

Quality Skills, Quality Services

**Final Report of the Public Services Forum
Learning and Skills Task Group**

Summary

December 2008

**Making
government
work better**

Introduction

The Public Services Forum (PSF) Learning and Skills Task Group was launched in 2006 and brought together representatives of Government, employers, unions and partners with a clear remit to develop a 'skills action plan' fit to meet the shared ambition of improving public services.

With the onset of the global economic downturn, the work of the Task Group has taken on a new and urgent significance. The recommendations set out in this report reflect our view that public services have a critical role to play in upholding principles of fairness and public value in tough times, providing practical support for citizens and communities through the recession, and helping the country to prepare for recovery.

Task Group members share a firm belief that skills and service improvement go hand in hand. All parties stand to gain - skills are a key driver for improving both the quality of public services and the working lives of those who deliver them.

Throughout its work, the Task Group has embraced an approach of 'learning through doing'; Task Group members have led by example, developing new partnerships and practical initiatives, and sharing best practice in the process. The Task Group is living proof that a joint approach - Government, employers and unions working together - can add real value to the drive to expand workforce skills opportunities and so deliver better public services for all.

The Task Group is co-chaired by David Amos (Director of Workforce, University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust) and Frances O'Grady (TUC Deputy General Secretary) and members were largely drawn from employer and trade union representatives on the PSF.

The remit given to the Task Group by the

PSF was as follows:

- Scope out the major long-term skills priorities for public services in the context of workforce development and the overall aim of improving public services
- Address some key strategic public sector skills issues on a cross-sector basis.
- Develop an action plan for employers and trade unions to take forward and that would influence the LSC's remit on skills.

1. Policy Priorities

Following the first year of its work, the Task Group published an interim report¹ in 2007 which recommended that the following four priority areas should be incorporated into a joint action plan to be taken forward by employers, trade unions and Government:

1. Build a joint commitment on delivering the Skills Pledge across public services.
2. Develop new skills pathways for young people entering public services employment, especially by expanding Apprenticeships.
3. Establish a skills investment strategy and Train to Gain service for public services that will support the planning and delivery of skills priorities and enable employer investment and publicly funded provision to align more effectively.
4. Identify good practice in leadership and management facilitating access to skills in public services.

It was also agreed that a case study of a particular sub-sector should be commissioned in order to 'reality-test' the effectiveness of the above approach.

The Task Group reported back to the PSF with a number of provisional recommendations in June 2008. Following

¹ The interim report is available at: www.tuc.org.uk/skills/tuc-13514-f0.cfm.

this a case study was commissioned in the adult social care sector to assess the appropriateness and practicability of the draft recommendations for improving workforce skills in a single sector.

In the light of the case study research, the Task Group has now finalised its findings and recommendations with the aim of instigating Government, employers and trade unions to take forward a public services skills campaign.

2. Policy themes

The underpinning theme of the Task Group's discussions has been the need to ensure that an improvement in workforce skills has a tangible positive impact on both the quality and delivery of public services and the career prospects and personal development of individual employees.

Task Group members viewed this as a classic 'win-win situation' on the basis that significant advances in skills levels would produce a major pay-off both for users of public services and the workforce that delivers them. Further improvements in workforce development and skills are also crucial if the Government is to achieve its vision of world class public services, which is increasingly based on developing a *new professionalism* where managers and front-line staff have freedoms and flexibility to shape how services are delivered.²

However, the implications of the economic downturn has quite rightly dominated discussions recently, especially in relation to the crucial role that public services can play in supporting individual citizens, communities and the wider economy through the recessionary period and also to help maximise the benefits of the upturn when it inevitably arrives. The Pre-Budget Report has reprioritised spending on public services to support the economy through the downturn

² *Excellence & Fairness, Achieving World Class Public Services*, Cabinet Office, June 2008

and it is welcome that this has been accompanied by related announcements on skills, such as 'making it a requirement that successful contractors have apprentices as an identified proportion of their workforce.'³

Rising unemployment and the risk of increased poverty will place a growing demand on public services over the coming period and workforce development strategies will be more important than ever in maximising the reach and impact of these services during a time when there will also be increasing pressure on the public purse.

Public services have a key role to play in supporting the country through the recession, especially through delivering on values of fairness, equality and support for the most disadvantaged. For example, the Government needs to develop a strategic approach to opening up job opportunities in public services to private sector employees who may lose their jobs in the recession.

