

Tourism Skills Network South East 2006-2009 Evaluation

Skyblue Research Limited

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Executive Summary



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Context

1.

The Tourism Skills Network South East (TSNSE or the 'Skills Network') has been in existence since September 2004, and was independently evaluated in 2006 at which point it successfully negotiated a three-year funding extension from SEEDA based on its impressive performance in a short period of time. This evaluation report focuses on the performance and impact of Skills Network between October 2006 and the end of August 2009.

2.

A range of contractual targets were agreed that would contribute to South East regional targets and core outputs specifically from October 2006 as follows:

- **Employment support:** helping individuals get a job in the tourism industry
- **Business support:** helping tourism businesses improve their performance
- **Skills:** helping people working in tourism to improve their skills development

3.

Furthermore, the over-riding driver for having a Tourism Skills Network in the first place was to tackle significant challenges across the hospitality, travel, leisure and tourism sector in the region, as expressed in its core objectives as follows:

- Driving up skills and professionalism in the sector
- Ensuring sector specific, needs based skills / training provision is identified and delivered
- Helping achieve a step change in customer care in the region's tourism sector
- Providing co-ordination / a single point of contact for tourism training and skills on a local basis
- Saving employers time by finding out what is available for them in terms of skills and training and simplifying it

4.

This evaluation seeks to consolidate a range of intelligence gathered through both secondary and primary sources in order to inform any decisions to be made by the Skills Network about how best to sustain its essential function from April 2010 in conjunction with Tourism South East, SEEDA and local Area Tourism Partnerships.

Evaluation Participants

5.

A sample of forty-one tourism businesses and partners were interviewed by the evaluation team during October 2009 to seek their views about and experiences of the Skills Network since 2006. The sample comprised a mix of business types, size and sub-regional location. In addition, the evaluators interviewed key representatives from SEEDA, People 1st and each of the Skills Network's Coordinators for their perspectives on the 2006-2009 period, experiences and learning lessons for the future.

Management Information – Headline Performance

6.

SEEDA provided contract funding of £159,000 to the Tourism Skills Network for the achievement of specific contractual outputs between 1st October 2006 and end August 2009 as detailed in point 7 below. In addition, £57,800 of funding (from SEEDA and Train to Gain) was provided for the achievement of additional outputs also included in the table below specifically for the delivery of the Train to Gain Brokerage pilot. SEEDA funding has therefore contributed to the achievement of the outputs described which in our independent view represents **excellent value for money**. Moreover, the Network has achieved significant financial leverage to support its activities in this period from other sources. Total income in this period was £459,000 (including SEEDA funding of £159,000) and £300,000 from other external sources including Train to Gain; New Vision; Learning and Skills Councils, Business Links, Sussex Enterprise and local authority partners.

7.

A review of the management information suggests that the Tourism Skills Network South East has over-performed in **all** contractual delivery areas as follows with some very impressive outputs being delivered:

Core Outputs	Objective for the Skills Network	Target	Actual ¹	Performance
Core 2: Employment Support – number of people assisted to get a job	Employment Support Provide employment support to economically inactive individuals seeking employment in the leisure, tourism & hospitality sector.	115	116	100%
Core 4: Business support – number of businesses assisted to improve their performance	Quality Workshops for Employers Roll out a programme of quality workshops to employers.*	45	69	153%
	TNAs (Training Needs Analyses) Undertake company diagnostics/action plans (TNAs).	410²	583	142%
	‡ Train to Gain ONAs (organisational needs analyses)	80	93	116%
	‡ Train to Gain Referrals	150	178	119%
Core 6: Skills – number of people assisted in their skills development as a result of RDA programmes	Quality Workshops for Employees Roll out a programme of quality workshops to employees.*	90	145	161%
	Olympics Create an Olympics derivative of 'Welcome to Excellence' suite and pilot with employees in the Olympic host areas.	100	108	108%

NB. The activities with a ‡ symbol in the table were funded separately to the £159,000 core funding for the Skills Network

¹ Figures confirmed by SEEDA and Tourism South East 10th December 2009

² This contractual target includes an increase agreed with the Network when additional funding was levered in for a specific project called the Train to Gain Brokerage pilot project which has been evaluated separately in 2008

8.

