. The membership scheme and briefing events were introduced as a result of this new objective. More recently, regular information bulletins, additional capacity building activity, speed-dating sessions and events to bring third sector organisations and mainstream providers together have been added to the menu of support. The enhanced website is a very recent development brought about with the support of Engage and Enable.

The impact for members has been a more informed view of the learning landscape and the benefits of structured collaborative working. This has resulted in greater success in accessing funding. Working Together was a catalyst for this. More recently, and with the support of Engage and Enable increased numbers of third sector organisations have been brought on board as project delivery partners and new funding opportunities and new areas of work have become available to them. The Learning Partnership, via the PCF, is well-placed to put in place the support that third sector organisations might require in relation to making applications for funding and moving into new areas of work. This can involve facilitating or leading bids as well as supporting the development of bidding partnerships in which the PCF plays no further role. This has led to a number of successful submissions for ESF funding, some led by the PCF and some by other organisations. The PCF also actively seeks to source funding from other sources including the DWP Work Programme and Next Step. The Learning Partnership manages the NLDC funding on behalf of the SFA. Member organisations have been supported to obtain qualifications for their staff and volunteers for both teaching and the delivery of information, advice and guidance.

The PCF is seen as a key part of the remit of the Learning Partnership and one which it is proposed to continue and expand even if the reduced income might lead to some restriction of activities.

### **Cambridgeshire Guidance, Employment and Training (GET) Group**

GET has been in existence since 1989 but have only referred to themselves as a learning consortium since the inception of Working Together in 2007.

The aims of GET are to:

- coordinate activities and information for providers of IAG and training;
- provide representation and advocacy for the sector at a strategic level;
- monitor and address gaps and duplication in provision in the Cambridgeshire area.

Its main activities are:

- holding regular formal meetings involving external speakers;
- providing information via a website and by email;
- developing the Cambridgeshire Quality Mark;
- organising capacity building activities;
- supporting the submission of funding bids;
- representing the sector in the allocation of various funds including NLDC and LPSA reward money;

Funding from the Working Together project and, more recently, Engage and Enable has permitted a greater level of strategic engagement to be undertaken on behalf of GET members as well as the provision of enhanced workforce development opportunities. An annual celebration event has become a key feature of the GET calendar. The membership of GET has

been restructured in order to reflect the increased involvement of key stakeholders from outside the third sector.

The impact on members has been an improvement in the overall level of service offered, including the development of a website. The delivery of PTLLS courses have also become an established part of the GET offer. GET alerts members to funding opportunities and facilitates the establishment of bidding partnerships. It does not, however, provide active support in the development of funding proposals. A number of GET members have been supported to secure funding from ESF, NLDC and other sources. GET provides capacity building and networking opportunities which have increased the level and quality of information available to members on funding, recruiting, supporting and progressing their learners. It also acts as a trusted intermediary able to articulate the contribution that the sector can make to the agendas of other stakeholders such as localism and the Big Society.

GET is in receipt of funding from a range of sources including the local authority and the Big Lottery. Hence, the loss of Engage and Enable funding will not immediately affect the future stability of the organisation although the level of strategic engagement may have to be scaled down if overall levels of income are not maintained.

### **Norfolk Unites**

Norfolk Unites was established in January 2008. It is hosted by Community Connections.

Along with other learning and skills consortia the original aim of Norfolk Unites was to secure and manage contracts for learning and skills on behalf of other third sector organisations. However, initial consultation with members and with other similar organisations nationally led to a decision to focus on proactively linking members to funding opportunities and brokering partnerships among members so that the partnerships themselves could successfully secure funding as prime contractors or sub-contractors. The focus of Norfolk Unites is thus on the needs of its partners and service users rather than the consortium itself. Its core values are to be financially attractive, realistic and practical.

The main activity of Norfolk Unites is the development and support of a low-maintenance but comprehensive website accompanied by the creation of a long term culture change in ways of working across the sector which is intended to be both sustainable and successful. Vision, time, funding and effort have been invested in the development of a website that is largely self-managed by its users and provides them with timely access to the information, partners and support that are relevant to them. Norfolk Unites also acts as the representative of, and channel of communication with, learning and skills providers across the third sector in Norfolk.

Norfolk Unites did not exist before the launch of Working Together. It has resulted in a new way of working and a sector that is both well-connected internally and also has strengthened connections with a wide range of

providers and funders from outside the sector. Members now have ready access to an impartial hub of information on learning and skills and experience an increased willingness to engage them in cross-sector partnerships. A survey in 2010 indicated a total of £200k funding secured by members specifically as a result of the support of Norfolk Unites. The new cross-sector partnerships established with the support of Norfolk Unites have resulted in some third sector organisations becoming involved in the delivery of learning for the first time.

