

ENGAGE AND ENABLE

Project Evaluation

Summary Report

November 2011



European Union
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Investing in jobs and skills

NIACE was commissioned by COVER on behalf of the Learn East consortium to carry out an evaluation of 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. The work took place during the lifetime of the project, commencing in June 2010 with the final report being submitted in November 2011.

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 with the LSC/third sector Working Together initiative and continues to the present day. Six sub-regional third sector learning and skills consortia / partnerships in: Bedfordshire and Luton, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk work together under the umbrella of a regional consortium – Learn East, managed by COVER the regional third sector infrastructure organisation. 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. The main outcomes proposed for the Engage and Enable project were to further **engage** and **enable** third sector organisations to participate in the ESF 2010 and 2011 funding rounds and to increase their opportunities for delivering learning.

During the period since 2007 the funding environment within which the third sector operates has 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. It is not possible to use the same criteria to evaluate the impact and distance travelled in these last three 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.

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.