Early analysis undertaken by the LSC for the Task Group highlighted that whilst overall public services compared favourably to other sectors on training and workforce development strategies, there remain huge challenges. For example, around a fifth of employees in public services do not have a Level 2 qualification and, in line with trends across the wider economy, the distribution of work-based training is inequitable with staff in front-line service-user roles being much less likely to access training on a regular basis.

Encouraging young people to make a conscious decision to enter public services and to develop their job roles was another key theme addressed by the Task Group, in particular in respect of any longer-term improvement strategy. The LSC highlighted the challenges facing the sector on account of the age-profile of the existing workforce and other worrying age-related trends (e.g. less than 10% of all Apprenticeships are in

³ *Pre-Budget Report*, Treasury, November 2008

the public sector).

The Task Group had extensive discussions about the strength of leadership and management skills, particularly at a supervisory level, and how weaknesses in these skills can act as a barrier to training by front-line staff in particular. Linked to this, Task Group members agreed that skills initiatives will only pay off over the longer term if managers have the proficiency to ensure that the utilisation of new skills ultimately delivers on improved service delivery and job satisfaction.

Understandably, the recommendations in the final report of the Leitch Review of Skills and the ongoing implementation of the Government's skills strategy have also had an important bearing on the Task Group's thinking, in particular the increasingly critical role that Train to Gain and Apprenticeships are playing in addressing the specific skill needs of public services. Over the past year the Government has introduced a number of flexibilities to these programmes so that they can better meet the needs of the business sector, especially in light of the rapidly changing economic environment. The Task Group has discussed the need for similar flexibilities to boost the skills and capacity of the public services workforce whilst maintaining the overall coherence of the Government's skills strategy.

At the same time it has been acknowledged by Task Group members that there is a need to clarify and build a consensus on the respective contributions of all parties in funding key priorities in recognition of the limits on DIUS/LSC skills funding. This should ensure that existing training resources are protected and maximised in order to promote value for money in keeping with the overall objectives set out by the Task Group.

The Task Group has also considered how a number of ongoing policy developments could best be tailored to support the skills development of public services workers.

Some of these include the role of procurement in influencing employer behaviour on skills, the increasing use of Sector Skills Compacts to better tailor government skills provision to the specific needs of sectors, new skills initiatives designed to counter the impact of the economic downturn in the private sector, and the proposed new right to request time to train.

The Task Group also considered the potential impact on workforce skills of developments such as contracted-out services, the commissioning process and the drive to deliver more personalised services. The findings from the adult social care case study proved to be highly informative in these areas as was the recent agreement brokered by the PSF with the aim of improving the quality of services delivered under central government contracts.

Throughout the Task Group's discussions, there was a positive recognition about the increasingly significant contribution of migrant and immigrant workers employed in public services and also the extent to which changing patterns of migration and new immigration policy could impact on recruitment in some parts of the sector.

The Task Group also specifically considered the role of unions in promoting skills development in the workplace and especially how they could further build the capacity of their union learning representatives to achieve a stronger and more strategic approach in all unionised workplaces across public services.

The crucial role of providers, including FE colleges and independent training providers, in supporting an improved 'skills offer' for the public services workforce was also acknowledged by the Task Group and the need to ensure that they had the capacity to deliver on this agenda.

3. Main recommendations

The Task Group has drawn up the following recommendations following the findings of the 'reality-testing' exercise facilitated by the case study undertaken in the adult social care sector in autumn 2008.

Public services and the economic downturn

1. The Task Group calls on public services employers and trade unions to make a public statement on the need to maintain investment in skills during the economic downturn in the same way as private sector employers and the TUC have done so in the recent advertising campaign under the auspices of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. The Government must ensure that all public services employers are persuaded that this challenge applies as much to them as to their counterparts in the private sector. Maintaining skills investment will be essential in order to boost the capacity of public services to support individual citizens, communities and the wider economy through the recessionary period and also to help maximise the benefits of the upturn when it arrives.

2. It is inevitable that there will be tough choices ahead for employers and trade unions in public services as they juggle challenges on a number of fronts resulting from the consequences of the downturn, especially the impact of rising unemployment and disadvantage in many communities. The Government should send a clear message endorsing the crucial role of public services in supporting fairness and social justice during the tough economic times ahead and it should also consider a range of flexibilities to enable employers and trade unions to come to agreements that safeguard jobs whilst maintaining investment in skills in the sector.

