

Local accountability and autonomy in colleges

This survey reviewed how well colleges are responding to the new freedoms and flexibilities in determining their priorities and developing their curriculum to meet local community needs. It also aimed to identify barriers to progress in meeting local needs, and the features of best practice. Inspectors evaluated the effectiveness of colleges' work with their local strategic partners to help ensure that the learning and skills provision supported local economic growth. Inspectors explored how well governors held senior managers to account for this work. They visited 13 further education colleges and four sixth form colleges and also used evidence from 15 inspections carried out between September and November 2012.

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Executive summary

Overall, the government's policy to deregulate the curriculum for the learning and skills sector has been well received by the further education sector, but systems to measure the impact of these changes are insufficiently robust. Senior managers and governors in colleges who were interviewed for this survey welcomed the new freedoms and flexibilities introduced for the sector by the government in December 2011 in its publication: *New challenges, new chances. Skills investment 2011–2014: investing in a world class skills system*.¹ They perceived that the policy offered enhanced opportunities for colleges to tailor their provision to meet more specifically the needs of various community groups, local residents, businesses and employers in their locality. However, one year after the policy was introduced, the colleges sampled in the survey did not have sufficient evidence to determine the extent of the impact of any changes they had made to their provision on reducing youth unemployment and supporting local economic growth. Most governing bodies had not monitored these changes rigorously enough.

This survey involved discrete visits to 13 general further education and four sixth form colleges. It also considered supplementary evidence from inspections of four general further education colleges and 11 sixth form colleges that took place between September and November 2012. All but two of the 32 colleges included in this survey showed a strong commitment to their local community. They worked extensively with a wide range of local community partners and employers to widen participation in their provision and reduce unnecessary duplication of programmes offered by local providers. However, only three of the 17 colleges visited had revised their curriculum content and structure considerably to focus on preparing learners better for opportunities in local employment and enterprise and to fill local, regional or national skills gaps that had been identified. Such initiatives were being developed in a few curriculum areas in the other 14 colleges visited, but were not being implemented systematically across all the provision.

All the colleges visited had identified common and key priorities in their locality: rising unemployment for young people and adults; rising poverty in disadvantaged areas; the mismatch between local jobseekers' skills and what employers needed; and the lack of progression routes for vulnerable residents, such as disabled learners and those who had special educational needs. While colleges evaluated the success of initiatives in increasing participation among these groups, they were unable to demonstrate fully how successful they were in supporting progression to further training or employment.

The local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) were not fully effective in working with the colleges to ensure high-quality, coherent local planning for further education and skills in their respective areas. Inspectors identified significant variations across the

¹ *New challenges, new chances. Skills investment 2011–2014: investing in a world class skills system*, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-investment-statement-for-2011-to-2014-new-challenges-new-chances.

country in how well LEPs were established and taking a lead role in local planning. There was good practice in only a few LEP areas. The LEPs were not always sufficiently well informed about the extent and range of college provision in their areas. The quality and availability of labour market data varied far too much for colleges and other providers to plan effectively and collaboratively across the area to reduce youth and long-term unemployment, or to respond to specific skills gaps identified by local employers.

Most of the colleges sampled offered a broad range of courses at different levels that led to nationally recognised qualifications. However, it was less clear how colleges ensured that the courses and qualifications they offered equipped learners with the necessary skills to progress successfully to training and employment. As identified in Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2012, government policy, funding mechanisms and quality measures have generally led providers to prioritise learners' achievement of qualifications over developing the skills and knowledge they require to support their progression to further training or employment.² Measures to evaluate providers' effectiveness in meeting local employment and skills needs were not sufficiently well developed at college or sector level. There has been no consistent, sector-wide measure of colleges' effectiveness in responding to identified training needs, local or regional skills gaps, or supporting learners into employment.

In most of the colleges in the survey, senior managers and governors expressed a clear commitment to reviewing their curriculum to meet the needs of a wider range of learners, local residents and employers. However, only one third of the colleges visited had already reorganised their management and governance structures to strengthen their accountability for employer and community engagement and school liaison work.

In the colleges sampled, the quality of provision varied too much across the range of programmes. Variations in quality across curriculum areas meant, typically, that colleges did not meet the needs of employers for a skilled workforce in all vocational areas.

For college governors, a key challenge remains: to hold their college to account for the quality of provision and outcomes for learners. More specifically, the college governors in the sample were not fully effective in monitoring how well the college diversified and adapted its provision to respond to changing economic and social needs locally. The lack of consistent, sector-wide measures of learners' progression, including into sustainable employment, has hindered governors' ability to evaluate the wider impact of their college's work in the local area. This should now be a priority for all colleges.

² *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12*, Ofsted, 2012; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1112.

Despite the development of constructive partnership working, tensions remained where post-16 providers competed directly for learners. Planning for new sixth forms has not always been sufficiently well aligned to demand and demographics in the local area. A key preoccupation for college managers and governors has been that post-16 funding rates, VAT rules and eligibility for free school meals are perceived, historically, to have favoured school sixth forms financially over other post-16 providers. This has militated against effective collaborative working across all post-16 providers to plan for and provide careers advice in the best interests of all learners.

