

EDUCATION, SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY THEMATIC BOARD

02.03.2021

Support for Union Learning Fund Y&H

Purpose of Report

To highlight to members the contribution that the Union Learning Fund has made to improving skills to date and the impact of the end of funding from April 2021. To seek approval for an offer of funding to TUC Yorkshire and Humber to support a project officer post to lead on the continuation of Union Learning Funded activity once national funding comes to an end on 31st March 2021.

Freedom of Information

The paper will be available under the Combined Authority Publication Scheme

Recommendations

That the Board consider and agree:

1. The Union Learning fund has made a significant contribution to workplace learning and in particular to supporting those with low skills to achieve and progress.
2. Continued ULF style activity has the potential to add further value across South Yorkshire and contribute to the priorities identified in our SEP and RAP.
3. £170k proposal for funding for a project officer support post for 2 years from 1st April 2021 to allow South Yorkshire to continue to benefit from the capacity and expertise built up under ULF.

1. Introduction

- 1.1** The Union Learning Fund (ULF) was set up in 1998 to support trade unions to widen access to learning and training in workplaces. The fund supports workplace projects across England and is coordinated by the TUC.
- 1.2** Successive evaluations of ULF show it to have been particularly effective in reaching people in workplaces who are hardest to engage in learning and in supporting progression for people with very low skills levels. However, ULF plays an important role in helping people progress into apprenticeships and higher-level learning and in supporting employers find solutions to their skills challenges.
- 1.3** In late 2020, the Government announced that funding for ULF would cease from 31st March 2021. This will lead to a significant loss of capacity and expertise across South Yorkshire.
- 1.4** This paper recommends funding is provided by the Authority to the TUC to extend the ULF model and continue activity on a geographical basis.

2. Proposal and justification

- 2.1** Each year around 200,000 workers nationally have been supported into learning or training through ULF and TUC activities. These learners undertake all sorts of job-relevant and life changing learning and training, including basic literacy and numeracy, ICT skills, apprenticeships and traineeships, vocational training, continuing professional development and many other informal and formal courses.
- 2.2** At the heart of the model are union learning reps – trained workers who understand the workforce, the nature of the business and the skills gaps that exist. Union learning reps work with employers, their own union, unionlearn and with learning providers to broker access to relevant learning opportunities for workers in their workplaces. There are currently more than 44,000 union learning reps in England with 1600 in Yorkshire and the Humber and an estimated 700 in South Yorkshire.
- 2.3** Successive governments have evaluated ULF and there is good evidence of the success of the union learning model. For example, 37 per cent of union members regularly access workplace training compared to 22 per cent of non-members. Total training volumes are on average 19 per cent higher in unionised workplaces.
- 2.4** The 2018 evaluation of ULF clearly shows benefits to individuals, employers and to the Exchequer:
- Over two-thirds (68 per cent) of learners with no previous qualifications got a qualification.
 - 47 per cent of those with entry level or level 1 qualifications got a qualification at a higher level.
 - Four in five (80 per cent) said they had developed skills that they could transfer to a new job.
 - 53 per cent saw an increase in the number of employees gaining qualifications.
 - Over two-thirds (68 per cent) of employers said that unions could reach and inspire reluctant learners to engage in training.
 - For every £1 spent on the Union Learning Fund, there is a return of £12.30: £7.60 to the worker, £4.70 to the employer.
 - The return to the exchequer (through reduced spending on welfare benefits and other factors resulting from the boost to jobs and wages) is £3.57 for each £1 spent on the Union Learning Fund.
- 2.5** The success of union learning is attributed to the fact that union learning reps are trusted by their peers and by employers, and both employers and workers can see the benefits. Union learning activity is determined locally with reps working collaboratively with employers to identify solutions that respond to skills challenges that are directly relevant to the workplace and are tailored to the skills, progression and wellbeing needs of workers.
- 2.6** Last year, the Government announced that it intended to cease ULF activity from March 2021, absorbing the £12m annual ULF grant into the £2.5bn National Skills Fund. The stated expectation is that people in unionised workplaces won't be disadvantaged because they will be able to access the universal skills offer. However, given that ULF activity has been particularly successful in supporting those with very low skills levels and reaching people who are the hardest to engage in learning, the end of ULF will disproportionately affect these groups. The impact will affect workers across South Yorkshire at a time when upskilling and reskilling are critically important, especially for those seeking new jobs or retraining as current roles changes eg for the green economy as highlighted in the RAP.
- 2.7** In practical terms, the end of ULF will mean that 12 learning centres across South Yorkshire – established through collaboration between unions and employers working

together with the Union Learning Fund - will be left without support or resources. We risk losing significant skills capacity in workplaces and communities as the momentum to engage new union learning reps and provide direction and support for their activities comes to an end.

