

Area reviews of post-16 education and training institutions

28 October 2016



In July 2015 the Government announced a national programme of area reviews. The aim of these is to create stronger, more financially sustainable institutions, with the capacity and capability to deliver high quality provision which meets the current and future needs of learners and employers. The programme of reviews, covering further education and sixth form colleges, is taking place in waves and is due to be completed by end of March 2017.

Each review is led and overseen by a Local Steering Group, consisting of chairs of governors, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), local authorities, FE and Sixth Form College Commissioners and Regional School Commissioners. The steering group assesses the educational and economic needs of the area before evaluating the institutional options available to meet their needs. The options available include specialisation, merger of one or more institutions and closure in some cases. The final steering group report makes recommendations arising as result of the review.

It is up to the institutions to decide whether they accept the recommendations. However, there is a Government expectation that the institution will take the appropriate action in light of the review's findings. Local authorities and LEPs are responsible for funding any changes resulting from the review process.

Impact of the area reviews

Local authorities and LEPs are required to set out the economic vision for the area and the skills base it will need to succeed. This provides an opportunity for each area to consider how existing provision and delivery structures can be adapted to deliver educational and economic needs and growth aspirations of an area.

The review process will deliver resilient and efficient institutions which offer maximum value for public investment, resulting in a rationalised curriculum offer with fewer and larger organisations.

Implementation

At a national level, Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency will be responsible for implementation, following the area review. Monitoring will take place every 6 months to ensure the programme is on track and to determine any requirement for additional support or national guidance. At a local level, it is expected that the successor body to the area review steering group, local authorities and LEPs will be monitoring the implementation.

Councils' response

Overall, the area review process is welcome by the local government sector. Councils have been able to provide local intelligence and agree specific criteria which meets local needs. In Greater Manchester area review local criteria were agreed against the Government's guidance, which included: an offer that meets each area's educational and economic needs; sufficient access to high quality and relevant education and training for all; providers with strong reputations and greater specialisation.¹

¹ GM Area Based Report, 29 January 2016, GMCA

Briefing

However, in some cases councils have not been included in the process at an early stage. This is regarded as a missed opportunity, especially when the councils have clear statutory duties around raising participation of 16 to 18 year olds, safeguarding responsibilities for young people in their areas, and more generally the duty of well-being for all young people in an area.

There has been some concerns raised about the scope of the area reviews being too limited by nationally set priorities and not locally determined. The process does not drive the system change required to respond to the skills challenge. It is narrow in its remit and lacks the focus on future changes to economy and commissioning. The set benchmarks focus on the present way of working without any opportunity to make a case for the vital system reforms.

Significant sections of the post-16 educational landscape (including school sixth forms, academies, free schools and University Technical Colleges) are out of scope. This means it is not possible to consider the potential for greater streamlining, despite significant concerns about over-supply and duplication. The Government in response to address this concern has stated that such institutions can opt-in to the reviews if they wish and that Regional Schools Commissioners will identify any issues with such provision as part of the review process.

In addition, discussions regarding the devolution of powers and funding to combined authorities are not part of the review process, despite the potential significant impact that they could have on the post-16 education landscape. There is no opportunity in the process to consider the alignment with devolved budgets and responsibility for adult skills budgets

Progress to date

The programme of area reviews is taking place in five waves. The earlier Waves 1 and 2 included Birmingham and Solihull, Greater Manchester, Sheffield City Region, Thames Valley, West of England and Surrey. These waves have now concluded, with some of Wave 3 areas drawing to conclusions and Wave 4 and 5 progressing.

The review process to date has predominately focused on further education colleges' financial sustainability. The recommendations in many cases have concentrated on bringing colleges together through mergers or federation models. In other cases the review process has facilitated the opportunity to consider radical alternative delivery models, for instance, joint apprenticeship companies. However, a challenge of this process is to ensure that the mergers or planned collaboration improve outcomes for learners as well as financial saving targets.

There is an Education Committee inquiry at present to examine the area review progress and the recommendations coming forward from the steering groups. The LGA and a number of other stakeholder have submitted a response.

The Department of Education has produced additional guidance for Local Enterprise Partnerships, Combined Authorities and Local Authorities to support them with the area reviews and this can be found [here](#).

Further details:

[Reviewing post-16 Education and Training Institutions](#)

[Post-16 education and training institutions: list of area reviews](#)