Key findings

- Almost all the 17 further education colleges and around two thirds of the 15 sixth form colleges in the survey had made some changes to their curriculum structure and provision to align these more closely with perceived local needs, and to enhance learners' skills for employment. In particular, this work generally focused well on developing new or enhanced provision for young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs); longer-term unemployed adults; disabled learners and those who have special educational needs; and residents from socially and/or economically disadvantaged areas. However, destination data were generally not sufficiently complete for managers to evaluate fully the impact of these programmes on supporting learners into work.
- In recent years, government policy, funding and quality assurance mechanisms have encouraged colleges to base their curriculum offer on funded qualifications and to focus on success rates as the key performance measure. Few incentives have actively encouraged colleges to adapt their provision to ensure that learners acquired the skills that local employers needed to support economic growth.
- Corporations received and monitored at least some data on learners' qualification success rates in all of the 17 colleges visited, but there were considerable variations in the range and type of data they used. Not all corporations received equally comprehensive and objective data about all aspects of college performance. Governors acknowledged that they were less well informed about the wider aspects of the quality of teaching and learning and the impact of actions taken to secure improvement. Where governors did not always have a comprehensive analysis of better and weaker areas of provision they were unable to provide an unambiguous view of college performance.
- Managers and governors did not fully evaluate their work with, and its impact on, local communities and employers. A lack of coherent, consistent sector-wide measures of all learners' destinations, and systems to track their progression over time, hampered the colleges' ability to demonstrate how effectively they developed learners' wider skills and supported their progression to sustainable employment.
- Only three of the 17 colleges visited had made significant changes to their curriculum content and structure in all curriculum areas to develop learners'

employability skills and to prepare them for progression to employment. In the other colleges, some curriculum areas engaged well with local employers, but this was not done systematically across the provision.

- At the time of the survey visits, governors in 12 of the 17 colleges visited confirmed that they had already received briefings, or had held discussions, about the impact of raising the participation age. However, there was little evidence on how this was translated into specific or detailed plans for changing their provision to respond to the raising of the participation age to 17 in September 2013 and 18 by 2015. Inspectors found little evidence of clear collaborative planning between schools and the post-16 sector for how they would ensure that all 16-year-olds would be directed towards purposeful and relevant programmes from September 2013. This is particularly important for learners whose core aim will be at intermediate level or below.
- Fewer than half the 12 different areas visited had LEPs that were well established and beginning to have a demonstrable impact on local planning and provision. Further education remains under-represented at the highest strategic level on the LEP boards. Only eight of the 17 colleges visited worked directly with their LEP on planning and decision-making. Only around one third of all LEPs in the survey had a direct representative of further education and skills on the LEP board. This meant that the majority of LEPs were not sufficiently well informed about learning and skills provision in their area, or the role of local colleges in reducing unemployment and supporting economic growth.
- In six of the 17 visits to colleges, managers did not have sufficient labour market intelligence to help them to plan their provision. In these areas, this information was not shared well enough between LEPs, local authorities and other key partners so that planning and oversight of all provision for young people and adults across the local area were informed and coherent. A lack of comprehensive, current data hampered providers' efforts to respond quickly to the needs of local employers or specific communities.
- College managers interviewed for the survey were concerned that planning for 11 to 16 schools, new schools and academies intending to open sixth forms did not always take into account the wider post-16 provision in an area. They also reported that historic differentials in funding rates, VAT rules and eligibility for free school meals financially favoured school sixth forms over colleges and militated against open and fair competition.
- It is too early to determine whether the revised arrangements for careers guidance in schools are effective in ensuring that all young people receive impartial and comprehensive guidance on all their options for progression and sufficient guidance on related employment opportunities.³

³ The Education Act of 2011 placed a new duty on schools to provide independent, impartial and comprehensive advice and guidance for all students in Years 9, 10 and 11 from September 2012.

Recommendations

The government should:

- support the learning and skills sector to ensure that it has the capacity required to meet the challenge of the raising of the participation age and the direct enrolment of 14–16-year-olds in colleges
- review its role in the recruitment, training and support of college governors to develop their capacity to hold colleges to account for the quality and impact of their provision
- monitor and review the work of local enterprise partnerships to ensure that they have a positive impact on reducing local youth unemployment and increasing economic growth
- ensure that funding and other incentives reward colleges appropriately for prioritising provision that directly supports local economic growth and social development
- ensure that there are clear impact measures for further education and skills provision that focus on learners' progression to training and employment.

Local enterprise partnerships should:

- implement coherent plans for all post-14 provision in LEP areas, based on sound analysis of existing provision, gaps or duplication to meet anticipated local demand
- work closely with colleges to share detailed and up-to-date local area data and labour market intelligence so that they can plan effectively to reduce youth unemployment and better meet employers' skill requirements.

Colleges should:

- ensure that their managers and governors are sufficiently skilled and supported to identify and respond to local needs while maintaining a rigorous focus on internal quality and college performance
- provide comprehensive college performance data to governors so that they can hold leaders to account more effectively for quality and performance, including the quality of teaching and learning, monitor internal quality robustly and the effectiveness of actions to secure improvement
- work collaboratively across the further education sector to share best practice from the most entrepreneurial colleges, and develop consistent ways of measuring their impact on their local community and holding themselves to account for this
- work closely with their LEPs so that local employers and communities are fully aware of the full range of provision and how colleges can contribute positively to meeting local needs.

