Research Report DCSF-RR121

Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots

Programme Theory Evaluation

Working Paper 4
Learning Agreement Provision

Rosie Page, Claire Johnson and Miranda Munro
Institute for Employment Studies

department for
children, schools and families

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Executive Summary

Background and research aims

The Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots were launched in 12 areas of England in April 2006. Activity Agreements were designed for young people (aged 16 or 17) not in employment, education or training (NEET) and operate in eight of the 12 areas. Learning Agreements were aimed at 16 to 17 year olds in jobs without training (JWT) and also operated in eight of the 12 pilots areas. Under a Learning Agreement (LAP), young people took part in agreed activities, which included undertaking a designated course.

This paper is part of the programme theory strand of the Learning Agreement Pilots evaluation. This is a realist evaluation method which focuses on testing some of the key 'theories' which underlie the LAP policy to identify which components of the policy work (or not), how, for whom, why, and in what circumstances.

The paper is based on research undertaken among LAP Advisers, training providers, and young people in three Connexions Partnership areas. The aim of this particular focused study was to gather evidence in relation to two theories about LAP provision, in particular the range of provision on offer and the enablers and constraints on brokerage arrangements:

The 'menu of choice' theory : If the policy provides a 'menu of choice' to the young person there is a greater likelihood of being able to provide them with learning activities they need and want in order to progress. The subject of the learning on offer may not be the most important or appealing aspect to the young person, rather the opportunity to learn in a setting that is 'not like school' (eg at work or in an open learning centre) or using a mode of learning which is work rather than classroom-based.

The 'broker' theory: For an agreement to work, the broker must access provision that meets young people's needs, and to do this effectively a) they need to be fully informed about the range of provision available to them, b) they may need to negotiate with the young person about what provision best suits them/ is most appropriate and c) the provision needs to be responsive and available when and where the young person can do it.

Methodology

The study took place between March and May 2008, in three Connexions Partnership areas. It involved three stages: eight mini-focus groups with LAP Advisers; 24 depth interviews with young people who had participated in the LAP; and 15 depth interviews with learning or training providers. In addition, the research team also referred to previous transcripts undertaken as part of the process evaluation of the LAP pilots, which helped to inform the development of the topic guides. Originally it was also planned to conduct up to eight 'matched' interviews with employers who had been actively involved in the LAP, but this proved infeasible as most of the young people who took part in the study either did not involve their employer, or did not want their employer to be approached about the research.

Key findings

Co-location could strengthen Adviser-provider partnerships

Advisers generally felt well-informed about available provision in their local area and kept up-to-date through a variety of formal and informal structures. In one area, some Advisers were co-located within providers and this was felt to be critical not just to keeping informed but to building buy-in from providers and helping providers to understand more about dealing with the needs of young people in jobs without training.

In the same area, local 'buddy meetings' between Advisers and providers were useful for identifying patterns of unmet demand or where provision was available but needed to be delivered in a different way. Also in this area, a dedicated role of Learning Development Adviser had been created: these staff specialised in sourcing less common provision and filling gaps. In other areas, where this role was only one aspect of what general Learning Agreement Advisers did, there were fewer examples of new provision being specifically developed to meet the needs of young people and employers.

Some providers more flexible than others

With some exceptions, private training providers were generally found to be more responsive than colleges, which faced greater constraints on their flexibility to run roll-on, roll-off provision as well as placing more emphasis internally on meeting their mainstream targets. Many private training providers in particular had worked flexibly to meet the specific needs of individual young people. However, there were resource constraints involved in this and it was also more difficult for those based in larger, rural areas.

Many courses widely available, but some specific gaps

In two of the areas, Advisers were generally happy with the range of provision available and felt that this had improved as the pilot progressed. In the other area, there was felt to be a general lack of work-based and specialist provision, which meant that key skills and general courses such as customer service were more commonly used as a fall-back.

Specific gaps could be in a particular subject or in a particular locality. Construction training existed but it was difficult for many young people in jobs without training to get access to it, due to the amount of competition for places. Other gaps were identified in more specialised areas such as window manufacturing, carpet fitting, provision for rural industries, and courses in the creative industries. Some young people were working in occupations for which there was no relevant NVQ qualification at Level 1. These issues led to some cases where the course could 'pick itself' as there was only one option. However, this was not necessarily a deterrent for young people as long as it fitted with what they wanted to do.

Funding criteria limit the 'menu'

The LAP offer is limited to certain courses on Section 96 of the LSC Learning Aims Database, and excludes short courses of fewer than ten guided learning hours, and stand-alone NVQs at Level 2. Advisers and providers alike advocated the use of short courses as an engagement tool (especially for employers, and for young people who had low confidence about returning to learning). In one area, short courses were being 'bundled' together with other courses to form a coherent package which met the funding criteria, or Apprenticeships were broken down into their component parts, so that learners had the option of doing their learning in smaller units. Generally the limits on funding were felt to constrain types of provision such as tasters and short courses which could be the most appropriate starting points for some young people in jobs without training.

Engaging young people: what do brokers need to offer in the 'menu of choice'?

Young people in jobs without training came to the LAP from a variety of different contexts in terms of prior qualifications, past experiences of school/college, and whether they liked their current job. Advisers stressed that each young person was different and had to be treated on a case-by-case basis. However, the common factors identified as engaging young people were:

Being able to offer learning that leads somewhere. This did not necessarily have to be related to the young person's current job - it could be a key skills qualification (to gain entry to another course or type of work that required C grades in maths and English). Some learners were doing aspiration-led vocational qualifications, with a view to changing to a different type of work, although these were often more difficult to broker because of the need to have some form of voluntary work placement which could provide an opportunity for gaining work-based evidence.

Progression was important to many of the young people and some had even done more than one course within the LAP. In order to make learning more attractive, some courses were being broken down into 'smaller steps', for example doing the Technical Certificate component of an Apprenticeship. Offering courses in such a way was felt to build up young people's confidence over time, as it was less daunting for them to sign up for a shorter course, while still allowing them flexibility to complete the full Apprenticeship qualification at their own pace.

Help with travel, or brokering learning that comes to the young person. Advisers mentioned that travel was a key barrier for some young people in terms of both cost and the time it could take to make journeys using public transport. This was a particular problem for, but not limited to, rural areas. Ways around this tended to be ad hoc and dependent on the goodwill of Advisers or providers, therefore it is questionable how sustainable they would be if an LAP-style policy were to be rolled out nationally. Examples included Advisers providing lifts for young people, liaising with providers to arrange dedicated transport for small groups of learners, or finding providers who would make home visits or visit at times outside of their usual hours. In a few cases, discretionary funding was used to pay towards travel, if this was a significant barrier.

Sourcing provision that can fit around work. This was particularly important for young people who were doing learning that was un-related to their current job and/or did not want their employer to be involved. Many young people worked irregular hours and needed the flexibility of an open learning centre, or of assessor visits at times that fitted into their shifts, including early mornings, evenings and weekends. However, some providers were not able to offer this level of flexibility or were doing so as a 'loss leader'. In some areas Advisers had tried to broker distance learning courses but raised doubts about how appropriate this was for this client group of young people.

What makes brokerage more straightforward?

The factors which made brokerage easier were:

- **Strong partnerships with providers**. Factors which could help facilitate this included co-location, regular meetings between Advisers and providers, and having dedicated Learning Development Advisers who had specific responsibility for brokering less common provision and filling gaps.

- **Flexible provision** that could start fairly soon, hence roll-on, roll-off provision was often preferred to college courses which had fixed start dates. Long delays while waiting for a course to start could deter some young people and their employers.

- **Employer support** was critical if the young person wanted to do a work-based qualification such as an Apprenticeship or NVQ related to their current job.

What makes brokerage difficult?

The following circumstances made brokerage more difficult, but not impossible:

- **When young people wanted to do an aspiration-led course**, that is courses that would lead them away from their current job and towards an industry they aspired to work in. Voluntary work placements had been brokered in a small number of cases, but these were only usually possible for young people who worked part-time.

- **When the young person worked irregular shifts** (particularly if they also worked full-time hours). This increased the need for flexible provision including open learning and home visits from assessors.

- **When the young person's job role involved a limited range of tasks**, this could mean they did not have enough opportunity to provide the full range of evidence required for certain work-based qualifications. In this situation, young people had to do a lower level or more general courses, or none at all. In one area, a 'carousel' system had been instigated among local farmers in order to provide experience and evidence for employees from different farms to gain a full qualification.

Brokerage had enabled some provision gaps to be filled

Advisers had sometimes been able to broker new provision to fill specific gaps in their area. This had been achieved via use of sub-contracting to bring in a wider range of providers than was originally contracted; transferring successful outreach models from partner organisations into the LAP; and brokering between young people, employers and providers to provide shared opportunities for work experience.

Generally, it was felt that providers had become more flexible as the LAP pilot had progressed, in terms of how they delivered courses (for example through the use of more drop-in sessions), and providers themselves felt that the LAP had increased their understanding of the needs of young people in jobs without training. The ways that provision was delivered, and the range of provision on the 'menu', had also broadened over time *because* of brokerage.

1 Introduction

The Activity and Learning Agreements Pilots were launched in 12 areas of England in April 2006. Learning Agreements were aimed at 16 and 17 year olds in jobs without training (JWT) and operated in eight of the 12 pilots areas. Under a Learning Agreement (LAP), young people took part in agreed activities, which included undertaking a designated course. If successful, young people could receive a monetary bonus.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), formerly the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), has commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), the Centre for Education and Industry (CEI) and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), to undertake the evaluation of the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots. The evaluation had three main strands:

- **a quantitative element**, using surveys of young people to measure the impact of the pilots in comparison to a number of control areas
- **a programme theory element**, focusing on testing some key aspects of the policy to identify what works or not and why
- **a process evaluation**, examining how the pilots have been set up and delivered and the main implementation issues.

1.1 What is programme theory evaluation?

Programme theory evaluation is considered a useful tool for conceptualizing programmes, guiding evaluations, planning empirical research, and analysing *why* programmes are successful (or not). It seeks to identify the 'theory of change' that lies behind an intervention and assess to what extent, why and how this change has occurred. In doing so, any unintended as well as intended outcomes are considered.

The results of this type of evaluation are *explanatory* rather than providing a clear-cut answer on whether a policy 'works', and can be fed back into the policy design in order to make improvements.

The guiding principle of this approach is that policy interventions are originally underpinned by theories. Pawson et al. (2004)[1] sum up the basic 'if then' logic of this as follows:

> *'If we deliver a programme in this way or we manage services like so, then this will bring about some improved outcome.'*

The theories that underpin interventions are informed by assumptions about a) the reasons for behaviour and b) what might cause that behaviour to change. But these theories are also mediated by individual, social and institutional effects that influence how policy is delivered. Hence, a key focus of programme theory evaluation is to examine how policy mechanisms are *supposed* to work and compare this to how they *do* work. The evaluation can then assess whether there is any gap between the two, and if so, explore the extent, nature and causes of that gap, and resulting impacts on outcomes.

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[1] Realist Synthesis: An Introduction, Pawson R, Greenhalgh T, Harvey G and Walshe K, ESRC Research Methods Paper 2/2004.

The outcome is not to provide an unequivocal answer about whether the 'Learning Agreements' work, but rather to highlight the components that inform the successful operation of the policy (as well as ones that hinder it). This will help to refine the theories implicit within the policy design to better articulate what works, for whom, how, and in what circumstances, so that this learning can be embedded into any subsequent revision of the policy, or nationwide roll-out.

The programme theory approach to evaluation adopted by this study has two main elements. The first is to identify, assess and refine the theories that underpin the Learning Agreement policy (the 'theory elicitation' stage). The second is to then test these theories via empirical research. This will take the form of a series of 'focused studies', each of which will be a discrete research project, linked under the umbrella of the identified programme theories.

1.2 Background

The theory elicitation stage presented 25 different theories and sub-theories, which were formulated after a review of related research and in-depth interviews with a number of key policy architects and stakeholders. These theories and sub-theories were collated under different elements of the ALA policy: financial incentives, agreements, personalised support, flexible options, brokerage and progression. The next stage of the study entailed prioritising which theories to investigate within a programme of 'focused studies'. In consultation with representatives from the Department for Children, School and Families (DCSF), LSC, Treasury and other key stakeholders, it was decided to prioritise research into provision (involving the theories relating to flexible options and brokerage).

1.3 Hypothesis and research aims

The aim of this study was to gather evidence in relation to two theories about LAP provision, in particular the range of provision on offer and the enablers and constraints on brokerage arrangements. The theories for investigation in this Working Paper are as follows:

The 'menu of choice' theory : If the policy provides a 'menu of choice' to the young person there is a greater likelihood of being able to provide them with learning activities they need and want in order to progress. The subject of the learning on offer may not be the most important or appealing aspect to the young person, rather the opportunity to learn in a setting that is 'not like school' (eg at work or in an open learning centre) or using a mode of learning which is work rather than classroom-based.

The 'broker' theory: For an agreement to work, the broker must access provision that meets young people's needs, and to do this effectively a) they need to be fully informed about the range of provision available to them, b) they may need to negotiate with the young person about what provision best suits them/ is most appropriate and c) the provision needs to be responsive and available when and where the young person can do it.

The 'menu of choice' theory hypothesises that a broad menu of provision is needed to be able to provide young people with the learning opportunities they want. This 'menu' may include being able to learn in different settings, work-based learning, classroom learning, short courses and longer courses. Within this theory we will seek to investigate the types of learning that appeal to young people and their employers.

The 'broker' theory hypothesises that for an agreement to work, the Adviser must be able to access provision that meets young people's needs. Within this we will explore: how Advisers keep up-to-date about provision; how they work with employers and young people to decide upon and choose provision; and the availability and responsiveness of provision and how far this meets young people's and employer's needs.

The research aims set out below relate to the Learning Agreement[1]. The main aims of this project are to:

- **Investigate the broker role** - how does the Adviser negotiate provision that meets the needs of the young person (and their employer, where relevant)?

- **Examine the constraints on provision** - from the perspectives of young people and Advisers - and what impact(s) these have, including how they can be overcome.

