

THE 'E' IS FOR ENTERPRISE: AN OPINION

NFEA and SFEDI have long worked together to improve the quality of support for individuals wanting to start or run their own enterprise. These key people represent 97% of all UK businesses and 25% of the adult workforce, yet receive less than 10% of the Government's support and skills budgets. What little Government training exists is often delivered by so-called experts with no small business experience.

Entrepreneurs need practical advice and support from people like us, who, unlike civil servants, can see, feel and hear the difference between corporate management consultants and those with enterprise know-how. With our track record, you'd think that Government officials who wanted to know what's what in enterprise skills and support, would come to us first.

Yet even though we're consulted and sit on endless steering groups, this is usually only *after* Government has framed its policies. We then work frantically to meet its programme criteria or to change the criteria in time for the next bidding round. Look at Unemployment to Self Employment, Business Support as a Profession and Train to Gain as three recent examples of this.

This must change. We must break new ground in enterprise support policy proposals to ensure we're the enterprise advisers to Government and not at the mercy of Government advisers, who don't understand our sector. We must show our belief in self regulation through adherence to SFEDI standards in training and support. Our clients can't afford us to just jump through Government-made hoops.

Finally, we must campaign for public policy to recognise that individuals starting their own business are entitled to the training and support they need to thrive – and from publicly available skills and support budgets - just as those making other career choices are. They should be able to go directly to the enterprise support professionals in their community, not via a broker, for one stop shop training and support. In this way, we will shape the enterprise training and support landscape, rather than just adapt to it.

This is not a moan or a rant. We have an opportunity now to embrace an enterprising approach in order to provide the services that our clients deserve. The SFEDI Board resolved at its last meeting to do this.

If you agree, please send this article to every national or regional policy maker or implementer you know. We can showcase to the nation just how far our enterprising partnership has progressed at the SFEDI BAFTAs in Piccadilly on 17th April 2008.