Colleges and schools should:

- work closely with all the local post-16 providers to ensure that there are sufficient places on relevant and purposeful provision for all young people aged 16 from September 2013, including at foundation and intermediate levels
- work collaboratively to ensure that all young people receive objective and comprehensive information on all progression routes and qualifications and that they are informed of the full range of education, training and employment options available to them.

Ofsted should:

- ensure that proposed improvement activities for providers focus appropriately on supporting and challenging governing bodies to help them hold senior managers to account for college performance and impact in local communities
- consider developing models of inspection which take sufficient account of the impact of local partnership and collaborative work on developing provision particularly for 14–19-year-olds, and how effectively local leadership makes a positive contribution to the local economy and communities.

Background

Survey aims, methodology and evidence base

1. The survey aimed to evaluate how well colleges are responding to the new freedoms and flexibilities, determining priorities and developing their curriculum to meet local community needs. This included the effectiveness of their arrangements for consulting, planning and working with LEPs; employers; public services; community agencies, and local education and training providers. The survey aimed to identify barriers to progress in the above and features of best practice.
2. Inspectors gathered evidence from discrete visits to 13 general further education and four sixth form colleges through interviews with senior and middle managers, governors and college staff. Inspectors also held discussions with representatives from LEPs, local authorities and other key partners of these colleges, including other local education and training providers; voluntary and community groups; employers and local business representatives.
3. In addition, inspectors gathered evidence through the inspection of leadership and management in 15 college inspections – four general further education colleges and 11 sixth form colleges – between September and November 2012.

Inspectors also held meetings with relevant sector bodies and reviewed a range of recent reports and publications.

The national policy context

4. In 2011, the government signalled its intention to grant greater freedoms and flexibilities to the further education sector. This was to enable providers to meet local community and business needs better by supporting both economic growth and social mobility. This agenda was set out in a publication by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS): *New challenges, new chances. Skills investment statement 2011–2014: investing in a world class skills system.*⁴
5. Given this enhanced autonomy, in the context of reduced public spending and the need for greater efficiency, the government expects senior managers and college governors to play a key role as strategic leaders in local economic and social development and to be more accountable to their local communities.
6. Local Enterprise Partnerships were established in 2010 as voluntary strategic partnerships between business and civic leaders to drive local economic growth. They have the potential to involve colleges much more directly in the strategic planning and commissioning of provision to meet identified local community and business needs.

Responding to freedoms and flexibilities

7. Senior managers and governors interviewed for this survey welcomed the new freedoms and flexibilities for the sector. However, only one year after the publication of *New challenges, new chances*, colleges were at different stages of developing and implementing changes to provision.
8. All the 17 colleges visited had begun to respond to the new agenda by focusing on:
 - identifying changing local needs and the adaptations they needed to make to their curricula, teaching and learning
 - increased working with employers in business and industry
 - increased provision for disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.
9. College managers recognised the ever-changing local circumstances and the importance of developing their capacity to respond quickly and appropriately. Although the needs identified for training, education and support were often

⁴ *New challenges, new chances. Skills investment statement 2011–2014: investing in a world class skills system*, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-investment-statement-for-2011-to-2014-new-challenges-new-chances.

highly specific to particular areas or communities, colleges and their partners identified a number of common and current priorities. The most frequently cited were:

- the rise in the numbers of young people who are NEET
- increased levels of redundancy and unemployment, including long-term unemployment
- the increased proportion of people in part-time work and/or on temporary contracts
- the lack of coherent provision and progression routes for young people and adults with severe or complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- an increase in the numbers of learners presenting with mental ill health and/or drug or alcohol addiction
- the impact of legislation to raise the participation age to 17 by 2013 and to 18 by 2015 and recent powers for colleges to enrol 14–16-year-olds directly.

10. Progress in responding to these issues varied significantly in the colleges visited. Weaker aspects that needed to be a higher priority for most of the colleges were:

- the rigorous use of performance data to identify any gaps in achievement and opportunity between different social or community groups, particularly among the most disadvantaged or marginalised
- effective curriculum management to narrow any identified gaps and to tailor provision to support economic growth and employment opportunities more directly
- adaptation of the content of the curriculum to meet employers' needs more effectively, prepare learners better for work and ensure more effective matching of college provision and curriculum to local and regional employment opportunities and skills shortage areas
- support for new or growing employment sectors such as digital media, alternative energy, science, technology and engineering
- an increase in the number of apprenticeships, including higher-level apprenticeships, and appropriate alternatives for learners not wishing to progress to degree-level study, or who need local opportunities for higher-level study.

11. Most of the colleges sampled were using bespoke provision or specific changes to the curriculum effectively to respond to at least some of these identified changing needs and local circumstances. Although these initiatives often met the needs of specific learners and employers well, too often they were confined to specific curriculum or vocational areas rather than being implemented across the whole college.