The decision to focus entirely on the support of member organisations rather than the consortium itself leaves Norfolk Unites in a vulnerable position once Engage and Enable funding comes to an end. The aim of Norfolk Unites was always to bring about long term change that would be sustainable without having to rely on short term funding. The website, therefore, has been designed to be low-maintenance and largely managed by its users. However, without a dedicated web-master, working perhaps one day a week, there is some concern that the website could fall into disuse. Various strategies, including a minimal payment for use of the website, have been put in place to raise the very small amount of funding required to support such a position.

## **ENGAGE**

This section addresses the extent to which the Engage and Enable project has achieved the agreed outcomes and outputs of the 'Engage' element of the project.

### **Regional Coordination**

A crucial output of the project has been the continuation of the Regional Strategic Skills Manager post and the appointment to this post of an individual with the third sector experience and background necessary to coordinate and manage the project. This post has been filled on a full-time basis throughout the lifetime of the project by a Skills Strategy Manager employed by COVER.

The Manager has been responsible for managing all projects, pilots and networks associated with regional third sector skills activity. The role has been pivotal in developing better working relationships at a national level by developing links and building partnerships, and in some instances carrying out joint projects, with stakeholders and partners such as: Skills Third Sector; the Third Sector National Learning Alliance (TSNLA); the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA); the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE); Consortia Plus; Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). At a regional level relationships have been developed and maintained by facilitating, coordinating and hosting networks and meetings with a range of strategic stakeholders including: the National Apprenticeship service (NAS); The Skills Funding Agency (SFA); Jobcentre Plus (JCP), the Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region (ACER); Skills for Care and various prime contractors holding contracts from the DWP.

The post has also facilitated better dialogue, improved information and good practice exchange, and brokered development opportunities for learning and skills activity within the third sector across all six sub-regions as part of the support and management of the Learn East network. Having a dedicated third sector skills representative to attend national and regional events and to cascade information has proved to be a cost effective resource. As well as disseminating information via the six sub-regional members of the Learn East network (having a total membership of over 650 members) the Skills Strategy Manager has a circulation list of over 300 other organisations within the region.

Representatives of the seven Learn East members have met 10 times during the course of the project. These meetings are very well attended with the full complement of members present on almost all occasions. This group focuses on issues and operational matters of direct relevance to the Engage and Enable project.

### **Promotional materials**

Learn East members have undertaken research into the role that the third sector can play in contributing to regional and sub-regional learning and skills

priorities. This has resulted in the production of *Help in a Box*, a high quality resource pack designed to promote to commissioners and prime contractors key messages about the ways in which the sector can assist them in meeting learning and skills priorities, particularly in relation to skills for employment for those furthest from the labour market. It contains case studies of effective practice, testimonials from funders and partner agencies and beneficiaries and a demonstration of the value for money that the sector can provide. It has been widely disseminated to stakeholders across the region.

In addition Learn East has developed and widely disseminated the *Merlin 80* template designed to facilitate the engagement of third sector organisations as sub-contractors in large-scale regional and national contracts by providing a common format for Expressions of Interest and related organisational information. Whilst the trigger for the production of the template was the 2011 -12 Work Programme tendering, it is envisaged that the template will be portable across all manner of learning and skills contracts nationally across the DWP, SFA, YPLA and associated bodies.

### **Regional contract**

A key objective of the Engage and Enable project was that Learn East would secure one regional contract during the lifetime of the project. Numerous regional bids have been submitted on behalf of the consortium but only one of these has been successful. Funding has been obtained from the LSIS Regional Response Fund to engage in the capacity building of Learn East members via an in-depth assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each member organisation, the development of a regional skills matrix and individual action plans followed by a targeted programme of individual and group capacity-building activities largely delivered by Learn East members. The contract for this project is held by The Learning Partnership - Bedfordshire and Luton on behalf of Learn East as a whole.

### **Websites**

An important element of the promotion of what Learn East and its members can offer has been the establishment of a Learn East website and the further development and maintenance of six sub-regional websites linked to this with RSS feeds enabling links to regional and national information and funding opportunities. This evaluation involved the scrutiny of each of these websites in July 2010, January 2011 and September 2011. This led to the establishment of minimum compliance requirements including acknowledgement of ESF support and Learn East membership as well as weblinks to the other six websites involved. During this period all the websites have been either launched for the first time or substantially revised.

The Learn East website, [www.learneast.org.uk](http://www.learneast.org.uk) describes the Learn East partnership and the Engage and Enable project. It contains web links to the websites of Learn East members and other strategic partners. Case studies are featured from some individual Learn East members or their partners. It contains information on regional and national news, events and funding

opportunities of relevance to the third sector. There were around 360 unique visits to the website in May 2011, 330 in April and 390 in March.

The Suffolk Learning Consortium website, [www.suffolklearningconsortium.org](http://www.suffolklearningconsortium.org) contains a wealth of information likely to be of interest to third sector and other organisations involved in learning and skills in Suffolk. In addition to regional and national news events and funding via links to the Learn East website it contains information on resources and support available to organisations in Suffolk as well as full details of the members and activities of the Suffolk Learning Consortium. There were around 2,600 unique visits to the website in May 2011, 2,300 in April and over 3,000 in March.