- **Identify the circumstances where new provision (in terms of subjects or settings) has been developed or brokered** under the LAP. How were any gaps identified and filled?

- **Explore the extent and impact of choice of provision on young people's participation** - do they really get a 'menu of choice'? What scope is there for flexibility?

When we refer to choice of provision we mean in the context of provision that is eligible under the Learning Agreement (see Section 2.1 for a brief overview).

1.4 Methodology

The methodology for this study consisted of a review of interviews undertaken in the case-study areas as part of the process evaluation, followed by qualitative research with Connexions staff, young people on the Learning Agreement (and, if directly involved, their employer), and training providers.

The study was conducted in three Learning Agreement pilot areas: Area A (a mixed urban/ suburban area), Area B (a mixed area, with some rural pockets), and Area C (mainly a rural area).

1.4.1 Review of interviews undertaken for the process evaluation

A range of stakeholders were interviewed about Learning Agreements as part of the process evaluation, including Connexions management and advisory staff, employers, training providers, and representatives from local Learning and Skills Councils.

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[1] Newton, B, Johnson, C , and Fearn, H (2009), Evaluation of the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilot, Programme Theory Strand Working Paper 3: Activity Agreement Provision, Research Report RWxxx, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

A review of the notes and transcripts from Round 2 (undertaken in 2006-07) and Round 3 (undertaken in 2007-08) was conducted looking for relevant evidence in the three case-study areas which could inform the two provision theories. This was used to inform the development of the research tools, and also underpins the content analysis presented in this working paper.

1.4.2 Adviser focus groups

In each Connexions Partnership area, two or three 'mini' focus groups were conducted among Advisers. These were frontline staff dealing with young people, training providers, and employers - part of whose remit is to fulfil the 'brokerage' role.

Eight mini-groups took place, and in total 36 Advisers participated. Each group lasted between an hour and 90 minutes. Advisers were asked to discuss how they kept up-to-date about provision, the sorts of learning provision that was available in their local area, and the extent to which this met young people's and employers' needs. They were also asked to discuss how they negotiated courses with young people and employers, and whether/ how any gaps in provision were resolved.

1.4.3 Interviews with young people

Advisers who had attended the mini-groups were asked to consider their caseloads and identify a range of young people whom the research team could approach to interview. By using this method, the research team sought to access 'critical cases' where brokering the provision had played a key role. Advisers were asked to identify examples of young people for whom:

- provision that did not exist before was brokered or newly developed
- the Adviser played a key role in helping the young person to decide on a course
- the Adviser had a key role in liaising with the employer and getting them on board
- no suitable provision could be brokered.

The aim was to interview 24 young people (c. eight young people per Connexions Partnership area). In one area the number of leads gained via this method was too small to achieve this target, so the 'critical case' criteria was opened up, and Advisers provided the research team with leads from among any of the young people in their caseload.

In total, Advisers gained consent from 53 young people to be contacted by the research team and the target of 24 interviews was achieved. The majority of interviews were undertaken face-to-face, although a small number were undertaken over the telephone where it was not possible to arrange a convenient time to meet in person. Table 1.1 indicates the range of young people interviewed by gender and Connexions Partnership area.

Table 1.1: Profile of young people interviewed, by Connexions Partnership area and gender

	Male	**Female**
Area A	5	6
Area B	1	4
Area C	2	6
Total	**8**	**16**

1.4.4 Interviews with employers

Where appropriate, for example if the employer had been involved in choosing that young person's course, the young people who took part in an interview were asked whether someone from the research team could also contact their employer to discuss how the course was negotiated and the extent to which it met their needs.

It was anticipated that the research team would be able to conduct approximately eight employer interviews 'matched' to a young person who had also participated. However, in the majority of cases the young person's employer was not involved in the Learning Agreement. In some cases where the employer *was* involved, the young person did not want them to be contacted. In a few cases the young person's employer had been involved when they originally signed up, but they had since left their work and continued the LAP in a different job where the employer had not taken part. Therefore, only one employer interview was undertaken.

1.4.5 Interviews with training providers

A number of training providers had been interviewed as part of the process evaluation, and these transcripts were reviewed for content relevant to the provision theories.

In addition, Connexions staff were also asked to provide the research team with a number of training provider contacts within each area. In total, an additional 15 providers were interviewed (five in each Connexions Partnership area). These interviews were conducted by telephone.

1.5 Structure of this Working Paper

The remainder of this Working Paper is structured as follows:

- Section 2 details how Advisers keep up-to-date with the provision available under the Learning Agreement in their local area and examines the range of provision that is available more broadly.
- Section 3 examines what Advisers do to engage young people and employers in the Learning Agreement, and explores how courses are brokered, including which circumstances make brokerage more straightforward and which make it more challenging.
- Section 4 looks at young people's education and employment contexts and, in light of this, their experience of doing Learning Agreement courses. Finally this section looks at the impact of the Learning Agreement on provision available to young people in jobs without training.

The conclusion assesses the research findings in relation to the original hypotheses. Some broader implications, in terms of raising the learning participation age, are also considered.

1.6 Acknowledgements

The authors would particularly like to thank all of the young people, training providers, and Connexions staff who gave up their valuable time to participate in this research. In addition, Susanna Greenwood (DCSF) and Professor Ray Pawson (University of Leeds) provided incisive and helpful comments on the original proposal for this study, the topic guides used with staff and young people, and the original draft of this Working Paper. Gill Brown at IES provided invaluable support to the research team in terms of helping to arrange interviews, sending out interview confirmations, acting as a remote 'personal safety buddy' to the interviewers, and formatting this report.

2 Awareness and Availability of Provision

This section examines how Advisers kept up-to-date about the provision on offer in their local area. This relates to the 'brokerage' theory **(to broker courses effectively Advisers need to be fully informed about the range of provision available to them).** It also explores the range of provision that was available to Advisers within their local area, and the impact of the funding guidelines on availability of various types of course. This relates to elements of both the 'menu of choice' and 'brokerage' theories, that **the broker must be able to access provision that meets young people's needs** and **the provision needs to be responsive and available when and where the young person can do it.**

2.1 Team structures

The structure of teams and types of roles varied between the case study areas:

- **Area A** - Advisers were structured into two teams covering the north and south of the area. Team Leaders had primary responsibility for resolving any specific issues with brokering provision.

- **Area B** - Advisers were structured into three local teams, each of which also had a Learning Development Adviser who was responsible for dealing with, and resolving, more challenging provision enquiries. In this area, a number of Advisers were co-located within learning providers.

- **Area C** - Advisers worked from their local Connexions office overseen by a Team Leader who had responsibility for a number of Connexions offices. Team Leaders each had a number of training providers that they were responsible for liaising with. Where there were issues with provision, Advisers would complete a 'system failure form' to raise the issue with their Team Leader, who would then take it up with the relevant training provider and / or local LSC.

The way that teams were organised did have an impact on how quickly information could be shared and on relationships between Advisers and providers, which in turn impacted on the extent and nature of the brokerage that could be achieved. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2.2 and Section 3.3.1.

2.2 Advisers' awareness of provision

In all the areas, Advisers generally felt informed about available provision and kept up-to-date through a variety of formal and informal structures. Team meetings were used to provide updates on local provision, as were more informal emails and telephone conversations. Advisers in Area A used a 'provision matrix' to gather information about courses, but some mentioned that this was not always as up-to-date as it might be.

> *'If they know in advance that something will be coming on at a certain point then they tell us in team meetings. Because sometimes there is a delay with the matrix because it has to come from the LSC.'* Adviser

Advisers in all areas felt they had built up their knowledge of local provision over the last two years and also drew on the knowledge of colleagues for help and support when brokering provision. However, much of this was based on personal relationships rather than on formalised knowledge management systems or processes, creating a risk that knowledge may be lost as the LAP pilot winds down and some staff come to the end of temporary contracts.

'We can drop an email out to them and someone will get back to us in minutes saying I've done that, this training provider will access that.' Adviser

In Area B, Advisers used regular 'buddy group meetings' to stay informed about local provision and to discuss any gaps. The meetings were held at a sub-team level, and included representatives from all the providers in that locality. These were felt to be particularly useful:

'You can start to pre-determine how things can be delivered in a different way, meeting the demand that the PA is identifying in those little groups.' Adviser

As noted earlier, Area B had also based some Advisers within a number of colleges and private training providers. Among other benefits, such as increasing the buy-in of providers to the LAP pilot, Advisers felt that these links were critical in keeping them informed about provision and the sometimes rapid changes in the provider market. Provider-based PAs were described as *'an instant source of information',* helping to answer any queries about provision within that specific provider.

2.3 Eligible provision under the LAP

Learning that can be funded under the Learning Agreement comprises all qualifications listed under Section 96 of the LSC's *Learning Aims Database*. This includes qualifications accredited at Level 2 or above but does not include stand-alone NVQs at Level 2. It can include:

- Apprenticeships or Advanced Apprenticeships
- BTEC and similar FE courses
- GCSEs or A-levels
- NVQ Level 2, if done alongside another course.

Funded LAP provision may include that which supports progression to Level 2, as long as the learning plan also addresses basic and/or key skills; including:

- NVQ Level 1
- Technical Certificate components of an Apprenticeship framework
- Literacy, numeracy or IT (key skills)
- Short courses if they are over ten guided learning hours (and on Section 96).

Stand-alone key skills qualifications are also eligible, including those which support the LSC's *Skills for Life* target.

Towards the start of the pilots there was some confusion about what could, and what could not, be offered within the LAP[1]. This resulted in some LAs being offered which included stand-alone NVQ qualifications at Level 2. Apprenticeships comprise Level 2 qualifications, as well as key skills and a Technical Certificate, ie a full framework agreement. There was anxiety that offering stand-alone NVQs at Level 2 would undermine the take-up of the Apprenticeships, despite it being widely reported that these were highly sought after by young people and their employers.

Subsequent changes to the national guidance on delivery of the LAP pilots clearly set out the boundaries of the qualifications that could be offered. Connexions staff were concerned that aligning Learning Agreement provision more closely with the qualification attainment specification within the Apprenticeship framework, had made Learning Agreements less attractive to some young people and their employers. Some young people in jobs without accredited training had refused the offer of an Apprenticeship in the past, and it was argued that greater flexibility and innovation was needed within the Learning Agreement in order to widen participation in learning and training.

2.4 Availability of provision

2.4.1 Some providers more flexible than others

Advisers in all areas reported that private training providers had generally been more responsive than colleges, although there were some notable exceptions to this. Colleges tended to have two main entry points to courses, in January and September, rather than flexible course starts. This limited their responsiveness to the range of start times required by young people on the LAP:

> *'Others [providers] are, this is the way it works, this is the time it works, this is where it works, and if that doesn't fit in - tough.'* Adviser

Flexibility *within* colleges was also reported to differ between departments, with some who worked flexibly to meet the requirements of the young person and others that did not. In Area C, Advisers described how the work-based assessment approach of the hospitality department in one college was being explored to assess how feasible it was to extend to other departments:

> *'They're looking at the success that the hospitality department has had because of the Learning Agreement, mainly going out and assessing in the workplace and they are trying to get that kind of provision within other departments, but it takes time I guess.'* Adviser

The constraints on flexibility, in terms of course start and end times, were also acknowledged by some providers themselves, in particular for popular courses such as construction:

> *'In terms of capacity basically those areas are running at capacity through the full-time and the work-based provision. It has been quite difficult to be flexible, where we have had learners who have been in the position of wanting to start a construction course in September that has not really been an issue, but it is where it is outside normal college start and end period that it has been difficult.*' College, Area B

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[1] Maguire S, Thompson J (University of Warwick), Hillage J, Dewson S, Miller L, Johnson C, Newton B, Bates P, Page P (IES), (January 2008), Evaluation of the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilot, Process Evaluation: Year One Report, Research Report RW027, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Advisers felt that generally the Learning Agreement was a lesser priority for colleges which were more focused on achieving their mainstream targets, and on Entry to Employment (E2E) provision. Some reported that they understood why this might be the case, due to the scale of the courses and the amount of forward planning that was involved:

> *'Colleges have to set their stall out 12 months in advance so they're very set in their guidelines and it's not because they don't want to be helpful, they just haven't the means to do it. But with training providers they have more flexibility because it's roll-on, roll-off and they can set a two day training course up at a moment's breath.'* Adviser

There were some large colleges which openly supported this view. For example, a college reported that they had tens of thousands of students per year, but had tutored just 40 students through the Learning Agreement pilot over the past two years. They explained that it was difficult to promote smaller initiatives to all the staff in a large college and that, in relation to larger programmes, sometimes such initiatives had to take a lower priority:

> *'The organisation has got that many things going on, Train to Gain, Apprenticeships, and everything else, so it [the Learning Agreement] wasn't seen as a priority.'* College, Area C

Advisers described how some providers were flexible in how they arranged learner assessments, and worked at weekends or evenings. In Area B, for example, one group discussed how a provider had recruited a hospitality assessor to work evenings and nights, specifically to be able to deliver a qualification to a young person who worked in a 24-hour bar. It was reported that some providers were willing to work flexibly to meet the specific needs of a young person in other ways, for example visiting them at home where there were issues with transport, or where they had particular learning needs (see Section 4.2. for examples of how this impacted on young people).

In Area C, Advisers were more likely to report that providers worked from their own sites and preferred the young people to travel to the learning rather than to undertake home or work visits, although there was a minority that would go out to meet the young person. The reasons for this were linked to the large geographical coverage of this area and its rurality: it was not economical for providers to visit individual young people.

> *'They [training providers] do like them [young people] to come into the base [the training providers' site] to do it [the training] which is convenient for them and not so convenient for the young person or employer.'* Adviser

2.4.2 Many courses widely available, but some specific gaps

Advisers in Areas A and B reported that there was a good range of provision available in the areas, although there were some specific gaps, either in subjects or in specific localities. For example, provision for some construction trades was reported to be difficult to source (particularly if the young person was not working in that field):

> *'It's the trades, the main trades that especially young lads are wanting to do. It's so difficult to get them a place.'* Adviser

Other gaps included window manufacturing, carpet fitting and provision for rural industries, such as pesticide spraying and chain saw operations, and courses in arts and the creative industries.

