Qualitative Evaluation of the Sheffield City Region Enterprise Adviser Network

SUMMARY REPORT: PHASES 1 AND 2



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## Introduction

* 1. In June 2018, the Sheffield City Region (SCR) Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) commissioned York Consulting to undertake a qualitative evaluation of the SCR Enterprise Advisor Network (EAN). The evaluation had two phases:
* Phase One (June – July 2018) assessed the effectiveness of the EAN’s contracting, management and communication structures as they were at that time.
* Phase Two (September – November 2018) focused on the outcomes, impacts and additionality of the EAN.
  1. This summary report presents key findings from both phases of the evaluation.

## Evaluation approach

* 1. Phase One of the evaluation involved:
* Qualitative consultations with all SCR Enterprise Co-ordinators (ECs), the LEP, Doncaster Chamber (in their role as the managing agent), the Careers and Enterprise Company and representatives from the Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley local authorities.
* Qualitative consultations with representatives from four other LEP areas to explore how they structure and manage their EANs. The four areas – the Humber, Greater Manchester, Leicester and Leicestershire and Lancashire – were chosen on the grounds of positive anecdotal feedback about the effectiveness of their EANs.
* Preparing an options appraisal for future contracting and management arrangements for the EAN in SCR.
  1. Phase Two involved qualitative consultations with eight Enterprise Advisers (EAs) and nine representatives of schools/colleges participating in the EAN. All the consultees were self-selecting.

## The EAN structure in mid-2018

* 1. The contracting and management structure in place in mid-2018 came into effect in September 2017. As shown in Figure 1, the LEP sub-contracted day-to-day responsibility for the management, co-ordination, quality and performance of the network to Doncaster Chamber (‘the managing agent’). Doncaster Chamber sub-contracted to the Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley local authorities to supply the ECs. In Doncaster, the ECs were employed by the Chamber itself.

# Figure 1: Sheffield City Region EAN Structure as at July 2018

## Views on the structure of the EAN (Phase One)

* 1. There was little support amongst the Phase One consultees for the structure of the EAN as it was in mid-2018. Concerns were raised about the relative complexity of the arrangements and the inefficiencies that were sometimes apparent in the communications between key partners.
  2. Consultees also tended to be dissatisfied with the processes for gathering EAN claims and performance data, and in particular the regularity with which incomplete or erroneous claims were being filed with the LEP. Queries raised within the network (e.g. relating to claims or performance data) reportedly took longer to resolve than stakeholders would have liked and there was a general view that too high a proportion of queries were being referred to the LEP rather than being resolved by the managing agent.
  3. There was strong support amongst the Phase One consultees for the introduction of a Senior EC in the SCR and a sense that some of the network’s ‘fine tuning’ and potentially its impact was being compromised by not having one.
  4. ECs were largely unanimous in their view that the EAN was undervalued and underappreciated by the SCR LEP. In reality, this might have been somewhat unfair (throughout 2018 the LEP was spending considerably more time on EAN-related work than it was funded to) but it may have had a negative effect on the network nonetheless. It is a view that was fuelled by the soft launch of the SCR Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) Strategy which, ECs argue, could have been used to make a far stronger statement about the importance of CEIAG to the City Region.

## Structures in the comparator areas (Phase One)

* 1. Table 1 (overleaf) highlights key features of the EAN models in the comparator LEP areas. As at mid-2018, only one of the four (Lancashire) had entered into any sub-contracting and none had a second level of sub-contracting. Reporting lines were very similar across the four areas: all had an EAN steering group or advisory group and all reported into their LEP’s or Combined Authority’s board or partnership group with responsibility for employment and skills. All four areas were successful with their Careers Hub bids in 2018.

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| **Table 1: Summary of the EAN models in the comparator LEP areas** | | | | | | | |
| **LEP** | **Any sub-contracting involved?** | **No. ECs?** | **Senior EC in post?** | **ECs allocated to specific geographic areas?** | **Who employs the ECs?** | **What are the reporting lines?** | **Successful Careers Hub bid?** |
| Humber | No | 2 | No | Yes | They are employed by local authorities but are jointly line managed by the local authorities and the LEP. | The ECs report progress to the skills lead at LEP and to the LEP’s Employment and Skills Board (as requested). | Yes |
| Leicester and Leicestershire | No | 3 | No\* | No (not in terms of ECs being responsible for all EAN activity in a specific borough or district) | The LEP | EAN progress is reported to the LEP’s People Board. | Yes |
| Greater Manchester | No | 8 | Yes | Yes | 7 are employed by the Combined Authority and 1 by a local authority. | EAN progress is reported to the Combined Authority’s Skills and Employment Partnership. | Yes |
| Lancashire | Yes: the management and delivery of EAN activity is sub-contracted to Inspira. | 7 | Yes | Yes | Inspira | EAN progress is reported to the Lancashire Skills Hub and the Lancashire Skills and Employment Board. | Yes |

\*The Leicester and Leicestershire LEP did have a Senior EC in post until early-mid 2018. They intentionally delayed filling this vacancy until they knew the outcome of their Careers Hub bid.