Procurement, contracted-out services, commissioning and personalised services

3. The Task Group welcomes the new Government statement on public procurement⁴ and recent statements by the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills setting out a much more proactive use of national procurement policies (and similar levers available to local authorities) to influence employer behaviour on skills investment, especially during the coming economic downturn.

- However, it is evident that too many of the relevant agencies at national, regional, local and sectoral levels lack suitable information and guidance to enable them to implement this new proactive approach on procurement and skills. The Task Group therefore recommends that the Office for Government Commerce (OGC) in consultation with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Cabinet Office should urgently develop guidance on procurement and skills to drive forward this agenda as quickly as possible.
- In addition, the Government's commitment to bring forward major infrastructure projects to counter the economic downturn needs to be mirrored with a commitment to use the procurement process so that businesses which win contracts deliver skills and training opportunities. This will help to revitalise local communities and deliver the sustainable skills required by workers and the economy over the longer-term.

4. The Task Group also welcomes the new agreement⁵ brokered by the PSF designed to improve the quality of services delivered

⁴ *Buy and Make a Difference: how to address social issues in public procurement*, Office of Government Commerce, 2008

⁵ *Joint Statement on Access to Skills, Trade Unions and Advice in Government Contracting*, Cabinet Office, July 2008

under central government contracts, including raising the skills of service providers' employees. The commitment to ensure access to Skills for Life training for all contracted-out employees and to encourage access to Level 2 qualifications via the Skills Pledge is a very positive step. The Task Group recommends that the PSF should consider extending this approach to contracted-out services in all other parts of public services as soon as is feasible.

5. The Government should undertake further research into the potential risks and opportunities for skills development arising out of the commissioning process and also the move towards greater personalisation of services, especially in the adult social care sector. The Task Group recognises that the plans to rapidly increase the number of personal assistants in the adult social care sector will do much to deliver services that are better suited to individual needs by promoting a sensitive, consistent, personalised approach to care-giving. However, the Task Group notes that, in direct contrast to other sections of the adult social care workforce, there are currently no plans to register or regulate the rapidly growing number of personal assistants directly employed by service users.

To ensure that personal assistants have the knowledge and skills to provide safe and high quality care throughout their careers, the Task Group recommends that the Government and General Social Care Council consider scope for increasing access to training for personal assistants. The Task Group calls on the Government to urgently assess how the current plans to expand personal assistants will impact on the quality of skills and service delivery in the sector, and how to guarantee the principle of parity with the rest of the workforce. In addition, the PSF should initiate a wider review of the implications for workforce development of the commissioning process and also the move towards greater personalisation of public services.

Skills Pledge and Train to Gain

6. There is an urgent need to tackle the degree of variation in take-up of the Skills Pledge by public services employers, especially the relatively slow progress in some sub-sectors (e.g. adult social care). The Task Group recommends that the Sector Skills Compact approach for Train to Gain that is being rapidly rolled out for much of the private sector offers a model which can be tailored to support a better take-up of the Skills Pledge in all parts of public services. However, such an approach would also have to tackle the irregular fit between parts of public services and the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) network. For example, there is a strong case for developing a Sector Skills Compact for local government even though its workforce is currently spread across a range of SSCs. In addition, the Task Group has been particularly impressed by the Joint Investment Framework model developed for the NHS, which has greatly supported progress in take-up of the Skills Pledge in this sub-sector. Although it recognises that this model is not completely appropriate for all parts of public services, the Government should also look at extending this approach where possible.

7. The Task Group has been concerned that there still appears to be a degree of confusion about the eligibility criteria for Train to Gain provision for different parts of public services. Whilst this would be clarified by the roll-out of public services sector skills compacts (see above recommendation), the Task Group recommends that the Government should immediately issue a clear policy statement to clarify the situation as it stands and that this should be followed up by a marketing and communications strategy by the LSC to make sure this message reaches all employers and trade unions across public services.

8. The proposed right to request time to train, the Skills Pledge and developing best

practice should be used as an opportunity to launch a new comprehensive culture of regular dialogue on learning and skills, thereby empowering all public services employees to access suitable training to develop their job role. The Task Group therefore recommends that the Government should lead by example by making a commitment that all public services employees should have an annual review of their training and development needs with actions flowing from it, especially in those occupations where this is currently not the norm.⁶ This commitment would strengthen and promote best practice in training and development across public services as well as providing a positive example for private sector employers.

