

SKILLS FOR JOBS – FE WHITE PAPER – WNY LEARNING PROVIDERS RESPONSE

“At W&NY Learning Providers we support much of the white paper, how it details plans for our sector and the statements it makes on addressing the needs of improving skills and reforming the FE landscape. The overarching narrative within the paper is in putting employers central to the future skills system – which although we support, is certainly something we have heard before in other Government strategies and we must not forget our commitment to learners at all levels of education, social mobility and levelling up.

However, there are definitely new ways of improved working highlighted within this reform that we will not have dealt with before, but I believe as we already have excellent, strong relationships with the chamber and other business membership bodies (FSB, CBI, LEPs etc) we are in a great position to support the roll-out of the FE reform for the employers & communities we serve locally. I believe this reform provides a good opportunity for providers and the network to further develop & grow engagement with employers and help shape a local skills curriculum that is as successful & impactful, as our members are truly at the heart of any employer-led strategy”. Alex Miles, WNY Learning Providers, Managing Director

This position paper will breakdown the key deliverables identified within the paper and how we, as a network and as providers, can respond.

The focus on jobs and growth will be delivered by 5 key themes:

- Putting employers at the heart of the system so that education and training leads to jobs that can improve productivity and fill skills gaps.
- Investing in higher-level technical qualifications that provide a valuable alternative to a university degree.
- Making sure people can access training and learning flexibly throughout their lives and are well-informed about what is on offer through great careers support.
- Reforming funding and accountability for providers to simplify how funds are allocated, give providers more autonomy, and ensure an effective accountability regime which delivers value for money.
- Supporting excellent teaching in further education.

The Five themes & WNY LP response

Putting employers at the heart - We are in a great position to support this theme with our existing successful working relationship with the WNY Chamber of commerce & in 2020 we launched our joint workforce development & future skills needs survey for local businesses to complete. WYLP is represented on the WNY Chamber Leadership Board so this will provide a great opportunity for skills and employers to be further aligned and ensure any skills curriculum developed by the chamber truly reflects all employers needs as well as providing a better understanding how providers and colleges operate, deliver and can respond accordingly. Skills providers & colleges have developed long standing, collaborative, great working relationships with employers locally and this can only help the chamber, LEP, MCA have the right provision to address local priorities & meet employer needs (we must also not forget learners needs too). As a sector we need to ensure the IfATE are developing standards in a timely manner, that have a wider employer involvement & testing than currently in place & this will be part of the future communication between the network, NSN and IfATE moving forward. The papers response to Apprenticeships and its 3-way approach – we are in a great position to support further employers involved in apprenticeships, working with the apprenticeship hubs, chambers & other business networks and engaging with young people through our school's project and adult learners through the devolved AEB coming in 2021 for WY. The Paper discusses gaining more feedback from employers, and we started that process in 2021 with our first roundtable discussion between ESFA & employers – which generated a fantastic, lively debate on future apprenticeship improvements and an exercise we will continue – however we need to get more involvement in feedback and sessions with smaller employers so the same players with the same messages are not getting feedback to government and local officials on employer needs. With regard to traineeships, Providers have already started positively developing traineeship programmes locally, however this is led by funding & with a very limiting 19+ tendering process and new entrants at 16-18 not yet mentioned this is very restrictive to support growth. If the Gov wants this element to achieve it needs to be more inclusive & open the funding to meet demand – a better managed funding ability, will lead to better & more traineeships offered. We will continue to promote and share traineeship opportunities, discuss with young people and help providers develop & strengthen their traineeship offer. Our members fully support the need to further support the participation in English, math & digital skills, but there is more to do from across the sector & locally to ensure this provision is top quality and aimed at the people who need it most, that support social mobility, social value and progress to employment. We have a Green Skills and an Adult & Community working group for network members which addresses some of these development areas and we will continue using this group to raise areas of business needs and engagement activities for the network. We will work with members and sector support agencies, such as ETF, to ensure the development & quality of these essential skills remains a key development area for the network, our members and the skills plans locally (that sometimes tend to focus more on higher level skills).

Higher-level technical qualifications / skills - We generally support this theme, but I believe there is a missed group of people or communities that are not yet higher level. There is a lack of pathway alignment or mapping that identifies and highlights how to lead to higher level learning and identifying appropriate “hop on – hop off” points in the education pathways so it is inclusive for everyone. The introduction of specific level 3 qualification is not really supporting the “employer led” rhetoric of the reform, if the Gov is mandating the qualifications. Surely this should be a demand led offer. The national skills fund will provide opportunity for adults to upskill and our skills providers & colleges will welcome this, however the devil will be in the detail and if this displaces opportunities that our devolved AEB should fill. The Gov clearly has an aspiration to grow level 4 & 5 provision, so providers need to think about their curriculum offer for the future and how they can continue the critical level 2 and below provision they offer but also support the papers theme for higher level skills – working with businesses and helping providers with their quality skills offer will be a priority for the network. However, it is crucial that quality provision is supported with the appropriate funding mechanisms to allow providers & colleges to develop their staff, recruit outstanding quality tutors and trainers and retain staff with the appropriate salaries. Our network can be the key aid to help link businesses and providers together further to ensure provision can be flexible and meet the needs and share the LMI, skills opportunities, relationships and partnerships with businesses across the region.