Structural change

12. Most of the colleges visited were still at a relatively early stage of reviewing their organisational structures. They were in the process of careful consideration and planning before they embarked on radical change. This did not reflect a lack of interest or action on their part, but rather the view that they were 'in this for the long haul'. One chair of governors commented: 'We see this as a fantastic, potentially one-off opportunity to really make a difference – we can't afford to get it wrong.'
13. Six colleges in the survey had significantly revised their internal management, organisational or governance structures to provide a clearer focus on, and accountability for, employer and community engagement and liaison with schools. These colleges responded quickly and positively to their changing local environment. They made internal changes and developed new external partnerships in order to be more responsive to, and accountable for, meeting wider and longer-term community and employer needs.

Changing college structures to meet local needs

In a large general further education college, managers reshaped the college's provision for English, mathematics and employment into a faculty of 'workskills' to enable it to work more strategically with the local Jobcentre on meeting employers' needs and supporting adults into employment.

A faculty of outward collaboration was set up to strengthen community partnership working and improve connections across the city.

Three senior staff were accountable for the three key areas: community engagement, employer engagement and school liaison work.

These changes were helping the college to engage productively with more partners across the city, resulting in increased participation of communities where the greatest social and economic needs had been identified. The college was at an early stage of tracking the impact of its wider community work, but senior managers and governors believed that their revised structure provided a much stronger framework for holding the college to account for provision and outcomes for these learners.

14. The governors interviewed appreciated the flexibility that the redefinition of the instruments and articles of governance afforded them, but there was little evidence of any substantive change so far. They generally perceived little need for immediate changes in the way that they worked as the current regulations had not been barriers to developments they wanted or needed to make.

Curriculum change

15. Almost all the colleges in the survey reviewed and updated their curriculum regularly. However, their approach was often too narrowly focused on changing the qualification offered. Few senior management teams used a sufficiently wide range of labour market information to help them make more significant changes in order to align their curricula more closely to local needs and local employment opportunities.
16. Three further education colleges had made more significant changes across all their provision to strengthen the links between the vocational curriculum and local business and employer needs, and to engage employers more directly in curriculum design. Good examples of such changes included:
 - enhancing employability skills through introducing radical changes to the curriculum, teaching and learning or through extending the range of vocational courses and apprenticeships
 - developing learners' enterprise skills by establishing learner-led companies, where the revenue generated was reinvested to enhance learning or provide financial support to enable learners to attend college
 - increasing opportunities for progression for disabled learners and those who had special educational needs; for example, through setting up a centre of excellence for learners with autistic spectrum disorders to support their progression to further education, training or employment
 - targeting provision for disadvantaged or vulnerable learners; for example, through providing programmes in conjunction with the Prince's Trust to support young people leaving care, young offenders, the long-term unemployed or learners with low prior educational achievement into further training or work.
17. The sector has welcomed initiatives to simplify funding rules and create greater flexibility in allocating funding to meet different needs and priorities. However, college leaders still found that funding rules and eligibility criteria limited flexibility and constrained how well and how quickly they could respond to identified local needs. In particular, college leaders welcomed the introduction of the single adult budget which gave them greater discretion in funding provision to meet local needs, but this was too recent a development for the full extent of its impact across the sector to be determined.
18. Inspectors found a very limited early uptake of the innovation code, introduced by the Skills Funding Agency in April 2012, in response to Baroness Sharp's report on colleges and communities in December 2011.⁵ Only two of the

⁵ *A dynamic nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2011; www.niace.org.uk/news/colleges-inquiry-final-report-published.

colleges visited had already used the code to develop new provision for employers; in health and care, retail and the public sector. One college had developed a bespoke higher-level qualification in custodial care for over 200 mental health workers in secure units. It had also developed a retail programme for 100 learners, designed specifically to meet the needs of a market traders' federation in the local area, where existing retail qualifications were not appropriate.

19. However, several colleges found the innovation code too bureaucratic or inflexible to meet their needs. Initial funding rules focused only on employer-related provision and this prevented colleges from working flexibly with learners or specific client groups that the colleges and their partners had identified as priorities in their areas. The sector has welcomed the Skills Funding Agency's revised guidance issued in November 2012, which permits greater flexibility in using the code.

Working with business and employers and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises and micro businesses

20. Although most of the general further education colleges visited had developed business support units to work with and support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), inspectors found that too few SMEs had a realistic understanding of the modern further education sector and what it could offer. In particular, employer engagement was less of a priority for the sixth form colleges sampled: only two of the four sixth form colleges visited had substantive links with smaller businesses to support their curriculum development.
21. Several general further education colleges had engaged a large number of SMEs successfully through offering well-targeted support services, including human resource and payroll services. However, there were fewer examples where employers were directly involved in developing the curriculum to meet specific skills needs or shortages. Involving employers on advisory boards to inform the curriculum and promote apprenticeships was a very successful approach to working with SMEs, as in this example:

Employer advisory boards

A college had set up 10 expert advisory boards in key industry sectors to provide an industry-led platform for experts to advise the college on developing and delivering high-quality training programmes and services to meet local, regional and national priorities. Curriculum developments were therefore closely aligned to specific industry needs. Learners benefited from the up-to-date knowledge and expertise of employers in

preparing them well for progression to employment. Close links with key employers had supported the development of nine new apprenticeship frameworks over the previous two years to meet specific needs; for example in construction, information technology, leisure, customer services and care.