Apprenticeships

9. The Task Group recommends that the PSF should set aspirations for the number of Apprenticeships that each part of public services should be supporting over an appropriate timeframe in order that the sector delivers its fair contribution to doubling the total number of apprentices by 2020. This should be developed in consultation with employers and trade unions and these aspirations would be based on a realistic projection of the capacity of each sub-sector to support growth in the number of Apprenticeships.⁷ The achievements of the constituent parts of public services in developing 'home-grown' Apprenticeships should be published regularly in order to recognise the contribution of those that deliver on this agenda whilst also highlighting those sub-sectors where there is particularly slow progress.

⁶ If possible, a question should be included in the National Employer Skills Survey asking whether employees are having annual reviews of their training and development needs.

⁷ This should be based on a robust analysis of the profile of the workforce in each sub-sector and official projections of employment change over the coming years.

10. Government, employers, trade unions and partners should develop strategies in all parts of public services to ensure that new government guidance on procurement and skills (see recommendation 3) is used proactively to drive up the number of apprentices and to tackle equality and diversity issues, especially by improving access to high quality public services Apprenticeships for women and black and minority ethnic communities.

11. Best practice should be a key means of driving forward a new approach on Apprenticeships in public services and innovative approaches already in development in different sub-sectors should be more widely publicised with the aim of promoting similar approaches by employers and trade unions across all parts of public services. The Task Group has been made aware of a number of pioneering approaches in different parts of public services and some of these are highlighted in the main body of the report.

12. The expansion of adult Apprenticeships should be a major plank of the Government's strategy to rapidly increase the number of Apprenticeships in public services. This would demonstrate a strong commitment to progression for the current workforce. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that adult Apprenticeships are proving to be an effective means of supporting access to high-quality training for women employees and black and minority ethnic workers, many of whom previously faced skills barriers in the workplace.

13. The Task Group has called on the Government to make a clear statement about the need for employers to maintain their investment in skills (see recommendation 1). However, there remain concerns that some apprentices in public services may be at risk of not completing their training due to financial pressures in the areas where they work. The Government must therefore make

a clear commitment to work with employers, unions, training providers and apprentices to minimise the risk of non-completion and maximise the employment opportunities open to public sector apprentices. Such an initiative could draw on the 'Clearing House' model that is currently being developed in the construction industry to tackle this challenge.

Leadership and Management

14 The Government's vision for achieving world class public services is increasingly based on developing a *new professionalism* where managers and front-line staff have freedoms and flexibility to shape how services are delivered. Developing leadership and management skills is a crucial component of this approach and the Task Group has been struck by comments from employers and trades unions alike that public service managers and supervisors responsible for front-line staff can often lack the skills, confidence and organisational support to develop the staff for whom they are responsible. The Task Group considers it extremely important that the training and development needs of all new public sector managers or supervisors are reviewed on their promotion into a management role. Where necessary, actions should be put in place to enable new (and potential) managers to access appropriate training and development so they can develop staff reporting to them effectively. New and existing supervisors and managers should receive support with their responsibility to consider the training and development needs of the staff they manage. This could include extra development in managing a team's workload to allow time for training for team members. Employers and unionlearn should both play a role in supporting new supervisors and managers to develop their staff.

15. The Task Group also recommends that a number of other initiatives are developed to support such a strategy including:

- Asking the PSF Chair to write to the main, sector based, public service training and development organisations inviting them to promote the importance of developing staff and supporting frontline managers to promote training in their courses, and to review their curriculum to ensure that managers and supervisors will be equipped with the skills to be able to detect learning needs in staff and take actions to address them.
- Recommending that senior managers lead and enable training provision throughout their organisations to empower frontline managers to promote training and development opportunities for their staff. Lessons should be learnt from existing good practice and carried across sectors, where possible. The work underway at Barking and Dagenham local authority (for example, their Done in One Academy) is a compelling example.
- Requesting that unionlearn develop a strategy to address Skills for Life challenges in managers which impede their role and on which they are too embarrassed to ask for help.

The Trade Union Role

16. The Task Group recommends that unionlearn should work closely with all public services unions to assess how they could further build the capacity of their union learning representatives to achieve a stronger and more strategic approach in all unionised workplaces alongside a greater focus on supporting the introduction and delivery of Apprenticeships and the Skills Pledge.