

Helping understand Post-16 education and training institutions: area based reviews

'Reviewing Post-16 education and training institutions: guidance on area reviews' - produced by Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Department for Education

What is it?

The document sets out the national framework for area reviews of the post-16 education and training sector and provides guidance on how these reviews should be conducted.

The aims of the review are:

- to ensure consistency across reviews while maintaining local flexibility;
- to encourage collaboration amongst stakeholders including local authorities, LEPs and employers;
- to promote a move towards fewer, larger and more resilient and efficient colleges; and
- to increase specialisation and provide the expertise needed to improve progression through professional and technical routes, as well as driving standard in core subjects such as English and Maths.

Whilst the focus of the guidance is on general further education ('FE') and sixth-form colleges, other post-16 providers are encouraged to contribute.

The final reviews are expected to be completed by March 2017.

The guidance makes clear that it expects the result of the reviews to be a rationalisation of 16+ provision, driven by mergers and closures that will lead to 'fewer, but stronger individual institutions'.

Purpose of the reviews

The clear emphasis of the framework is on ensuring that area reviews deliver consolidated and cost-effective institutions that promote specialisation for school leavers seeking a route into employment.

It provides outcomes that each review is expected to deliver:

- the identification of financially viable institutions that provide cost-effective and sustainable services, with clear analysis of key cost drivers at institutions against a set of national benchmarks;
- an offer that meets each area's educational and economic needs by assessing local conditions and considering how changes can be made to existing education provision;

- the establishment of clear routes for progression for students from pre- to post-16 education, particularly by assessing the scope for introducing Institutes of Technology. These are designed to provide a clear route from school to 'high status', specialised training with strong links to business;
- access to high quality and relevant education to all, including 16-19 year olds, adults and those with SEN; and
- provision which reflects the changes in government funding priorities, especially the push to create 3 million apprenticeships.

Who leads the reviews?

The guidance requires local and national stakeholders with representation from (but not limited to) chairs of governors, LAs, LEPs and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to form steering groups. It sets out the need for the chairs to be independent and gives them the power to call on experts where necessary.

The guidance makes clear that it is for the governing bodies of each individual institution to decide whether to accept the findings of the reviews and that the reviews produce recommendations only. However, the governing bodies are expected to engage fully with the review process, ensuring the analysis covers the option that they would wish to be considered.

Spirit and values of the consultation process

The guidance seeks to define the spirit in which local reviews are undertaken, outlining guiding principles for the review teams. This includes taking a visionary approach, being open-minded as to change, collaborating effectively with other stakeholders and taking an evidence-based analytic approach.

The emphasis is again on financial considerations; seeking best value, ensuring sound financial planning and embracing technology to drive efficiency. This focus is maintained in advice on funding, which is to be provided through colleges, LEPs and LAs, with Government funding pointedly earmarked as a 'last resort'.

Initiating a review

Reviews are initiated by ministers on the recommendation of the National Area Review Steering Group. The guidance suggests that reviews will be rolled out for all FE and sixth form colleges over an 18 month period and will be expected to last on average 3-4 months.

Initiation is based on either a risk assessment by the FE/Sixth Form College Commissioners that an area should be prioritised, or a local area proactively proposing that they want to engage with the process.

The guidance makes clear that the National Area Review Steering Group will coordinate the roll out of all area reviews through what it calls the 'gateway process' and has oversight of how an area for review is defined.

The scope of the review is also considered in the guidance. There is a clear reliance on the willingness of FE/sixth form colleges to participate for the process to be a success, and for other providers including school sixth forms to enrich the process by voluntarily contributing to it. First and foremost this is dressed up in the guidance as an opportunity to shape the future of post-16 education rather than a review driven by economic constraints, though this is a clear theme throughout.

In consequence, the guidance makes clear the need to communicate effectively with all post 16 providers in a given area to engage their interest.

What happens during a review?

Each review team will take an evidence-based approach when making their recommendations and the analysis will follow an agreed framework to ensure consistency.

Site visits are highlighted as a key part of the review process, affording an opportunity to interview staff, students and other key people.

The review will include an analysis of:

- the economic priorities of the area in question, including needs spanning the next five to ten years, the current and future demand for 16+ education, the needs of employers and an assessment of the level of publically funded provision which is affordable in the local area;
- the current provision and delivery arrangements including capacity, quality and the opportunity for further specialisation and the position of the institutions currently operating in the area including their financial situation; and
- the different options for change, such as potential rationalisation of the curriculum and mergers/closures of providers.

The guidance discusses the need to remain positive about potential mergers between providers, stressing that such mergers are not the objective of the review but rather part of the process. It seeks to mitigate the inevitable criticism that mergers would lead to job losses by concentrating on the need for a fair and open recruitment process in the selection of senior post holders. This addresses a concern referred to elsewhere in the guidance – the need for active participation from HE/sixth form providers regardless of vested interests.

Deciding on whether to accept the recommendations of the review body

It is for the governing bodies to decide whether to accept recommendations but the guidance is clear that it expects funding agencies, LEPs and national partners to fund and support only those institutions that have taken action to ensure they can provide a quality offer to learners and which are financially stable in the long term.

The guidelines insist on timely implementation of outcomes, with the steering groups to ensure recommendations are implemented in time for the next academic year where possible.

Monitoring of the effect of the proposals falls to funding agencies, with reporting required to the Minister for Skills. A formal evaluation of the effects of implementation is required by the departments.

If you or your organisation would like any help in this area, please contact me or anyone from our Education Team.



Tony McPhillips

Partner
Employment

Tel: 0191 211 7908

Mob: 07776 208 241

tony.mcphillips@muckle-llp.com