Quality and accountability

22. The college governors interviewed were generally aware that the agenda of localism and local accountability meant that a significant change was needed in how they worked with their colleges. Clerks to governing bodies and senior managers tended to focus well on ensuring that governors were well informed about the relevant legislation and government policy. However, most of the governors interviewed acknowledged that corporations needed to review their skills base and working practices carefully in order to build capacity for the significant challenges that the changes presented. Inspectors agreed, and found that too few of the college governing bodies had taken a sufficient lead in monitoring how well their own college's provision supported local economic growth by providing learners with the skills they needed for progression to further training or education and for future employment.
23. The governors recognised that the new freedoms placed considerable additional demands on the board's capacity to diversify the work of the college and increase their accountability to local communities, while holding senior managers to account for improving standards or maintaining high-quality provision. However, few of the senior managers and governors interviewed had specific plans for resolving the internal challenges they had identified. These challenges included:
- resourcing a changing curriculum to ensure that the provision met identified needs and was sustainable
 - prioritising funding to facilitate the partnership work that was necessary to identify and support local needs
 - developing the skills of senior and middle managers and governors to support change: to the curriculum, to the organisational structure and, inevitably, to the organisational culture
 - maintaining a strong focus on the quality of provision and measures of successful outcomes for learners, while developing robust systems for accountability to the local community and other stakeholders
 - reducing variations in the quality of teaching, learning and outcomes for learners between different curricula or vocational areas within the college, or for different groups of learners.
24. As highlighted in this year's Annual Report, previous funding and quality mechanisms and priorities have encouraged colleges to focus on offering

funded qualifications as the means of selecting and managing their curriculum and evaluating performance.⁶ This has led to the overuse of qualification success rates to measure the impact of their overall provision. Reports to governors have not always provided them with a sufficiently deep understanding of the quality of teaching and learning, priorities for curriculum development, or the impact of actions taken to secure improvement in weaker aspects of provision.

25. Against a backdrop of high youth unemployment and high levels of young people entering post-16 provision with poor literacy and numeracy skills, it is clear that colleges and their partners need to continue to fill these gaps for learners for the foreseeable future. Too many of the governing bodies sampled had not done enough to ensure that their colleges had the capacity to do this and they had not held college leaders rigorously to account for improvements in these key areas.
26. Although most of the colleges in the survey had well-established systems for quality assurance and self-assessment, their evaluation of their work with, and impact on, their local communities was much less well developed. While many colleges reported on aspects of employer and community work through their annual self-assessment, this was related largely to participation and success rates. Measures for wider outcomes, such as vocational skills development and progression to sustained employment, were underdeveloped in individual institutions and across the sector.
27. There are currently insufficiently coherent, consistent or robust sector-wide measures for:
 - learners' progression to sustainable employment or self-employment and tracking this over time
 - measuring progress from all learners' starting points, including those who are not yet ready for qualifications or employment: for example, those furthest from work readiness, with the lowest levels of skills and experience, and disabled learners and those who have special educational needs
 - evaluating the wider impact of providers' work in their local areas on:
 - different local communities
 - specific or targeted groups and identified local priorities
 - enhancing learners' social and mental well-being
 - local social and economic development and regeneration

⁶ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12*, Ofsted, 2012; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1112.

- better outcomes for children and families through contributing to raising achievement in local schools, and provision for families and other adults
- employers and their employees
- increasing the numbers of young people and adults progressing to education, employment or training.

28. In the colleges visited, managers, governors and their partners used agreed key performance indicators well to evaluate the impact of individual projects. However, they were less able to evaluate effectively the wider impact of their work across the community, or their contribution to local employment and economic growth, or demonstrate how they were accountable to their local communities. The colleges were at an early stage of developing their strategies to strengthen local accountability. Examples of work in progress included:

- developing community learning trusts to increase community representation and provide a forum for information and feedback between colleges and their communities
- exploring models of mutualised ownership of the college to increase responsiveness and accountability to internal and external stakeholders
- strengthening governors' links with local communities and employers; for example, through meeting these groups more regularly, and holding meetings in local community venues or on business premises
- increased college representation at various local strategic and planning partnerships
- collaborative work with other colleges and sector organisations to explore ways to identify key performance indicators in relation to local accountability and to benchmark performance
- the sharing of data and the development of common quality assurance and improvement systems across partnerships and federations to strengthen quality improvement and local accountability between different partner organisations.

29. While these activities provided useful mechanisms for consulting communities and employers, college managers and governors acknowledged that there was still much to do to ensure that this work was translated into genuine systems for accountability and for measuring performance.

Colleges in their communities: partnership working to meet local needs

30. Thirty of the 32 colleges sampled through institutional inspection and discrete survey visits had well-established partnerships, including employers, other

learning and skills providers and community agencies. Successful partnerships had enabled colleges and other local providers to:

- coordinate curriculum planning and delivery well to extend the range of provision available to learners, while avoiding wasteful duplication or fragmentation
- provide well-targeted courses to meet the needs of specific groups of learners, including disabled learners and those with special educational needs, local residents with mental ill health, and young parents and families in areas of social and economic disadvantage
- reduce the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training in their areas, and support more adults, including those furthest from the job market, into employment
- align their curriculum specifically to local business and industry needs.

