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Response to consultation on 'Skills and Employment in London', draft strategy of London Skills & Employment Board

21 January 2008

I welcome this consultation and its emphasis on the need for a London-wide strategic approach to a big London problem - namely low skills and unemployment. There is clearly a need to focus on measures which benefit Londoners most disadvantaged by low skills or unemployment in London - including women, people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic origin, and disabled people. However, this should be in addition to, or by a more inclusive approach to, current provision for others with low levels of educational attainment and qualifications. It is also important to remember that employers also value what are often described as "soft skills" (the ability to work as part of a team, clear verbal expression, the ability to show appropriate initiative etc) and these need to be part of the training mix.

Problem of unemployment/worklessness in London

The strategy is right to highlight that London has more people out of work than any other region. It should, however, be more explicit in emphasising how this contributes to other social problems in London - for those out of work, but also for their families and the wider community. Addressing this problem therefore has the potential to lead to multiple positive outcomes, not just reduced unemployment and an increased skills base, and this should be clearly stated.

We should also be aware that there are many people who are not in the work of their choice because they have been unable to access appropriate training places, even in areas where we know there are domestic skills shortages, such as construction. Some schemes are very restrictive in who they will take on (e.g. definition of "local", or targeted at particular income levels or other measures of disadvantage).

Skills and education for Londoners: importance beyond employment

The draft strategy rightly draws attention to the fact that "Fewer than 50% of Londoners have the numeracy skills expected of an 11 year old, and over 600,000 adult Londoners have no qualifications at all" (p5, Executive Summary). The draft rightly highlights this education and skills deficit as being a major impediment for many Londoners when competing in the job market. However, it should also emphasise that the low level of education and skills is a problem in itself: as a general objective it should state that Londoners should be numerate and have some qualifications, which would improve future life choices and quality of life more generally. This provides value far beyond the immediate economic sphere, including positive impact upon families and dependent children educationally. This should not be overlooked.

Economic policy - sustainable development

It is essential that the strategy acknowledges the role played by economic and social policy in shaping the structure of London's employment market. For example, London's increased reliance on the increasingly globalised financial services sector is partly a product of planning an economic climate and framework for such a sector to thrive.

Sustainable development focuses on stable economic development which provides or enhances social and environmental benefits, and operates within ecological limits. It emphasises the quality of economic development, not the quantity. Sustainable economic development focuses on developing green sectors (see 'Green skills and green jobs', below) and on 'greening' all other sectors - that is to say, improving their social and environmental outcomes, as part of a low-carbon future. It also seeks to develop smaller scale local economic opportunities, and where possible utilises greater levels of workplace democracy and worker participation. Community and social enterprises, co-operatives, and worker-ownership initiatives broadly follow this model. The strategy should put the importance of adopting a 'sustainable development' approach at its centre. It should include funded measures for providing the training and support for those wishing to start-up local businesses, community and social enterprises, co-operatives, worker-ownership initiatives, and local and small-scale initiatives which train and give skills to those groups most disadvantaged by low skills or unemployment in London.

The current climate sees training being "built" to what employers want. Training should also be being built to what society and the environment needs. It should take into account issues of the future which have an environmental dimension. If it does not do this, it misses the opportunity of graduating the student into a more sustainable society. The opportunity cost of not doing it now will only mean that the student will need to be "retrained" once they are in the work place.

Local recruiting and employment

It is important that employers are encouraged to actively recruit at the local level. This is mentioned in the Executive Summary (p6, Challenge 2). However, the strategy should explicitly make reference to a 'sustainable development' approach, which, when applied in this area should aim for a greater proportion of Londoners being able to work locally. This also improves quality of life, reduces the need to travel (and hence emissions and congestion), and is better for balancing employment with childcare or other caring commitments. The strategy needs to fully develop this 'local recruiting' commitment, as referred to in Challenge 2.

Green skills and green jobs - climate change

The London Development Agency/London Energy Partnership key report "Skills for a Low Carbon London" offers comprehensive recommendations for starting to build the skills needed to transform London into a low carbon economy. For climate change to be taken seriously at the London level, it is essential that the strategy puts green skills and green jobs at its centre, and acknowledges the need for a skills strategy to play a central role in the response to climate change. London Assembly Greens (Darren Johnson and Jenny Jones) have responded to this consultation, making recommendations in this area. I endorse and add my voice to their recommendations. In particular, the strategy should follow up on the "Skills for a Low Carbon London" recommendations, and detail progress towards their delivery, and the evidence base of the final strategy should be widened to analyse the skills needed to deliver genuine sustainable development in London. In

general terms, the strategy needs to explicitly champion training on green skills, and ensure this is built into all areas of its subsequent work, assessing progress to this end.