The evaluation team also learned that the wider contribution of the Network may be much larger than the metrics suggest. For example, key performance indicator information provided to us by the Network's Regional Manager suggests that for the 2008-2009 period alone the Skills Network had achieved the following outstanding results:

- 3,410 participants on training and skills activities
- 880+ businesses engaged in activity
- Overall contribution to tasking framework points 80% (total 3,755 points from Training)
- Additional 739 points through the Skills Network

If one then considers the wider potential impact of the Skills Network's activities the TSE Training Team contend that over the three year period since 1st October 2006, together with the Skills Network their Team has delivered positive outcomes to over 17,000 participants on Welcome to Excellence courses and engaged over 4,800 businesses in activity. It has also produced 24 best practice case studies and quarterly skills newsletters with the aim of disseminating good practice throughout the industry in the South East region. The important point here is that the Network did not just achieve contractual targets in the 2006-2009 period, rather it **exceeded every single one** and achieved additional outputs and outcomes by virtue of the way in which its services integrate with wider regional and sub-regional activity.

9.

Between October 2006 and October 2009 the Skills Network comprised a team of seven part-time members of staff including a Regional Coordinator³ and six sub-regional Tourism Skills Coordinators. Each of these team members were employed on a **part-time basis** for between 1 and 3 days depending on their agreed localised employment arrangements and the extent to which external funding was leveraged in to support their activity in the region and area tourism partnerships. It is extremely important to bear this point in mind when considering the impact the Network has managed to achieve on essentially a part-time resource only throughout this time period.

Tourism Skills Network Team Perspectives

10.

The Network is viewed as highly successful by the Team despite working in different local area tourism partnerships under different deployment contracts and regimes and despite the heavy workload. They feel that it has out-performed compared to contractual objectives and adds significant strategic added value in terms of marketing, relationship management and brokerage as well as direct delivery of funded projects. Some Coordinators believe it adds significant value to Tourism South East's membership offer and that there are further opportunities to build on this work in the future should the Network be sustained post-March 2010. The Network provides TSE and the industry at large in the South East with a collective voice on issues relating to business support, skills and training

11.

The Network adds value to businesses – particularly SMEs – in the way that it can give the employer a supportive role when it comes to training and development, saving them time and maximising funding available for training courses. Moreover, the Network provides much

³ The Regional Coordinator was also able to call on administrative and strategic support on a matched funded basis during this period with Tourism South East's financial support

more than training – it provides vital networking services for businesses who might otherwise feel isolated or unconnected to other businesses in the industry despite sharing common challenges and issues in respect of workforce development

12.

The Network has levered in funding from a range of sources so that it can continue to innovate and service industry's skills and training needs. However, there is still a feeling that so much more needs to be done and could be done particularly regarding following up on all the training needs analysis information that has been so painstakingly collected from employers in the field

13.

Relationships with strategic partners were at an all-time high at the time of this evaluation, and are the consequence of five years' hard work and investment by the Co-ordinators at regional and local level. On the ground activity is also critical to success – the time out in the field engaging with employers and stakeholders in the industry is extremely valuable. Going forward, the majority view, in an ideal scenario, would be for each Coordinator to have two days per week (minimum) for Skills Network activity

Tourism Skills Network – Strategic Partner Perspectives

14.

Representatives from key partner organisations, including SEEDA and People 1st, view the Network as highly successful. They highlight the fact that the Network is now fully embedded in the region; it has proven itself to be successful above and beyond contract core objectives and outputs; employers in the tourism industry value the Network greatly; and the Network has continually come up with ideas and proposals to take new developments forward to the benefit of the tourism industry

15.

These representatives feel that the critical success factors have included: the skills and competencies of the individual Network Coordinators; the quality of relationships they have built up with tourism businesses over time; the quality of service delivery; their ability to be the 'eyes and ears' for the industry's skills and training needs; and their robust and credible reputation at local and regional levels

16.