[www.norfolkunites.org.uk](http://www.norfolkunites.org.uk) is a sophisticated website designed to enable members to upload and advertise their own events and training courses as well as to identify partners for collaborative funding bids and other activities. In addition to information on regional and national news events and funding via links to the Learn East website it contains similar categories of information specific to Norfolk. There is also summary information on the work of the SFA, NAS, YPLA, and the NHS as well as information on various Norfolk groups including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). There were almost 1,400 unique visits to the website in June 2011 and over 1,000 in May 2011.

Full details of the aims, objectives and activities of Hertfordshire Training and Development Consortium can be found on [www.htdc.org.uk](http://www.htdc.org.uk) along with information on how to join the consortium. It contains information on regional, national and county news and funding opportunities as well as details of training courses, resources and delivery organisations in Hertfordshire. There are currently no mechanisms to record the number of visits to the website.

The main content of the Voluntary Sector Training (VST) website, [www.voluntarysectortraining.org.uk](http://www.voluntarysectortraining.org.uk), is designed to promote the wide range of training courses offered by VST. However, the Learning in Essex section of the website contains information on regional, national and sub-regional news and funding opportunities. As well as links to Learn East partner websites there are a small number of links to other useful organisations both in Essex and beyond. There were 1,900 unique visits to the website during the period March to May 2011 inclusive.

The Cambridgeshire GET Group website, [www.getgroup.org.uk](http://www.getgroup.org.uk), contains full details of the members and meetings of the GET Group as well as meetings of a number of other associated groups in Cambridgeshire. Information on regional and national news events and funding is available via a link to the Learn East website. As well as links to GET and Learn East members' websites there are links to other organisations likely to be of interest to third sector organisations in Cambridgeshire. No information is available on the number of visits to the website.

[www.learningcommunities.co.uk](http://www.learningcommunities.co.uk) is the recently re-launched website of the Learning Partnership - Bedfordshire and Luton, the host organisation of the Partnership Community Forum (PCF), the Bedfordshire member of Learn

East. The website contains information on the aims, objectives, projects and other activities of the Learning Partnership - Bedfordshire and Luton, including the PCF. It contains links to the websites of Learning Partnership and Learn East member organisations, as well as information on becoming a member of the Learning Partnership. The website contains details of news and events in Bedfordshire as well as information on regional and national news events and funding via a link to the Learn East website and links to the websites of a number of relevant national organisations. As the website was only launched in June 2011 there are currently no data on the number of visits it has received.

### **Engagement at sub-regional level**

The 'reach' of the Learn East consortium is largely dependent on the membership and distribution networks of the partner organisations. The reported membership during the lifetime of the Engage and Enable project is shown in the table below:

	<b>Feb 2010</b>	<b>May 2011</b>
Hertfordshire Training and Development Consortium	124	197
Norfolk Unites	66	305
Voluntary Sector Training (Essex)	26	26
Suffolk Learning Consortium	112	130
Cambridgeshire GET group	32	31
Partnership Community Forum (Bedfordshire and Luton)	150	150

However, the figures above mask considerable differences. In some cases the majority of members are individual organisations whereas in others most members are themselves infrastructure organisations with their own membership base which offers a multiplicative effect in the dissemination of information. A number of Learn East members have revised their membership arrangements during the lifetime of the project by, for example: introducing several categories of membership; introducing or removing membership fees; and moving from an 'opt in' to an 'opt out' approach to membership. The present financial climate plus changes to procurement arrangements on the part of several national funding organisations have led to large numbers of third sector organisations being forced to close. This has had an impact on the membership base of Learn East members. Some Learn East members draw their membership exclusively from third sector organisations whereas others have Associate Member categories which embrace organisations from other sectors. In most cases the distribution base of Learn East members extends considerably beyond their own

membership making the true reach of Learn East as a whole difficult to estimate.

Learn East members communicate with their member organisations in a range of ways:

- conferences and workshops;
- networking events and meetings;
- one-off and regular email bulletins;
- website;
- responses to individual queries by email and telephone;
- training sessions.

### **Regional networks**

The regional Third Sector Skills Advisory Group has met eight times during the lifetime of the project. These meetings have been well attended. In addition to representatives of COVER and the six sub-regional third sector consortia / partnership, membership includes representatives of key stakeholder organisations including the SFA, NAS, JCP, NIACE, ACER, Children Matter East, the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), Nations and Regions East as well as individual CVS organisations. A considerably wider group consists of organisations not in regular attendance at meetings but in regular receipt of minutes of meetings and related information. The Advisory Group has a remit for the development, delivery and oversight of the regional Third Sector Skills Action Plan as well as acting as a steering group for the Engage and Enable project. All members provide regular updates at meetings in addition to one-off inputs from external speakers on specialist topics such as the LSIS Support Programme, the Regional Skills Priority Statement, the Institute for Learning, initial teacher training qualifications and the legacy of volunteering developments related to the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. The Group sees its role as including advocacy and lobbying on behalf of the sector and has recently been in correspondence with the Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning.

### **Stakeholder engagement**

As part of this evaluation a survey was undertaken amongst regional and local stakeholders to identify the level of awareness of and value placed on the Learn East network and its member organisations. 33 respondents completed the survey. The majority were from local authorities (11), third sector organisations (10) and government agencies (5). There were very small numbers of respondents from provider organisations in the further education, private and local authority adult learning sectors.

17 of the respondents were aware of Learn East although only nine knew that it had a website. Of those who were aware of the existence of the website the vast majority visited it only rarely. Of those who had visited the website the majority found it to be fairly beneficial or better. A considerable majority

of respondents, whether they had previously been aware of it or not, deemed the existence of the website to be very beneficial.

The extent to which respondents were involved with, or in membership of the various Learn East member organisations is listed below. It should be noted that some stakeholders have been involved with two or more of the Learn East member organisations.

	Involved with	In membership
Partnership Community Forum (Bedfordshire)	12	5
Cambridgeshire GET Group	7	6
Voluntary Sector Training (Essex)	9	4
Hertfordshire Training and Development Consortium	11	9
Norfolk Unites	5	4
Suffolk Learning Consortium	3	2
COVER	15	10

The majority of communications between respondents and Learn East member organisations were reported to take place by email with a substantial number of contacts also reported via face to face meeting and at networking events. A small number communicated by telephone and two respondents had never had any direct contact. 16 respondents estimated that they were in contact at least once a month with the remainder being in contact only rarely.

Respondents were asked what they felt were the benefits of the existence of their Learn East partner organisation. A considerable majority put a high value on the existence of an organisation which could act as a voice for the third sector in their locality. There was also support for the role of the Learn East organisations in providing information about and access to local third sector organisations. Although a number of organisations welcomed the opportunity to promote their own services to the third sector only around a quarter saw the Learn East organisations as providing a route via which they could identify partners or sub-contractors for project work. Overall the vast majority of respondents regarded the existence of a sub-regional third sector learning and skills organisation to be either invaluable or very beneficial.

Only a small number of respondents (4) visited Learn East partner organisation websites more than once a month. The majority visited these websites rarely or never. In spite of this eight respondents claimed to find the websites very useful. The remainder had no clear views one way or another.

Slightly under half of respondents had attended any Learn East member organisation events. Six had attended three or more such events. The most common reasons for attending these events were: obtaining an update on third sector activity, networking and making new contacts, and hearing about good practice in the sector. Almost half the respondents attended these events in order to promote the work of their own organisations but only a minority saw them as a way of funding partners or sub-contractors for project work. Over 70% of those attending found the events very beneficial and all respondents gained some value from their attendance.

Only 11 respondents were aware of the existence of a regional third sector Skills Strategy manager based at COVER. However, seven of these had had direct contact with her which in all instances proved beneficial in progressing their objectives. In addition only nine respondents were aware of the existence of the regional Third Sector Skills Advisory Group and only four individuals had had direct involvement with the group. However, once they were aware of the existence of the post and the group almost all respondents felt that this was beneficial.

### **National initiatives**

The Engage and Enable project has supported engagement with the key government learning and skills initiatives as well as ensuring that third sector organisations are fully briefed on these. Learn East partner members have been actively involved in related developments.

Before the programme was withdrawn they were heavily involved in promoting Train to Gain to their members and in working with brokers to ensure that the support responded to third sector needs.

More recently this area of activity has transferred to the Apprenticeship programme. Learn East members have worked with NAS staff to promote the programme and with employers including local authorities and SMEs and sector skills councils, particularly Skills for Care, in order to assist in its implementation. Projects around Apprenticeships have been developed or are underway in Suffolk, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire.

Learn East members have had considerable involvement in national third sector activities, particularly in collaboration with Skills Third Sector, TSNLA and Consortia Plus, all of which have provided input to regional and local events as well as lobbying on behalf of the sector. Members provided materials for the TSNLA Quality Toolkit and are involved in joint funding bids with Skills Third Sector.

Considerable efforts were made at both regional and local levels to develop relationships with the expected prime contractors in various DWP programmes. The Learning Partnership – Bedfordshire and Luton recently secured an end to end delivery contract with one of the prime contractors in the DWP Support for Vulnerable Families Programme. Delivery partners will include third sector organisations from the Partnership Community Forum.

The Merlin 80 template mentioned above was another positive outcome from this activity.

Learn East members have worked actively with local Business Link organisations which has involved contributing to advisory groups and events as well as some collaborative project work – notably around a Future Jobs Fund brokerage service for third sector organisations and SMEs in Bedfordshire.

