

## ADDENDUM

Joint Response to

# Skills for Sustainable Growth: Consultation on the Future Direction of Skills Policy

By

The East of England Rural Forum & Rural Action East  
12<sup>th</sup> October 2010

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**Introduction**

These are additional comments to our full response submitted on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

This Addendum captures additional comments and emphasises specific points from our earlier submission following further consultation with businesses, training providers and educational establishments in the east of England.

These comments are again focused on distinctive rural issues regarding provision of training to rural people and meeting the needs of businesses located in rural areas including the specific requirements of land based agri-food industries.

**The East of England Rural Forum (EERF)** is a voluntary group which exists to debate, champion and promote rural issues and solutions. Its membership includes representatives from councils, business and community interests across the East of England. In addition to the full forum, a specific Learning and Skills sub group has been in operation since 2003 and draws its membership from representatives of businesses, community groups, training providers and funding bodies and has a private sector chairman.

**The East of England Sustainable Farming and Food Group** has its roots in the response to the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001, and has been configured in its current form since 2006. It acts to collate industry views on the future of the farming and food sector, and to present these clearly to the public sector agencies which work with the food sector.

**Rural Action East (RAE)** is an independent community led charity organization that works for rural regeneration across all six counties of the East of England. Its overall aim is to build strong sustainable communities where local action can transform the outlook for rural quality of life.

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**Principles for Rural Skills Provision**

Most of the skills issues faced by rural areas are not unique in their nature, but the way in which they are experienced or the solutions which are needed, are often different to those in urban areas. This is a particular issues in relation to skills, where rural people, communities and employers have the same requirements as the rest of the country, namely skills which assist with employment, competitiveness or social inclusion, but in rural areas accessibility and the range of provision can often restrict access to skill development opportunities which urban residents take for granted.

When looking at enterprise in rural areas, there is the same range of industries and business sectors as in urban areas, however the sizes of companies differ with micro and SME being more common and a higher proportion of self employed and home workers. This leads to specific barriers to accessing training.

**The overwhelming concern of all consulted is that unless the policy specifically addresses the higher costs of rural delivery, supports innovative approaches to delivery and ensures fair access for rural communities, there is a real danger that rural areas will be disadvantaged.** The result will be a failure to close the gap in participation and attainment which is most extreme in the more remote rural communities. This would also have serious economic and social consequences for rural communities, and their contribution to the country as a whole.

**Rural Businesses and Skills – General Comments**

- Increasing demand for skilled technicians and managers to support both new high value businesses located in rural areas and the increasingly sophisticated requirements of more traditional land based and agri-food industries.
- All education, whether for technicians or managers, must combine scientific and management knowledge with practical training and its application.
- An expansion of apprenticeships for Levels 2 and 3 is necessary but even technicians qualified at these levels level must have problem solving skills more normally associated with Level 4
- The remoteness and dispersed nature of rural businesses, communities and workers leads to additional costs ('rural premium') for access to training and its provision

**General Recommendations**

- 1 Rural proof training plans and apply rural target to ensure fair treatment for rural communities.
- 2 Rural proof funding methodologies such that they recognise the extra costs faced by training providers in sparsely populated areas.
- 3 Encourage modular courses to help smaller businesses and individuals access more flexible provision

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**Consultation Questions**

***We are concerned that the consultation is very high level and focuses on policy and principals without details of how delivery will be achieved.*** This will be particularly important in achieving equity in skills support and engagement with rural businesses and learners.

**Principles for a skills strategy (questions 1-3)**

**Q1.** We welcome the stated key principles. However, we are concerned at the narrow age range of the consultation. We would like to see the principles as part of a coordinated approach that provides a consistent, coherent, end-to-end system for education and training from aged 16 years onwards. This would link careers advice in schools to job opportunities and demand from businesses to the need for and benefits of qualifications and increased life-chances. Too often youngsters are unaware of the skilled, high value jobs and commensurate rewards offered by land based and agri-food industries.

**Q2.** We are concerned that the emerging Local Enterprise partnerships (LEPs) despite their economic focus have no explicit link or responsibility to support the development of skills and provision of appropriate training to meet business needs.

**Q3.** While we recognise the financial constraints and the need to increase private investment, businesses will (typically) only pay for training which increases the value of the employee to the company. This would lead to fragmented skill development and not support the attainment of qualifications and career development of the individual. A demand for a few specific Units will also lead to increased cost of training provision compared to the greater efficiency and reduced costs of providing a full course aimed at awarding a qualification.

The ability to pay should also be taken into consideration with a sliding scale of employer contributions based on the size and financial capacity of the business to contribute to costs of training.

**A respected and credible training offer (questions 4-10)**

**Q4.** Greater flexibility should be allowed. Too rigid a framework combined with constrained funding will not allow training to be designed to meet the needs of rural businesses. A small single rural business will not be able to provide the range of experience that frameworks require. In addition, tight health and safety regulations make it difficult to provide the necessary supervision at the 'work bench' of land based industries. Industry specific courses at land-based colleges have successfully overcome these problems, with high levels of both employer and student take up.

**Q5.** We support the idea of a pre-apprenticeship programme, however it will not solve a land based industry specific issue, where it is very hard for learners to gain access to employed status, until he/she has reached at least a basic and safe level of competence. It is essential that admission to courses is not based solely on prior qualifications, but is based on **both** qualifications and experience.

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**Q7** We recognise and support the principle that all training is of a high standard and delivered by suitable qualified trainers. However, the application of this mandatory requirement for specific training qualifications by **all** involved in provision of a course is preventing sensible use of industry based individuals to complement the formal course content from professional trainers. Industry qualified, experienced and knowledgeable individuals can provide great insight and inspiration to learners about career opportunities and development of their skills. However, the blanket application of the requirement of formal training qualifications for all involved in delivery of a course in order to secure Ofsted approval is preventing use of these willing industry experts.

**Q8.** Significant benefit to training through increased relevance and quality can be achieved through training provision at the 'work bench'. However, such out-reach, work based training is more difficult to achieve in practice and has additional costs for its delivery in rural areas. The rural premium must be reflected in the funding support to training providers

**Funding and entitlements**

**Q11.** The skills system has to recognise that working with the unemployed or disengaged in rural areas is more difficult because of access and remoteness and is more expensive. Funding of training providers must recognise the extra support and related cost which is necessary in these circumstances otherwise they will tend to concentrate their efforts on easier urban markets.

**Conclusions**

Whilst we have identified issues of specific importance to rural communities in this paper, many of the issues we raise are equally applicable to other areas.

We welcome the move towards local planning of skills development and would encourage an associated increased flexibility in approach rather than rigid frameworks. Training provision must be more flexible so that it truly meets the needs of all employers and learners.

While we welcome the general thrust of the proposals, the ultimate test is how the principles set out are delivered. The solutions to delivery in rural areas are not the same as in urban areas because of the sparsity of learners, remoteness, poor access to broadband, smaller employers and smaller providers. Unless a re-invigorated skills system allows rural areas to be innovative in how skills are provided and inclusive so that all employers and small local providers can participate, it will not be able to tackle the disparity in participation and attainment which are already present and holding back many rural people and communities.