## Options appraisal for SCR (Phase One)

* 1. Phase One of the evaluation presented five future contracting and management options for the EAN in SCR. These were:
* **Option 1:** continue with the current model (as it was in mid-2018).
* **Option 2:** discontinue the EAN in SCR.
* **Option 3:** bring the contract management and, over time, the employment of ECs in-house within the LEP.
* **Option 4:** bring the contract management in-house but not the employment of the ECs.
* **Option 5:** appoint a managing and delivery agent (one organisation) with no further levels of sub-contracting.
  1. The tables below summarise the pros and cons of each option.

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| **Option 1: Continue with the current model** | |
| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| Would not require any additional resource commitments from the LEP. | Based on the evaluation evidence collected in Phase One, there was very little support for an EAN model with two levels of sub-contracting. |
| Would provide the opportunity for the managing agent to build on the improvements made in mid-2018 regarding the quality/accuracy of claims information. | Issues over communication flows and the timeliness of issue resolution could remain. |
| The LEP would remain (too) distant from on-the-ground EAN activity and would not have the desirable level of oversight on progress or quality. |
| **Conclusion:** the feedback gathered during Phase 1 made it very difficult to recommend this option. Even with the introduction of a Senior EC, the appetite for a more fundamental change to the model was too great. Therefore, this was not the evaluators’ preferred option. | |

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| **Option 2: Discontinue the EAN in SCR** | |
| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| Time and resource savings for the LEP. | Without introducing other/new activities to replace the EAN, it would be difficult for the LEP to demonstrate how it was supporting the government’s Careers Strategy[[1]](#footnote-1). |
| Risk of backlash/dissatisfaction from schools, EAs, local authorities and politicians. |
| No additional administrative or legal costs for the LEP (aside from those associated with the dissolution of the network). | Risk of compromising or harming the pupil experience in SCR regarding careers provision and exposure to employers. |
| Other funds and activities that are leveraged via the CEC/EAN in SCR may have been forgone. |
| Offered the potential for the match funding (provided by the local authorities) to be targeted specifically at local priorities. |
| **Conclusion:** it is difficult to envisage how Option 2 would have been the most appropriate choice in anything but extreme circumstances, e.g. if it became impossible for the LEP to commit any resource at all to the network, or if there was no way of finding match funding for the EC posts. In addition, none of the consultees expressed support for this option. Therefore, this was not the evaluators’ preferred option. | |

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| **Option 3: In-house contract management and employment of ECs** | |
| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| Would give the LEP far greater control and oversight of progress and quality across the EAN. | Would require short to medium term administrative efforts to recruit the ECs to the LEP (including any TUPE considerations), set up line management arrangements, put in place necessary systems and processes etc. |
| Having a simplified model (i.e. with no sub-contracting) should speed up communications and issue resolution, including issues with claims. | Bringing the EAN in-house could add pressure to the LEP’s skills team which already reported being under-resourced/stretched. |
| Would convey CEIAG as a strategic priority for the LEP. | The LEP would be carrying all the responsibility and associated risk for the day-to-day performance of the EAN. |
| Would make it easier to align EAN activity with other education and skills activity in which the LEP is involved. | The LEP would be making the decision to bring the EAN in-house before having considered independent evidence from Phase Two of the evaluation on the network’s outcomes and impacts. |
| **Conclusion:** the case for Option 3 was strong. It had support from consultees and could act a clear statement from the LEP that it intended to improve process efficiency and better integrate careers provision within its strategic priorities for education and skills. Option 3 was the evaluator’s preferred option. | |

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| **Option 4: In-house contract management only** | |
| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| Would give the LEP greater oversight and control of the network without the work/risk involved in recruiting and employing the ECs. | The LEP would have limited or no control over who is recruited into the EC posts, when they are recruited and how quickly they are replaced if they leave. |
| Would reduce the risk identified in Option 3 of adding pressure to the LEP’s current skills team. | The LEP would not have as much real-time insight into the work/performance of the ECs or the EAN as in Option 3. |
| Would make it easier to align EAN activity with other education and skills activity in which the LEP is involved. |
| **Conclusion:** the evaluators concluded that if the SCR LEP did not feel able or willing to bring the EAN in-house in full (Option 3) and was not minded to appoint another managing agent (Option 5), then this model would represent a workable solution. | |