Advisers also reported that some young people were working in occupations for which there was no relevant NVQ at Level 1. This meant there was a gap in work-based provision, if the young person was not ready to undertake a qualification at Level 2.

Lack of provision was in some instances reported to be because of a shortage of assessors in the subject, which could cause delays in starting. Gaps could be more acute in specific local areas depending on their rurality and the number and types of provider operating in the area. This was the case across all of the Connexions Partnerships involved in the study:

> *'We have found a couple of times the courses they can deliver, we obviously offer it to the young person, phone the training provider and then they say, "oh sorry no we can't deliver it because we haven't got an assessor in your area"…so that's where we have barriers really because of our location.'*
> Advisers

A limited range of provision, particularly work-based and specialist training, was more frequently mentioned as a constraint by Advisers in Area C:

> *'There's only a limited amount of training providers. They only offer certain courses basically, so sourcing that sort of elsewhere has been very difficult and like we said the basics they all do, literacy, numeracy, customer service.'*
>
> *'Ultimately we have a lot that we can't help youngsters with because we can't get the provision.'*
> Advisers

In this area, the lack of work-based provision, and hence choice of courses, influenced both the sorts of young people that Advisers approached and the likelihood of engaging the employer. Some Advisers said they avoided approaching young people working in sectors where they knew provision was most limited:

> *'It's pointless to be honest, well going back to construction again, to see a builder, a small jobbing builder with a lad who he's employing as a labourer, because there's going to be nothing. If that lad's working full-time there's going to be absolutely nothing we could offer.'* Adviser

Where there was no scope to undertake a work-based qualification, employers were reported to be less willing to give the young person time off to train, and many young people were doing key skills courses instead, in their own time. This often meant they had to travel to the provider and this could cause time and cost issues for the young people involved.

2.4.3 Some learning is 'second-best' option

Where there were gaps in provision that could not be filled, Advisers discussed developing a Plan B, or brokering alternative provision that might also be relevant to the young person. Advisers said it was important to work up a number of possibilities and to plan for the eventuality that provision would not be available, so that young people were better able and more prepared to work around gaps and to take another course of action if necessary.

> *'If it really couldn't go ahead, my window fitting boys were going to do a customer service. They're dealing with customers every day. You have to look at the second choice.'* Adviser

For many young people working toward a key skills qualification became part of a 'stepping stone' process, with several identified actions required to achieve a longer-term aim, such as working in a different industry. Advisers felt that the mentoring and ongoing support they could offer was particularly important for young people wanting to change direction. Key skills courses were often used to fill gaps in provision:

> *'They usually go onto Key skills if there is nothing we can do that is work-related.'* Adviser

However, this was not an option for those young people who already had GCSE Maths and English at grade C or above, who therefore had fewer fallback options if their first choice was unavailable.

A small number of individuals voiced concern that Advisers were filling gaps in provision with 'second-best' options and this could mask the actual demand for courses from this group of young people. One LSC representative reported that demand was being manipulated to fit in with supply:

> *'We also get this hidden number of young people who say "I don't really want to do a Learning Agreement because you can't give me what I want". But the brokers persuade them that literacy is the way to go.'*

2.5 Impact of funding on availability

Advisers in all areas felt that limiting LAP funding to Section 96 constrained the choice of provision they could offer young people:

> *'Like medical secretary, legal secretary, they are accredited qualifications, but they are not on Section 96 so we can't provide them. That's quite difficult because we've got a young person who is interested and knows what they want to do, they are just in the wrong box.'* Adviser

Advisers and providers alike felt that LAP funding should be extended to cover shorter courses than were currently supported, modules or parts of qualifications, such as units of NVQs:

> *'They [young people and employers] wanted things that the LSC don't fund, so that was always a difficulty because we have had to say no. For instance, ECDL was really popular, but it is no longer fundable yet it is an industry standard qualification…there is the Health and Safety, and First Aid, Catering and Food Hygiene type things, which would equip all these people to do better work, but because the government doesn't fund it we can't deliver it.'* College, Area C

> *'The short courses like the two day First Aid course or food hygiene…around here we've got a lot of hotel industries and if a young person goes for an interview for a job and they've got their food hygiene they have a start against the others…I feel there should be more short courses and some NVQ 2s. Perhaps not in all areas, perhaps not where there's a Level 1 and I still think to fund units towards an NVQ to get them inspired is a good idea.'* College, Area B

Many Advisers reported that NVQs were popular with employers, and felt that they should also be able to fund NVQs at Level 2. This was also supported by a large number of training providers, some of whom argued that the absence of funding for NVQs at Level 2 created a gap in the progression framework for young people taking part in the LAP:

'We're not allowed to deliver Level 2, so as regards to what the employer wants, and what the candidate wants, they want Level 2, but they can't have that because the LSC won't fund it without the full framework, but these candidates don't want the full framework, which is why they're on a Learning Agreement in the first place…I would put a clear Level 2 progression system in place.' Specialist provider, Area B

'We need to be able to do NVQ Level 2 because there's a lot of very bright youngsters who have the ability to work, who are well above the Level 1, but they're not at Level 3 because they are not working in supervisory level jobs, and for us to find them something to do is difficult.' Adviser

3 Brokering Provision

This section first discusses the evidence on whether a choice of course is important to young people (in relation to the 'menu of choice theory' that **young people need to be presented with a learning option or range of options that they need or want to enable them to progress**). It then presents the various different types of provision and ways of working that have engaged young people and employers, before exploring the factors that make brokering provision challenging or more straightforward, and lastly how the areas filled any identified gaps. These issues also relate to the following elements of the 'brokerage' theory: that **Advisers may need to negotiate with the young person about what provision best suits them/ is most appropriate** and that **provision needs to be responsive and available when and where the young person can do it.**

3.1 The importance of having a choice

Good to offer a choice, but the course can 'pick itself'

Advisers generally felt that it was good to offer young people a sense of choice about what learning to do, and where and how to learn, because it created 'ownership':

> *'They're [the young people] making decisions and I think that sometimes gains quite a lot of respect from the off really doesn't it…because you're kind of putting the ball in their court…and I think that's just going to encourage them even more because they are making the decision.'* Adviser

However, choice could be guided by the Adviser, and/or the availability of provision, particularly when some young people were unaware of the learning options available to them or where there were only one or two suitable courses that fitted their circumstances:

> *'Sometimes a decision makes itself. There's only certain things that are available for that young person.'* Adviser

In Area C, where Advisers seemed to be more constrained by the range of provision they could broker, one Adviser reported that the most important outcome of the Learning Agreement was that the young person undertook some training and achieved a qualification, rather than was necessarily able to do their ideal course in the first instance.

From the perspective of the young people, having a choice between different courses was especially useful for those who were unsure about what they wanted to do or their future career direction. For example, one young person chose between a qualification in Retail (related directly to her current job) and one in Customer Service (which was more general and transferable into other areas of work). Having a choice between courses was not always a necessity - it was being able to get onto the right course that was more motivating:

> *'I would have taken what they offered, I'm not a picky person. As long as I get a good outcome at the end I'll be happy. If they [Connexions] had come to me and said we only do this, this is all we can offer, I would probably have said yes [as long as it was] in my area of work.'* Mike, Area A

> *'I knew I wanted to do childcare. She asked me if there was anything else I was interested in doing because I was working in retail and she said I could do something in retail, but I wasn't really bothered about retail, I wanted to do childcare.'* Helen, Area A

3.2 Engaging young people and employers

3.2.1 Engaging young people

Advisers stressed that each young person was different and the provision best suited to their needs varied on a case by case basis. For example, some young people liked their current job and others did not; some wanted to learn in a learning centre and others preferred work-based learning. However, there were some common factors that Advisers felt engaged young people.

Learning that leads somewhere

For the vast majority of young people the key factor affecting their course choice was how much it would benefit their work and learning prospects. Perceived benefits included advancing in their current line of work, improving grades to enable them to access higher level courses, or gaining the necessary qualifications and experience to move into a different type of work. Very rarely were the young people undertaking courses without a vision of where they hoped it might lead.

A small number of young people had planned to undertake a series of courses in order to achieve their desired work goal. Others chose a course that would give them the most options in the future. Overall, it was important that the learning was relevant to current or future work or learning ambitions for young people to be motivated and engaged. Learning could be relevant in a variety of ways:

- **Transferability**: keeping future work options as wide as possible.

  'I could have had a choice of customer services or retail. Customer service I can take anywhere, into any job. I can't take retail into teaching. I said customer service would be better I can take it anywhere…I would have taken what they had offered…as long as I get a good outcome at the end of it I'll be happy.' Mike, Area A

- **A safety net:** a fall-back plan in case other work aspirations do not work out.

  'Because I am in a retail job at the moment, and in a couple of years if I don't get where I want to be [working in care], then I have still got it [the qualification] to get another job in retail.' Aimee, Area A

- **Proof:** being able to prove to future employers and learning providers that they have the skills required for the job or higher level course.

  'I just needed something to prove I've got the basic maths and English and IT skills to get onto a college course. I knew I could do it myself, but I didn't have the paper to prove it…I didn't have the qualifications to get onto the courses that I really wanted.' Jade, Area B

- **A platform for progression:** a first step that can be built on and helps them to move towards a longer-term work goal.

  'There were telephone courses and things, whereas I thought an office one would be more beneficial for me working in an office than just a telephone course… with this you can keep progressing and keep building up, like you can move from marketing to something else, to a manager, whatever, I'm looking high!' Clara, Area A

  'I needed to have a GCSE, I need English, because English I got a 'D' on and I can't get into the Force [the Police] unless I have a GCSE in English.' Dean, Area C

Learning that is not like school

Although some young people were reported not to mind learning in a classroom-based environment, the majority of Advisers agreed that it was important to be able to offer learning opportunities that 'were not like school':

> *'I think they [young people] like the thought of working or training in the workplace because they get more of a thrill factor that they're still getting paid to work… but yet they're getting a bit of time out.'*
>
> *'If you talk to them about going up to the college as part of the Learning Agreement they absolutely refuse to go and often you'll find an alternative training provider…young people will experience college as school.'* Advisers

Several providers also reported that being able to offer learning opportunities outside of the classroom environment was critical to engaging young people. One college had started delivering provision for the Learning Agreement off-site in another building to try and separate it from the standard college environment:

> *'Young people have found it [a Meet and Greet course] was a very different type of learning to they have had before usually in school and they have become quite hooked, it's like I have done that, what can I do now? That has been quite nice that there has been a more grown-up, more self-reliant, more fun learning.'* College, Area B

Evidence from the interviews with young people reinforces the importance of offering learning opportunities that are seen to be different from school. Several young people reported negative experiences of school or college in the past. Some also reported that they found a group environment intimidating, particularly joining a class where they did not know people. Earning while learning was also an important factor in some young people's preference for work-based provision.

> *'I wanted to be working and I wanted to learn as I were working so I felt like I were going towards something rather than just being at college …because I felt I knew where I was going.'* Samantha, Area A
>
> *'I really didn't want to go back to college from the experience I had before with it not working out…going back to college with a bunch of people I don't know, it worried me.'* Chris, Area C

One-to-one support

Many of the learning opportunities under the Learning Agreement were delivered in a small group setting or on a one-to-one basis. The level of support that the young people could get from tutors was reported by Advisers to motivate and engage them. A one-to-one setting also appealed to young people who lacked confidence or were apprehensive about group settings and particularly to those who had had negative past experience of school or college. Advisers said:

> *'You talk through the issues that they've had and say you'll get one-to-one, you're not going to be sat in the classroom where 30 other people are looking at you because you haven't been able to read a page, so that is a big draw for most of them.'* Adviser

'I do think that a lot of young people do prefer to do it on a one-to-one basis rather than a classroom because they are scared of looking silly…I think because it is just the assessor and the learner they [the learner] tend to feel more comfortable and they express themselves better.' Specialist provider, Area B

Young people also mentioned that they valued being able to learn in a one-to-one setting and had benefited from individual tutoring:

'It's just one-to-one and if I get stuck and then I haven't got to wait for X to shut up talking… one-to-one is alright as well if I don't quite understand some things. I understand more then, it helps me listen more. I haven't got so many distractions.' Hayley, Area C

Help with travel, or learning that comes to them

Advisers mentioned that transport was a key barrier to learning for some young people, particularly in rural areas and areas with poor public transport links:

'They're expecting young people …to do journeys that I wouldn't do on local transport…how do you encourage young people that are traditionally disengaged from learning to make those trips when they've been doing a days work.' Adviser

Cost was not always the biggest issue (although it could be if young people worked part-time hours and for low pay). What was often more important for those who worked full-time or irregular hours was long journey times on public transport, especially if they had to change buses or trains. Where travel was identified as a particular barrier, Advisers tried to think of ways to overcome this. These included:

- **Advisers transporting young people to courses** some miles from their home and inaccessible by public transport, waiting outside while they took part, and then dropping them back home. Clearly, this was dependent on the goodwill and capability of individual Advisers and would not be sustainable on a larger scale.

- **Liaising with providers to arrange dedicated transport for learners** to get them to and from classes. In Area A, one young person was doing a childcare course at an open learning centre in a nearby city. In order to facilitate access to the provider, a mini-bus pick-up service had been arranged from the town centre nearest to where the young person lived, to the provider's premises. This service had greatly reduced the travel time for this young person.

  'It is hard for me to get across to [local town]. I have to get the bus into town, that takes about 25 minutes, and then a minibus picks me up from there…but without the bus it would take me a lot longer to get there.' Helen, Area A

- **Using discretionary funding to pay towards travel** for some young people. One girl described how she received money to enable her to get a taxi back home from her evening course at college during the winter. Although the college was fairly close, there was no direct bus route, and getting there involved walking through subways and underpasses in what she described as a 'rough area'. Without this financial support, the young person said she would have been deterred from attending college because of the walk home on dark evenings. Again, it is unlikely that this level of individualised support would be sustainable on a larger scale, without significant additional investment. A common issue raised by Advisers was the lack of a dedicated travel budget to support learners:

  'One of the biggest difficulties we have is that there isn't any travel budget.'

