



Briefing 07/56 October 2007

To: All Chief Executives, main and email contacts (England)

CC: All Chief Executives, main and email contacts (Scotland, Wales and NI)

Mind the Skills gap. The skills we need for sustainable communities

A research report from the Academy for Sustainable Communities.

Key issues

- A research paper highlighting labour shortages and skills gaps
- Details the skills which are in high demand and short supply and regional differences
- Public sector will find it increasingly difficult to recruit skilled professionals

1. Introduction

The Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC) was established to lead and co-ordinate a new approach which is designed to address the demands of community building. It is the Government's national body for the skills and knowledge required to make and maintain better places with responsibility to ensure there are recruitment and training programmes in place to provide enough people with the right skills in the right areas. ASC commissioned Arup to undertake this national study of labour shortages and skills gaps.

The foreword notes that ASC and the other organisations and individuals involved need to change the education, training and continuing development of professionals and community leaders, giving them broader skills and a new approach to meeting the

needs of local residents. They must develop more people with place-making skills that transcend narrow disciplines and encourage team working.

The study ran for two months and there were 763 individual responses and 146 organisational responses. Other evidence from Ernst and Young and York Consulting was used to inform this report

The report can be found at

<http://www.ascskills.org.uk/pages/research/mind-the-skills-gap>

2. The national context

The report opens by reiterating the point that providing affordable, carbon-efficient homes in safe prosperous communities is a national priority. This clearly depends on the efforts of a wide range of occupations such as engineering, architecture, surveying, housing, neighbourhood management, community and economic development, planning and environmental management.

By way of definition the report states that “Sustainable communities balance and integrate the social, economic and environmental aspects of places to meet residents’ needs today and in the future. Sustainable communities are diverse, reflecting local circumstances, but share common characteristics and offer people: a decent home they can afford; a community in which they want to live and work; the chance to develop their skills and interests; access to jobs and excellent services; and the chance to get engaged in their community and to make a difference”.

The evidence provided reflects increasingly acute recruitment shortages as well as a lack of generic skills such as project management, leadership, partnership working and communication.

3. Overarching findings

The report notes the need for those organisations involved in delivering sustainable communities to have access to staff with the right skills - technical, managerial and customer skills. This report and other related information shows that although there are significant numbers of qualified and committed individuals there are labour shortages across the sector, concerns about some technical skills and recognition that generic skills are lacking in many areas. Progress has been made since the Egan Review with regard to improving skills.

The report goes on to say that the best projects result from full engagement of all professionals willing to work together and compromise on individual objectives. An organisational culture that embraces opportunity, mutual understanding and cross-disciplinary working is also a central factor.

The role of consultants is also noted. The frequency with which they are used is increasing and the ability to efficiently manage consultants is a further skill required of public sector managers.

4. The workforce

The report notes that the core sustainable communities workforce comprises a broad mix of built environment, public service and socially focused professionals in the public, private and voluntary sectors. There has been significant growth in the total sustainable communities workforce in recent years, but experience and forecasts suggest a shortfall in supply in suitably qualified professionals.

The Arup survey identified leadership, the ability to make things happen, project management and team working as those issues most important to organisations. The same organisations thought they were lacking in project management, communication, financial management, leadership and process/change management. When questioned individuals thought they were lacking most in financial management, inclusive visioning, process/change management and stakeholder management.

On an organisational level, the private sector tend to have a younger workforce, face fewer barriers recruiting staff and seem better able to attract scarce candidates. Organisations expect to have particular difficulty recruiting landscape architects, urban designers, regeneration and economic developments specialists, sustainable developments specialists and planners, with the public sector having most problems attracting the latter group.

5. Technical Skills Gaps

The report highlighted that there is concern from some professionals about their own technical and specialist skills. Examples of areas identified for development include green infrastructure, funding sources, bidding arrangements, habitat creation, local development frameworks, planning policy statements, development appraisals, sustainability appraisals, GIS, e-communication, drawing skills and IT design.

6. Generic Skills Gaps

There is a lack of project management skills amongst this workforce, a skill which is required hand-in-hand with technical skills to ensure effective delivery. There is also concern about leadership and communication skills and if responsibility for delivery of public services is devolved further, leadership at a local level will become increasingly important. Breakthrough thinking, inclusive visioning and making it happen are skills which individuals have identified as areas of concern, especially those in the public sector. The report notes that this partly reflects organisational challenges in empowering staff to think creatively, take risks and drive forward delivery.

7. Regional Skills Gaps

The report notes that although the sustainable communities workforce as a whole is distributed across the country in roughly the same proportion as the workforce at large, certain clusters appear such as architects and surveyors in the South East and community and neighbourhood workers in the north.

A model developed by Arup forecasts skills gaps in the sustainable communities workforce in the regions by 2012. The main findings of this model are that there will be a definite north / south split with northern and midland regions experiencing far greater supply than demand with the opposite being true for southern regions.

