

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE ON SEEDA's APPROACH TO LABOUR FORCE AND EMPLOYMENT

Submission from: **Southern and Eastern Region Trade Union Congress
(SERTUC)**

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The Southern and Eastern Regional Council of the TUC (SERTUC) represents over 800,000 trade unionists in the SEEDA Region. SERTUC, through its affiliated trade unions, has members in the private, public, and voluntary and community sectors of the south east economy. SERTUC represents the very wide interests of working people and their families. This membership covers a wide range from the highly skilled and qualified to the low skilled and those with literacy and numeracy problems.

Introduction

SERTUC places real importance on improving the south east labour force's employability and competitiveness in the global economy. To that end, through the national TUC and affiliated trade unions, it has developed networks and support mechanisms through the SERTUC Regional Council, SERTUC unionlearn, the Social Dialogue Forum of SEEDA, and the Learning and Skills Council, as well as through locally based Trades Councils. Affiliated trade unions' representatives in the individual workplaces play a key role in looking after the wellbeing, not just of their members, but also other employees. SERTUC, through SERTUC unionlearn, provides training for thousands of workplace representatives each year, and supports over 1,200 Union Learning Reps in SEEDA's workplaces.

Before moving on to the specific questions of the consultation, we must say that SERTUC is concerned that in the Context and Issues Paper and its Appendices, there is little mention of the role of trade unions, either at regional or local level, including on the learning agenda. Trade unions have and play a key and positive role in developing good practice and advocating skills development both regionally, locally and in the workplace, with trade union representatives supporting individual members through, for example, IAG.

SERTUC regrets that the Region's Economic Partnerships do not include the TUC as one of the region's significant economic partners, and believe the RSPs and their work would be enhanced by the involvement of trade unions.

1 Within the RES, does SEEDA adequately capture the range of key issues and challenges regarding labour force and employment in the region?

In the Context & Issues Paper, 5.5 Smart Growth, Skills, page 9: no mention is made of the contribution that trade unions make in the areas of employee engagement into training through the activity of trade unions and Union Learning Representatives. We also believe there should be positive mention of the TUC/BERR protocol on Train to Gain.

Emphasis should also be given not just to the innovative models that move adults back into sustainable employment, but also to the innovative working arrangements and models that *maintain* sustainable employment.

2. How effective are the key strategic regional agencies with an interest in labour force and employment, such as SEEDA, Job Centre Plus and the Learning and Skills Council, in developing a joined up and coherent approach?

SERTUC believes that the recent changes to the LSC and the changes at Job Centre Plus have made determining whether there is a joined up approach more problematic. The changes, job losses and office closures at JCP have caused further problems.

In addition within 5.6, no mention is made of trade unions as a voice of the employee/learner in developing a joined up and coherent approach. Whilst many learning and skills initiatives are formally targeted at the employer, the actual learning and skills needs rest with the workforce and trade unions play a key role in identifying what learning needs the workforce has and play a critical role in ensuring that those with learning needs are engaged in learning and skills programmes.

3. SEEDA's Corporate Plan gives considerable emphasis to higher level management and technical skills. Is this focus appropriate and what should it do to also ensure development of basic skills and employability?

It is appropriate to have this focus, but in addition there is a need to develop effective support structures for those with 'skills for life' needs. In many cases, individuals can play a greater role in the organisations where they work, but are prevented from doing so through their lack of confidence. Trade unions play a significant role in encouraging these individuals to come forward and engage. SERTUC recognises that the south east economy is a dynamic and changing economy, with the move to more knowledge based skills; in this situation it is critical that the social divide is not widened. Skills for Life will continue to play an important part across all levels of employment.

4. Is the range of SEEDA's activities appropriate and suitably targeted to tackle labour force and employment issues? Where should the balance lie between strategic and local interventions?

SERTUC believes there have been a number of innovative pieces of work undertaken under the leadership of SEEDA as highlighted in the document. SERTUC is concerned that with the development on the current model of MAAs and LAAs this strategic

intervention could be lost to narrow local interests that may bypass the Regional strategic needs and wider interests. SERTUC is also concerned that many stakeholders, for instance trade unions, are not involved in the development and delivery of MAAs and LAAs, and is concerned that the focus is too much at a local authority level and not the wider economic level.