Provision that fits around work

It was also important that the provision fitted around the young person's existing work commitments. Especially for aspiration-led courses, where the course was not directly related to their work, young people often reported that they did not want their learning to affect the amount of hours they could work and the money that they earned.

Many young people also worked irregular hours, in terms of both the number of hours they worked and the times of their shifts - this meant that they appreciated being able to learn in a flexible setting such as in an open learning centre.

> *'I knew it was best if I did it at night so I didn't lose any time at work.'* Graham, Area A
> *'They told me that on a Wednesday they stayed open late so I could come in after I'd been to work or before. They didn't expect me to turn up religiously every day. If I come in a couple of hours a week I remember them saying work through it at my own speed, they were fine by that.'* Thomas, Area A

> *'I work some weeks at 7am, because [my shifts] are different each week, so if it was a set time then I don't think I'd have been able to do it.'* Hayley, Area C

There were several examples of assessors going out of their way to schedule appointments around young people's working hours:

> *'I met [the assessor] on the Saturday which is meant to be her day off but she had a word with her manager and her manager said she could work that day, so she like fitted it around me because I couldn't go in on a weekday because I was working.'* Shelley, Area A

Some even made home visits, usually those providing key skills, in order to fit around working hours or other LAP training that the young person was doing during work:

> *'She comes around 8:30am because I have to go to work and then I sometimes have the food course afterwards, so it's better to fit the maths one in the morning.'* Beth, Area B

Although young people wanted provision that was flexible and fitted around their work commitments, some providers felt the level of funding to support this tailored service was not high enough. Some providers discussed needing to ensure a minimum number of young people in a group, or had been subsidising their work on the Learning Agreement through other contracts.

> *'That's been a limiting factor, we have to make sure we have 3-4 young people together before we can run a course, otherwise we're in danger of losing money.'* College, Area C

Others reported that they took a long term view of the costs of engaging with the Learning Agreement and hoped to progress a proportion of the young people onto higher level courses in the future, such as Apprenticeships.

> *'Because if the college had been looking at it as a business, given that we have had two members of staff doing basic skills and key skills, staffing the groups it's just not a viable proposition. We are doing it really in order to support the young people and the project rather than to make money.'* College, Area A

'The money is not that great. Our whole point is if we can move them into an Apprenticeship it becomes worthwhile, if we don't it is sort of a loss lead. A lot of time for very little financial income.' Specialist provider, Area C

In some areas Advisers had tried to overcome combined travel barriers and work commitments by brokering distance learning courses. Although this engaged some young people, both Advisers and training providers discussed that retention and completion among this group of learners had been less favourable. They reported that the young people involved had needed more support and structure than was possible under this learning method:

'It was blended learning really. There was a taught module, we have got three taught days and the rest of the assignments we did by distance, and telephone conversations and emails, things like that and it seemed, that not entirely surprisingly that really wasn't working for this group of young people.' College, Area B

'We are looking at trying to get a cohort and build more structure to it because obviously distance learning is quite difficult to keep people motivated…we are actually looking at completion rates at the moment to look at how we can improve those.' Specialist provider, Area C

Tasters and short courses

Helping aspirational learners

Short taster courses were felt to be particularly helpful for aspirational learners (ie those wanting to move into a different area of work). Tasters could help this group of learners to clarify or confirm whether or not they wanted to undertake a specific course or to work in a specific area. It was also reported to be useful if taster courses offered young people a certificate of some kind that they could use to help them when applying for courses or for jobs. Advisers said:

'I had a girl who really wanted to be a hairdresser and she went for a taster day and hated every minute of it.'

'Something like that [a taster] gives them a little bit of a foot in, one I think to see whether they like it, and to see whether it's something they would want to do, but it's also a qualification, some sort of certificate that gives them just the tiny little step up the ladder when they're applying for jobs.'
Advisers

Engaging young people

Advisers said that breaking down qualifications into smaller 'bite-sized chunks' was felt to engage young people. Examples of this included undertaking a stand-alone Technical Certificate, and a 'meet and greet' module of an Apprenticeship.

'I don't know what we'd have done if we haven't had the flexibility of chunking it up and encouraging the young person to first of all do a technical certificate…getting them to feel relaxed about it, then introducing the key skills element of it and then looking at the NVQ part of it and you've broken it down into three chunks, and hey-ho the young person has actually completed in a round about way.' Adviser

'Sometimes we offer them the chance to do a Technical Certificate first, and then move onto the rest of the Apprenticeship framework. It's a question of getting the ball rolling…some learners don't want to commit to a longer-term course. Offering them something quite short often helps them to realise how important it is to get some training. It opens their minds to learning.' Specialist provider, Area B

Short courses were also reported to increase young people's confidence that they could achieve and succeed in learning, and to increase their motivation to undertake further learning and perhaps longer qualifications:

'Some of the young people needed that bite sized training to get back into it. Some were very education and training shy. That was a good tool for those young people, trying to persuade them to do something.' Adviser

Shorter courses could also be useful because many young people frequently changed employer and or occupation.

'We agreed to change the model…reducing the assessment time down to a three month as a standard maximum and with delivery times usually in around six weeks. They wanted it to be over six months, but candidates are young people in construction and aren't going to stay in one place for six months.' Specialist provider, Area B

Several providers in Area B were adopting a more innovative approach and creating 'bundles' of learning, in which short courses could be packaged up so that they offered more than the minimum of ten guided learning hours, or were packaged to lead on to a full qualification such as key skills or a Technical Certificate.

Breaking down courses into smaller parts was often done as part of the brokerage by Advisers, without young people knowing this was the case. However, a small number of young people also mentioned the benefits of short courses and breaking down qualifications into what they saw as more manageable parts, or qualifications they could gain relatively quickly before undertaking something else. For example:

'My Adviser helped me…he explained that it would be easier to do Key skills first rather than the retail GNVQ as when I go onto do that one it will be half the work on the GNVQ.' Shelley, Area A

'If it [the course] was going to take me a year to then it would have run over into the time when I could have done the Apprenticeship [in care], so if it's only going to take three months, then I can get two courses done in that time.' Chrissie, Area C

However, other young people, particularly those who said that their course was directly relevant to their current job, were happy to undertake qualifications that lasted a year or more:

'It wouldn't have affected me obviously I'm doing it in the workplace…it wouldn't have mattered how long it would have taken because I would still get the same thing out of it.' Ashleene, Area C

Learning at their own pace

A number of young people discussed their progress with the course and liked the fact that they had control over how quickly they completed. Some young people liked to take things slowly, whereas others were keen to put in a concentrated amount of effort to complete the qualification as quickly as they could. This underlines the importance of personalised provision under the Learning Agreement.

For example, one young person undertaking an NVQ Level 1 in Food Catering had been learning for almost a year. She explained that she wanted to do the course a 'little bit at a time', so that she could continue to fit it around her work, social life and other commitments. Conversely, other young people preferred to work faster:

> *'I'm impatient, very impatient. I don't know, I try and get things over and done with, but not so they're done badly…I just like working at my own pace. With stuff like this [her NVQ] I tend to work quicker because I do want to get it over and done with and I want to move onto the next one and carry on.'* Clara, Area A

Learning that can start soon

Advisers in all areas reported that when young people had to wait for courses their motivation and enthusiasm waned. Access to roll-on, roll-off provision, that could start as soon as the young person had shown an interest in the course and signed up to the Learning Agreement, was seen to be important in minimising the risk of drop out. Quick access to provision was also felt to be important due to the frequency with which some of the young people changed job:

> *'With these youngsters you've got to do it now, it's no use waiting till September and we'll put you on the course then, they'll probably be gone and in a different job by then.'* Adviser

3.2.2 What employers want

Advisers described how employers ranged from very supportive to not at all supportive of young people on the Learning Agreement. Some were willing to support their young employee irrespective of whether the learning was directly related to their present job, and others were not. For example, one young person who had done a Key skills course while working at a supermarket said:

> *'They [her employer] knew I were doing it, but didn't mind it as long as it didn't get involved in my work.'* Shelley, Area A

However, in many instances the employers' view was not consulted when choosing a course, because the young person wanted to undertake a course unrelated to work in order to change job, they did not want their employer involved, or they saw their learning as something quite separate from their current job. The degree of employer involvement depended on the extent to which it was a necessity. Employers tended only to have been involved with the Learning Agreement where the course was work-based learning and would require on-site visits or to agree set days off for young people who worked shifts in order for them to attend learning.

Whether or not the employer was involved was dependent upon the young person's preferences; on their relationship with their employer, in terms of how they were getting on at work; or on how 'secure' they felt in their job:

'It depends on how well the young person is doing at work. They could tell you that they love the job and they work all these hours and in reality they have been off sick three times that week and are not pulling their weight. An employer is not going to want to talk about work-based learning if they are not pulling their weight, or let them off on day release.'

'We have quite a few young people that don't want the employer involved. They don't even want us to ring the employer; they're absolutely frightened to death of mentioning training to the employer.'
Advisers

Advisers reported that employer support could depend on whether the young person was a full-time or part-time employee. If they worked part-time then Advisers felt that employers were more reluctant to offer time out of the workplace, or work-based training, than they were for employees who worked full-time.

Work-based learning

Where employers were supportive and bought into the Learning Agreement, it was reported by Advisers and training providers that they generally preferred work-based learning rather than releasing their employee from the workplace to train. None of the participating Connexions Partnership areas offered the wage compensation variant of the Learning Agreement.

'I think they [employers] prefer work-based learning for the simple fact that it boils down to money really. An assessor is going to come in to the workplace for one hour, then that is only one hour of the company's time, whereas if they are doing on a day release somewhere obviously they are going to have to have new staff in to cover for that member of staff.' Specialist provider, Area A

Qualifications related to work

Employer buy-in was dependent on the nature of the qualification being undertaken. It was the view of Advisers that the more related the qualification was to the employer's sector and business, the more willing they were to support the young person:

'Some employers, like an engineering company I went to, he wanted the young person to do a specific type of engineering course and we couldn't offer it and so we had to discuss the NVQ and he was reluctant because he just wanted the specialist technical engineering qualification.'

'The Health and Safety course and the Welding course was what the employer needed and the provision wasn't there, so therefore he didn't allow him time off to do anything else because it wasn't in the interests of the employer.'
Advisers

3.2.3 Whose demand takes precedence?

Depending where the Learning Agreement lead had come from and whether (or not) the young person wanted their employer involved, Advisers reported that their primary customer could either be the employer, the young person, or in some instances both. However, most frequently the young person was the primary focus:

'It depends where the lead comes from. If that young people comes to you, then it's definitely the young person. If the employer comes to you and you don't know the young person…you have to focus on what the employer wants.'

'If you find a young person who wants to do something in the workplace and the employer's willing to support them, then it's the employer that you need to focus on as well. By meeting the employer's needs, you're meeting the young person's as well.'
Advisers

Overall, most employers were reported by Advisers to have a fairly hands-off role in choosing a course. This tended to be left to the Adviser and the young person, albeit -where the employer was going to give time off for training - constrained by the young person's job role and the needs of the business. One Adviser said:

'I haven't had an employer specifically say, well I really need this, so do this, this and the other. They generally give you a free hand, so you can really do what's best for the young person, but you also have to bear in mind you have to stay within the restraints of doing the best for the young person whilst they're in that business.'

3.3 Brokering provision

When brokering provision for a young person the Advisers did not typically have to undertake a 'negotiating' role. This could be because the choice of provision was straightforward, or because young people were not aware of their learning options and therefore were not well-informed enough to 'negotiate'. Often Advisers, whether explicitly or implicitly, worked with young people on a long-term plan, so that they could develop and progress in their chosen area of work, or work towards a longer term learning aim, such as returning to college. Factors that made brokering provision relatively straightforward are now discussed, followed by those that made it more difficult.

3.3.1 What makes brokering provision straightforward?

Close links with providers and dedicated troubleshooting roles

In Area B, where some Advisers were co-located within training providers, it was reported that this helped increase their awareness of provision, and to broker provision more quickly and effectively because they had a single point of contact within the provider who was also an internal influence for increasing buy-in to and support for the LAP.

'A lot of help is having the PAs in. When you want to speak to a college or find out anything, having that instead of going through this department to that department…that cuts out a lot of time.'

'I have better access to the assessors than I would have otherwise, I can always get hold of the assessor…I have a high understanding of what goes on in X as a training provider which I can pass on to other PAs in Connexions.'
Advisers

This partnership also extended to referrals: for example, young people who had dropped out of college to get a job were then referred to the in-college Adviser to discuss the Learning Agreement.

Also in Area B, the specialised Learning Development Adviser role had responsibility for brokering and sourcing less common provision, and working with partners to fill any gaps. This role had been instrumental in facilitating the brokerage of new provision, in particular specific work-based provision, for the Learning Agreement, because staff had specific responsibility for this role as well as the time to work closely with providers and other partners to fill gaps. In other areas where this was only one part of an individual's role, there were fewer examples of provision being specifically developed to meet the needs of young people and employers.

Flexible provision that can start soon

Advisers described that once they had engaged the young person and employer (where relevant) they then needed to be able to deliver on their promises and broker training quickly. Flexible provision was therefore reported to enable brokerage:

> *'Flexibility is a key player in making the job easier for PAs, so they can sell the product and act as a broker that's confident and knows what they are doing.'* Adviser

A flexible attitude to funding was also reported to aid Advisers in brokering provision if the young person was not suitable for provision that could ordinarily be supported under the Learning Agreement:

> *'The LSC have been quite flexible with some. I've got quite a few who have special authorisation for them to do a qualification that's not on Section 96 because there's nothing else for them…I have a couple who are doing an NVQ 2 because there isn't a Tech Cert available for it. They've already got Key skills.'* Adviser

Delays in brokering provision were reported to make some young people and employers disengage:

> *'Where we can't broker anything immediately, they'll just turn around and say "I'm not interested"…we're selling a product and a service, if you don't have the product and service there, what can we sell?'* Adviser

Where courses took a longer period of time to procure, or where there were delays in starting, the mentoring and supporting role of the Adviser was reported to be crucial.

