



Photo: Sue Parkins

Make sure your voice is heard

With the toughest public spending review in generations in the offing, the case for publicly supported adult learning needs to be made, loudly and by as many people as possible, says **ALAN TUCKETT**

September is the busiest month, with students to advise and enrol, tutors to find and induct, and a million summer emails still to trawl through. Despite this, everyone with a commitment to the education of adults will need to carve out time to respond to the plethora of consultations issued this summer by a government in a hurry.

There may be a tendency to feel that this is a task that can be safely left to others, given the enthusiasm of Vince Cable, and especially that of John Hayes, for a broad and inclusive adult learning offer. Despite the prospect of swingeing budget cuts across the landscape of social policy, busy professionals may think that adults' learning opportunities are in safe hands – a feeling reinforced by ministers' stout and successful defence of the further education sector in the June reduction of £6.2 billion.

But that would be to underestimate the risks. First, there is a long history of new ministers making impressive speeches and expressing undying commitment to the education of adults, followed all too often by regulations that reduce opportunities for adults to learn on their own terms. This is not to accuse past government ministers of bad faith. But there are wider forces at work.

Take the Treasury. Its necessary scepticism in the middle of a Comprehensive Spending Review is reinforced by the life experiences of the bulk of its officials, who have arrived there after flawlessly brilliant education careers. No need for second chances there. Schooled in a narrow conception of economic value based on conventional analyses of rates of return they struggle with arguments about the wider benefits of learning. With tough decisions certain in October, the case for publicly supported adult learning needs to be made, loudly and by as many people as possible this month.

Second, there is the Skills Funding Agency, now part of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and keen to simplify budgets as far as possible. What will that mean for the Adult Learning Safeguard? It was created in 2003 to protect at least a minimum of provision for adult liberal education, family learning and learning for neighbourhood renewal from national qualifications frameworks, national targets and the like. Its value can be seen by looking at what has happened to the adult learning offer outside the safeguard over the last few years, with 1,500,000 places lost. Community-based adult educators need to make the case

firmly for a continuation of the safeguard in their responses to the two BIS consultation papers – *Skills for Sustainable Growth* and *A Simplified Further Education and Skills Funding System and Methodology*.

Anyone with concerns over the impact of reductions in funding on equality and diversity will also need to respond. The evidence of the last year showed just how difficult it is to square legislative entitlements with tight local budgets. Adults with learning difficulties too often found their learning needs, though fully protected in law, squeezed by institutional heads facing the challenge of forcing quarts into pint pots.

And then there is the UK Commission for Education and Skills consultation on the future of information, advice and guidance. It is clear that the new government is keen on the principle of all-age services. It is a principle few could argue with. It is just the practice that presents difficulties. Faced with the whole population to serve, and modest resources to do it with, providers have concentrated resources on young people. As a result, NIACE has taken broadly the same approach to IAG that it takes towards the adult safeguard – asking for a ring-fenced element for adult IAG within the all-age framework.

Of course, consultations provide the chance to do more than respond to the questions asked – answer the questions you would like them to have asked too. When I was invited to meet the Chancellor of the Exchequer (with other FE representatives) I was keen to point out that government spends as much on employer and self-employed tax relief for training as it does on the FE system – so any discussions on spending the FE pot better, or cutting budgets, might better start by looking at the two sums together.

I'd like to know, too, when the coalition (or the opposition) will develop a coherent policy to address the demographic gap – just who is going to fill the jobs left empty as baby boomers retire? So many questions, so little time to ask them.

Meanwhile, there is, of course, no truth in CIPD's inadequately researched suggestion that NIACE would be closed down as part of a cull of quangos. We are not a quango, and our grant accounts for 10 per cent of our turnover. We are proud of our independence, and celebrate it again this month when we launch an inquiry into the state of literacy work with Lord Boswell in the chair. Look forward to its consultation, soon.

Alan Tuckett is Chief Executive of NIACE