

SLIM-Comment

Raising Expectations: Machinery of Government and Sub-National Review make an impact

Editorial

Here we take a look at the new Government paper - **Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver (Joint DCSF/DIUS consultation)**. Many of the outcomes have already been communicated – loss of the LSC, the arrival of the Commission for Employment and Skills and shifting emphasis to Local Authorities.

So the LSCs are finally to close, but not until 2010, with their responsibilities being split between Local Authorities, a Young People's Learning Agency - charged with helping local authorities work coherently together in providing for the 14 -19 age bracket, and the SFA, no not the Scottish Football Association... and nor indeed the Super Furry Animals... but – the Skills Funding Agency to administer the flow of £4bn of public money a year to colleges and training organisations.

Colleges, providers and other interested parties have until June 9 to give Government their verdicts on the paper, but there is little doubt in the further education sector that the main proposals are to be carried out.

Andy Dean

The Paper

Last June's decision, as part of the "machinery of government" changes, to hand over the greater part of its £11.6bn budget, for 16 to 19 year-olds, to Local Education Authorities effectively ripped the heart out of the LSC and clearly signalled that its end was approaching. The paper stresses that it is not that the LSC has done badly:

Since its creation in 2001, the Learning and Skills Council has helped drive significant progress towards its goal of improving the skills of England's young people and adults to create a workforce of world-class standard. Together with schools, colleges and other providers, the LSC has delivered year on year improvements in participation and success rates, with more young people and adults than ever before gaining the skills and qualifications that employers need and value. 87% of all 16 year-olds are now staying on in education or training, and over a quarter of a million young people are on an Apprenticeship programme.

The LSC has successfully hit all its targets, but the ever increasing pace of change means the skills landscape too must change, and itself be flexible and responsive to new challenges. It is just that the world has changed. As this document is published, there is a Bill before Parliament to raise the participation age. The ambition being that every young person will be pursuing a programme which engages them and enables them to progress in learning and employment. Successfully implementing this vision will require 'clear local leadership in every area'. Government clearly wants Local Authorities to provide that leadership. The switch to greater Local Authority role was trumpeted by the children, schools and families secretary Ed Balls as follows:

"We are committed to revolutionising the education system so that it delivers for all young people whatever their interests or abilities. Local authorities are in the best place to respond to the needs of young people locally. So by giving them responsibility for the funding we are putting the final pieces in place to ensure they can offer this choice."

Two key features in particular dictate that structural change is necessary: the aim of a demand-led system, and the integration of employment and skills. The advent of Skills Accounts and the growth of Train to Gain herald a radically different model of organisation of the skills system, where the role of Government is to ensure that customers are empowered, well-informed and well supported, so that demand can lead supply. According to the document, the SFA will oversee the "coherence and performance" of the whole FE service, especially its responsiveness to the strategic skills needs of employers and learners. It will also manage the National Employer Service, the single service for employers with more than 5,000 employees, and will manage the new adult advancement and careers service that is to be set up in

England. One task it will not inherit from the LSC is the administration of apprenticeships. In January the government announced the creation of a National Apprenticeships Service to take end-to-end responsibility for the apprenticeships programme. It will also manage the new Advancement and Careers Service, Offender Learning and the growing integration with Jobcentre Plus. A tough job – and maybe one sufficient to dissuade LSC staff from a transfer? John Denham, secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills, said the new SFA would:

"Ensure that government funding responds to employers' and adults' skills needs and supports excellence in the FE sector".

If the 14 – 19 Agenda is to be led through Local Authorities then the post 19 Agenda – the Leitch targets, Train to Gain and Skills Accounts will be led by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills which will start work on the 1st of next month (<http://www.ukces.org.uk/>)..., and, in some cases, local Employment and Skills Boards but principally the new SFA.

With a continuing nod to evidence-based policy we find that research will play a key role in the UKCES, enabling it to discharge its remit to advise ministers on strategies, targets and policies and to assess our progress in achieving World Class Skills and an 80% employment rate. Research evidence will underpin the UKCES work programme priorities, inform policy and delivery reviews and provide 'big picture' intelligence on UK skills and employment trends in an international context.

The Young People's Learning Agency will join with the RDAs and Government Offices to provide the wider context, and 14 – 19 partnerships as the local planning and steering group. In essence, Local Authorities will be charged with planning and funding 14 – 19 provision, ensuring that the entitlement is available for every young person and that funding follows the learner. They will start by drawing up a local commissioning plan, based on intelligence from local 14 – 19 partnerships and any other demand mechanisms, and incorporated as part of their Children and Young People's Plan.

Local authorities will judge demand for different forms of provision, and the extent to which the available supply meets that demand and makes a full reality of the new entitlements to Diplomas, Apprenticeships and the Foundation Learning Tier. They will then decide where to commission more provision, where to expand the best provision to fill gaps, and where to remove the least effective provision. In doing so, they will aim to make the new entitlements available in full to all young people at the highest possible standard.

The Young People's Learning Agency will perform a final moderation of the commissioning plans to ensure they fit within overall budget and that the new entitlement is being delivered. Funding will follow the learner's choice and

comparable funding will be provided for comparable provision within a national funding formula, which will continue on a very similar basis to the current formula. Local authorities will be funded according to the institutions which are in their area – not according to where young people live.

Final thoughts

This consultation paper proposes two new systems - reflecting the different needs of young people and adults. In the system for young people, responsibility and accountability is given to local authorities, to deliver the right education and training provision for every young person in their area. The system for the adult sector is focused on establishing a market which rewards success and brings together education and skills in a high quality offer to respond to the needs of adults and employers. The first – Pre 19 is about giving “*Local Authorities the necessary funding and commissioning powers to effectively deliver the new entitlements and raise the participation age.*” The second, for adult learning, is about “*streamlining the post – 19 skills system, creating a demand – led system, integrating employment and skills*” and thereby making faster progress towards the 2020 skills targets.

I cannot but sympathise with the LSCs beleaguered staff who have suffered re-structuring after re-structuring, so I'll leave the last words to Mark Haysom the LSC chief executive:

"The LSC is a remarkable success story and I am proud of what it has achieved. Under its leadership, further education has been transformed."

It will, after all have survived for 10 years in 2010. It will have outlived its predecessors, the Further Education Funding Council and the shorter lived Training and Enterprise Councils.

Links

Raising Expectations: Summary

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conSection.cfm?consultationId=1520&dId=840&sId=5011&numbering=1&itemNumber=1>

UK Commission for Employment and Skills

<http://www.ukces.org.uk/>

The Guardian's take on the changes

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/further/story/0,,2266142,00.html>