Looking to the future these representatives express concern at the idea that the Network could not be sustained at a time of such importance for the tourism industry – through recession, out of recession, and maximising the positive opportunities (and mitigating against any loss of skills to London) catalysed by the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. They also feel that without the Network Tourism South East would experience a major reduction in terms of their ability to achieve core tasking framework points and therefore suggest that the TSE Board considers ring-fencing a proportion of its core funding from SEEDA to sustain the Network's essential activities from April 2010 onwards. Other opportunities include exploring relationships with organisations that may also have members of staff working with tourism businesses in the region (such as Business Link) to ensure that relationships are managed effectively and intelligence shared to the benefit of the industry.

Tourism Skills Network Business and Partner Perspectives

17.

A sample of 41 tourism businesses and partner organisations were interviewed by the evaluators in October 2009 to identify their experience of and attitudes towards the Skills Network. Participants were diverse in terms of sub-sector, workforce size, sub-region and length of relationship with the Skills Network⁴

18.

Respondents had enjoyed a range of dealings with the Skills Network including the receipt of useful information (93%), support from at least one Tourism Skills Coordinator (88%), training (81% had paid for this service) and / or attendance at one of the Network's many events (51%). Other dealings with the Network have included helping develop the tourism skills strategy in the local area, funding some of the Network's activities (strategic partners only), taking advantage of heavily subsidised training, helping set up HR Forums, participating in best practice and networking events, offering up rooms / venue for training courses and events, helping to organise events for other tourism businesses and advising on content (e.g. quality workshops/recession busting) and taking part in product knowledge and familiarisation tours.

19.

Consultees were asked what had been the main benefits of their organisation's involvement with the Tourism Skills Network between 2006 and 2009. The varied and detailed responses suggest that the Network is extremely well-regarded and particular benefits have included support from the Network's team of local, knowledgeable, sector specific Coordinators; the receipt of high quality, relevant business support and training; the opportunity to network with other businesses; and to have someone to help them source training provision and funding (where appropriate).

20.

88% of respondents felt that tourism businesses (employers) had been the main beneficiary of the Network's activities, whilst 66% also thought that tourism employees had been major beneficiaries of their work. 37% felt that other networks had also benefited from a relationship with the Tourism Skills Network at regional and local levels. The evaluators noticed a major shift in beneficiary profile since the Network's early years (2004-2006) and the new survey findings in 2009 emphasise how much more focused the Network has been on deriving benefits for tourism businesses and employees since 2006 compared to its foundation years when it was perhaps attempting to service too many audiences and expectations.

21.

Businesses and partners were asked to comment on how successful they felt the Network had been if they had taken part in any of their activities. The survey suggests that of those services accessed by the majority of this sample they have all proven very / successful particularly in respect of:

- the general advice and signposting received (100% rated this very successful or successful)
- quality workshops for employees that have been delivered through the Network (100% rated these as very successful or successful)
- quality workshops for employers that have been delivered through the Network (93% rated these as very successful or successful)

⁴ Please refer to the full report for further sampling information

Respondents were asked, without prompting what they felt had been the most important achievements by the Network. Responses were grouped as follows based on independent respondent views and opinions:

- The personal, tailored support and valuable connections that the Network provides including 'hard working Coordinators that go the extra mile'
- The proactive service by the Network to encourage tourism businesses to train and upskill their people, including the service to make businesses aware of cost effective and sector specific training provision
- Increasing the skills and abilities of people working in tourism by identifying needs and then organising local, specific and relevant training courses
- Raising the profile of tourism careers, employment opportunities and qualifications
- Making it easy to find out what was available i.e. unpicking the plethora of schemes and initiatives and making it easier for employer to understand
- Bringing about a coherent approach amongst a wide range of strategic bodies that have an interest in promoting a successful tourism industry in the South East

22.

Respondents felt that the main factors contributing to the Network's success were:

- **fit for purpose Network Coordinators**
 - The Network Coordinators are reliable, knowledgeable and provide the support requested by tourism businesses often exceeding expectations
 - The communication skills of the Skills Network Coordinators are first class
 - The Coordinators provide reassurance and useful intelligence and good practice for the businesses to learn from
- **fit for purpose service**
 - The service provided matched the business' needs
 - The service accessed was affordable
- **fit for purpose training provision**
 - The training is sector-specific and tailored to the industry's needs
 - The training topics are relevant and delivered by specialist facilitators / presenters
 - The training provision received good feedback from employees and has helped them do their job more effectively
 - The training received has helped business participants save money or implement new practices
 - The training has been accessible sometimes in-house at the company's request
 - The training topics are driven by the industry not imposed on them by the Network
 - The training is practical and action-oriented

23.

