

North West Network



Newsletter

Issue 75

Welcome to the last edition of North West Network's newsletter, featuring information on European issues relating to the Voluntary and Community Sector in the North West.

The End of North West Network

It is with great regret that the Trustees of North West Network (NWN) have to inform you that NWN will cease trading on 31 March 2011. A difficult general funding environment and in particular the failure to secure adequate match funding in the required timescale has meant that NWN does not have viable contracts beyond 31 March 2011.

Our sister organisation Merseyside Network for Europe (MNE) will continue to provide technical assistance and will be in a better position to take up any future contracts. They have agreed to extend their area of benefit to the whole of the north west of England. If you want to be kept up to date with European funding and take advantage of the services of MNE you should apply to become a member of that organisation. They can be reached at 151 Dale Street, Liverpool, L2 2AH Tel: 0151 237 3972 E-mail: all@merseynetwork.com For more about them visit their website at: www.merseynetwork.com

ESF Update

Skills Funding Agency

The second freeze of ACTOR took place at 17:00 on 11 March 2011. The next freeze date of ACTOR will be at 17:00 on 15 April 2011.

ACTOR is the Skills Funding Agency's (SFA) on-line e-Tendering application for the procurement of

education and vocational training services. ACTOR replaced the Qualified Provider Framework in October 2010.

All organisations seeking funding for the provision of education and vocational training services must be registered on ACTOR for at least one of the programmes funded by the SFA.

To be registered on ACTOR, colleges and training organisations must have passed a due diligence pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ) and must submit at least one on-line Invitation to Tender (ITT). This is done through the SFA e-Tendering portal. To access the portal please visit:

<https://skillsfundingagency.bravosolution.co.uk/>

Please note that in previous Guidance Notes the SFA has set out its intention to introduce a Minimum Contract Level which is intended to create efficiencies within the Agency and economies of scale across the sector.

The Minimum Contract Level threshold for 2011/12 has been set at £500,000. This means that organisations that are interested in applying to become providers under ACTOR need to be able to run contracts of at least the value of the minimum level. For smaller organisations there are opportunities to sub-contract or become partners in the delivery of larger contracts.

Supported by:



Department for Work & Pensions (DWP)/ Jobcentre Plus (JCP)

The intention for European Social Fund (ESF) spent through DWP/JCP is that contracting for ESF will be let by the DWP Framework for Employment Related Services. The Framework will identify a number of potential providers in each regional "lot" who have the capacity to deliver large provision such as the new Work Programme, as well as managing provision such as ESF. The assumption is that those providers will manage subcontractors who deliver the provision at sub-regional level. The list of the Providers who have made it on the DWP Framework for Employment Related Services (the Work Programme) was released just before Christmas. The Providers will now compete for contracts to deliver the Work Programme. For the list of selected providers please visit:

www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/ersspreferred-suppliers.pdf

ESF procurement and The Skills Funding Agency

Whilst all the final details are not yet known the SFA have made it known, with regards to future European Social Fund (ESF) procurement, that they do not intend to subject ESF co financed provision to open competition. The SFA consider that the Approved College and Training Organisation Register (ACTOR) process has already demonstrated contestability. Instead, funding will be allocated on the basis of ACTOR scores moderated by local SFA staff. Whilst we await further details we feel that this development has serious implications for the voluntary sector. NWN, MNE and Voluntary Sector North West (VSNW) have put together a response to this announcement.

The main point of concern raised in the joint paper is serious reservations that ACTOR, while providing an enhanced due diligence process, will not necessarily provide sufficient and adequate information to select the best providers, particularly where those providers have a more limited involvement in mainstream learning and so do not necessarily have such a strong showing in certain areas assessed by ACTOR. This could in our view seriously disadvantage voluntary sector providers.

To view the NW Voluntary Sector partners response please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/6cswrs7>

The views we expressed in the paper were relayed to Geoff Russell, Chief Executive of the SFA. His reply to our views was emailed to us on 8 March 2011 and for your information we have printed it in full.