Raising awareness of environmental impact should be considered as fundamental a requirement of training as communication, language or reading and writing skills. Currently, even where trainers want to put environmental issues in to a training syllabus, they are often inhibited from doing so because they either lack the required knowledge of the subject;, can not see how it will help them meet existing funding requirements or targets or have no authority to develop such issues.

Emphasis on quality of employment

The strategy needs to acknowledge that employment can be of varying quality, and adopt the objective of improving Londoners access to employment of high quality. This does not have to mean highly skilled, professional employment, but it should mean work paid to a living wage standard, with security and decent terms and conditions, the opportunity to join a trade union, and working in a safe and healthy environment.

Further education

Challenge 3, relating to increasing responsiveness from London's learning and skills providers calls for "continuing to ensure the further education sector is focused on employability". Whilst this should be an essential function of further education, it must be made clear that it should be one priority of further education, but not the sole or primary priority. It is important that further (and adult) education retains a broader set of priorities, in terms of adult education, lifelong learning and other forms of education/training, which benefit Londoners more broadly than simply in terms of employability. A broader vision of further education for Londoners will benefit London as a whole, in terms of 'quality of life', diversity and culture. This needs to be made clear in the strategy, and the importance of employability as a key priority for further education should be put in this context. It must also be remembered that restricting education to employability outcomes can be counter-productive in that people may be deterred or, indeed, prevented from acquiring new skills or developing new interests because they do not see an immediate relation to employment, but that can often be a later outcome> It is also important to foster a climate in which developing new skills and interests is seen as the norm.

Role for unemployed people and anti-poverty groups

It is vital that any strategy is informed by the perspectives of unemployed people and anti-poverty groups in London. The strategy needs to fully take on board their concerns and recommendations. A mechanism should be developed for these stakeholders to assess progress as the strategy is implemented. Emerging concerns from these stakeholders should inform adjustments to the strategy. A principle should be explicitly stated in the strategy that unemployed people are partners in a strategy which seeks to benefit them, in terms of employment, skills and, ultimately, quality of life. In keeping with this approach, programmes helping people into work should not be coercive or withhold benefits as a sanction.

Trade unions

The strategy focuses on employers and core skills providers. However, it should also recognise the importance of the role of trade unions in providing training and other

support. This is especially important when looking at career/skill development, and in particular for those employed in lower skilled jobs or on a short-term basis, so they can gain access to skills and training in a workplace setting to strengthen their employment prospects. Unions provide these opportunities in the workplace setting, and this should be fully acknowledged and included in the strategy. There should also be a partnership role for unions in developing the skills and training programmes of employers, which will also lead to greater 'buy-in' of the workforce. There is an additional role for unions in the 'greening' of individual sectors, with a view to creating new greener employment opportunities - this also need incorporating into the strategy. The strategy needs to build in these aspects of union activity.

Small and micro businesses: support for training opportunities

Small and micro businesses find it particularly difficult to provide training opportunities for their staff. The strategy needs to acknowledge this issue and ensure that tailored support is made available to small and micro businesses enabling them to provide training opportunities.

Funding (Chapter 7)

The strategy is right to seek funding from central Government that is commensurate with the problem of London's high unemployment, and the need for a London-wide strategy to guide and prioritise funding to address the problem. However, the Government's own decision to target funding towards the "youth" sector has serious implications for the funding of training for older workers. It can cause problems too, for those studying part-time.

I would also make the following specific points linked to funding in general:

Funders of training programmes should take steps to ensure that training providers green all their training programmes or projects by making an environmental component of the proposal a prerequisite for funding. Funders audits for the effectiveness of projects should also include relevant qualitative and quantitative measures for how effective the training is in this area, undertaking environmental and social assessments of the course syllabus and methods.

Funding is a force for influential change, as economic incentives or disincentives can be designed for desirable or nondesirable objectives. Funders at all levels, therefore, have great potential to encourage the greening of training and the development of green career paths. This could also stimulate corporate social responsibility within business practice as green training is closely linked with 'doing business' in a responsible way that has a positive social and environmental impact.

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