Ensuring that members are fully briefed around the professional requirements of the teaching and learning workforce is a central element of the support that Learn East organisations provide to their members. This includes the organisation and sourcing of PTLLS and CTLLs training courses as well as the provision of up to date information from those organisations central to professional requirements – notably LLUK and the Institute for Learning (IfL).

## **ENABLE**

This section addresses the extent to which the Engage and Enable project has achieved the agreed outcomes and outputs of the 'Enable' element of the project.

### **Practical support**

An important role of the individual Learn East member organisations has been to offer practical support to enable their own members to enable and facilitate the delivery of learning contracts secured from statutory bodies and prime contractors and to help to develop the learning and training provider role within the sector. An on-line survey was used to evaluate the extent to which individual third sector organisations had accessed this support and the value that they placed upon it.

129 responses were received to the survey, with over 40% of these from organisations involved with VST Essex and over 20% with Norfolk Unites. Between 10% and 15% of the responses were received from organisations involved with each of COVER, Cambridgeshire GET Group, HTDC and the Partnership Community Forum (Bedfordshire and Luton). Slightly less than 5% of the respondents had been involved with Suffolk Learning Consortium.

Slightly over 70% of respondents had attended Learn East partner events during the previous 18 months. Around one third of these had attended three or more events. Approximately the same proportion of respondents had been offered individual support and advice from Learn East partners during the same period, in many cases on multiple occasions. The vast majority of respondents had received or accessed general information from Learn East partner organisations via websites, newsletters and email alerts. The main themes of the events and other forms of practical support were reported as being information and advice about learning opportunities (71%), building capacity to deliver learning (36%), finding partners for collaborative funding bids (32%) developing quality assurance (QA) and management information systems (MIS) (24%), and preparing funding bids (23%).

38 respondents reported leading funding bids in the previous 18 months, with 34 of these having been successful. For most organisations the pattern of submission and success was much the same as during the previous year. A smaller number, 30, reported being involved in funding bids in a sub-contractor capacity. 23 of these were successful. Again, for most organisations this repeated patterns of previous years.

41 organisations reported having been involved in the delivery of learning in the previous 18 months with the average number of learners engaged being 587. 37 organisations reported having been involved in the delivery of information, advice and guidance during the same period with the average number of episodes being 842. Over half of the organisations involved reported that these figures were an increase over the previous year, with only a small proportion reporting a decrease. Almost 70% of respondents

reported that they had developed or substantially improved their QA processes and / or MIS systems during the previous 18 months.

The survey invited respondents to assess the impact of the practical support they had received from Learn East member organisations. The proportions of those agreeing or agreeing strongly with statements about various categories of impact is tabulated below. It should be noted that only a little over half of respondents replied to this question.

We are more knowledgeable about the opportunities available to us for delivering learning and skills	73%
We are in a better position to be involved in the submission of funding bids (as a prime contractor or sub-contractor) for the delivery of learning and skills	55%
We are more likely to be involved in successful funding bids (as a prime contractor or sub-contractor) for the delivery of learning and skills	52%
We are more confident in our delivery of learning and skills	54%
We are more confident in our provision of information, advice and guidance	51%
We are more confident that we have effective QA processes and MIS systems in place	56%
We are more engaged in the whole learning and skills agenda	63%

Overall the majority of respondents (74%) reported being either satisfied or very satisfied with the support and advice offered by Learn East Member organisations. Only six organisations claimed to be dissatisfied and two very dissatisfied. Again a significant proportion of respondents did not answer this question.

Respondents were invited to share any specific experience, service or contact they have had with a Learn East partner organisation, good or not so good. A selection of typical comments are recorded below:

*“The Learning Partnership Bedfordshire and Luton has provided a range of useful events in addition to the network meetings that have enabled us to keep informed and up to date.”*

*“The GET Group has enabled us to have members of staff properly trained and to train others – something we would not have done if they had not made the opportunity possible.”*

*“VST Essex provides a valuable resource for charities that have very little to spend on training and developing their staff and volunteers. It means that training and development can be top of the agenda without the concern of how to fund it.”*

*“HTDC are excellent. They are fully aware of their members’ strengths and skills and always bring the right organisations together. An exceptionally valuable service.”*

*“I have routinely accessed both the Norfolk Unites email alert system for new funding and contracting opportunities as well as sought advice in relation to SFA and Bravo Solutions queries. Equally COVER have provided very useful newsletters electronically rich with information relevant to the region and the work that we do. Staff from both organisations are extremely helpful and knowledgeable. With dwindling local resources and people these organisations are a crucial point of reference for advice and guidance.”*

### **Impact on individual third sector organisations**

Six third sector organisations, one involved with each of the six Learn East member organisations, agreed to act as case studies and to participate in a telephone interview on two occasions during the lifetime of the project. The purpose of these interviews was to evaluate the impact of membership of the Learn East member organisations on the individual case study organisations and to identify ways in which they would welcome further support in order to achieve their aspirations for the future.