"Dear colleagues

Thank you for your email dated 24 February in which you took the time to articulate some concerns you have about ACTOR and our new associated procurement processes for ESF.

First I should state that the aim of ACTOR is to provide a more streamlined and simple process for all potential delivery organisations, including the voluntary and community organisations, reducing the bureaucracy and allowing quicker and more effective procurement. All of this is set in the context of European Union procurement rules and the need for the Agency to account for large sums of public funding.

The changes in policy since the advent of the Skills Funding Agency and since the Coalition came to power has meant that the Agency's role, as highlighted in the Skills Strategy and Skills Investment Strategy, is no longer one of planning in detail what providers should deliver. Please be assured that this in no way conflicts with the need for ESF to add value and respond to local demand, or with our recognition of the important role of the voluntary sector in delivering learning and skills provision to those at most disadvantage.

ACTOR has been introduced over the last year, with all existing and potential delivery organisations required to submit extensive information about their organisation and capability in January 2011. This initial phase of establishing the new system has been onerous to some organisations, but once complete will require much less on-going maintenance by the organisations.

We are using ACTOR to procure provision for the unemployed so that it is in place from April this year. I appreciate that this is the first time we have used ACTOR in this way and so we understand that there is some confusion about how it works. With this in mind we published an External Briefing Note on 22 February to provide a brief overview of ACTOR, summarising its purpose, functionality and how intend to use it so that the processes can be better understood. The demise of Regional ESF Committees is in part due to the fact that performance management of the achievements of the ESF Operational Programme can be managed centrally by ESFD and the national Programme Monitoring Committee, who will have regional and local data available to them at CFO level. There should be no need to replicate this monitoring responsibility at local level, other than as part of the wider perspective of informing providers of local demand, and working with those providers (ESF and mainstream) to ensure that needs are being met. It is

no longer the remit of the Agency to be involved at this level, and furthermore, neither ESFD, nor the Skills Funding Agency, are or will be resourced in future to recreate another layer of monitoring, even if Technical Assistance were able to provide financial support. The Agency itself will clearly monitor the impact on its ability to meet the targets agreed in Co-Financing Plans, and will take the necessary steps if expectations are not being met. As stated in the ACTOR briefing note, this may include running additional procurement activity if necessary.

All organisations must be registered on ACTOR in order to be considered for funding. Once on the register, organisations may be considered in the procurement exercises that the Agency carries out, without having to submit additional lengthy, onerous bids. The Agency can do this because the information required is already recorded in ACTOR. This more streamlined approach is simpler and reduces the need for organisations to respond to multiple individual tenders. As activity co-financed by ESF aligns with the national Skills Strategy and thus mainstream activities (e.g. Apprenticeships, provision for the unemployed etc) in most cases, separate Invitations to Tender will not need to be issued to procure ESF provision. This change represents an improvement for the sector in terms of simplicity and reduced bureaucracy. Certainly other members of the voluntary sector have welcomed the opportunity to compete on a level playing field, where evidence of their track record and success rates are the key criteria for decisions and not an organisation's ability to write extensive bids (or hire expensive bid-writers). I am sure that this is the kind of competition that you will welcome.

Because ACTOR is new, the Agency will run further ESF procurement rounds this year to ensure that all delivery organisations have the opportunity to be considered. Some provision will be sought over the spring/summer, for activity to start from August 2011. This will include workplace learning provision and related Apprenticeships activity. We anticipate using the direct selection process (described above) for these activities, using information taken from ACTOR following the April 2011 freeze date. Further information on this specific exercise will be communicated during March 2011. The Agency will then continue to communicate appropriately as and when further tendering opportunities arise.

Please be assured it is not our intention to disadvantage any area of the sector and we do recognise the valuable contribution voluntary and community organisations can make in engaging hard to reach groups. Because it is a new process, the Agency will continue to review how well it is working and will invite a reference group of

colleges and training organisations from across the sector (including voluntary and community) to meet with us and to help review the system and process and contribute to its development.”