A key consideration for this evaluation is trying to assess to what extent the Tourism Skills Network made an impact in the specific areas it had been set up to achieve. Encouragingly 34 out of 41 respondents (83%) said that the Skills Network has definitely or probably made a positive impact on skills specifically helping people in tourism to improve their skills development. Moreover, 35 out of 41 (85%) said the Skills Network has definitely or probably made a positive impact on business support helping tourism businesses improve their performance. Only 15 respondents were aware of the Network's employment support output activity (helping individuals get a job in the tourism industry) and of those, 53% felt the Network had definitely or probably made a positive impact.

In respect of the Network's five stated core objectives (See Table 8b in the full report) between 73% and 78% in each instance, felt that the Network had definitely or probably made a positive impact. The Network appears to have been especially successful (in the view of this sample of respondents) in its pursuit of: driving up skills and professionalism in the sector (88%); ensuring sector specific, needs based skills / training provision is identified and delivered (88%); and helping achieve a step change in customer care in the region's tourism sector (86%).

Compared to evaluation results in 2006, the latest survey suggests that the Network has made significant increases in impact across eight agreed evaluation measures with notable success and impact in terms of:

- engaging tourism businesses / employers (83% definite or probable impact)
- developing initiatives (83% definite or probable impact)
- acting as a broker between tourism businesses and training providers (81% definite or probable impact)

24.

Respondents were asked how much they valued their relationship with the Tourism Skills Network and all those taking part in the research said they genuinely appreciate the services provided to them 'at the coalface' particularly by the Tourism Skills Network Coordinators. 96% value the relationship with their local Coordinator. Looking at those businesses and partners who have had any direct dealings with the Regional / Head Office Team we find a similar result with 82% saying they value that relationship very much or quite a lot.

This is perhaps the most significant result of the survey. The Coordinators in particular are the face of the Network – trusted by tourism businesses in their local area, well regarded for their expertise their attitude, their willingness to provide service above and beyond contractual requirement and to genuinely help and support the businesses that they deal with on a continuous basis. Many testimonials were freely provided by the businesses contacted through our independent survey included in the full report which we encourage the reader to review to get a true sense for how genuinely appreciated this team is. 83% of respondents feel it is very important to have direct access to someone local with the skills and knowledge exemplified by Network Coordinators and a further 12% think this is quite important.

25.

When asked what impact, if any, there would be on their business or partner organisation if they could no longer access the services / personnel provided by the Tourism Skills Network in future respondents could be categorised into three segments who predicted either high (the largest segment), medium (the second largest segment) or low (the smallest segment) impact. (Please see table 11 for a detailed listing of impacts).

26.

Respondents were asked to suggest up to three priorities for the Tourism Skills Network from 2010 to 2012 in terms of supporting tourism businesses and their workforce. The most prevalent priorities were very clear as follows:

- Priority 1: Delivery of affordable and relevant training to the industry (56%)
- Priority 2: Personalised, local support, advice, guidance and training brokerage (44%)
- Priority 3: Information provision, good practice updates and networking events (29%)

Future Demand for the Network and Key Drivers

27.

Given the strength of positive feedback about the Network by those businesses and partners that have been engaged by its activities since 2006 (and even before that), it is highly likely that demand for its continued services will be high. The Network is in our view a significant 'engagement network' with the tourism industry in the South East that, at the time of recession is perhaps even more important than in 'normal' economic conditions. It is precisely during this period that tourism organisations – particularly SMEs – need to continue to invest in their business and their workforce, but they need help to do it. And they need skilled professionals, such as the Network's Coordinators and Regional Team, to proactively prompt businesses to continue to invest so that they are ready for the recovery. On the horizon are the London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games – again another significant driver of demand and impact on the tourism industry in the South East region. For some businesses this may provide opportunities, for others it may provide threats – in either scenario the Network can play a vital role in maximising the benefits and / or mitigate against the risks presented by the largest event on the planet.

