



## A Training Consortium for Shropshire's Voluntary Sector

### The background

The Community Council of Shropshire (CCS) was asked by the Learning & Skills Council (LSC) to investigate the development of a consortium of voluntary sector training providers. The idea is that individual training providers would work together to fulfil tenders from the LSC. This approach has been adopted elsewhere in the UK and is also being explored in Herefordshire & Worcestershire and Telford & Wrekin.

A Consortium has several benefits for its members. While the most obvious is the capacity to make bids against tenders, there is much greater scope for co-operation, both in offering training, managing and monitoring what they do and sharing best practice, and in relating to 'the outside world' via quality standards and links with regional partners.

Richard Sowden, an independent consultant, was asked to help enable this process and he began with research into local voluntary sector providers of learning and training opportunities. The aim was to establish the training delivered, numbers of candidates, accreditation and funding that are currently in place; and to gather the views of training providers on how a consortium might be established and how it should act.

### Initial research

28 of the 65 organisations originally circulated returned the completed questionnaire, a very high response rate for a written survey. 18 of these organisations are actually training

providers (although others provide in-house training to staff or volunteers), and 14 of these were interested in being part of a consortium. From these there were sufficient representatives willing to be part of a reference group to take the process forward in discussion with the CCS and LSC.

The survey presented a range of services provided by some existing consortia, and asked organisations to identify those which would be useful to them. A new Shropshire consortium may not provide this range in the short-term, depending on how and to what level it is funded, but the answers (see over) showed the priorities of its potential members.

All of these functions make good practical sense to organisations but also might be good for morale. To feel part of a larger body with a common philosophy (even if not common aims) reinforces the voluntary and community sector (VCS), particularly in a rural area where they may be working in isolation.

Strengthened co-operation between organisations increases their value as training providers.

The research function was not given quite as much importance in the list of priorities. This may be because CCS already maintain a database of such information, available to the whole voluntary network via the Voluntary Sector Learning Information Point (VSLIP) website.

### **We think a consortium should be:**

- most importantly - representing the interests of the sector.
- consulting with funding & planning bodies
- supporting the preparation of bids against tenders. Small voluntary bodies may be short of both resources and confidence for mounting significant funding applications, and nervous about managing and distributing the results
- exchanging information and skills - sharing good practice, being kept informed of local and national developments, sharing expertise
- organising joint events and joint publicity, and exploring ways of joint delivery
- Providing support in meeting the requirements of the Common Inspection Framework (required for all learning delivery funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) or government) and in gaining access to National Vocational Qualification/ Open College Network (NVQ/OCN) accreditation through approved centres.
- Encouraging ongoing research and recording of training needs and providers.

The relationship with the LSC was seen as critical. The VCS need to take advantage of the willingness of the LSC to work with them. They also need to have confidence in LSC support. And they need to be re-assured that a consortium is not going to be just another talking-shop, consuming time and energy in meetings which can be ill spared from practical action.

Of the training providers that have responded so far, there are only 5 that have directly contracted with the LSC, and as such have the most to gain from establishment of a consortium. However there is potential for any consortium to expand as its benefits become apparent.

### **Other examples of local voluntary sector consortia**

Other examples of local voluntary sector consortia include 'Learnability' in Staffordshire ([www.learnability.org.uk](http://www.learnability.org.uk)), 'Right People Right Skills' in the Black Country ([www.rightskills.org](http://www.rightskills.org)), Coventry & Warwickshire Learning Consortium ([www.cwlearningconsortium.org.uk](http://www.cwlearningconsortium.org.uk)), 'Learning Together' in Cheshire & Warrington ([www.learning-together.co.uk](http://www.learning-together.co.uk)), and the 'Learning Curve' in Wiltshire ([www.learningcurve.org.uk](http://www.learningcurve.org.uk)).

### **Taking the process forward in Shropshire**

The first meeting of the Shropshire voluntary sector reference group took place on February 7th. Reference group attendees include representatives of the LSC and CCS as well as interested individual voluntary organisations including North Shropshire Voluntary Action, Home Start North Shropshire & Oswestry, Shropshire Pre-School Learning Alliance, Homeless in Oswestry Action Partnership, and South Shropshire Furniture Scheme.