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| **Option 5: New managing and delivery agent** | |
| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| The LEP’s additional resource commitments in Option 3 would not apply, i.e. this option could be more cost effective. | Risk of the LEP being more detached from on-the-ground delivery through the EAN than under Option 3. |
| Having only one level of sub-contracting could have a positive impact on the efficiency and speed of communication and issue resolution. |
| Reduced risk for the LEP by not having the employment liability of employing the ECs. | Risk of pushback from within the network about the introduction of another external managing agent (it would have been the third one in recent years). |
| Appointing an organisation with a specialism in work of this kind could bring good/best practice to the EAN in SCR whilst allowing the LEP to maintain a strategic overview. |
| **Conclusion:** this option would be attractive if a managing and delivery agent could be found with the requisite credibility and track record. However, it would not have been possible to have appointed them by September 2018. Either a transition year or a temporary extension of the existing arrangements would have been required. | |

## Feedback from schools and colleges (Phase Two)

* 1. There was unanimous support for the SCR EAN across the school/college representatives consulted for Phase Two of the evaluation. They praised the matching of EAs to schools/colleges and were consistently positive about the EAs’ broad and deep knowledge of their industry sector. They also highlighted the personal attributes of the EAs, including their ability to engage with, and inspire, young people.
  2. The school and college representatives evidently hold the ECs in very high regard, particularly in terms of how they:
* Facilitate regular communication between schools/colleges and EAs.
* Help schools/colleges to identify aspects of their careers provision that the EAN could help to strengthen.
* Share information about careers activities and events within the SCR.
  1. Feedback from the school/college representatives about the activities in which EAs had been involved was also consistently positive. Success factors have included:
* Collaboration between the schools/colleges and EAs to ensure that activities are well aligned with students’ needs and abilities.
* The dedication and proactivity of EAs, resulting in activities that the school/college representatives consider to be well structured and high quality.
* Interactive and practical activities that are engaging for students.
  1. There was unanimous agreement across the school/college representatives that the EAN had helped them to improve their careers provision by:
* Enabling more interactions with employers.
* Better preparing young people for employment.
* Stimulating young people’s interest in, and engagement with, careers provision.
  1. All the school/college representatives agreed that network had met or exceeded their expectations and said they would recommend it to other education providers. All said that the quality and relevance of their careers provision had improved and all felt better informed about their local labour market.

## Feedback from Enterprise Advisers (Phase Two)

* 1. All but one of the nine EAs consulted in Phase Two said they had been matched appropriately with a school/college. They spoke of a shared commitment that they and the school/college had demonstrated to making their EAN relationship a success and were extremely complimentary about the ECs.
  2. The EAs were consistently positive about their experience of the EAN, although they did identify some challenges. For example:
* Some school/college senior leadership teams have reportedly been quicker to support the programme than others;
* There have been occasions where teaching staff have reportedly had to focus on other priorities at the expense of time that had originally been earmarked for the EAN.
  1. Nonetheless, the EAs identified a range of positive outcomes for pupils and for schools/colleges (the same as those reported under ‘Feedback from schools and colleges’, above). They also provided examples of how they’d adapted their work experience and recruitment practice as a result of their involvement in the EAN.

## Recommendations

## Expansion

* 1. The SCR LEP has taken action to address the management and contracting issues reported through Phase 1 of this evaluation. That action, combined with the consistently positive feedback obtained through Phase 2, would add weight to any proposal to expand the EAN by engaging new schools and EAs. The evaluation evidence does not, on its own, provide the full rationale for expansion given the range of other conditions in play. These include the scale of demand from schools not currently involved, the supply of suitably skilled EAs and the capacity of the LEP/ local authorities to fund more EC posts. Nonetheless, the clear indications are that a business case for growing the network is likely to be very strong.
  2. As at August 2018, the SCR had 107 EAs from 15 different industry sectors[[2]](#footnote-2) - undoubtedly a very commendable achievement. There remains, however, some notable underrepresentation of industry sectors amongst the current EA cohort when local employment volumes are taken into consideration. Wholesale and Retail Trade, for example, is represented by five EAs, yet it accounts for approximately 16% of all employment in the City Region. Health and Social Work also has five EAs, but it too accounts for 16% of employment. There is, of course, a strong demand-led element to the EAN model in terms of the sectoral preferences of schools and colleges, but this underrepresentation sits at odds with the likelihood (based on current and historic employment data) that significant numbers of those young people exposed to the EAN will eventually be employed in one of these high-volume sectors. As the network expands, the LEP is encouraged to try and recruit more EAs from these sectors and to emphasise to schools and colleges the rationale for doing so.