The time during which the case study organisations had been involved with the Learn East Partner organisations varied from a few months to a number of years. The level and type of involvement also varied depending on the services offered by the Learn East members and also the specific needs and circumstances of the individual case study organisations.

The types of support offered included: provision of information via websites, newsletters and email alerts; facilitation and / or delivery of training; offering access to training bursaries; signposting to potential partners in collaborative funding bids and, in some cases, the active support for the development of collaborative bids and the management thereof where bids are successful; networking opportunities; support for the delivery of accredited programmes and one-to-one support in a range of areas.

Where the following services were offered, the case study organisations placed particular value on:

- national, regional and local information;
- up to date and comprehensive information on the learning and skills landscape and funding opportunities;
- brokering of partnerships for funding applications;
- coordination of collaborative funding applications;
- face to face networking opportunities;
- fit for purpose and affordable training;
- the feeling that the sector had a local unified 'voice'.

The services offered by the various Learn East members do vary considerably. Between them the Learn East members have extensive knowledge, experience and expertise, all of which is welcomed by their individual members. This offers opportunities for them to learn from each other and adopt good practice that has proved successful within other parts of the region. The evidence to date suggests that Learn East members have focused on their own particular models of service delivery and have not necessarily made efforts to trial other ways of supporting their members. Where the following are **not** offered by a particular Learn East member the case study organisations were emphatic that they would enhance the service provided if they could be added to the menu of support:

- face to face networking opportunities;
- training;
- coordination of collaborative funding applications.

The impact on the case study organisation of their involvement with Learn East members once again varies according to individual circumstances and the support available to them. However, all but one case study organisation was able to identify the difference that engagement with Learn East members had made to them in a number of ways. These included:

- access to funding;
- engagement in collaborative funding bids, projects and initiatives which could not be undertaken alone;
- engagement with new partners, often from different sectors;
- acquisition of better knowledge of the local learning and skills landscape, including progression opportunities for learners;
- increased capacity and confidence to deliver learning and training and hence the ability to attract new work;
- wider impact and ability to attract new members;
- opportunity to promote their own services.

## **Bursaries**

Funds have been made available within the project to provide support in the form of a bursary of up to £500 in value to enable providers within the sector to undertake qualifications in learning support, initial teacher training and related areas. The target of 40 such bursaries has been considerably exceeded. 52 bursaries have been awarded for a total of £17,906. The

breakdown of qualifications awarded and the location of recipients are indicated in the table below.

Qualification		Sub-region	
PTLLS	27	Suffolk	9
CTLLS	7	Norfolk	26
DTLLS	3	Hertfordshire	5
Learner Support	5	Essex	5
Train the Trainer	2	Bedfordshire and Luton	2
Assessor Award	2	Cambridgeshire	5
NVQ IAG levels 3 and 4	4		
Coaching for Work	2		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52</b>		<b>52</b>

The majority of the training courses were delivered by Colleges of Further Education, Local Authority Adult Education services and other third sector organisations.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme a questionnaire was sent to each recipient approximately four months after the completion of the course in question. 25 responses were received. 78% of respondents completed their course successfully. The remainder were still on course.

Approximately half of the respondents had heard about the bursaries from Learn East member websites, newsletters, e-bulletins or meetings. Everyone found the application process straightforward. Around one quarter of recipients sought help with their application from COVER. This was received by email or telephone and was helpful in all instances. All respondents felt that their application had been dealt with efficiently and that they were kept informed of its progress.

The majority of comments about the courses supported by the bursaries were positive ones:

*“The course was excellent and suited my learning style.”*

*“Despite my disability and health problems I had the best tutor who understood my learning needs and adapted the material.”*

*“The course was fantastic.”*

*“The tutor was excellent.”*

However, there were a small number of lukewarm and even negative comments:

*“Quite good but lacked a certain sparkle.”*

*“Sometimes felt too rushed and things weren’t covered very well.”*

*“Outdated and expensive”*

On-line learning was not universally popular:

*“The only criticism would be the difficulty of getting used to the online forum and finding the way around the site.”*

*“I would have liked to have had a course with other students and practice the coaching styles with a face-to-face tutor.”*

Respondents saw the courses as offering benefits to themselves in relation to the quality of their teaching, their ability to support other colleagues and career progression. They also identified benefits to their organisation in terms of enhancing the quality of the service offered to clients and supporting future funding bids and income generation.

All respondents were unanimous in recommending the bursary scheme to others.

### **Regional and sub-regional events**

Nine partnership events have been delivered across the region with the support of Engage and Enable, targeting regional and sub-regional audiences. These have aimed to highlight the latest developments around commissioning and tendering as well as other learning and skills initiatives. They have provided opportunities for organisations to come together to respond to, or consult on, the progress of regional developments affecting the sector and its ability to engage with ESF and other funding streams.