Employer support

In cases where the young person liked their job and wanted to undertake work-based learning, gaining the support of the employer was crucial in being able to broker the provision required:

> *'If the qualification is heavily vocational then the employer obviously has quite an input because they know their business and they know what the young person needs probably better than the young person…and they obviously have to welcome the assessor in.'* Adviser

Where the employer was the young person's relative, for example a parent, and hence had a wider interest in their employee's development, then Advisers reported that these employers were easier to engage and they were more likely to support training that was not necessarily directly work-related and to allow time off. In some cases, the employer was not supportive and this made brokering work-based learning in particular more difficult:

'Lets just say an NVQ in retail and their employer is not willing to support them, we are unable to complete that qualification with them because they have to have the employers support and we have got to go to the workplace to do it.' Specialised provider, Area A

The employer of one young person interviewed for the research was supportive, but failed the training provider's Health and Safety assessment, so the young person could not undertake the work-based learning they had hoped to do. Instead the young person was now undertaking a Technical Certificate and being visited by a provider at home.

3.3.2 What makes brokerage more challenging?

Advisers and providers discussed a range of examples where brokering provision had been challenging. These challenges were caused by a range of factors and varied on a case by case basis. The most frequently reported examples are discussed below.

Young people wanting an aspiration-led course

Advisers said that young people often wanted to undertake 'aspiration-led' courses, (ie courses that would lead them away from their current job and towards an industry they aspired to work in). This was primarily more challenging because work-based learning options were limited if the young person's current and chosen future sectors were not related:

'A lot of kids in this area are doing seasonal, temporary work with the goal of wanting to do something else…I've got a lad who really wants to get into youth work and he's working in a cafe at the moment. Unless he's got a placement he can't do that qualification.'

'Most lads working part-time jobs want to be electricians, plumbers or construction, don't they. And all the girls working in shops want to be child nannies, hairdressers and beauticians and you're like, well there's no transition for them, they have to get the job before they can do the training.
Advisers

In a small number of cases, Advisers described how they had been able to find a voluntary placement to enable a young person to undertake work-based courses, although these were usually only possible for young people who worked part-time. In many cases this meant that Key Skills courses were brokered instead, because of their transferability. However, for the small number of young people with good GCSEs at C or above, this option was not appropriate and Advisers said that choices for these young people were more limited in this scenario.

For some young people their choices could also be limited by legislation around the working age for particular sectors. For example, to work in Social Care and to undertake specific aspects of the job role, such as personal care, employees need to be aged 18 or over.

The young person's working hours

The young person's working hours could make brokering provision more difficult in a number of ways. For example, if the young person was working full-time and wanted to undertake learning that was not related to their work the Adviser needed to find a provider that was flexible and could work around this. Working full-time could preclude some young people from having the time to also work in a voluntary capacity to build experience for a work-based qualification in another type of work.

Where young people worked shifts and could therefore not attend learning at the same time every week the provision needed to be flexible, particularly if it was non work-based. Home visits fitting around shift patterns were often reported by young people, particularly those improving their Key skills or working towards Technical Certificates.

Lack of provision

In a small number of cases Advisers described how they had not been able to sign up a young person to the Learning Agreement because they were not able to broker the course that they wanted, and the young person was not interested in doing another course that was available:

> *'In a couple of instances where those courses weren't available, they haven't done anything, they've just said no I don't want to do anything else, that's what I'm interested in, that's what I want to do, so they've not taken up the opportunity to do anything else.'* Adviser

One training provider explained that the sporadic demand could cause capacity constraints and meant they had to temporarily withdraw provision.

> *'Sometimes we have hardly got any Learning Agreements on and then all of a sudden we get a lot at one go, which is a problem for us because we have only got room for say three or four on each persons caseload. Sometimes we are telling Connexions Advisers that we just can't do it at the moment.'* Specialist provider, Area C

Another provider described how the rural nature of their county meant that some young people could live too far away from their nearest assessor for work-based learning to be economically viable. The same Area A college reported that they could only offer work-based learning provision because of the requirement for roll-on, roll-off provision. They had not offered any other types of provision to young people under the Learning Agreement because they needed to ensure viability. In their view, one-to-one support was not viable, and bringing together small groups of young people had not been possible.

> *'The biggest problem is the roll-on, roll-off nature they want. The only way I can see that we can do that is to offer work-based NVQs.'* College, Area C

The young person's job role

Among the interviews with young people there were a small number of examples where their job role did not contain the breadth of skills and tasks required by an NVQ. For example, one young person who was undertaking an NVQ in Business Administration had to do a lower level than she had hoped as she did not perform the range of tasks needed to gain evidence for her portfolio.

> *'My qualifications I already had were good enough to do it, but in my job I didn't have enough things to do it, enough duties.'* Samantha, Area A

3.4 Filling gaps in provision

Before planning another course of action, in some instances Advisers worked with the LSC and other partners to try to fill any gaps in provision. There were some specific examples where learning to meet the demands of both young people and employers had been brokered especially by the pilots. This had been achieved through:

- **Sub-contracting to bring in a wider range of providers (or more specialist providers)**, in particular to cater for a particular type of employer. In Area B, a Level 3 qualification in the Sale of Residential Property had been resourced due to a demand from young people and employers. There were no local providers, so a University was sub-contracted through a local provider to deliver this course. Sub-contracting through providers already contracted to the Learning Agreement had also been used in the area to fill other gaps. For example, a representative from the LSC explained how an on-site assessment and training model had been developed to meet the needs of micro-employers in the construction industry who were reluctant to release their young employee for training. The model involved training on-site as well as assessment.

  'We're using a sub-contractor arrangement with one of our colleges who is a CoVE in construction…they are using almost a peripatetic assessing team…It's been hugely successful because these young people are with micro employers and the micro employers don't want to release the young people.' Adviser

  Advisers in the area felt that sub-contracts encouraged partnership working between providers, and could help to play to the strengths of two providers: in this case, the flexibility of one provider to deliver what was needed at a time to suit the young people, within the quality assurance framework of the larger organisation (a college with Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) status).

- **Transferring successful outreach models to the LAP.** In Area B, one college already delivered courses in Equine Studies, but they did not deliver work-based courses for the 16-17 age group. When investigating possible solutions, the Learning Development Adviser (LDA) found that the local Education Business Partnership (EBP) had already designed a Grooms Award for 14-16 year olds on extended school placements, and that this was being delivered in 20 stables throughout the county. Although this provision was not on Section 96 the model of delivery was felt to work well. After further research the LDA found that all the stables were British Horse Society registered and set up a meeting with LSC, the local agriculture college, and the British Horse Society (which was the awarding body). Using the EBP model, they developed an outreach model based in the Centre of Excellence (the local agriculture college) and they are now able to offer young people the Technical Certificate element of an Equine Studies apprenticeship, funded through LAP.

- **Brokering between employers and providers to provide shared opportunities for work experience leading to a work-based learning qualification.** In Area C, Advisers had successfully worked with one college to fill a gap in provision in the northern area of the county. By liaising with employers and young people, Advisers found out that it was a four-hour round trip for young people to travel to the nearest agricultural college and this meant that many young people working on farms (and their employers) did not participate in accredited training. As a result, the college employed an assessor in that local area to visit the young people at their workplaces. The local farmers also joined forces and have hosted training days at their farms so that young people employed on other sites could gain the range of evidence they needed to complete the NVQ. For example, the Advisers said that one farmer had allowed the young people to come to his farm at lambing time and another had let his farm be used for ploughing.

  'We had so many Level 1 agriculture NVQs going through that they [the training provider] just realised that (this area) was an untrodden area really, and they've acted on it…and the farmers are reacting positively to that in that they are each offering their farm for one of the activities that takes place under the apprenticeship.' Adviser

Filling gaps in provision in this way took a considerable amount of time in some instances. However, once it was in place the provision could be accessed more easily and brokered for other learners. The range of providers contracted under the Learning Agreement and the provision available had broadened over time in some localities.

In one area in particular, Advisers felt that trying to get additional provision added to fill gaps was time-consuming and bureaucratic, and it was often easier to find an alternative such as key skills:

> *'If you ask have I ever used it [the process to get new provision]? Once I think to get one person provision that wasn't on our list that wanted to do it. It's too difficult, it's too daunting…if it's not on the list that we're doing then actually you're far better off trying to talk about our options and a transferable skill.'*

> *'It's so much hassle trying to get a qualification on that list, that nice list, that it's just not worth it and if it was the only young person that I had to work with that month then I'd probably take the effort to do it, but it's not and by the time it's got to go up, back across, back down to me, the young person's going to be 18, or 21 in some cases!'* Advisers

When such provision gaps could not be filled, the alternatives were:

- to use key skills or another, more general qualification such as customer service, as a 'fall-back'

- to provide support to the young person to help them find a new job in the area they were interested in, either one that came with an Apprenticeship or where they could undertake a different work-based qualification.

If neither of these alternatives was an option, it was likely that the young person would not be able to take part in a LAP.

4 Young People's Contexts and Experiences of the LAP

In this chapter we explore the young people's experiences of learning, what they felt they had got out of it, and plans for future progression. Evidence of progression is important in relation to the 'menu of choice; theory: the aim of providing a broad menu of provision is that **there will be a greater likelihood of being able to provide young people with learning activities they need and want in order to progress.** We also examine the impact of the LAP on provision available to young people in jobs without training in the study areas, more generally: has the LAP itself generated a broader 'menu of choice' for young people?

4.1 Young people's contexts

4.1.1 Experiences of and attitudes towards education

With few exceptions, the young people interviewed had almost all stayed on at school until the end of Year 11 and taken their GCSE exams. The number of GCSEs taken varied; most had taken between five and seven. Grades obtained were predominantly in the B to D range, sometimes lower.

The few who had not sat, or not passed, any GCSEs were usually not very forthcoming about the reasons for this, with the exception of one girl whose final year at school had been disrupted by a sudden change in family circumstances resulting in several moves. By the time things had settled down, she felt there was no point in continuing with school, although she had received good grades up until that point and was clearly motivated to learn further:

> *'By that stage I just thought I'd be better off working and earning myself some money.'* Jade, Area B

A large number reported that they had disliked school. Many felt they were not suited to learning in such an academic environment:

> *'I didn't like having to sit in a classroom and do work behind a desk. I preferred to go out and do the work.'* Katie, Area B

Others had difficulty getting on with teachers and resented the authority. A few reported particularly negative experiences, including bullying, which had impacted on their attendance and health:

> *'I had so much time off because of the bullying. I got in a fight and after that I was in hospital constantly.'* Simon, Area A

For those who reported that they *did* like school, this was generally because of the social aspects, rather than because they had enjoyed all their subjects.

4.1.2 Experiences of work and learning since leaving school

Some of the young people were eager to get out into the workplace as soon as they left school and did not consider continuing any further with formal education:

> *'I wanted to get a job straight away because I just didn't like school, so I never thought about going to college.'* Beth, Area B

> *'I just didn't want to be behind a desk for another couple of years. I found at school I had five years of it and I wanted to give it a break.'* Mike, Area A

Others initially progressed to college. Most commonly this was to pursue a vocational qualification, although sometimes it was to study for A-levels. One had obtained a National Certificate in Animal Care, for example, and another a City and Guilds Motor Vehicles qualification. Another had completed AS-levels but decided not to progress to A2-levels as the grades she had achieved were relatively low.

However, the majority of those who had embarked on college-level study had dropped out. Reasons for dropping out varied widely, from feeling they were not suited to learning in a college environment, through falling behind with work, to the course being poorly organised. For example:

> *'I went to college and had a go at hairdressing then I realised I wasn't academic.'* Katie, Area A

> *'I was getting under with work, course work, teachers getting on my back. Problems at home and it was just getting too much.'* Dean, Area C

Some had made a conscious decision, either directly on leaving school at 16 or on dropping out of college, that they would prefer to do work-based learning:

> *'I wanted to be working and I wanted to learn as I were working so I felt like I were going towards something rather than just being at college and then not knowing what I were doing.'* Samantha, Area B

One young person, who had chosen not to go to college, said that she now regretted her decision. She felt she had not got anywhere since leaving school and that her job, working for a large supermarket chain, was a dead end. Another commented that she wished she had worked harder at school:

> *'At the time I didn't like it so much but as soon as I left I realised how easy you've got it. I wish I would have tried more.'* Chantal, Area C

The young people worked in a wide variety of different employment sectors. Their jobs included sales, administration, welding, call centre work, mechanics, waitressing, factory work, catering, farm work and care work. Some had continued with jobs they had done part-time whilst studying. Others had simply drifted into any available vacancy. For example, a girl who worked in retail described how she had taken her current job for no other reason than because it was:

> *'Something to do and it was there.'* Aimee, Area B

The young people's families had often played a major role in helping them to find work. Several worked for, or alongside, parents or extended family members:

> *'My uncle needed a hand so I thought I'd go help him.'* David, Area B
> *'I was quite lazy with jobs and stuff like that, so as soon as I was old enough to start wanting money and wanting to work my mum gave me a job [in her business].'* Chantal, Area C

Some had changed employers several times within the short period of time they had been working, occasionally with periods of being Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) in between. Sometimes this was just because periods of casual work had come to an end. In other cases the young people did not get on with their employers or colleagues:

'I was being bullied in that job. It lowered my confidence and I ended up walking.' Mike, Area B

4.1.3 Current circumstances

All the young people interviewed were currently in work. Some worked a standard nine to five week whilst others worked irregular shift patterns. Most worked part-time, between 20 and 30 hours a week, with none working more than 40 hours. A few worked much less than this - for example one worked only two days a week and another just eight to 12 hours. One Adviser described the increased prevalence of young people working part-time in his local area.