### **The LSC perspective**

Since re-organisation the LSC area now covers Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Corin Crane gave a presentation of the LSC's perspective, outlining the LSC requirements for a consortium. The LSC has high quality and delivery standards for consortia, requiring that they:

- have a common data collection system that meets the requirements of the Common Inspection Framework,
- have a communication strategy between members that demonstrates that the consortium is fully inclusive to the VCS
- have a staff team with a leader who has a full understanding of contracting with the LSC,
- have fair and transparent governance, ensuring equality in the receipt of contracts,
- monitor staff development needs throughout the membership,
- show evidence of capacity building to develop the range of training delivered,
- and take a role in local planning through Local Area Agreements.

The LSC are particularly concerned with closing the skills and training gaps for young people and for adults, and with employer skills provision.

All of this places high demands on any potential consortia and requires a different perspective from that of the small voluntary organisation that is looking for the benefits of a networking group and co-operation in accessing funding and delivering training.

### **The options**

A Reference Group of key partners was set up and at meetings in February and March 2007, the group considered options and selected the following as the best way forward:

- The consortium to consist of a partnership governed by a Partnership Agreement
- Shropshire County Council Learning, Employment & Training Services (LETS)

to act as the accountable body

- Funding to be sought for a coordinator
- Further actions agreed to maintain momentum
- Long-term sustainability to be achieved through top-slicing from successful bids



*The reference Group gets to work*

### **LSC Area**

At the same time that CCS has been investigating a Consortium, Telford & Wrekin CVS were asked to carry out a similar exercise for their area. Community First did their research and consultation in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, with Richard Sowden, in 2005/06. There have been meetings between the lead organisations, and other interested voluntary organisations and the LSC, to co-ordinate the potential for a consortium across the LSC area.

The Herefordshire, Worcestershire & Shropshire Training Providers Association (HWSTPA) gave a presentation to a meeting of the tri-county co-ordination group. HWSTPA's membership is a mix of private work-based learning providers, FE Colleges and some of the larger voluntary providers. The Association runs on low overheads with the two staff working from home. They have secured

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£8.2m of contracts over the last 18 months. Tenders are circulated to all members, who are then able to submit an expression of interest. Bids are drawn together from across the variety of their members.

The option agreed by the Shropshire Reference Group was to continue to co-operate in joint working between the LSC, HWSTPA, Community First and Telford & Wrekin CVS, giving the benefits of membership of HWSTPA, together with additional resources to facilitate the process and produce the best outcomes for the voluntary organisations that join.

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### **What next?**

The process is in its early stages and needs to be explored further. The experience of setting up voluntary sector consortia both locally and elsewhere in the UK suggests that the establishment of relationships and trust takes time. The most sensible way forward would be to build on the networking and signposting activity already carried out by CCS and for which there is already acceptance within Shropshire's voluntary sector, (although there is no future funding for this from the LSC.)

But failure to begin to move towards some sort of consortium-type structure would miss an opportunity to establish a more effective way of bidding for training funds and delivering training within the sector. Although many organisations within the sector may feel that they want to be involved at this stage, the nature and scale of training to be delivered via a consortium might limit their involvement. The LSC is most concerned with the delivery of NVQs and although voluntary organisations are well placed to refer and provide information to hard to reach people, they are not major

deliverers of NVQs. The LSC will be issuing tenders for the delivery of services rather than providing grants or any other funding, and providers will have to meet their quality and delivery requirements.

Meanwhile the following action points have been agreed:

- The LSC will maintain a watching brief on any funding which might become available for a consortium co-ordinator.
- CCS and the Learning Employment & Training Service (LTS) will apply for funds for a consortium coordinator
- CCS will organise a meeting during Adult Learners' Week, w/c 21 May 2007, as a joint event between training providers, colleges and the voluntary sector
- CCS's new Voluntary Sector Recruitment Service for Learning and Training will be promoted
- Consideration will be given to a joint bid to the LSC for a NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) project
- CCS and Telford & Wrekin CVS will agree a Partners' Profile format to enable bidders to select potential partners from the voluntary sector
- The Shropshire Reference Group will work on the Potential in People Groundwork West Midlands project
- And continue to liaise with Telford & Wrekin and Herefordshire & Worcestershire

What form the consortium takes in Shropshire will continue to develop in relation to the particular needs of the voluntary sector in the county, and voluntary and community organisations are encouraged to contribute their views to Jean Garner at CCS (see address below).

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## Examples of voluntary sector training and learning delivery in Shropshire

**North Shropshire Voluntary Action** work with both individual volunteers and with voluntary organisations, recruiting, matching and supporting individuals into volunteering. Many of these are people with low confidence, basic skills needs, mental health issues or learning difficulties or are using volunteering to improve their employability.

