

## Off-the-job training rule concerns feature again at AELP Autumn Conference

Coming a day after the welcome Budget announcements on apprenticeships, the AELP autumn conference in Manchester took place in a positive atmosphere but the mood among delegates was that there was plenty more to be done to get the levy reforms fully sorted. The BBC and a large northern NHS trust said that spending all of their levy money would be extremely difficult and therefore the 25% transfer facility would be important. The BBC also called on the government to take a more measured approach to the funding band reviews because they posed major challenges to business planning. ESFA director of apprenticeships Keith Smith told the conference, sponsored by City & Guilds, that the shortly to be reopened register would raise the bar in terms of quality providers. A highlight of his presentation was a commitment to the rebirth of Traineeships and to look at the QAR rule which was holding back their growth. The ESFA director explained the planned process for moving non-levy employers on to the digital service, saying that it was unlikely for those providers without an ESFA contract to get access to these employers before August 2019 at the earliest. An electronic vote by the audience showed how big a barrier the 20% off-the-job training rule remained in engaging employers but Keith Smith stood firm on the government's line over the issue.



Philip Augar confirmed that the report of the Post 18 Review would be published in early 2019 and that its primary focus was addressing skills shortages in the economy. He talked about 'a blended solution - blended by type of learning and provider'. Kirstie Donnelly of City & Guilds focused on the current EPA and EQA challenges, questioning whether we currently had a consistent quality model to underpin apprenticeships. Visibility and consistency of learner data was a particular bugbear for her organisation. She added that other challenges included multiple regulation by different EQA providers, lack of readiness on standards and availability of expert assessors.

Providers were made aware of the enhanced opportunities available to them under the devolved arrangements for the adult education budget. Senior representatives from Greater Manchester and West Midlands Combined Authorities confirmed that they were looking at different types of outcomes to measure success such as securing a job. West Midlands added that it had an agreement in principle to fund apprenticeships of SMEs with unused levy money in its area. It also had a slice of funding for the new £100m National Retraining Scheme and the conference heard from Matt Hassan of the DfE on how the programme was going to be slowly rolled out, with its main aim being about how we can support people at risk from automation, upskill them and get them into more stable employment. The final session of the conference saw the Department

for International Trade and Open University explain the major opportunities which are available to British vocational education providers if they are prepared to get on an aeroplane and invest a little time abroad. We were told that we were 'too shy' which was unfortunate because there was a real appetite in Asia and China for UK expertise. Earlier Shane Mann of Lsect announced that nominations would soon be open for the AAC Apprenticeships Awards 2019 and the conference finished on a positive note with delegates using the electronic polling to say that they were feeling more optimistic about the future of apprenticeships. Presentation slides, including the very comprehensive set presented by the City & Guilds managing director on EPA, will be made available to conference delegates.