Example of successful partnership working to achieve the above

Two sixth form colleges and one general further education college in a city collaborated successfully to create a long-standing accord led by the three college principals. This enabled them to avoid unnecessary duplication of provision by providing a coherent range of courses across the three colleges. They also developed an overall city prospectus that provided a comprehensive overview of all the provision in their local community. The impact of these changes on the provision was that:

- the general further education college no longer offered its own A-level provision, concentrating on vocational education and training
- the two sixth form colleges collaborated on their A-level provision to enable students from all institutions to access a wide choice of A-level subjects
- even traditionally less popular subjects had viable numbers, further extending the range of subjects offered
- resources, such as funding, learning resources and staff expertise were shared successfully across the three colleges.

31. The general further education colleges in the survey tended to have more extensive and diverse arrangements for partnerships, particularly with employers and community groups, than the sixth form colleges did. Only four of the 15 sixth form colleges sampled had increased partnership work with employers and community groups as they extended their provision beyond traditional A-level programmes.

32. As colleges were striving to be more innovative or entrepreneurial to meet changing local needs, the types and purposes of partnerships expanded. Successful approaches included:
- setting up companies or trusts within, or as an adjunct to, the college, often to provide strong management for a specific aspect of work (11 general further education colleges)
 - establishing federations or joint ventures with other providers which created clear, formal structures and well-defined, shared objectives for partnership working (12 general further education and five sixth form colleges)
 - sponsoring academies, studio or free schools (16 general further education colleges and three sixth form colleges)
 - working with universities and employers to set up university technology colleges with a specific vocational focus (10 general further education and two sixth form colleges).
33. Much of this work was driven by the need that key partners perceived to raise educational standards across a local area. Where partnerships were sufficiently well-established, there was evidence of positive impact; for example, through improved achievement at GCSE level in local schools and increased progression to further education or training. However, there was little clear evidence of planning across providers in preparation for the raising of the participation age from September 2013.
34. In 12 of the 17 colleges visited, external partners, including representatives from LEAs, local authorities, voluntary and community organisations and employers, noted that their local colleges were well-trusted, key strategic players. They particularly valued the colleges' good level of local knowledge and extensive experience of working with local communities and employers as well as their capacity to manage complex funding streams and secure specific project funding.
35. While partnership brought many challenges, particularly in terms of managers' time and resources, those involved perceived that the benefits outweighed the difficulties. Senior managers identified their key incentives for effective partnership working. These included: improving provision and outcomes for local people; developing a strong institutional reputation for high-quality provision tailored to local needs; being the provider of choice for learners and employers; meeting their own business needs and securing financial viability, through maintaining a high level of learner recruitment and success. However,

as identified in the Annual Report, the provision did not always support learners' progression to employment, where this was a primary aim.⁷

36. For colleges seeking to enhance and increase their provision to meet the changing needs of their various communities, the most frequent barriers cited by the college managers interviewed were:
- frequent changes in government policies and initiatives, and the high number of short-term initiatives
 - continuing variations between school sixth forms and colleges in funding, VAT rules and learners' eligibility for free school meals, which favoured school sixth forms financially over other post-16 providers
 - the lack of parity of measures for learners' success between school sixth forms and colleges to support consistent judgements across different providers about the quality of their provision and the outcomes for their learners
 - the opening of new post-16 providers with a lack of clarity about the identified demand for new provision, especially at advanced level
 - the unknown impact of adult loans on participation rates and on colleges' capacity to maintain provision for advanced and higher-level skills development
 - the impact of the proposed changes to curriculum policy for 11–19-year-olds
 - the lack of clear progression routes for learners with severe or complex learning needs, particularly those not yet ready to progress to an accredited qualification course
 - the impact of the new duty for schools to provide careers information and advice and guidance to their pupils to support their career choices.⁸
37. While colleges were well-accustomed to working in a competitive market, and aimed to achieve a healthy balance between collaboration and competition, it is clear that these factors could militate against productive collaboration and effective planning across a local area. In nearly half of the colleges visited, college managers were concerned about how increased competition for learners, the diminished role of local authorities in relation to local planning for schools, and the loss of ring-fenced government funding for careers guidance had a detrimental effect on close partnership working to provide comprehensive advice and guidance for all learners. In particular, these managers felt that it was more difficult to ensure that all young people received comprehensive and

⁷ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12*, Ofsted, 2012; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1112.

⁸ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12*, Ofsted, 2012; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1112.

impartial advice and guidance on all post-16 options, including vocational routes, apprenticeships and employment.

38. Almost all of the colleges visited worked in partnership with schools, most frequently in providing vocational courses and alternative curricula for 14–16-year-olds or programmes for disabled learners and those with special educational needs. Despite these regular links with local schools, only four of the colleges visited identified effective collaborative arrangements to ensure that all progression routes for 16-year-olds were equally well promoted. College managers were concerned that the raising of the participation age in education and training to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 could be interpreted by schools, pupils and their parents as just another version of raising the school leaving age.
39. Given the significance of these policy changes for the provision of career information and guidance, it will be crucial to monitor and report on their impact on such provision for all young people, particularly disabled learners, those with special educational needs and less advantaged learners.