They deliver Information, advice and guidance (IAG) through the Getting Qualified project for learners from the sector wanting to undertake NVQs at level 3, supporting learners as they progress through their NVQs.

They also provide training for voluntary and community organisations, primarily on volunteering or volunteer management issues, and have also run courses on voluntary sector issues e.g. funding / fundraising.

They provide one-to-one support for voluntary and community organisations - e.g. through Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations (PQASSO) mentoring, and the Investing in Volunteer standard; and run a Volunteer Co-ordinators' Forum which specialises in learning through a Learning Loop model, enabling those managing volunteers to exchange information and learn from each other's experiences.

Training is normally delivered by their own staff except where specialist issues are involved in which case they use reputable outside facilitators.

They are Matrix accredited, have the Volunteer Centre kite mark, and have achieved PQASSO at level one.

The work is supported through a mixture of funding from the LSC; Regenerating

Communities Action Plan, Objective 2; Northern Marches Leader +; Lloyds TSB Foundation; Home Office funding (Volunteer Recruitment Fund); and ChangeUp. As with all such work they are dependent on time-limited funding but they feel that there will be increasing need for volunteer management training and one-to-one support for organisations to improve their practices.

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**South Shropshire Furniture Scheme** works with individual learners, specifically those who are difficult to engage. Identifying and signposting those with basic skill needs, they deliver a range of practical vocation workshops across Shropshire. A taster session is followed by approximately 30 hours of training, building up a portfolio which is then accredited through OCN at entry level and level one. Skills include carpentry, computer recycling, and various crafts, and they also cover Personal development, Customer service, Health & Safety and group work.

Most of this is delivered by their own organisation, though some of the IAG delivery is sub contracted to County Training. They are OCN and Matrix accredited and as an LSC provider (and with their training fully funded by them) are audited by them annually. Over three years they have worked with almost 900 learners and are hoping for a renewed contract to continue the work.

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**Homeless in Oswestry Action Partnership (HOAP)** provides housing advice, support and a furniture scheme, aiming to support clients to solve their housing problems and maintain their independence. The clients have a skills

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gap, with 80% not in employment, and HOAP have developed training to meet the needs of clients and some volunteers. In Autumn 2006 they gained OCN accreditation. They have provided Health & Safety training and Internet courses and are going to be delivering OCN Assertiveness courses in their clients' homes. Their aim is to meet the individual needs of clients, many of whom may not want to go to college or even consider training. A lot of 'hand holding' is needed, together with a subtle approach to identifying basic skills needs. HOAP therefore aim to deliver training in a way to suit the individual and in co-operation with other appropriate bodies. For example South Shropshire Furniture Scheme's ESF Project may be able to provide assistance, and working with the furniture scheme is ideal for learning related activities. The Supporting People contract is meeting some of the current funding needed. Future funding is always being sought for what they want to deliver.

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**Shropshire Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA)** is a registered training provider that has achieved an excellent Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) Inspection. They provide accredited courses nationally which they are able to offer locally. These are at Level 1 through to Level 4, plus informal and practical workshops, Skills for Life, and workshops involving parents working with pre-school children. PLA also provide early years sector specific workshops including Health & Safety, Committee Skills, and Special Needs, for staff, volunteers and parents.

Recent training is aimed at providing parents with skills, covering, for example, nutrition and physical play. Shropshire PLA has two Triple-P (Positive Parenting Programme) workers who deliver workshops, or one-to-one sessions, on

behavioural management.

Accredited courses are run by trained and appropriately qualified tutors. Their NVQ Assessment Centre is based at the Midlands regional office in Birmingham. Informal, local, unaccredited learning is delivered by development workers, often in the pre-school setting. Over the last three years Shropshire PLA, which also covers Telford & Wrekin, have provided training for between 1,000 and 2,000 people. Funding is from the local authorities, (and in particular from Early Years Services), the Lottery, the Local Network Fund, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and Defra. Future funding is always an issue but the PLA has been in existence for over 40 years and has proved its worth.

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**The Community Council of Shropshire** provides training & learning to the voluntary sector in 3 ways: the "Getting Qualified" NVQ project, the programme of Short Courses offered by the Voluntary Sector Support Unit and the Wheels to Work programme.