A regional Learn East stakeholder dialogue event was held in March 2010. It was designed to showcase the diverse nature and added value of third sector learning delivery. In addition the event offered delegates the opportunity to see what support is being offered to providers from local and regional infrastructure networks and to hear first-hand about examples of excellent learning provision and partnership work. 50 people attended the event and reported that they had found their attendance very worthwhile. 88% of delegates completing the evaluation form rated the event as good or very good. A second regional event took place in September 2011. This focused on the cultivation of collaboration and joint working between the third sector and Colleges of Further Education. 45 people attended the event including 10 senior representatives of FE colleges across the region. A series of structured and productive discussions led to the formation of collaborative action plans for each local area. 96% of those completing evaluation forms

deemed the event to be good or very good and stated that it had been a worthwhile use of their time.

Norfolk Unites hosted an event in Norwich in November 2010. It focused on the county, regional and national contexts for third sector learning and skills and considered particular issues in relation to working with the health sector, local authorities and the DWP. The event achieved a satisfaction rating of 77%.

Suffolk Learning Consortium organised a conference in Ipswich also in November 2010. The event aimed to provide information, and answer questions, on significant changes in learning and skills which affect the third sector in Suffolk, as well as to consult on the future direction of the consortium. 42 participants attended 71% of whom felt that their objectives for the day had been achieved. A further event was held in April 2011 although this attracted a somewhat smaller audience with only 17 participants.

A sub-regional event took place in Welwyn Garden City in March 2010, organised by Hertfordshire Training and Development Consortium. Its aims were to clarify the future landscape for third sector learning and skills as well as to provide a progress review for HTDC and to consult delegates as to how services should develop in the future. 50 delegates attended the event. 77% of them felt that they had gained a clearer understanding of learning and skills issues and 87% felt that they had been provided with a good opportunity to influence HTDC's future development. A further event took place at the same venue in May 2011 with 90 delegates in attendance. The aim was to provide an update on third sector learning and skills issues and the work of HTDC in addition to stimulating ideas for partnership working. Again the satisfaction ratings were high.

Cambridgeshire GET Group held a celebration of adult learning in Cambridge on May 19 2010 as part of Adult Learners' Week. Alongside setting the strategic context for third sector learning and skills activities the core of the event was a series of presentations by a variety of adult learning providers and learners. 79 delegates attended, over a third of whom came from the third sector. 99% of those providing feedback deemed the event overall to be good or very good. A similar event was held in May 2011 although funded from sources other than Engage and Enable.

The Learning Partnership - Bedfordshire and Luton held an event funded by Engage and Enable in November 2010. The purpose of the event was to invite partners in the sub-region to discuss the future direction of learning and skills in the locality and how participants might respond to this. It also provided the opportunity for the Learning Partnership to launch its *New Directions* prospectus for partnership working to support partners in difficult times. 78% of those attending, who completed evaluation forms, said they found the event good or very good.

No Engage and Enable event has taken place in Essex.

## CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of third sector learning and skills consortia at regional and sub-regional level in the East of England has been a journey which commenced in April 2007 and continues to the present day. The work of developing, building the capacity of and maintaining the consortia has been supported by three successive sources of project funding, the most recent of which has been the ESF Technical Assistance Funding which has supported the Engage and Enable project from November 2009 to October 2011. It is not possible, therefore, to evaluate the achievements and impact of the Engage and Enable project in isolation. It is simply the most recent part of a continuum of steady progress. Furthermore, during the final six months of the Engage and Enable project additional capacity building activity was undertaken with the support of the LSIS Regional Response Fund project.

During the period since 2007 the funding environment within which the third sector operates has equally been subject to steady and radical change. The timing has been unfortunate, an initiative designed to increase the engagement of the third sector in learning and skills activities was followed closely by the progressive adoption of tendering processes and protocols which are perceived to make it much more difficult for the third sector to contribute fully in this respect. At the outset it was the aim for the consortia / partnerships which comprise Learn East to achieve prime contractor status and to secure and lead contracts on behalf of the mainly smaller third sector organisations which form their membership. Over time they have been forced to reconsider their missions and to put in place mechanisms for effectively managing the process of becoming involved in projects led by others. These changes have brought about a considerable amount of cynicism within the sector since on the one hand there is a considerable amount of rhetoric at national level about working with and needing the third sector whereas, on the other, changes to the system militate against this. Some, however, see this as a clarion call to the sector to put its work on a more robust business footing and as a catalyst to demonstrate evidence of more collaborative working, including through the development of consortia. Whatever the case, the achievements of the Learn East members cannot be judged against the initial aims of the Working Together project back in 2007, nor even those of the Engage and Enable project when they were formulated in 2009. The world has moved on too much for this to be fair. ESF funding opportunities co-funded by the SFA or DWP are small in number and very large in scope and, as such, are likely to be beyond the reach of even a regional third sector consortium. Even funds appropriate for small third sector organisations, such as the Adult and Community Learning Fund, are very heavily over-subscribed and chances of success are small.