Coherence and impact of local planning

Local Enterprise Partnerships

40. The 2010 Local Growth White Paper set out the government’s intention that LEPs would be led by local authorities and businesses across national economic areas. The government has confirmed its commitment to LEPs through the announcement of additional funding in December 2011 to support their functions and build their capacity to help local small and medium-sized enterprises. However, even by the autumn of 2012, there were still significant variations across the country in how well the LEPs were established, and to what extent they were taking a leading role in identifying and planning provision to meet local area needs.
41. All 39 LEPs indicated a strategic commitment to enhancing skills development to support local growth in their areas, with more than two thirds indicating positive support for their proposals from the further education sector.⁹ However, while further education was well represented on local employment and skills boards, the sector was severely under-represented at LEP board level. Only around one third of LEPs had a further education representative on their board. This contrasted sharply with more than 80% who had a higher education representative on the board. This meant that not all LEPs had direct

⁹ *Local enterprise partnerships and colleges*, Association of Colleges, 2012; www.aoc.co.uk/en/research/aoc-surveys-and-research/partnerships-and-employer-engagement.cfm.

access to the full range of provision that colleges could offer to support local communities and employers.

42. Where LEPs were able to build on previously strong local partnerships, they were developing a good understanding and clear oversight of the full range of provision across their area, as seen in this example.

Effective collaborative work between colleges and the LEP

In the west of England, the LEP established itself more quickly, drawing on previous participation and expertise. It had taken a lead in local area planning, which had supported local partners effectively to collaborate in and plan well-coordinated provision; this identified possible gaps and unmet skills needs, and avoided unnecessary, expensive duplication and fragmentation of provision between multiple providers.

The well-established consortium of five further education colleges ensured that the learning and skills sector was well represented in the area and that colleges were actively involved in shared decision-making and planning for future provision.

43. Where the areas served by LEPs varied significantly from those previously covered by local or regional planning partnership groups, much more work had to be done to re-establish and re-define partnerships and boundaries. This resulted in LEPs making slower progress in developing a clear plan for local provision.
44. The effectiveness of the LEPs must be monitored and evaluated to assess how well local partnerships identify and meet local needs, and to establish their direct contribution to local economic growth and social development.

Accessing and using local market intelligence and data

45. To identify local requirements and plan for changes to provision for 16-year-olds, local labour market information and progression data are required. The survey revealed that this varied far too much in quality and availability. Only 10 of the 17 colleges visited had ready access to high-quality, detailed and localised data: for example, on the number and location of job vacancies, jobseekers and young people not in education, employment or training. These 10 colleges used these data well to identify needs in the locality very quickly. This worked most effectively when either the LEP took a lead role in ensuring that all providers had access to local data, or where colleges had close partnerships with local authorities, employers and their local jobcentres. Examples of effective sharing of local management information data to identify and respond to local needs included:

- monthly meetings between college and Jobcentre Plus staff to ensure that relevant partners had up-to-date information on:

- local employers’ needs, so that short courses could be set up within two weeks in relevant vocational areas where there were vacancies
 - identified skills gaps, so that the college could revise aspects of its curriculum to give local people a better chance of sustained employment
 - local people seeking employment to enable the college to target the marketing of short-employability provision
 - the proportion of NEETs mapped across the city at local ward level, with these data analysed according to particular social needs and barriers to learning, so that college staff and local support agencies could ensure that the young people were offered courses tailored to their specific needs.
- close working between a college and Jobcentre Plus to develop and deliver a programme for young people throughout the borough, known locally as ‘Improving Life Chances’; this resulted in 85% of the participants moving from being NEET into work or full-time college courses
 - good sharing of information with employers which enabled one college’s managers and its governing body to act very swiftly to agree a buy-out of a local apprenticeship training agency which was going out of business: local jobs were saved and the apprentices’ training could continue.
46. Close working with neighbourhood partnerships to share local data and intelligence was very effective in several colleges visited, as seen in this example.

Neighbourhood partnerships

Rather than simply adopting city-wide targets, a large general further education college used data and intelligence from the city’s ‘Working Neighbourhood’ teams to determine local community needs. In this case the focus was on adults with basic skills needs and those who spoke English as an additional language. The college used its extensive partnerships with voluntary organisations very effectively to inform its planning and to allocate resources for specific projects. The partnerships also provided ‘soft intelligence’ on community perception and the likely take-up of provision within the targeted areas.

The local authority led the ‘Working Neighbourhood’ strategy, identifying local community needs and setting local targets. The pilot project, established in an area of high social and economic deprivation, was successful in supporting almost 80% of more than 100 participants into accredited courses in basic skills, voluntary work, apprenticeships or employment.

47. However, more needs to be done to ensure that detailed and current local labour market information and NEET data are available in every LEP area. All colleges need to recognise their responsibility for ensuring that they use these data to identify specific needs and respond effectively. In three areas visited for the survey, the fragmented collation and analysis of NEET data in local areas often meant that the proportion of 'unknown destinations' noted in data on school leavers, and the 'unknowns' noted in relation to the 16 to 24 age group had increased markedly.

Local authority partnerships

48. Regular strategic planning with local authorities was a feature in 14 of the 17 colleges. This was often a result of previously well-established work on 11 to 19 or 14 to 19 partnerships. College partnerships were often a key part of local authorities' strategies for raising attainment in schools: for example, through colleges' sponsorship of academies, free schools or university technology colleges. Colleges and schools that worked closely together were able to coordinate their curriculum offer and provide learners with clear advice and guidance on the full range of post-16 options for education, training or employment and, in this case, study.