- 2.8** Discussions have taken place between MCA officials and TUC Yorkshire and Humberside about the feasibility of allocating some funding to support continuing ULF activity. Providing funding to support project officers will allow the TUC across South Yorkshire to maintain momentum in activity and deliver workplace training that will support our region's economic recovery and meet the needs of mayoral, business and union priorities. It will also ensure that we retain the expertise and capability of the ULR network, with support to navigate the skills system as it changes.
- 2.9** TUC officials propose that a project officer and support fund would cost an estimated £85,000 (£65,000 salary inc on-costs + £20,000 facilitation budget) annually, with an initial pilot programme proposed to run over 24 months. The TUC would offer to provide payroll and line management services as the employer.

Do members support the proposal to support this project with the TUC when the ULF comes to an end?

- 2.10** Devolved Adult Education Budget funding is not in scope for this programme given the primary aim of AEB to support learner participation rather than capacity building or co-ordination. However, £8.4m has already been agreed from Gainshare funding for skills and employment activity and it would be possible to use a small amount of that funding to support this project.
- 2.11** KPIs and impact measures would be agreed to help understand the impact of the programme and would provide the evidence base for future decisions about the programme. KPIs might include:
- No of workers engaged in learning and at what levels
 - No of qualifications achieved
 - No of progressions supported eg into apprenticeships
 - No of learners achieving / progressing by demographic
 - No of people progressing into new jobs where redundancy is a possibility
 - No of workplace learning programme established and type
 - Number of active Union Learning Reps / number trained

Do members support these KPIs? Are there KPIs that are missing from this list?

- 2.12** To root this project firmly in collaboration between the Authority and TUC, it is recommended that the £20k facilitation funding is made available on a match funding basis. This would ensure a collective responsibility for delivering the programme, helping to maintain interest from unions beyond the end of the national ULF. Initial discussions with TUC confirm that non-cash match through TUC education officer time plus funding for events, seminars and publicity materials is feasible.

Do members support this approach to securing non-cash match for facilitation funding?

- 2.13** The TUC are interested in supporting this activity across both South and West Yorkshire and have begun parallel discussions with West Yorkshire Combined Authority. Those discussions have not yet concluded but we are hopeful that we can develop and support a joint programme of work with a West Yorkshire contribution that either reduces ours or adds additional capacity.

- 2.14** Recommendation: Board members are requested to approve use of max £170k Gainshare funding for a TUC project officer to work with union learning representatives for a period of two years from 1st April 2021 when ULF comes to an end.
- 2.15** Agreement on this recommendation will allow us to press ahead with arrangements and allow a smooth transfer when ULF ceases. However, we will continue to work with West Yorkshire as they consider a contribution which may reduce the required amount from South Yorkshire. ULF activity will be linked to the geographical area making funding available.

3. Consideration of alternative approaches

- 3.1** Do nothing and accept the consequences of closure of the Union Learning Fund and the loss of local capacity.
- 3.2** Fund as per the recommendations in this paper at a total cost of £170k over 2 years.

4. Implications

4.1 Financial

The recommendation is to make £170k max available to the TUC for this project over a period of 2 years from 01/04/2021. Funding would come from the £8.4m agreed for RAP skills and employment activity.

4.2 Legal

Potentially a legal issue around the Union Learning Fund title as this was government terminology and the programme will have closed. An alternative title will be agreed with TUC.

4.3 Risk Management

Risks in the programme will be managed through

- a) Requiring TUC to identify match funding for the project facilitation element of project funding so ensure that the programme of activity is built on solid foundations of union engagement
- b) Setting KPIs for the project to ensure value and alignment with RAP priorities can be identified.

4.4 Equality, Diversity and Social Inclusion

ULF activity supports people among the most disadvantaged to access learning and progress.

5. Communications

- 5.1** If members are supportive a communications plan will be developed with TUC. The Guardian ran a story on the closure of the ULF on 6th February so it is likely there will be interest in MCAs supporting the model going forward. This would also be a good news story in terms of continuing valuable support in line with RAP ambitions.

6. Appendices/Annexes

- 6.1** N/A

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Background papers used in the preparation of this report are available for inspection at: 11 Broad Street West, Sheffield S1 2BQ

Other sources and references: