



Post-16 Area Reviews of provision in England

Summary

This paper presents a summary of the Government's 'Review of Post-16 Education and Training' (Area Reviews) and ATL/AMiE's concerns with this policy.

Introduction

In July the Government announced the 'Review of Post-16 Education and Training' (known as the 'Area Reviews'). The objectives of this policy are to achieve 'clear, high quality professional and technical routes to employment, alongside academic routes' and 'better responsiveness to local employer need and economic priorities'. The Government notes that this will mean 'fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers'. ATL/AMiE has identified a number of issues with the rationale behind the policy, the process for implementing it, and some of the likely outcomes.

Detail

What are the Area Reviews?

The objectives of this policy are to achieve 'clear, high quality professional and technical routes to employment, alongside academic routes' and 'better responsiveness to local employer need and economic priorities'. The Government notes that substantial change to the Post-16 Education and Training sector is necessary to achieve these objectives whilst tackling the deficit. Essentially therefore, this means 'fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers'. The Government has been explicit that Area Reviews will result in mergers, restructures, course rationalisation and college closure.

Who will be involved in the Area Reviews?

The Government has required the sector to conduct the review of post-16 education and training itself, in partnership with a range of stakeholders. Steering groups will lead each Area Review and, following research analysis of provision in the area, followed by the consideration of various options, will make recommendations of what decisions should be taken. Membership of steering groups will comprise FE, Sixth Form and Regional Schools Commissioners, chairs of governors of each institution, representatives from the local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), funding agencies, BIS and DfE. Steering groups will be chaired by the representative from the combined or lead authority in areas with devolution deals, or in other areas, the FE or Sixth Form Commissioner.

Although not stated in the Government's policy documentation, those Area Reviews already underway are allowing college principals to attend steering group meetings alongside chairs of governors. In addition, whilst the focus of the policy is clearly on FE and Sixth Form colleges, other providers of Post-16 Education and Training

(including school sixth forms, UTCs, private learning providers and adult learning providers) are able to apply to the steering groups to join the Area Reviews.

Governing bodies of each institution involved will decide whether to accept the recommendations of the Area Review steering group, and will be responsible for implementation. However, institutions are expected to 'take the right action, in light of the findings of the review....ultimately [BIS] expect the funding agencies and LEPs to only fund institutions that have taken action to ensure they can provide a good quality offer to learners and employers, which is financially sustainable for the long term'.

Ofsted will be involved in supporting the Area Reviews through providing steering groups with information. The Education and Training Foundation and Jisc (supporting digital technologies and services) are named as organisations that will support institutions in going through the review, and its implementation. Policy guidance also states that sector bodies such as the Association of Colleges, the Sixth Form College Association, the Chartered Institute of Further Education (established in October 2015 to recognise the highest performing colleges) and the National Union of Students will wish to play a full role in supporting the reviews for the benefit of their members.

What is the timetable?

There will be around 40 Area Reviews, with LEP areas generally being used as the approximate boundary for each. All Reviews must be completed by March 2017 and the first wave comprising seven Areas began in September 2015. Five further waves of Area Reviews will begin every three months until December 2016. The Government expects that each Area Review will take place over three to four months and that the steering group will meet five times. Two piloted Reviews took place prior to guidance protocols in Norfolk and Suffolk and City of Nottingham. The former is currently implementing one of the Review recommendations.

What is the process?

Besides the three monthly waves described above, Area Reviews can be proactively initiated by a group of institutions, or as a result of Government intervention (primarily driven by the National Steering Group) where it 'sees a need to progress rapidly', and where concerns about 'quality of the provision, capacity, or financial sustainability of individual institutions' exist.

The stages of the Area Review are as follows:

- Economic need analysis
- Analysis of current provision and delivery arrangements
- Options analysis
- Governing body deliberations
- Stakeholder engagement and publication
- Implementation

Further information on the process is shown in the flowchart in Appendix 1.

ATL/AMiE's discussions with BIS have revealed that the analysis stage of the process will include site visits to colleges, when meetings with staff and students will take place. In addition, staff will have the opportunity to complete surveys.

The Government also require that the Area Reviews consider the following:

- The outcome of the spending review
- Supporting 'excellence in teaching essential basic skills - such as English and maths'
- Maintaining broad universal access to high quality education and training for all students 16+ years, including those with SEND
- National government policy, including the expansion of the Apprenticeship programme
- Local economic objectives and labour market
- Access to appropriate good quality provision within reasonable travel distances, particularly for 16-19 year olds and students with special educational needs and disabilities
- Effective support for the unemployed to return to work
- Legal duties relating to the provision of education, including but not limited to section 15A of the Education Act 1996 and section 86 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

ATL/AMiE's concerns around the Area Reviews

Rationale

The Government is considering post-16 education and training only in the short term, as it identifies a fall in the 16-19 population as one of two key drivers for this policy, along with deficit reduction. Whilst the 16-19 population is declining, it will begin to rise again (and steeply) after 2019 (see graph in appendix 2).

A comprehensive review?

Area Reviews of post-16 education and training are not comprehensive if they do not consider all provision, including school sixth forms, private learning providers, UTCs and community adult education providers. Whilst these providers can opt into the Area Review, the Government has made it clear, that the provision of these members will be scrutinised along with that of the colleges which are required to be part of it. BIS has also confirmed that, inevitably, very few of these providers have applied to be involved.

In addition, the Government argues that the Area Reviews must take all provision into consideration, and that providers other than FE and sixth form colleges will be represented on the steering group through local authority representatives and Regional Schools Commissioners. However the latter only have a responsibility for academies and it is doubtful whether, already over stretched, they can fulfil the role given by extending their reach to all schools.

Tensions and mixed messages in the process

- *The geographical area* for the reviews is unsuitable given the basis used is LEP areas. Although administratively convenient this is problematic for various reasons. For example the catchments for a number of colleges fall in different LEP areas and for many, this boundary is much less meaningful compared with travel-to-learn times, distances and routes.
- *Steering group membership* is inevitably huge. For example the current Area Review taking place in the Solent includes 13 colleges, resulting in 26 members (chairs of governors and principals) of the steering group from these alone. With representatives from the 11 local authorities involved and other stakeholders, the steering group is likely to comprise upwards of 50 members. It is difficult to envisage how meaningful meetings and decision-making processes can take place with such large steering groups.

- *The brevity of the process* (five meetings over three to four months), will compound the difficulty of decision-making through a large steering group. In addition, the process will require a quick turnaround of a substantial amount of data gathering and analysis, as a result of the large numbers of colleges and learners involved in each Area Review.
- *Learner representation* does not exist at all during the decision-making process. Whilst students will be consulted during the data gathering phase and travel-to-learn will be analysed as part of the Area Reviews, learner voice is not represented on the steering group. BIS insist however, that learners' needs are at the centre of the policy. It also notes that learners should be represented on the steering groups by college governors and local authority representatives.
- *Staff representation* does not exist on the steering group. Meetings with unions however, are taking place during the information gathering stage of the process.
- *Evaluation* could become problematic. BIS have told us that evaluations will inform the process for subsequent Area Reviews, with cost/benefit impact on learners and employers, and equality impact assessments produced as part of this process. However, we have also heard that the Area Review process should not change too dramatically as a result of evaluations of previous phases, as this would put later Reviews at an advantage to those that take place during the first phases.

Potential outcomes

- *A focus on efficiency* seems to be the key driver to this policy, with action under the Equality Act, being the only possible recourse for learners should their options be limited.
- *Specialisation* in various sector skills sectors will be considered as an optional outcome for appropriate colleges. The prospect of specialist Institutes of Technology, located around the country, raises the issue of whether learners will be able to access courses in particular curriculum areas close to where they live.
- *Digital learning* has been noted as a possible solution to problems around appropriate travel-to-learn times, distances and routes. Jisc is also mentioned specifically in the policy guidance as a partner in the Area Reviews. This implies that the Government sees 'teacherless' learning as a significant way forward for vocational learning.
- *The focus on apprenticeships* as an alternative to FE is concerning as these programmes do not yet exist in the numbers and quality to meet the potential demand created by the Area Reviews. In addition, young people in rural and coastal areas will be disadvantaged by a lack of supply of local apprenticeship opportunities. With apprenticeship availability in various sectors concentrated in particular geographical locations around the country, there is also a more general concern around accessibility for the young people.
- *Fragmentation* of the sector is a probable outcome as it has been predicted that 30-40% of colleges will close and some Sixth Form colleges will seek to become 16-19 academies to avoid merging with a large FE college.

Further information

Policy paper published by the Government on 20 July 2015:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/446516/BIS-15-433-reviewing-post-16-education-policy.pdf

Guidance published by the Government on 8 September 2015:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459845/BIS-15-526-reviewing-post-16-education-and-training-institutions-guidance-on-area-reviews.pdf

Conclusion

ATL/AMiE will continue to oppose the Review of Post-16 Education and Training at a national level, on the basis of the issues noted above. We have outlined our concerns in letters to Nick Boles, Minister of State for Skills and Equalities, and Gordon Marsden, Shadow Minister for Further Education, Skills and Regional Growth.

In addition, regular meetings are taking place with the senior officials responsible for the Area Reviews at BIS, which enables us to raise issues brought to our attention by members. ATL/AMiE is also looking at ways in which we can jointly campaign with other unions and interested partners.

With the Government's focus on apprenticeships to fill the gap in vocational education potentially left by the Area Reviews and funding cuts, ATL is developing an apprenticeship policy to support those members advising young people. This policy will also support members working in FE to develop good quality apprenticeship programmes, which is also one of the focuses of the ULF project. We are also analysing the potential consequences of the Area Review policy across the education sector.

ATL/AMiE recognises however that, there is no chance of reversing the Area Review policy, with colleges on the receiving end of cuts to skills budgets at levels that threaten their existence (in July, the National Audit Office estimated that 70 colleges could be assessed as financially inadequate by 2015/16) . ATL/AMiE resource is therefore being focused on supporting members through this difficult time as follows:

- Briefings members and reps via SROs on the Area Review policy, process and the questions to ask during Review meetings
- Drawing on members experience of the review process to feed into the evaluation process
- Attending meetings to brief reps where Area Reviews are taking place
- Coordinating meetings between reps and BIS representatives
- Developing a package to ensure members are adequately supported through redundancy and job-hunting.