The sub-regional consortia and partnerships are all very different. Three of them were newly created in 2007 and their development has been at all times supported, although not necessarily exclusively so, by funding from the Working Together and Engage and Enable projects. Consequently their distance travelled and achievements resulting from the injection of project funding are relatively easy to measure. On the other hand, two of the consortia are based on organisations which existed long before Working

Together was established and whose aims and objectives and activities remain largely unchanged from what they were in 2007. The final partnership forms part of a larger, pre-existing organisation. This partnership was in existence before Working Together came into being but has revised and re-focused its activities over the last four years. In these last three cases it is much harder to provide robust evidence to demonstrate the impact of project funding, although this is not to say that no impact exists. But it is not possible to use the same criteria to evaluate the impact and distance travelled in individual cases as those which are applicable in the first three instances.

All the key outputs of the Engage and Enable project have been achieved, and in some cases considerably exceeded. These include:

- regional coordination and support;
- regional and sub-regional events;
- meetings of the Learn East network;
- meetings of the regional Third Sector Skills Advisory Group;
- development of websites;
- production and dissemination of promotional material;
- securing a regional contract;
- provision of bursaries;
- external evaluation.

Consortia / partnerships are now in place across the East of England at both regional and sub-regional levels. They encompass a wide membership and operate effectively in both a strategic and an operational context. They offer systematic sources of comprehensive national and local information to third sector organisations via websites, e-bulletins and one-to-one advice and guidance. The Learn East members have put in place mechanisms to ensure that the quality and accessibility of this information will continue at existing levels when Engage and Enable funding comes to an end. In particular they intend to ensure that the improved dialogue, sharing of good practice and collaboration, governed by appropriate protocols, at a regional level is continued in a structured way. They further propose to ensure that strategic engagement and dialogue with key regional and national stakeholders is effectively maintained. The third sector as a whole is better informed, better equipped and more willing to operate within the shifting sands of the current learning and skills landscape.

Small third sector organisations now have a trusted and impartial voice and advocate at both regional and sub-regional levels. This has resulted in increased levels of recognition and appreciation of what the sector can offer from key stakeholders within both public and private sectors. This in turn has led to a number of productive cross-sector partnerships and projects which otherwise might not have existed. The consortia / partnerships have increased their ability to engage successfully with potential and existing prime contractors and to support their members to engage in contractual relationships that are fair and equitable and of benefit to their clients.

The sector has been supported to engage in key government initiatives such as Train to Gain, Apprenticeships and the Work Programme and to lobby effectively at national level via engagement with organisations such as Skills Third Sector, The Third Sector National Learning Alliance and Consortia Plus.

As a result of the Working Together and Engage and Enable projects enormous steps have been made in professionalising the third sector workforce (both paid and voluntary) in respect of both teaching and providing information, advice and guidance. In addition the sector has been provided with a multitude of other forms of capacity-building support to enable them to deliver learning, support and guidance for their hard to reach clients. Finally individual third sector organisations have been signposted and supported to develop partnerships, often across sectors, which have enabled them to secure funded contracts to support this delivery.

### **Looking towards the future**

All the work undertaken since 2007 with the support of the Working Together and then the Engage and Enable projects has been built on the premise that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that the future for the third sector must be based on the principle of collaboration. Strong collaborative structures are now in place at both regional and sub-regional levels. If the achievements of the last four years are not to be lost it will be important to find ways to ensure that these collaborative structures are maintained even without the benefit of project funding to support their various infrastructures.

Government and the various public funding bodies are increasingly looking for evidence of impact and return on their investment, be it social or economic. There is no doubt that the third sector is well-placed to contribute to a whole raft of cross-government policy objectives including: skills, employment, health, environmental sustainability, criminal justice, regeneration, social justice and cohesion, community involvement, citizenship, volunteering, digital inclusion and well-being. However, the evidence base is weak and not well-articulated. Although work to develop a set of comprehensive indicators would be best undertaken at national level, it would be in the interest of Learn East members to ensure that any future projects be they regional or sub-regional, are governed by a clear and measurable set of common performance indicators accompanied by additional and contextualised indicators specific to the individual organisations involved. This, accompanied by clear and succinct reporting against the indicators, would build a much stronger evidence base from which to argue for future investment from whatever source.

The various Learn East members came from different starting points and have developed in different ways. They all offer services much valued by their members but these are, in the main, very different. The Learn East framework has permitted a considerable degree of sharing of expertise, knowledge and good practice. This has been considerably strengthened as a result of the LSIS Regional Response Fund capacity building project. However, this has not in the main had any significant effect on the nature of the services delivered by the individual members. There could be considerable benefits to be derived from a review of the service offer on the

part of all Learn East members, and consideration of the adoption of services successfully offered in other parts of the region.