

Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme

SER – driving collaboration among providers



Learning providers throughout the West Midlands are working together and sharing their expertise in a way that's never happened before – thanks to the success of the region's Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme.

Funded by LSIS and run by ALP, the 157 Group, NIACE and the AoC, the SER programme set out to help learning providers work more closely with employers and meet the current and future skills needs of their businesses and employees.

The SER programme has certainly achieved that, says Kim Cook, an executive officer of HWSTPA, the Herefordshire, Worcestershire & Shropshire Training Providers' Association.

"The SER programme has been excellent because it's been all about sharing good practice and collaborative working," she says.

"We've never had so many providers working together and sharing things. I was working on the Apprenticeship strand of the SER programme and we had 58 providers all working together. That was completely unheard of.

"It's also enabled the smaller independent providers to have support and encouragement from the colleges that have the infrastructure to do things that they haven't, so we have 'the big boys helping the little boys'.

"The consultancy was excellent, too, because the providers had the opportunity to have one-to-one consultancy if they needed extra support and we were able to pick and match the consultants to the provider.

"And that consultant could have been a work-based learning provider – somebody in a provider network who was so good that we registered them as a consultant and they then went in one-to-one."

Kim, who has been working in the sector for more than 20 years, says SER has been able to build on the work of its predecessor, the World Class Skills programme, and bring even more benefits for providers.

"SER allowed us to take things to the next step, using the provider network to deliver to other providers. Across the West Midlands we have nine local networks consisting of 236 providers.

"We were able to liaise directly with those 236 providers via our networks and make our SER events even stronger because we had the infrastructure there already.

"The benefits have included the sharing of effective practice, collaborative working among the networks, enhancing the expertise we can access, and improvement in the quality of delivery.

"By sharing our expertise, we've been able to use tools that were already out there that people didn't know about, and it's also raised people's awareness of the support that's available."

Kim says the key to SER's success has been the sharing of expertise among providers.

“It wasn’t just a consultant coming along and delivering something,” she says. “It was learning providers delivering it to other learning providers.

“We could deliver subjects that were hot topics and decide what we wanted. In the group I work with it was all about safeguarding, quality, diversity, and the self-assessment process – things that providers are struggling with.

“We got providers who were good at it to come along and work with other providers – and we picked providers who got Grade 1 in their Ofsted in certain areas and had work-based learning experience.

“One provider needed lots of support. It had five days of consultancy and attended every event so it got a lot out of it. It’s all about the quality of provision and the improvements needed in all areas.

“I work with 40 training providers and the main benefit to us as a network is that we have providers with expertise delivering to other providers.

“We’ve been able to take the work Peer Review and Development groups have done in identifying effective practice and share it across hundreds of organisations in the provider network.

“The SER programme has really made a lot of people think. We asked if they were going to make changes as a result and nearly all of them said yes. They’ve come along and realised what they need to be doing.

“We’ve had a lot of people who were just dealing with Train To Gain and had to move into Apprenticeship provision, having never done so before. This programme has really brought them up to speed with how to deliver Apprenticeship contracts and what they need to do.

“We also held events on how to grow your Higher Apprenticeship programmes. This has opened people’s eyes to the opportunities.”

Another benefit Kim points to was the chance to bring providers together to collaborate on Minimum Contract Level issues and bring them up to date on the new Specification of Apprenticeship Standards in England (SASE) requirements.

The SER programme included workshops, webinars, coaching, and support.

“If we ran a really successful event we ran a webinar on it afterwards so that people who couldn’t attend could still benefit,” says Kim.

She describes the SER programme as nothing short of a revolution. “It’s an extension of the Peer Review Groups but on a much bigger scale across a much wider area – and it was exactly what the providers needed.

“We’ve probably doubled the number of Approved Sector Coaches because we’ve taken a lot of people from work-based learning and turned them into coaches.

“It’s going to improve success rates, increase retention, engage more people in Apprenticeships and increase the number of Higher Apprenticeships as providers now know what they have to do to progress people from Advanced Level Apprenticeships.

“There’s more collaborative working going on. SER has initiated that, definitely. And everybody’s hoping there will be a continuation of the SER programme because it’s been tailored to what they wanted.”

Current at March 2011

The Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme is funded by LSIS. It is a sector led programme tasked with increasing the capacity of all providers in the learning and skills sector to work with employers and help address the current and future skills needs of their business and workforce.

The SER programme is managed in the **East of England, East Midlands and West Midlands** by ALP, the 157 Group, NIACE and AoC. It offers support in three key strands:

- Employer responsiveness
- Apprenticeship provision
- Pre-employment provision and transition into work.

The Programme offers a variety of support including workshops, webinars, coaching and tailored support.

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