Conclusions

28.

It is the evaluator's independent opinion, that the Tourism Skills Network has provided excellent value for money between 2006 and 2009 given its clear achievement – and in all cases, over-performance – compared to contractual output areas agreed with SEEDA. It is also the evaluator's opinion that the metrics only tell a part of the story about the real value of the Network and its team of local, knowledgeable, sector specific co-ordinators. The testimonials, employer quotations and myriad case studies suggest a highly effective and motivated network of individuals who seek to provide excellence as standard to the benefit of the tourism industry in the region.

29.

It is the evaluator's independent opinion that the Network is:

- providing an effective service and represents good value for money
- for some an invaluable, and for others at very least a useful and highly respected, resource both at regional and local levels
- in a good position as a trusted resource to help businesses either through the recession or to pull out of the recession and plan for the future
- something that virtually all respondents would like to see continued and would feel disappointed if the services were no longer available in the form required and appreciated
- an important external, objective point of contact and source of support for tourism businesses
- in a position to provide quality training and upskilling where it is needed the most
- a vital conduit for networking and brokerage between business and training providers
- an effective vehicle for working with other partners
- well positioned, and mature enough to complement wider destination management objectives at area tourism partnership level
- a genuine success story to be celebrated in the South East and is deserving of further support from 2010 onwards
- providing a cohesive and structured approach to business support, training and skills for the tourism sector in the South East
- making it easier for the tourism businesses they work with to understand and then adopt an appropriate business solution from the many initiatives and schemes available, ultimately saving them time and money

30.

The Network is a mature and established solution that not only aligns with South East strategic policy objectives i.e. it supports the economic development of the region helping businesses reach their full potential', but is it is also operationally very effective. Its team works at the coal-face with real businesses. It has the ability to be 'fleet of foot' in terms of identifying and responding to business' genuine training and skills needs and has the expertise and knowledge about all the different programmes available, to advise and guide a business to a solution that will make a difference to the business' bottom line. The Network is 'an expert intervention' that continues to offer a vital service to address known market failures that the sector will not and can not solve for itself. Without the Network, one wonders how any claim might be made that the region has an in-depth knowledge of the industry's needs, the economic conditions in which they operate and can put in place training or skills solutions that have a direct impact on tourism businesses in the various localities of the South East.

Recommendations for the future

31. Recommendation 1:

Sustain the Tourism Skills Network model post March 2010 ensuring there is still a regional team and critically a presence at local level. This report needs to be shared with the Board of Directors of Tourism South East, SEEDA Skills/tourism/2012 teams and Area Tourism Partnerships to identify the best funding and employment models that will sustain the Network and its essential functions in the longer term. It may be necessary to manage employer expectations where demand for Co-ordinator activity is particularly high. Potentially the role can only be successfully delivered if funding is available to cover a minimum of 2 days each week at ATP level.

32. Recommendation 2:

Ensure that the Network remains focused on a small number of achievable, high impact targets in line with TSE's business plan that provide synergies with ATPs, SEEDA and other stakeholder requirements.

33. Recommendation 3:

Ensure that any memorandum of understanding between the Network, People 1st and the managing agent for Business Link in future is up to date and reflective of mutually agreed strategic objectives to support the tourism industry in the region post March 2010. The important point of this recommendation is to ensure that wherever synergies can be created between these organisations they should be explored and reflected in any joint action plan to support tourism in the region in future.

34. Recommendation 4:

Use this evaluation report to help prioritise the focus of activity to be targeted at the tourism industry between 2010 and 2015, and the types of service that the Network should continue to offer and / or develop in tune with industry's articulated needs as determined by the independent survey completed during this evaluation.

Priority 1: Delivery of affordable and relevant training to the industry (56%)

Priority 2: Personalised, local support, advice, guidance and training brokerage (44%)

Priority 3: Information provision, good practice updates and networking events (29%)

In this way the Network retains its credibility as an honest broker that is truly employer or sector led. In reality, there will be a balance to be achieved in terms of meeting employer needs and demands and delivering on specific targets such as SEEDA 2012 customer care targets, Accentuate, Welcome All, Rural Development Programme for England targets, other courses, and signposting to other TSE activity projects including Interreg.