ACTOR Briefing event

In February 2011, NWN in conjunction with MNE and VOLA, Greater Merseyside's Learning Consortium for the Voluntary Community and Faith Sector held a briefing event on ACTOR. 24 voluntary sector organisations attended the event and the feedback we have received suggests that it was a success. To view the slides from the presentation please visit: www.nwnetwork.org.uk/actor-presentation

Compliance with ESF Publicity Requirements

ESF Division has published an Action Note to reiterate the obligation on ESF funding recipients, including ESF and match providers, to publicise the ESF and EU support they receive - and sets out measures being taken by the Managing Authority and CFOs to ensure provider and sub-contractor compliance in 2011-2013.

Please have a look at the note if your organisation delivers projects either as a lead contractor or a sub-contractor. For further information visit: www.esf.gov.uk/resources/guidance.asp

King Baudouin Foundation project

In February 2011 NWN staff attended a task force on European Social Fund climate change and social justice. The task force was set up as part of the King Baudouin Foundation project on Climate Change Mitigation and Social Justice.

A new Regulation for the European Social Fund post 2013 is expected to be adopted in mid-2011 as part of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which will set the EU's budget for the period from 2013 onwards (probably until 2020).

The Task Force brought together experts from various backgrounds in an attempt to identify recommendations to strengthen the links between climate change and social justice in relation to the new ESF Regulation. The taskforce is currently drawing up policy recommendations on how policy-makers should balance the twin goals of social justice and climate change mitigation within the next European Social Fund regulation.

For further information about the King Baudouin Foundation please visit: www.kbs-frb.be For more information about the European Social Fund Task Force please contact Angeliki Stogia:

angeliki@nwnetwork.org.uk

ERDF in the North West

The future of the ERDF programme in the North West is currently being discussed by the European Transition Project Board (ETPB). This is made up of regional stakeholders who are looking at all aspects of European work in the region going forward into new arrangements including the future for the ERDF programme. The ETPB has responded to proposals sent out by the government. The preference amongst stakeholders in the North West is for future arrangements that maximise local involvement. The government's proposals are for the staff at Dept. for Communities and Local Government (CLG) to continue with the Managing Agent responsibilities, for example ensuring proper delivery of claims to Europe, while the local partners would fill the gap left by the North West Development Agency and would develop strategic partnership working. This will become increasingly important as we move into the next phase of the programme, ensuring the remaining money is allocated strategically and effectively, and

that we deliver the outputs, results and impacts. The development of strategic working will also become increasingly important as we begin planning the next Programme for the North West for 2014-2020. The Voluntary and Community Sector is represented on the European Transitions Project Board by Andy Churchill CEO of MNE.



UK Government response to Fifth Cohesion Report

The UK government has published its response to the European Commission's Consultation on the Conclusions of the Fifth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, recognising that EU policies and funds add greatest value where they are aligned with each other and with the domestic investments of individual Member States at national, sub-national and local level to promote economic development. The response also recognises the potential to achieve

significant operational benefits, were the administration of funds to be streamlined and bureaucratic burdens reduced. The response addresses five key areas of the Fifth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, the Policy framework, Conditionality and rewards, Delivery and the funds, Administration and Resources. To view the response please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/67wfq9d>

Europe & The Work Programme: TSEN Annual Conference

This event is being held in London on 30 March 2011. The conference will bring together the voluntary sector and DWP Framework Providers, will look at the latest situation and new research will be released showing the extent to which the local voluntary sector is being involved.

The event will be an opportunity for participants to be informed both on the latest developments and opportunities within the current ESF programme and plans for what the future holds for the Structural Funds post 2013. For further information visit: www.tsen.org.uk

Contact us...

If you would like further information about any of the subjects covered in this newsletter, if you have any feedback, comments or suggestions please contact North West Network on 0161 236 6493 or email info@nwnetwork.org.uk



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