In addition there is, however, further scope for innovative work to be done around the Train to Gain programme to engage employers and trade unions in promoting the opportunities offered by this more creatively and promoting examples of good practice where these exist.

5. Is SEEDA doing enough to encourage sustainable job creation in the region, particularly in under-performing areas? How and where should it focus resources on this issue to best effect?

SEEDA has done fairly well on job creation in the region, for example in Hastings, where not only did job creation take place but this, importantly, lifted the financial wellbeing of the area. Also SEEDA's recent work on Coastal Contours was an important development. These examples, along with support for the Royal Naval Carrier project and the Southampton Super Yacht, demonstrate the need for a strategic regional approach which helps bring much needed jobs.

SERTUC believes any resources used on job creation should be tied to a commitment to skills development, building quality long term employment, based on equal opportunities, and where appropriate, R&D, for continued sustainability.

6. How effective is SEEDA in engaging with businesses to understand their skills needs and in promoting employers' responsibilities regarding skills development?

SERTUC believes there is a need for SEEDA to take a more proactive role in coordinating and promoting more sector based skills initiatives and assisting in the greater alleviation of sector skills needs through the use of initiatives such as Train to Gain. SEEDA could play a role in bringing employers and trade unions together in key sectors to alleviate skills gaps and skills shortages through innovative events and activities to assist in employee/learner engagement, perhaps using the successful model of the unionlearn-supported workplace activity around Learning at Work Day to assist with engagement throughout the year and with a greater emphasis on progression routes.

7. What has been your experience of the Regional Skills for Productivity Alliance? What needs to be done to ensure its long-term effectiveness? What can SEEDA or other partners do to support the evolution of Local Skills for Productivity Alliances into revised roles as local Employment and Skills Boards?

The RSPA needs to evolve into a more 'executive' role in the sense of taking the experience from local ESPs and encouraging the use of good practice generated from these across the region. There is a need to ensure that partners get the opportunity to monitor what is happening across the region and that the detail of activity is engaged in at

a local level, whilst avoiding a situation where a 'postcode lottery' can exist due to local peculiarities of funding initiatives.

Whilst it is important that the voice of the employer is heard on these bodies, it is also vital that the voice of the employee is heard and trade unions are in a key position to be able to offer this input, having grass roots contacts in the workplace that can voice concerns and identify learning and skills needs.

SERTUC is pleased it is nominating representatives to the new ESBs. To make sure that a positive and constructive role is played there is the need for some capacity building and the development of productive and strategic liaison between ESBs and the Regional LSC.

The RSPA should ensure that it includes *sustainable* employment within its work on training and skills.

8. How effectively do SEEDA and other strategic regional organisations engage with the further and higher education sectors, voluntary and community sector, local partners and deliverers to tackle employment and labour issues in the region? What more needs to be done?

SEEDA has made efforts to engage with various partners to relative degrees of success. SERTUC is concerned that, with the proposed demise of SEERA and the changes that are expected via the Sub National Review, the various stakeholders currently consulted and engaged may be moved to the sidelines. SERTUC believes the existing stakeholders, including of course trade unions, need to be involved from initiation to delivery. SERTUC is concerned that those groups or communities who are not represented, or find it difficult to have their voice heard, may be further excluded and/or marginalised.

9. How effectively do SEEDA and local authorities work together on labour force and employment issues? In the light of an increasing role for local authorities in this area, what more needs to be done to ensure effective joined-up working arrangements?

In the light of the increased role proposed for local authorities, it needs to be agreed and accepted that trade unions through SERTUC play a key role in future working arrangements. The role of other social, economic and environmental partners also needs to be valued and structures devised to ensure their meaningful participation.

Also in this area it will be vital to ensure that updates on employment initiatives, and skills and training activities are available for the RSPA to consider in a more executive role, so that examples of good practice can be considered and replicated across the region.