'There's a big change in the market. They're not taking young people on for customer service or retail jobs now over 16 hours. Those young people don't qualify for apprenticeship programmes. All these young people working part time, two jobs, what do you do?' Adviser

The jobs tended to pay around minimum wage, up to a maximum of £6.25 an hour. They very rarely included any training beyond a basic induction and sometimes an industry-specific qualification such as a food hygiene certificate. The size of the organisations worked for varied greatly, from micro-businesses employing two or three people to branches of large multi-national companies.

The young people varied in how they felt about their jobs. Some greatly enjoyed their job and saw it as a first step in a long-term career:

'I love it yes it is really good, the people there are great, you do get a few issues sometimes with customers but it is all part of the job really.' Dean, Area C

Others disliked their jobs, often seeing them very much as a 'stop-gap' until they could find something better. Some were in stop-gap jobs because they wanted to enter fields which required them to be 18 (most notably care work and work within the police force):

'It's basically okay for me until I can find a better job and move up on the career ladder.' Mike, Area B

At the time they were interviewed, most of the young people were currently learning through LAs. A few had finished or were still in the process of getting started. Most were doing LAs because they had been approached by Connexions, either via a cold call or through an adviser they had already been seeing regularly. However a small handful had specifically sought out the opportunity themselves. For example:

'I was an office junior at a solicitors and then, it wasn't an apprenticeship, I asked if I could do an NVQ and while I were there I sorted it out myself.' Samantha, Area B

Only one had dropped out of her LAP, which was for a key skills qualification, because she had started full-time work and could not balance her increased working hours with studying. Another had previously been working on a farm where he was doing an NVQ in agriculture. He left this job and started a new one in a warehouse, where he was able to start a new LAP, this time in warehouse operations.

4.2 Experiences of doing the Learning Agreement

4.2.1 Types and modes of learning

The courses the young people were doing, or had done, through their LAs were either key skills qualifications or vocational qualifications (usually an NVQ). key skills were most commonly done by those who had received low results at GCSE, either overall or in a particular core subject. Most notably, several who had done poorly in maths at GCSE were doing a key skills qualification in numeracy. They usually appreciated the opportunity to do this:

> *'Because I failed my GCSE in maths I thought it was appealing. I wanted to get a maths qualification.'* Katie, Area B

Those doing vocational qualifications were almost always already working in a job related to the course (indeed this was usually a requirement). Although most of the young people were involved with just one course, a sizeable minority were either doing two courses alongside each other (typically a key skills qualification *and* a vocational qualification) or had completed one course and progressed to another under the LAP.

Vocational qualifications usually involved an assessor coming to visit the young person at work and working with them on a one-to-one basis. Less commonly, they involved the young person being granted a day-release to attend college. Key skills courses were also often conducted on a one-to-one basis, either at the young person's home or workplace, or sometimes on the training providers' premises. Sometimes they were conducted on a group basis, at a learning centre or training provider. Even in the latter case however, learning was usually very much tailored to the individual with all members of the group getting the opportunity to work on their own personal 'weak' spots:

> *'Fractions, adding fractions. I find it difficult. I get muddled up. He'd give me work on that and I had a friend who was going as well. She found decimals difficult. So while she was doing decimals I was doing fractions. And somebody across the room was doing angles.'* Katie, Area B

Whereas vocational courses could usually be done during work time, key skills qualifications generally had to be fitted into their own time. However providers appeared to offer a great deal of flexibility in making this possible.

The young people's experiences of the LAs, almost unanimously, had been very positive:

> *'It's a good idea to work and be in training at the same time. It's a good combination. It doesn't suit everybody but definitely someone like myself I enjoy it a lot better having a mixture.'* Thomas, Area A

> *'It's all just going along quite smoothly. It's all easyish work that I know how to do. If not I have the help there. I get along well with the people. I know where to go if I've got a problem.'* Chris, Area C

4.3 Benefits of doing the Learning Agreement

Particular benefits which young people mentioned were increasing confidence, gaining new skills (either job-specific or otherwise) and, for those learning on a group basis, meeting new people. Many talked at length about how the learning was very different from learning at school and that they appreciated being treated like an adult by those teaching them:

> *'With teachers they go and say, "Right this is wrong! This is wrong! Do it again!" With [my NVQ assessor] it's, "Oh this is wrong and that's wrong but we can work on that and then we'll pull out your folder and we will do that again another day."'* Dean, Area C

> *'I thought it would be like a classroom environment where you had to sit in silence and copy from a textbook, but you didn't. Everybody talked amongst themselves and you just called the tutor and he said I'll come over. He'd come over and just give you help one-to-one.'* Katie, Area B

Several young people commented that they appreciated being able to learn at their own pace, either so that they could go quickly and get their qualification finished or so that they could go slowly, enabling them to fit in around work. Some simply found this made learning less pressurised, again unlike school:

> *'It is not like a hassle you don't have to do loads of stuff and it is quite easy and relaxed and you can just do it in your own time.'* Chantal, Area C

Rarely, a course was taking, or had taken, longer than expected, which was frustrating for the young people concerned. Delays were due either to the assessors being over-committed or to administrative or bureaucratic hold-ups:

> *'It was meant to be 9 months but it was 12 months. I didn't see [my assessor] for about 3 months. He was meant to come once a month.'* Nancy, Area C

However, few of the young people had experienced delays in starting their learning. Indeed most were able to start almost immediately they had been signed-up. In one case, the young person's employer failed the health and safety inspection necessary for him to be allowed to do a work-based NVQ. He therefore had to settle for doing a Technical Certificate instead.

4.4 Further learning and progression

Virtually all of the young people interviewed said, when asked, that they would be open to or interested in further learning. A number had even completed one LAP course already and moved on to a new one. Others had plans to do this once their current LAP course was complete. For example, one young person, who was doing a Level 1 NVQ, had already arranged with her Adviser that she would move straight to Level 2 once finished (although this would be outwith the LAP as NVQ Level 2s are not funded):

> *'She asked me if I wanted to do it, and I've really enjoyed this one so I wanted to keep going.'* Beth, Area B

However, most of the young people's ideas were more vague. They were, in theory, interested in further learning but had not yet done anything concrete to arrange this, even those who had finished their courses:

'I'd probably consider it again or a home learning course. I've got that many ideas of what to do. I want to go into banking, admin… I've got varied jobs but I am hoping to move on.' Mike, Area A

Many clearly had aspirations to progress within the world of work and usually saw gaining further qualifications as beneficial in doing this:

'I don't know if I'll be here still [a year from now], I like to have different challenges, I don't think there's much scope for me to go too high here.' Samantha, Area A

'I don't want to be stuck at [large supermarket chain], so I thought it would be a good idea if I got some more certificates so I could show I've got better.' Alice, Area C

One more academically-motivated young person did not have any GCSEs, yet had completed Skills for Life courses in English and maths and a NVQ Level 1 in IT through LAP courses. She was hoping to go to college to study for a gateway programme equivalent to five GCSEs at grades A*-C. From there she planned to continue to A-levels and ultimately go to university.

4.5 Impact on provision

In all areas there were some examples of a broadening of the types of provision available to young people in jobs without training because of the LAP, although this varied between them. For example, in one area there was delivery of e-NVQs, with some units delivered via distance learning, and one provider had started to run drop-in sessions for young people to learn as and when they wanted. One group discussed that providers were now better at putting on provision at a level appropriate for this group of young people, for example, through wider use of NVQs at Level 1:

'We do now have a Level 1 option and we do have a cohort of young people in jobs without training who aren't wanting an apprenticeship, but they certainly aren't at Entry to Employment level, because they've got that job. So it's about the third alternative for those young people.' Adviser

Advisers felt that Connexions now had better links with training providers. They also felt that the flexibility of providers had improved considerably over the past two years. In Area B, it was felt that co-locating Advisers had enabled the needs of young people in jobs without training to be better fed back into providers and colleges.

In some instances, Advisers felt that providers were now more willing to visit young people on a weekly or a fortnightly basis for work-based learning, instead of a monthly basis as had been the norm previously. Some providers had also recruited more assessors specifically to work with this age group:

'One of our providers have actually had to take on three new members of staff to deal with the amount of referrals they are getting from us - we have had a really big impact for them.' Adviser

5 Conclusions and Implications

In this section we look at the findings in the context of the original theories being tested, which are:

The 'menu of choice' theory : If the policy provides a 'menu of choice' to the young person there is a greater likelihood of being able to provide them with learning activities they need and want in order to progress.

The 'broker' theory: For an agreement to work, the broker must access provision that meets young people's needs.

An analysis of the ways in which young people choose and access provision is presented and some implications for the provision needed to support young people in work when the leaving learning age is raised are also discussed.

5.1 A 'menu of choice'?

There was a **lack of provision** in some areas which meant that Advisers could be negotiating with young people to do the provision that was available rather than what they really wanted. In one Connexions area, there was demand for particular courses, but the supply-side was not geared up to be responsive to this – either because there was a shortage of providers in that type of course, they had other priorities, or because the processes for identifying, communicating and filling gaps in provision were not strong enough. There was an emphasis on individual Advisers to chase up gaps in provision - but this was difficult to do for individual young people due to time pressures.

In the other Connexions areas, the 'menu' of provision was generally broad enough to offer a choice, although there were still some specific gaps in certain sectors or niche areas such as window manufacturing.

Having a **choice of learning** in itself is not necessary to engage all young people in the Learning Agreement. What is *most* motivating for young people is being able to access provision that helps them to work towards their future work or learning aspirations - **offering them just one option is enough for some, if it is the right course for them**.

If the provision that the young person wants is not available, some choose not to engage with the Learning Agreement, rather than participate in other learning. However, other young people will undertake their second or third choice of course, if they feel it will still help them to achieve their end goal. This is an area where the 'menu of choice' and 'brokerage' theories overlap, because **in these circumstances the 'guidance' role of the Adviser becomes more important** and they can help the young person to see an alternative way forward.

Where work-based provision was not an option (either because of lack of provision, lack of employer support, or the young person was not working in the chosen area), it was common for some young people to undertake transferable qualifications, such as key skills, in order to work towards a longer term aim. In this case, what young people wanted was not on their menu of 'first choice' but they could do other courses as a fallback. It is important to note that, conversely, young people with GCSE passes at C or above in maths and English had very limited options under the LAP if they did not want or could not do work-based training in their current job.

The full extent to which young people have to undertake a Plan B (ie a second best course) because of constraints in provision or a lack of relevant courses is not clear from this qualitative research, although we did find some examples. This was highlighted as an issue, in some areas more than others, which meant that the true demand from these young people is being moulded to fit the supply of courses and the learning that is available.

5.2 Brokering provision

Some young people were not previously aware of the options available to them for combining work and learning, and so were easily negotiated with. The responsiveness of provision was a greater issue and this meant that the processes that Advisers used to identify and fill gaps or to work with providers became more critical. The design of the teams in Area B, with Advisers working from colleges and private providers, and regular 'buddy group' meetings between Advisers and providers, helped to increase the buy-in and responsiveness of all providers to the Advisers' and young people's needs. In this area there were several innovative examples of **new provision** being developed and brokered specifically for the Learning Agreement. In other areas, examples were also found but these were more about **changing how provision was delivered** rather than introducing new provision.

Several young people were undertaking learning through the Learning Agreement as a stepping stone to something else. Often this involved the Adviser in **more than simply a brokerage role**. Advisers were also mentors, and advocates, and gave young people in-depth careers guidance. Advisers need to have an appropriate skills set to undertake this diverse range of roles, including working with employers.

Several young people were approaching their learning in a strategic way, with an end goal of working in another industry, progressing in their current job role, or accessing higher level learning provision. Given the extent of planned progression, it is important that the Learning Agreement can support young people moving from Level 1, through Level 2 and beyond, in both work-based learning and other types of courses. **Brokerage *within* the LAP**, from one course to another, was important for retention and progression.

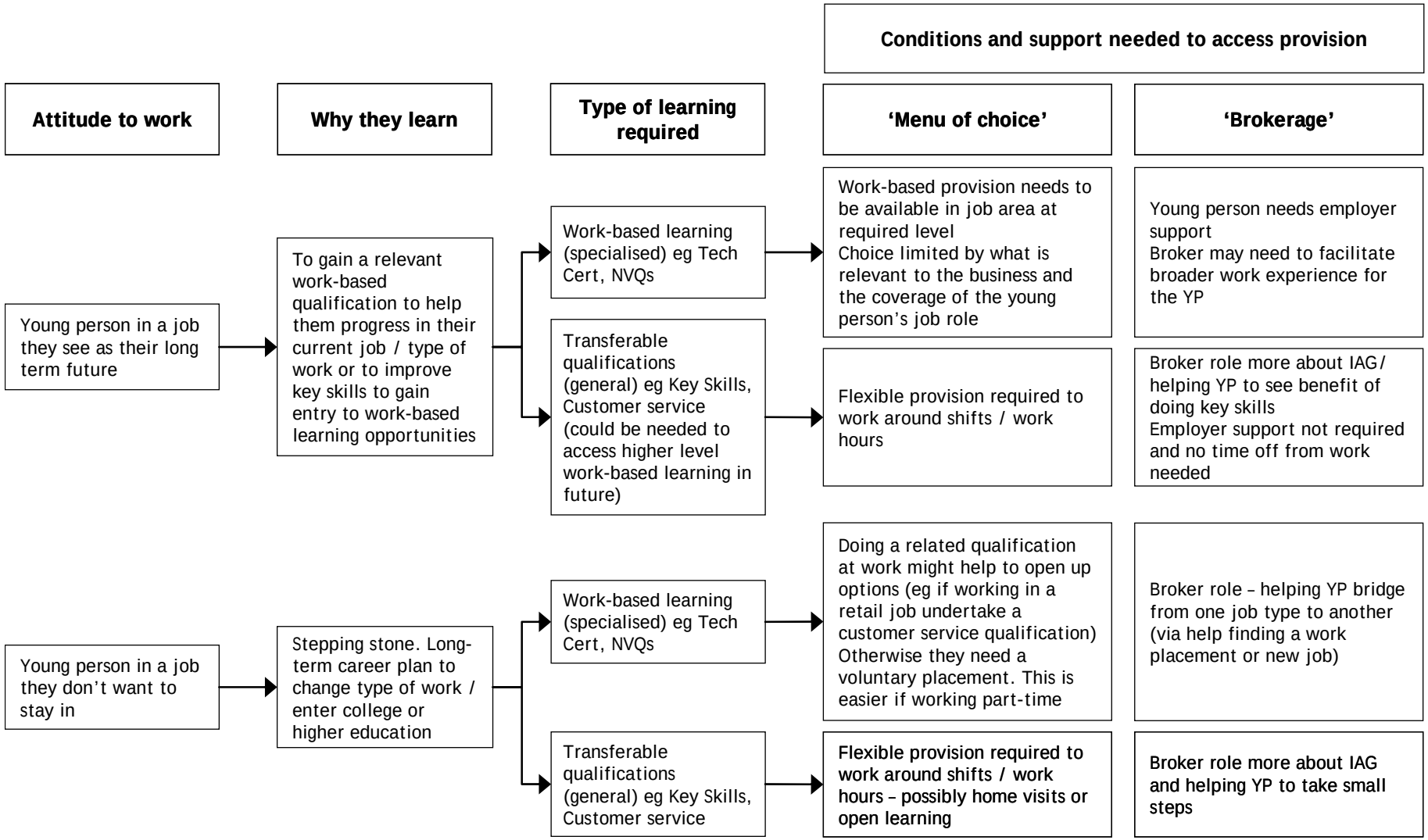
Advisers and providers alike felt that the LAP pilot funding rules had constrained the provision that Advisers could broker, and did not fit particularly well with the types of learning that some young people in jobs without training need. Advisers felt that short courses could be useful to engage some of these young people, in particular the least confident or least-qualified, to help them achieve quickly and re-engage them with learning. NVQs at Level 2 were also reported to bridge the gap between Level 1 and Apprenticeships. Provision at NVQ Level 1 was reported to have expanded in all areas as a result of the LAP pilot.

