

## **An LSC Chair Interviewed**

### ***Ursula Russell MBE***

Ursula Russell MBE is, by any criterion, a distinguished educationalist with wide experience. A late entrant to teaching, it took her only eight years to become head of a comprehensive school. From there she went to the Industrial Society as head of education, and then to the RSA where she was director of educational services. In her 'retirement' she is currently Chair of the Coventry and Warwickshire Learning and Skills Council; a Director of Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Partnerships and Chair of its Personnel Committee; a Director of UK Skills and Chair of its Awards Panel; a Governor of Coventry University; Trustee of the Achievement Trust; Vice Chair of Coventry and Warwickshire Connexions Executive Committee.

She also finds time to write and speak on Vocational Education and Training and on Women in Management; and to be a talented amateur actress, an excellent and imaginative cook and a keen gardener. She is excellent company and, as you will guess, an old friend of mine.

Full of enthusiasm and very positive about LSCs, she sees their function as one of leadership and brokerage; bringing together providers and getting joined up thinking..

Her LSC started with a review, long before strategic reviews became mandatory. Before setting off you need to find out where you are. This review threw up travel-to-study problems of which they had been unaware. While colleges were on board almost from the outset, schools with sixth forms were deeply suspicious and determined to defend their own patches, and needed reassuring that the LSC was interested in the range and efficiency of provision, not who did the providing. One, unforeseen, problem was that of the different cultures of the TEC and FEFC that the LSC replaced. The first three years of the LSC have seen a sea change in attitudes and there is now a functioning partnership of providers. The key, she believes, is to seek local solutions to local problems. But she is passionate about young people getting objective advice; something that schools find difficult to do.

Her attitude to restructuring was to leave it to market forces. A college merger ensued quickly. However, and much to her annoyance, a highly desirable school/college merger was stopped by the DfES on the grounds that the law did not permit a single governing body.

Although she feels that her LSC has made a good start, not least because it has able and committed officers with considerable experience of previous local provision, there is a great deal yet to do. She wants to see better vocational pathways, better adult courses and full commitment from all employers. Her dream is of three or four partnership centres involving all providers, from the university to employers of all sizes, and she is chairing a steering group on this. She envisages modern and welcoming buildings, easily accessible to both learners and providers, that would

both give status to crafts and trades and engender a sense of civic pride.

Generally supportive of Mike Tomlinson's thinking, she warns that we must learn from the experience of previous failed attempts at reform of the qualifications maze. Teachers, trainers, exam boards and employers must be fully involved, and the result must be neither a political quickfix nor ideologically-driven. And it must be properly funded, and we must get assessment right. All this means that adequate time must be allowed and it is not rushed.