A city-wide strategic group led by a local authority

A unitary authority had taken the overall lead in steering the local partnerships in an area where there had been a history of collaborative working between schools and colleges for more than 10 years. The local authority set up a city-wide group to enable providers to collaborate on the curriculum offer and ensure that all students in the area had access to objective advice and guidance on careers and transition. The benefits of this approach included:

- a common application process across the city's schools and colleges and comprehensive advice and guidance to young people on all options
- enrichment activities provided by the colleges for all Year 10 and 11 pupils that gave all of them experience of further education to inform their choices
- improved GCSE results across the schools, particularly in science, leading to increased participation rates in post-16 education and training.

49. Other examples of strong partnerships between post-16 providers have shown that effective collaboration can raise learners' attainment across an authority and support more school leavers to progress successfully to further education or employment. In an authority with low achievement in mathematics at most of the local schools, the local college appointed a cross-institution head of mathematics to oversee quality improvement and to lead subject development

activities for school staff. GCSE results across the city and progression rates to post-16 education and training both improved.

Notes

Inspectors gathered evidence from discrete visits to 13 general further education and four sixth form colleges between September and November 2012. During these 17 visits, they interviewed 17 college principals, 54 governors and nine clerks to the corporation, 77 senior managers, 92 middle managers and 60 other college staff. In addition, they held meetings with 36 employers, seven representatives from LEP boards and five from chambers of commerce, 22 local authority representatives and nine senior staff from schools. A telephone interview was conducted with another college principal to gain additional evidence about collaborative arrangements in one of the areas visited.

Inspectors gathered supplementary evidence through the inspection of leadership and management in four general further education colleges and 11 sixth form colleges that were inspected between September and November 2012.

The full range of evidence for the survey was therefore drawn from 32 colleges in all, of which 17 were general further education colleges and 15 were sixth form colleges.

Inspectors also held meetings with representatives from key sector bodies, including: the Association of Colleges; 157 Group; the Sixth Form College Forum; the Learning and Skills Improvement Service; the University and College Union; the National Union of Students; the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Education. They also reviewed a range of related reports and publications.

Further information

Publications by Ofsted

Skills for employment (110178), Ofsted, 2012;
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/110178.

How colleges improve (120166), Ofsted, 2012;
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120166.

Promoting enterprise in vocational courses for 16–19-year-old students in colleges (120020), Ofsted, 2012;
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120020.

Ofsted's good practice colleges and communities;
www.ofsted.gov.uk/search/apachesolr_search/good%20practice%20colleges%20and%20communities <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/search/a>.

For the last three years, Ofsted's good practice database for learning and skills has been hosted by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service on its Excellence Gateway. In March 2011, Ofsted launched its own website; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice%20w. This showcases good practice across the sectors that Ofsted inspects and regulates.

The case studies are written by Ofsted's inspectors following a visit to the provider to investigate a lead about good practice, which has usually been identified during an inspection. A number of the examples on the website include documents supplied by the provider which can be downloaded and adapted. There are currently over 80 learning and skills examples, including four video case studies, which illustrate effective teaching and learning in business administration, construction, hairdressing and engineering.

Other publications

A dynamic nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2011;
www.niace.org.uk/news/colleges-inquiry-final-report-published.

New challenges, new chances: next steps in implementing the further education reform programme, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011;
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.bis.gov.uk/newchallenges>.

Local enterprise partnerships and colleges, Association of Colleges, 2012;
www.aoc.co.uk/en/research/aoc-surveys-and-research/partnerships-and-employer-engagement.cfm.

Thinking outside the college: planning and delivering local accountability, Association of Colleges and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2012;
www.aoc.co.uk/en/college_governors/thinking-outside-the-college/.

Annex A: Providers visited

Providers visited for the survey

Bourneville College	Birmingham
City College Norwich	Norfolk
City of Bristol College	Bristol
College of Haringey and North East London	Haringey
Highbury College	Portsmouth
Leeds City College	Leeds
Oxford and Cherwell Valley College	Oxfordshire
Portsmouth Sixth Form College	Portsmouth
Regent College	City of Leicester
Salford City College	Salford
South Devon College	Torbay
South Thames College	Wandsworth
Stockport College	Manchester
The Lakes College	Cumbria
Wirral Metropolitan College	Wirral
Wyggeston & Queen Elizabeth I College	City of Leicester
Xaverian Sixth Form College	Manchester

Providers where evidence was collected through college inspection

Brighton Hove and Sussex Sixth Form College	Brighton and Hove
Cadbury Sixth Form College	Birmingham
Cambridge Regional College	Cambridgeshire
City College Plymouth	Plymouth
Gateway Sixth Form College	City of Leicester

Sir George Monoux College

South Tyneside College

South Worcestershire College

St Brendan's Sixth Form College

Stockton Sixth Form College

Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College

Thomas Rotherham College

Totton College

Varndean Sixth Form College

Worcester Sixth Form College

Telephone interview

Alton College

Waltham Forest

South Tyneside

Worcestershire

Bristol

Stockton-on-Tees

Stoke-on-Trent

Rotherham

Hampshire

Brighton and Hove

Worcestershire

Hampshire