Figure 5.1 illustrates how young people's choice of course can be affected by a range of factors, and is often framed by their attitude to their current work. It also details the conditions and support that need to be in place for them to access their chosen provision, including implications for the role of the broker. The key factors influencing how the menu of choice and brokerage theories operate in practice are:

- **Young people factors**: these include prior qualifications, experience of school or college, whether they like their current job, how far they have a longer-term goal, and how far this fits with their current job.

- **Provision factors**: these include location/ accessibility of the provision (in terms of travel), timing (in terms of how soon it can start), scheduling (in terms of flexibility of the course or meetings with an assessor), and course length. Young people generally appreciated being able to learn at their own pace. Some needed short courses as an initial step, or benefited from longer courses being broken down into shorter components.

Figure 5.1: An analysis of how young people choose and access learning provision



- **Employment-related factors**: these include the degree of employer support, the young person's working hours (in terms of number and regularity), and the duties they carried out as part of their current job (which could determine whether a certain work-based qualification was suitable or not).

5.3 Implications for provision with a raised participation age

The study has raised a number of issues of relevance to the likely increase in the compulsory age for participation in learning. These are discussed below.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

- Many young people were unaware of the diversity and choice they had, not only in what to learn, but also how and where. There is a need for more and better quality information, advice and guidance discussing the options for learning and working, which are not just Apprenticeships (for which many young people in jobs without training lack the entry qualifications).

- Young people's learning options could be limited by whether or not they were in a job that they liked. To be able to participate in work-based learning, access to jobs that they want to undertake in the long-run is critical. Information, advice and guidance becomes all the more important in these cases.

- One-to-one IAG support was important to young people in jobs without training to help them to develop ideas about future career paths and progression routes, so they could appreciate that doing a course through the Learning Agreement might lead to other opportunities.

Ways of developing the provision young people want

- The structure of Adviser teams in one area in particular increased buy-in and engagement from providers. Buddy meetings, having some Advisers co-located in training providers, as well as the dedicated Learning Development Adviser role, meant that there were several examples of new provision being developed and brokered. This provision was genuinely shaped by demand from young people and employers. These mechanisms helped to work with the providers to create a more demand-led system.

- Smaller private training providers tended to respond to the challenges presented by the Learning Agreement most flexibly (although there have been some notable exceptions). Understanding which provider is best positioned to viably offer which types of qualifications and delivery methods will be important when contracting for provision to be delivered to young people in work.

Working with employers

- The limited nature of some young people's job roles may require more partnerships between employers in order to provide a fuller work experience and to build up the necessary skills and experience to complete work-based qualifications.

- In most instances employers were not directly involved in choosing a course for the young person under the Learning Agreement. Where work-based learning was being undertaken employers were required to give their permission, but for most other courses employer involvement was no more than ensuring that young people were not scheduled to work during their course times. Learning that motivates some young people is likely to be unrelated to their current work.

The provision

- Young people in jobs without training are diverse. They have a range of prior levels of qualifications, ranging from no qualifications to five or more good GCSEs (ie having achieved a Level 2 equivalent). There needs to be a range of provision that can progress and challenge the variety of young people in this group.

- A range of learning opportunities will be needed. This includes those not based in the classroom and able to be undertaken on a flexible basis, including home and evening visits. The flexibility of provision in terms of timing in order to fit around work will be important, as will support for travel barriers. The suitability of distance learning for this group of young people has been questioned in the findings of this research.

- There may be times of the year when young people are required to work many more hours than at others, for example if they do seasonal work in hospitality or agriculture. Provision needs to be flexible enough to deal with these fluctuations. Roll-on, roll-off provision has proved to be more flexible than courses with fixed start times.

Appendix 1: Topic Guides

Employers' Topic Guide

The main aim of the study is to look at whether advisers can access provision that meets young peoples' and employers needs.

NB: The Learning Agreement is called Training Pays in South Yorkshire.

A. Introduction (2-3 mins)

This section is to give the employer some background to the study, to reassure them about confidentiality and to ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

- Introduce self and IES - independent research organisation and not related to Connexions, the government or anyone else
- Tell them about the research project - aim to find out about the process of choosing a course, and whether provision meets employers needs
- Opportunity to report back experiences with a view to improving LAs and other similar schemes.
- Reassure them that everything they say in the interview is confidential and anonymous which means that it will not be linked to them by name.
- Ask permission to record the interview.
- Expect interview to last no more than 30 mins (depending on how much they have got to say)
- Do you have any questions you want to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end of the interview.

B. About the employer (5 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the employer and their attitudes to training at work.

- Please could you tell me a little bit about the company / organisation?

  Probe:

  - □ main activity / industry
  - □ size of the workforce

- Please could you tell me a little bit about your role within this workplace? What are your main responsibilities?

- How many people does the organisation employ?

  Probe: full-time / part-time

- What types of jobs / roles do you have? How are they structured?

- What types of jobs / roles do you employ young people aged 16-18 in? How many young people of this age do you employ at the moment?

Approach to training and development

- How would you describe the company's approach towards training and developing staff?

- Do you run structured training programmes?

  Probe: on-the- job training, off-the-job training, developmental vs statutory training

- Prior to the Learning Agreement, what training had been available to the young person?

  Probe: type of training, length, whether in-house or otherwise, whether led to a qualification

- As an employer, could you give me a pen picture of the sort of learning / training provision that tends to appeal to you?

  Probe: general / sector specific, work-based learning / classroom based learning, length courses, accredited / non-accredited etc. Why is that? What sort of learning is less attractive?

C. Choosing a course (15 mins)

First impressions of the LA

- How did you first find out about the LA (direct marketing, through the young person, approached by Connexions, another employer, Business Link etc)?

- What were your first impressions of the LA, when you found out about it? Why did you think that?

- What initially attracted you to become involved with the LA?

  Probe: money (in some areas), chance to develop young person, corporate social responsibility, retain the young person, free training, meet business objectives etc.

Employer involvement in the decision-making process

■ Did you have any meetings about the Learning Agreement?

If no: skip to box **If yes: continue**

Who were they with? How frequent were they? What did you discuss?

■ Were you involved in choosing the course?

If yes: What sorts of things did you think about?

Probe the following and ask what they considered / thought about:

The course

□ subject: work-related/ developmental

□ learning at work / learning in the classroom

□ time commitment / time out of work

□ location

□ level of course / difficulty

□ length of course

□ business benefits

□ leading to a qualification / non-accredited

Views of other people / the organisation

□ young person's views

□ Connexions advisers views

□ Company policy

■ What was your most important consideration? Why was this so important?

■ How important was where the course was delivered to your involvement? Why / why not? *If relevant:* Would you have wanted the young person to continue if the course had not been available through work and they had to attend a college?

■ How important was what your employee learned to your involvement? Why / why not?

If no: skip to here

- Put yourselves in the shoes of the young person, how do you think your considerations matched theirs? What else might the young person have considered? What might the young person have felt was the most important consideration?

- What course(s) were considered?

  If only one course was considered: Why was that?

- Did the adviser suggest a course(s) that you hadn't originally considered? What happened? What did they suggest / What did you think? *Explore*.

- Which course / learning was chosen?

  Discuss the decision-making process: Why were certain courses ruled out? Why was the actual course chosen?

- If there had *not* been a course in [chosen subject] would you have supported the young person to undertake a Learning Agreement in a different subject? Why / why not?

- Some advisers have said that employers prefer their employees to undertake learning specific to their job, rather than courses that are more general. What is your view on this? Why?

- Did you, the young person and adviser all agree on the most suitable course?

  If no: What did you disagree about? How was this resolved? What was discussed in reaching this decision?

- Do you feel the course is more suited to the needs of the young person, the needs of your business, or to both equally? Why do you say that?

Availability of suitable provision

- Did you discuss with the adviser any courses that were not available/ that the young person could not do? What happened? Why could they not do this course?

  Probe: availability, course start dates, funding etc.

- Would you have preferred the young person to do something else or another course (that wasn't offered)?

  If yes, what and why?

- Do you feel you had enough choice over:

  a. where the young person would learn? Why / why not? What would you have preferred?

  b. what the young person would learn? Why / why not? What would you have preferred?

  c. when the young person would learn/ time out of the workplace? Why / why not? What would you have preferred?

- Some advisers have said that employers prefer short courses. Would you agree with this? Why / why not?

- Advisers have said that the length of time the young person spends out of the workplace is critical for employers. What is your view? Why?

- Were there any difficulties identifying an appropriate provider? If so, what were they, and how were they resolved?

- How long did it take to get started (i.e. from the initial meeting with an adviser to your employees starting learning)? Was this too quick, about right, too long?

- Is there anything that could have been done differently by the adviser that would have improved your experience?

- Is there anything that could have been done differently by the training provider that would have improved your experience?

D. Business benefits of the Learning Agreement (5 mins)

In this section we aim to find out about any business benefits resulting from involvement in the LA.

- How well has the provision met your needs? In what way has it / has it not?

- What difference do you think the training will make / has made to the employees involved?

  Probe: things they can do now that couldn't before, changes in confidence, chances of progression within the company, increased pay, increased job options etc.

- What are / have been the main benefits of the Learning Agreement for your company? What difference (if any) has the training made / will make to the workplace / company in general?

Closing the interview

Thank them for their time.

Ask if there is anything else they would like to add.

Providers' Topic Guide

The main aim of the study is to look at whether advisers can access provision that meets young peoples' and employers needs.

NB: The Learning Agreement is called Training Pays in South Yorkshire.

A. Introduction (2-3 mins)

This section is to give the provider some background to the study, to reassure them about confidentiality and to ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

- Introduce self and IES - independent research organisation and not related to Connexions, the government or anyone else
- Tell them about the research project - aim to find out about provision available under the Learning Agreement and whether this meets young people and employer needs.
- Opportunity to report back experiences with a view to improving Las and other similar schemes.
- Reassure them that everything they say in the interview is confidential and anonymous which means that it will not be linked to them by name.
- Ask permission to record the interview.
- Expect interview to last around 40 mins (depending on how much they have got to say)
- Do you have any questions you want to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end of the interview.

B. Provider background (5 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the provider.

- Please could you tell me a little bit about your job role and responsibilities?
- Which team in your organisation has responsibility for delivery against the Learning Agreement?
- What type of provision does your organisation offer?

  Probe: work-based learning, FE, Train to Gain, Entry to Employment etc.
- What provision did your organisation deliver to young people in jobs without training prior to the Learning Agreement pilot?
- When did your organisation become involved with the Learning Agreement pilot?

- Since then, how many young people have you worked with through the Learning Agreement? Was this the volume that you expected? Why / why not?

- *In Lancashire:* Do you have a Learning Agreement adviser within your own organisation?

C. Availability of provision (10 mins)

In this section we focus on the provision available through the pilot.

- How do Learning Agreement advisers find out about your provision? For example, how would they find out if a course had been cancelled, or if there was new provision?

  Probe: training days, newsletters, working relationships, brokers in their own organisation, searchable databases

- What type / level of contact do you have with advisers? How has this changed as the Learning Agreement has developed? What impact has this had on your organisation's relationship with:

  - Connexions,

  - provision (e.g. style of learning or assessment)?

- What sorts of provision have you delivered under this pilot? Was this newly developed / bespoke provision or existing provision (or both)?

- Generally, how would you describe your provision for young people in jobs without training in terms of:

  - *flexibility: time, location*
  - *range of subjects offered*
  - *types of qualification*
  - *accredited/ unaccredited training*
  - *the length of courses - are there enough short courses?*
  - *the range of level of courses*

- Advisers have said that have been instances of some specific gaps in provision - such as in trades and construction, and carpet fitting. From your perspective why do you think this is? What are the difficulties with meeting demand for courses from young people in jobs without training?

- Some advisers have said that young people want short courses and tasters. What is your view?

- *In Lancashire:* Some advisers have said that having PAs in providers has made brokering provision easier. What is your view?

- What (if anything) has constrained your offer to young people in jobs without training?

  Probe: funding, staffing levels, September start dates, lack of demand

- Are there any differences between the courses that young people want and the courses that are funded through the Learning Agreement?

  If yes: what are the differences?

D. Engaging young people and employers (10 mins)

In this section we focus on the sorts of provision that engages young people and employers.

- Could you give me a pen portrait of the sort of provision that tends to appeal most to young people?