## Information and resources

* 1. The SCR EAN has its own website: <http://www.enterpriseadviserscr.org.uk>. At the time of writing, none of the resources[[3]](#footnote-3) on the ‘Information for Employers’ page are available for download (clicking on them brings up a ‘page not found’ message). The LEP is encouraged to either reinstate the links/resources or add new ones as a priority in order to improve the image of the network to employers who are considering becoming involved. This also links to the need for EAs to have a full appreciation of the EA role, the types of activities that work well and relative aspects of education/skills policy, before they begin interacting with schools.
  2. The same is also true of the resources ‘Information for Educators’ page of the SCR EAN website, i.e. they too cannot currently be downloaded. As above, the LEP is advised to either reinstate the links/resources or put new ones in their place. This is one part of ensuring that when schools are considering joining the network, they clearly understand the time and resource commitments involved.
  3. Feedback gathered Phase 2 of the evaluation suggests that the LEP should review current mechanisms for EAs to share information and experiences about the network, such that all have the opportunity to participate and contribute going forwards.

## Demonstrating outcomes and impacts

* 1. An issue identified in both phases of the evaluation was that the routine collection of information about activity taking place through the network tends to focus on volumes of delivery rather than quality and outcomes. One way for the LEP to address this, without incurring significant cost, would be to set up an online survey for schools and colleges, allowing them to provide feedback periodically on quality and outcomes. Structured around the Gatsby Benchmarks, the survey could be administered on an annual or bi-annual basis and followed up with more in-depth phone calls or face-to-face meetings with schools/colleges as required.
  2. Evidence on the impact of EAN activities has not been yet collected from beneficiary young people in the Sheffield City Region (beyond end-of-activity feedback sheets). Doing this effectively is not without its challenges – it requires schools/colleges to agree to it and, as more time passes, it becomes difficult to accurately attribute changes in the young people’s attitudes or circumstances specifically to one intervention. But that is not to suggest it shouldn’t be attempted, especially given the value it could add to the LEP’s future efforts to recruit more schools or to secure funding for CEIAG activities. Other organisations that are active in the CEIAG space are also considering how best to do this, and the LEP may therefore wish to establish a dialogue with one or more of these organisations to discuss possible approaches[[4]](#footnote-4).

## Learning from elsewhere

* 1. The evidence gathered through this evaluation suggests that the activities delivered through the network are fit for purpose and well received. The SCR LEP has nonetheless demonstrated a commitment to ongoing improvement and a keen willingness to maximise the effectiveness of the network. As such it is recommended that time be spent researching and, where appropriate, learning from good or effective practice taking place elsewhere. The national evaluation of Enterprise Adviser Networks should have much to offer in this regard, but other resources are also available. The ‘Quality in Careers Standard’ website, for example, includes a section on ‘Case Studies of Best Practice’, including six in Yorkshire and the Humber. Making contact with some or all of these schools and colleges may help to stimulate ideas for new or improved activities that could be implemented in the SCR.

## The SCR CEIAG Strategy

* 1. The development of the EAN, through any or all of the recommendations outlined above, needs to be set in the wider context of the Sheffield City Region CEIAG Strategy. The strategy cites the EAN under the enablers of both Priority One[[5]](#footnote-5) and Priority Two[[6]](#footnote-6), but it also cites a number of other ambitions or plans that could directly impact upon, or be influenced by, the EAN. These include, although are not limited to:
* “Employers [will be asked to] commit to delivering at least four hands-on inspiring interactions, delivered as part of a quality assured Careers Education programme in schools and colleges” (page 8);
* “Improved alignment of local, regional and national provision, through an employer-led co-ordinating board generating a co-investment strategy for young people more effectively targeting local needs and utilising local structures” (page 9);
* “Education provision will be supported to meet the Gatsby Benchmarks including, for schools and colleges, a Quality in Careers Standard award for the quality of their careers provision” (page 9);
* “Opportunities will be created for parents and carers to be fully engaged in understanding the fast-changing labour market, through involvement in school programmes and places to interact with employers and providers of training and work” (page 12).

1. Given the above, an action planning exercise to determine the priority order, assign responsibilities, identify dependencies (including with the EAN) and specify delivery timescales of the proposals in the CEIAG strategy would seem appropriate. A more operational/delivery focussed plan would help to sharpen the focus on the (currently somewhat unclear) links between the EAN and SCR-wide aspirations for CEIAG.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-strategy-making-the-most-of-everyones-skills-and-talents> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Excludes 12 EAs whose main industry sector is classified as ‘other’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. EA Briefing 16/3/2016; Enterprise Adviser brief; Launch event flyer for employers (pdf); Launch event flyer for employers (jpg). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Careers and Enterprise Company’s Future Skills Questionnaire may be one way of benchmarking feedback from young people in SCR against feedback nationally. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ensuring effective employer leadership in the development of the current and future workforce. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Developing and rebuilding a robust infrastructure to maximise existing and future investment. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)