8. Recommendations

A number of recommendations for addressing labour shortages and skills gaps are included in the report:

- Promote a national drive to address skills gaps – the issue is a nationwide one and requires a nationally coordinated approach to developing skills and knowledge engaging all partners and stakeholders
- Recognise that generic skills are key – national programmes should be developed and delivered on a cross-profession basis to address common gaps and encourage and reinforce cross-sector working; short courses and dissemination of best practice are clearly recognised as preferred approaches for busy practitioners
- Work to address labour shortages, recruitment and retention – continued effort is needed in attracting new recruits and retaining them with ongoing opportunities from relevant bodies working together to add value to each other's work
- Identify, recognise and promote technical skills – partners and stakeholders need to support the development of technical skills amongst the newer professions and reinvigorate those of the more established professions
- Promote best practice – research and best practice needs to be captured, collated and translated into practical guidance and examples that reflect the needs of delivery organisations
- Develop and embed a common understanding of sustainable communities – there needs to be a common and shared understanding across the professions of what delivering sustainable communities actually means in practice
- Undertake further research – this report does not take into account the outcomes of CSR07, the Housing Green Paper and the Olympics and other developments will change and possibly exacerbate forecasts for the sector.

9. Conclusion

The report concludes that there aren't enough people with the right skills in the right places to deliver the Government's ambitious agenda for creating sustainable communities across England. It maintains there is a need for an integrated strategy to

support skills development and address labour shortages in key occupations and for a partnership approach across the sector.

10. Comments

This report provides further evidence for those who have experienced difficulties recruiting staff with relevant skills in the recent past and for those considering their own skill sets. There is little surprise in the message but this report provides useful details concerning the actual skills which are in short supply and the regions likely to be affected most.

The report notes some of the drivers for the increase in the sustainable communities workforce including the rapid increase in the demand for new housing, the desire to achieve increasing levels of sustainability and the requirements for integrated and comprehensive approaches which have limited the role of purely market solutions and placed increased responsibility on the public sector to facilitate effective delivery. APSE has been highlighting these issues for some time and welcomes the fact that others are thinking along the same lines. Relevant research carried out by APSE is detailed in the publications, 'Construction Skills shortages in the public sector', 'Towards a future for public employment' and 'Maximising Local Potential – Achieving community benefit via procurement'.

There is clear demand for the kind of skills noted in this report to cover the current responsibilities of local councils. The Government has recently been promoting the role of local councils as place-shapers and as potential providers of social housing once again. If their responsibilities do expand, the likelihood is that the demand for staff with these skills will increase further. The report notes that the use of consultants has increased over recent years. It would be unfortunate if the role of local councils were to expand only for any new functions to be undertaken by consultants with the opportunity for internal staff to improve their skills being lost. This would be a significant missed opportunity for councils. APSE appreciates that there is a significant role for consultants but that local councils must be planning to carry out any new or expanded responsibilities themselves over the medium to long term. The use of consultants is most effective where they provide short term assistance or in areas of specialist knowledge. Councils must build their own internal capacity to deliver the duties they have without the need to rely on external organisations to do it on their behalf, if at all possible.

There has long been a discussion about the extent of departmentalism and silo mentality in councils and the negative impact that this can have upon service delivery and local citizens. This report highlights the impact that such an attitude can have if it is allowed to remain between different professionals. The reference to the need for generic skills such as communications, leadership and the ability to make things happens whilst being willing to compromise on objectives, reflects the need for people from different professions to work together to provide sustainable communities and not be limited by any traditional restrictions of their profession.

Consultants continue to play an important role in delivering sustainable communities and will do so into the future. However the responsibility for the quality of their work and for the outcomes of the projects they are involved with lies with the local council. As such consultants must be managed effectively and this is a skill in itself. Local council staff must have the necessary skills to ensure consultants provide value for money. This should be recognised as a vital training requirement to ensure they have the capacity to manage effectively.

The report has concentrated on the role of professionals in delivering sustainable communities and clearly there is no doubt of how important their role is. However the role of those who do the physical work to put communities in place should not be overlooked in this discussion. The need for an adequate supply of bricklayers, plasterers, electricians, plumbers, road workers and joiners is also vital. Evidence also shows there are supply problems for people with these skills and it is an issue which many councils are actively addressing through their training arrangements. Community benefit clauses built into procurement arrangements can further strengthen the role of councils in their attempts to ensure a well trained local population. The establishment of a national drive to address skills gaps should ensure links to those delivering training to the people building the homes, infrastructure and community facilities which make up sustainable communities. The development of modern methods of construction, new plant and machinery and new 'green' products mean that training has moved on in all occupations and training must keep pace. It is worth noting that generic skills such as communication, making it happen and team working are a pre-requisite for both craft and professional workers.

This area of study is a dynamic one and the report acknowledges such. One of the recommendations calls for further research both into associated areas and to track trends. It is important that this continues and APSE is willing to work alongside ASC and other organisations to ensure the topic of labour shortages and skills gaps retains a high profile.

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