  Probe: general/sector specific, work-based learning/ classroom based learning, short courses etc. Why do you think that is? What sort of learning is less attractive?

- Could you give me a pen picture of the sort of provision that tends to appeal to employers?

  Probe: general / sector specific, work-based learning / classroom based learning, short courses etc. Why do you think that is? What sort of learning is less attractive for employers?

- What would you say is the relative importance of what to learn when young people decide to learn (i.e. do they want to learn regardless of the specific course)? How important would you say what they learn is for their employers? Why?

- What would you say is the relative importance how they will learn for young people when they make a decision about a course (i.e. do they want to learn regardless of whether it is classroom based or in the workplace)? How important would you say how they learn is for their employer? Why?

E. Gaps in provision (5 mins)

In this section we focus on how any gaps in provision have been overcome.

- What makes it difficult for you to put on suitable provision under the Learning Agreement? What makes it easy?

  Probe: the level of demand, the sporadic nature of demand, young person's working hours, young person's ability, attending the workplace etc.

- What happens if the young person, or employer wants a course that is not available (but that can be funded)?

  Probe for examples where they have developed new provision.

  - □ How was this done?
  - □ Partners / players involved?
  - □ Speed of this process?
  - □ Has this led to further take-up of this provision over time?
  - □ How has this changed your offer?

F. Impact of brokered provision (5 mins)

In this section we aim to find out about the impact of effective brokerage.

- *In Lancashire (if relevant):* What have been the strengths and weaknesses of having a Learning Agreement adviser within your own organisation?

  Probe: impact on brokering / developing provision, impartiality, referrals, awareness of your provision etc.

- What impact (if any) has the Learning Agreement had on the range of provision that is available in this area for these young people?
- What impact (if any) do you think the Learning Agreement has had on your organisation and its work with young people in jobs without training?
- What (if anything) have you learned about working with young people in jobs without training?
- With the benefit of hindsight, what suggestions would you make to improve the scheme?
- Is there anything that could / should have been done differently by Connexions with regard to provision / brokerage?
- Is there anything that could / should have been done differently by the LSC with regards to provision / brokerage?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences of brokerage under the Learning Agreement?

Advisers' Topic Guide

The main aim of the study is to look at whether (and how) advisers can access provision that meets young peoples' needs.

A. Introduction (2-3 mins)

This section is to give the respondents background to the study, to reassure them about confidentiality and to ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

Introduce self and IES - independent research organisation

Tell them about the research project:

- research aims
- interviews with staff and then young people, employers and training providers
- questions focus on the brokerage part of the Learning Agreement process
- we are after the practitioner's perspective on brokering provision, and are interested in your observations, and ideas on the topic

Expect interview to last about an hour

Confidentiality - and between the group - not to be discussed outside

Anonymity in report / findings

Ask permission to record the interview

Do they have any questions they want to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end.

B. Background (5 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the members of staff and how responsibility for sourcing and accessing provision is resourced.

- Ask them to introduce themselves - name and job title
- What does your role involve? What are your responsibilities? What are your responsibilities for brokering provision?
- How are the Connexions staff involved in the LA structured in this area? Who has responsibility for resolving difficulties with sourcing appropriate provision?

C. Adviser awareness (20 mins)

In this section we focus on the provision available through the pilot, and what makes provision attractive to young people and employers.

Awareness and availability of provision

- How are you kept informed and up-to-date about local provision?

  Probe: staff briefings, training sessions, newsletters, searchable databases, other advisers (i.e. in partner organisations), via relationships with providers etc.

- Overall, how informed do you feel about the provision available to young people in this area? How would you find out if there was a new course, or a course had been stopped?

- Generally, how would you describe the availability of LA provision in this area in terms of:

  - *flexibility: time, location*
  - *range of subjects offered*
  - *number and quality of providers*
  - *the length of courses - are there enough short courses?*
  - *the range of level of courses*
  - *the overall responsiveness of providers*
  - *how well provision meets young people's needs. Probe for:*
    - *those in a job they don't like,*
    - *those with no prior qualifications,*
    - *young people who can't/ don't want to learn through work,*
    - *young people with irregular work hours*
  - *how well provision meets employers' needs*

- Is the same provision available in all geographic areas of the pilot?

  Explore if any gaps. Where are any gaps?

- How have changes to what can be funded through the LA affected the availability of provision? What have been the implications of these changes for you and your clients? How has this affected the 'menu of provision' you can offer young people?

The role of learning in engaging young people

- In your experience, at the outset do young people tend to want to learn in general, or do they have a specific course in mind?

- To engage young people in learning, how important is it for them to have a range of courses to choose from? Why do you say that?

For the next three questions use a flip chart if available and the venue is suitable. Mark out what appeals most and least to young people about courses. Mark out what types of provision appeals most and least to young people and employers.

- Put yourselves in the shoes of a young person, which aspects of courses are most (and least) attractive? What appeals about doing the learning?

  Probe: the subject, the timing, "it's not like school", learning at work, progression opportunities

- Could you give me a pen portrait of the sort of provision that tends to appeal most (and least) to young people?

  Probe: general/sector specific, work-based learning/ classroom based learning, short courses etc. Why do you think that is?

- Could you give me a pen picture of the sort of provision that tends to appeal most (and least) to employers?

  Probe: general / sector specific, work-based learning / classroom based learning, short courses etc. Why do you think that is?

D. Deciding on a course (20 mins)

The aim of this section is to explore how the choice of a course is negotiated, and the ease of sourcing appropriate provision.

- When you're choosing a course, is the focus primarily generally on the needs of the young person, or on the needs of the employer?

- Could you explain how you and the young person/employer decide on the most appropriate course? What sorts of things do you tend to discuss? How do you resolve any differences?

- What affects whether or not an employer is involved in choosing the young person's learning?

  Probe: whether young person wants them to be, whether it is work-based learning/ classroom-based, the relevance of the chosen learning to work, employers general interest in learning etc.

- Does whether the employer is involved affect the ease with which you can broker training? Why / why not? *Probe for examples.*

- What happens when a young person wants to do a course you feel is not appropriate? *Explore examples*

Sourcing appropriate provision

- What things or circumstance help to make brokering provision straightforward?

  Probe: Learning and Development adviser role, flexible provision/provider, needs of the young person, needs of the employer, match between what employer and young person want, sector, young persons aspirations etc.

- What things or circumstances prevent provision from being brokered or make the process more challenging?

  Probe: no provision available, young person and employer disagree, funding constraints, no relevant qualifications

- Put yourself in the shoes of the provider, what makes it difficult for them to put on suitable provision?

  Probe: the level of demand, the sporadic nature of demand, attending the workplace etc.

- Are there any types of learner that it is more difficult to find provision for? What kinds? Why is this?

- What happens if the young person, or employer wants a course that is not available (but that can be funded)?

  Probe for examples where they have developed new provision.

  - □ How was this done?
  - □ Partners / players involved?
  - □ Speed of this process?
  - □ Has this led to further take-up of this provision over time/ changes in the provider?

- Are there any differences between the courses that young people want and the courses that are funded? *If yes:* what are they?

- What happens if the young person, or employer wants a course that is not funded under the LA? How is this resolved? How frequently does this happen? What is the impact of this?

E. Impact of brokered provision (5 mins)

In this section we aim to find out about the impact of effective brokerage.

- What impact does being able to broker the right course, quickly have on a young person's engagement?

  Probe for examples of where brokerage has worked effectively and ineffectively for engagement, in particular if time taken to source provision is an issue.

- What sort of impact (if any) does being able to broker the right course, quickly have on young people's interest in learning and progression to other qualifications?

  Explore changes in attitude to learning, engagement, motivation, progression to full-time education etc.

- What impact (if any) has the Learning Agreement had on:

  - the range of provision that is available in this area?

  - providers and their work with young people in jobs without training?

- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences of brokering provision under the Learning Agreement?

Young People's Topic Guide

The main aim of the study is to look at whether (and how) advisers can access provision that meets young peoples' needs.

More specifically:

- whether there is a 'menu of choice' for young people, so they can learn where they want to, how they want to, and what they want to.
- whether provision meets young people's needs, how (if at all) courses are negotiated with an adviser.

NB: The Learning Agreement is called Training Pays in South Yorkshire.

A. Introduction (5 mins)

This section is to set the young person at ease and give them some background to the study, to reassure them about confidentiality and to ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

- Introduce self and IES - emphasis that we are an independent research organisation and not related to Connexions, the government or anyone else
- Tell them about the research project - aim to find out their experiences of choosing a course
- They can refuse to answer a question at any time if they would rather not do so, and they can stop the interview at any time.
- Expect interview to last about 30-45 mins (depending on how much they have got to say)
- Reassure them that everything they say in the interview is confidential and anonymous which means that it will not be linked to them by name. Ask permission to record the interview.
- Do you have any questions you want to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end of the interview.

B. About the young person (10 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the young person, including their experience of education and work.

Previous experience of education

- Age they left school and age now. Did they stay in school until the full school leaving age (i.e. the summer after their 16th birthday) or did they leave earlier?
- Did you stay in learning after you left school, or did you start work (or something else)? *Probe any experience of education post-school and why they left.*

- *Ask those who left school at 16:* Why did you decide not to continue studying past 16? *Probe: wanted to work, wanted to earn money, couldn't find a course they wanted to do, found learning boring, didn't like school*

- Did you get any qualifications at school? Explore which ones and grades.

- Did you like school? Why / why not?

Current circumstances

- What are you doing at the moment - working, studying, training or something else? *Probe for all current activities*

- Confirm whether they are doing/ have signed a Learning Agreement with Connexions (we will ask more about this later).

  - If so, how long have they been doing it? What course is it?

  - *If no longer doing it* ask whether they finished it or whether they left early. Probe how long they were doing it and when they started / left or finished.

If working:

- What sort of work do you do? How many hours a week do you work? How long have you been in this job? What type of business is it? How many other people work there? How much do you get paid?

- Do you like your job? Is it something you see yourself doing in one year / five years time?

- Before you started on the LA, what if any training did you get in your job? *Probe: Induction training, on-the-job training, shadowing etc.*

C. Choosing a course (20 mins)

First impressions of the LA

- How did you first find out about the LA (direct marketing, friends, approached by Connexions etc)?

- What were your first impressions of the LA, when you found out about it?

  Probe: why did you think that?

- In the beginning, what did you expect the LA would be like?

  Probe: difficulty, support available, relevance to work, interest in the subject, time it takes etc.

The decision-making process

- Why did you decide to do a Learning Agreement? What appeals most to you about it?

  Spontaneous and then *prompt for: money, getting 1-2-1 support/ advice from adviser, getting / improving qualifications, doing learning that is linked to improving their current or future job/ prospects.* Probe: Why?

We're now going to use a diagram to show the sorts of things you thought about or were influenced by when you were choosing which course to do (if anything).

■ When you were choosing a course, what sorts of things did you think about (if anything)?

Probe the following and ask what they considered / thought about:

The course

□ subject

□ learning at work / learning in the classroom / learning at home

□ time commitment (including time off work / time for home study)

□ location / travel

□ level of course/ difficulty

□ length of course

Views of other people

□ parents views

□ Connexions advisers views

□ employers views

□ Colleagues, friends (doing the same course)?

□ anyone else?

Experience of learning and work

□ working hours / fit around these / timing (i.e. evenings / early mornings / weekends)

□ attitude to education / previous experience of learning

□ lack of options at work / progression opportunities

□ long term career options / future job

□ future learning options

Other

□ the bonus payment (i.e. short and long courses pay the same amount of bonus)

□ anything else?

■ What was your most important consideration? (mark on the influence / decision tree) Why was this so important?

- How important was where you learned in your decision? Why?

  If relevant: Would you have continued if the course had not been available through work/ at home / at a learning centre and you had to attend a college?

- How important was the subject in your decision? Why?

- If there had *not* been a course in [chosen subject] would you have done a Learning Agreement in a different subject?

- Would you have done a course if it had taken a year to complete? Why / why not?

- *If relevant:* Would you have done a course if you had to do it in your own time (i.e. not at work)? Why / why not?

- Would you have done a course if it had taken you an hour to travel there? Why / why not?

Choosing a course

- What courses did you consider/ discuss with your adviser? If no other courses were considered, why was that?

- Did your adviser / employer suggest you do a course that you hadn't originally considered? What happened? What did they suggest / what did you think? *Explore*.

- Did you discuss any courses with your advisers that were not available/ that you could not do? What happened? Why could you not do this course?

  Explore availability, course start dates, funding etc. What did you think about that?

- Did you do any tests or tasks to help you think about your skills, and the jobs you might be interested in and / or suited to?

  Probe for details - including which tests, where they took place, who administered them etc.

- Which course / learning did you do?

  Discuss the decision-making process: why courses were ruled out and why the actual course was chosen.

- Do you feel you had enough choice over:

  d. where to learn? Why / why not?

  e. what to learn? Why / why not?

  f. when to learn? Why / why not?

Employer support

- Was your employer involved in choosing your course?

  If yes, what did they say? What sort of learning / course did they prefer? Did you agree with them?

  If no: Probe for whether they wanted their boss to be involved and why / why not.

- Did your boss sign the Learning Agreement?

  - *If yes:* What do they think about you doing this learning? Have they done anything to help support you? e.g. fixed time off

D. Experience of learning / training (5-10 mins)

The aim of this section is to discuss learners' experience of the course to enable us to see how (if at all) this is affected by choice.

Engagement during the LA

- Have you started your learning/ course under the Learning Agreement yet?

  - *If no:* When is it due to start?

  - *If yes:* How soon after your first meeting with the adviser were you able to start your learning? Was this length of time ok?

(ASK ONLY THOSE WHO STARTED A COURSE)

- What training are/were you doing? How many hours a week? Is/ was this in work, or in your own time? *If relevant:* Why are you doing it in your own time and not in work?

- Do you have to attend a training provider or college? If yes, how long does it take you to travel there? Is it easy to get to? How do you travel there? How much does it cost to get there?

- Overall, how have you found the course / learning? What have you enjoyed most about it? What have you least liked?

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