**Getting Qualified Project:** This offered a free NVQ at level 3 to any member of the voluntary sector aged 19+ in Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin. Learners have been recruited by the Shropshire CVS Partnership and the Telford & Wrekin CVS and the NVQs are delivered by Walford & North Shropshire College and Telford College of Arts & Technology. The project is funded by the ESF and LSC Shropshire and offered 150 places.

**Voluntary Sector Support Unit (VSSU) Short Courses Programme:** These one-day and half-day courses are intended to build the capacity of the voluntary sector workforce.

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They are available to any member of the voluntary sector in Shropshire and the surrounding area. The training is delivered by professional trainers and by VSSU. The Health & Safety course is accredited, the rest are unaccredited. In 2006, VSSU ran 14 courses with a total of 126 attendees. These were all funded by CCS plus a small attendance charge to delegates. The training programme has been running for the last 10 years or so and it is intended to continue it into the foreseeable future.

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**Wheels to Work:** This is a programme to assist unemployed people to access transport to enable them to travel to work. This includes the loan of mopeds and assistance with learning to drive a car. The programme is open to unemployed people aged 16 to 64, in Shropshire only. The Compulsory Basic Training (CBT) for Mopeds is sub-contracted to "FastTrack" and is accredited by the Driving Standards Agency; Wheels to Work provide vouchers for subsidised driving lessons which are delivered by registered driving instructors and are accredited by the Driving Instructors Association. The programme delivers approximately 45 CBT courses plus 72 courses of subsidised driving lessons per year. Wheels to Work has funding for 3 years from Advantage West Midlands and Connexions, match funded by other agencies and administered by Shropshire County Council. By the time this funding expires in April 2009, the programme should be self-sustaining.

CCS has also been involved in additional learning & training activities, delivered by consultants and funded by the Shropshire CVS Partnership, for example, and we regard it as a

core unit in the services we offer to the voluntary sector.

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**Switch on Shropshire**, which incorporates Shropshire Broadplaces and Craven Arms Testbed Learning Community (TLC), delivers 'learner-led first steps learning' for new and reluctant learners.

Learning opportunities in the Craven Arms area include training in Legislative issues such as Food Hygiene or Health & Safety; Agricultural (Single Farm Payment Advice and Information Sessions); Practical, such as Hedge laying or Cookery; Developmental (personal and parenting skills); IT skills and Skills for Life such as Literacy and Numeracy L1 & L2.

Wherever possible the learning is delivered by the most relevant local training provider who is prepared to provide what the learner needs. If no provider can do this, the learning is delivered by the TLC itself either by staff from the TLC or by an identified private training provider. Delivery is accredited whenever possible and progression is encouraged. Four Volunteer Learning champions have also been recruited and work closely with the Learning Organisers in Craven Arms. Craven Arms TLC has delivered 600+ learning opportunities in 2 years.

Broadplaces is a self-financing programme to provide informal learning with volunteer support in accessing the Internet, using email, web cam, and online learning courses via ReachOnline. 420 Volunteers support up to 2,500 users per month in the Broadplace venues.

Personal and Community Development

Learning (PCDL) are using Broadplaces to support a pilot in Web based video-conferencing for a foreign language course in 3 -4 remote rural locations linked to a tutor. Brokerage of learning needs is beginning to be established, with requests to providers to bring learning to the community that is learner-led and negotiated with the provider.

Contact: Switch on Shropshire 01743 252020  
[www.switchonshropshire.org.uk](http://www.switchonshropshire.org.uk)

### **New UK Register of Learning Providers**

The UK Register of Learning Providers (UKRLP) is a 'one-stop' portal to be used by government departments, agencies, learners, and employers to share key information about learning providers. The UKRLP allows providers to update their information in only one place and share this across agencies such as the Learning and Skills Council, the National Learning Directory, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and UCAS.

Since provider registration opened on 1st August 2005, the UKRLP has grown to over 10,000 providers. Each of these has been verified against a recognised external source and has been allocated a UK Provider Reference Number (UKPRN). This is the unique identifier used to share information with the UKRLP partner agencies.

To find out more about the UKRLP project, click on <http://www.ukrip.co.uk>

### **Shropshire Training Courses**

If you are running courses you can advertise these free on our Training Digest website [www.vslip.org.uk](http://www.vslip.org.uk). If you are looking to go on a course also check out the website.

### **The Challenges of Voluntary Sector Management**

One-day course on Tuesday 22 May 2007 at The Lantern Centre, Shrewsbury

With course tutor Emily Tilling

Cost £30 (£25 members of CCS)

Contact Nickie Edwards at CCS on 01743 237872 or email

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