A Flexible Lifetime Skills Guarantee - Supporting a lifetime of learning theme is always going to be crucial and welcomed by us as the network and our members – for a long-time adult education has not been seen as much of a priority or need as funding and support for younger people – both are critical to ensuring the local economy and employment grows and recovers. We already work with the national careers service and local careers services; however, this could be strengthened and we will include in our business plans moving forward so providers and careers services can better communicate, share messaging and provide a single source of careers information locally. In 2020 we launched our skills matrix for WY and will develop a NY matrix in early 2021 – this shares the provision available locally into themes, and we will continue to develop and evolve this matrix throughout the year to promote what our members can offer and build in the lifetime learning and skills provision. We also have a comprehensive apprenticeship directory for WY and will launch in NY in 2021 also and continue to align the skills & apprenticeship pathways to local members and local provision so businesses, young people and adults know what is available to them in our region. We support the link to the Baker clause and will continue to develop this as part of our ASK project interactions and work with schools and providers to share the skills offer and opportunities locally. We also fully support the area of Improving how teaching is delivered so that it is more accessible, with the use of digital and blended learning and this has been a core CPD theme throughout 2020 and will remain so as we move forward. This is addressed in the quality corner monthly sessions we hold, and we have a range of support offered to providers to help develop and grow this area. We are also supporting the digital bootcamps and response from the LEP's / WYCA and we have continued with our Green Skills working group which incorporates digital developments.

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Reforming funding and accountability for providers - There is always nervousness when hearing funding is going to be streamlined and simplified – we have heard that before with apprenticeship reforms & other consultations which actually had the opposite affect – so the devil is definitely going to be in the detail here and we will keep members up to date with all developments on this. A certainty on funding is the absolute dream for our sector and members so we welcome this with open arms, but we need to be clear this is for all funding streams and all providers, if we want an inclusive, high quality skills system in this country then there needs to be parity and harmony of funding – if employers are really at the heart of this reform, then the funding needs to reflect that – businesses do not care about the intricacies of the different funding models between colleges, providers or programmes - they simply want the best provider to deliver the best provision for them – our funding system needs to reflect that and stop over complicating things.

We will work with partners on developing Local Skills Improvement Plans and ensure that all provider and provision types are included and locally this is seen as a true partnership arrangement for all parties and building on what works and not forcing new ways of working.

As we already have strong links with the chambers, LEPs, CBI & other business membership bodies, so we are in a great position to further develop the conversation locally for our members that leads to positive change for employers and providers. We are not starting off the backfoot unlike other regions where these excellent working relationships and links do not yet exist.

When discussing subcontracting I am sure we will all agree we would like to see poor practice taken out of the sector, but we are very clear this needs to be better managed by ESFA and not an ignorant approach that states poor practice exists in certain provider base instead of addressing it for all. We are well positioned to support providers & colleges with their subcontracting arrangements, risk assessments, provide critical external support and oversight and encourage local partnerships that offer a robust skills offer that meets the needs of all.

We do not support a refresh of RoATP in April for the full sector, all providers have enough on their hands dealing with learners and employers through recovery – now is not the time for a blanket approach but for the agency to have better control of providers that need more support or removal from the sector – this is poorly timed and poorly throughout our approach to drive up the quality of apprenticeships.

Supporting excellent teaching in further education - WYLP will fully support its members on the journey to outstanding and as such we will improve the provision of high-quality professional development and support progression for teachers and support the reform of initial teacher education and recognise the importance of initial teacher training to drive quality teaching, learning and assessment practice.

Through partnership working with key partners', we will promote and share the opportunities which are available to industry experts and how to make the transition from industry expert to dual professional in the FE and skills sector. Through utilising our links with universities & careers partners, we will provide insight into the career opportunities available working in the FE sector and what the routeways and financial incentives available to encourage graduates to explore moving into the education sector.

We will endeavour to provide high quality CPD opportunities for our network members which are frequent & topical to supporting excellent teacher training and develop and to ensure that these are accessible to all and not just new teachers. We will ensure all trainers are provided with CPD & skills development opportunities that continuously maintain and improve knowledge and skills with flexibility as to this being face to face, synchronous or asynchronous to ensure accessibility for all. We will continue to develop & provide opportunity for mentoring support to enable individuals to take those steps on a new career path and provide support to make the transition from industry to teacher.

Through utilising our established links with employers and memberships to various groups and boards across the districts to identify and secure opportunities for teachers to access and essential to maintain and develop professional skills and expertise to enable teachers to train the industry experts of the future and meet the skills needs of the area.

We will scrutinise workforce data which is published to provide members with a breakdown of the data and how this can shape their provision offer and curriculums to address the gaps in the region and employment opportunities available to individuals. This will also highlight any potential skills gaps for providers own workforce and upskilling requirements which we will then work with them to secure.

To discuss or provide your own feedback on the White Paper or our response please get in touch – alex.miles@wylp.org.uk

