

Report on school sixth form  
performance management

April 2010



# School Sixth Form Report

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### Introduction

For a number of years there has been growing concern around the issue of under-performing school sixth forms. A review carried out jointly by the DCSF and the LSC in 2008 revealed a lack of clarity in the system about the accountability and performance management arrangements for school sixth forms.

In September 2009 ministers agreed that local authorities should take strategic ownership of this work going forward. All LAs received a letter from Sue Baldwin at the DCSF, School Sixth Form Support and Challenge – September 2009 (annex 1), in which they were requested in the first instance to identify by 30 November 2009 those school sixth forms in their area that needed additional support to improve outcomes.

Working on behalf of the DCSF and in response to Sue Baldwin's statement on providing support to LAs, the National Strategies (NS) deployed a team of Specialist Sixth Form Advisers from January to March 2010 to work with the LAs and their school sixth forms. The aims were:

1. to support LAs in identifying underperforming school sixth forms
2. to support LAs in the development of suitable plans to ensure school sixth forms receive the support they need
3. to develop plans for SIPs to work with schools that have been identified to secure improvements
4. to gather wider information during this project, which would be reviewed by the DCSF to determine the level of need for school sixth form improvement and to inform future support for school sixth forms

The initial returns from LAs in response to the DCSF request identified 187 school sixth forms as under-performing, across 56 LAs; the remaining LAs provided a nil return.

Advisers visited 108 LAs and 32 schools, covering the nine Government Office Regions across three territories. No Academies, Sixth form Colleges or FE/training providers were included within the sample. Government Office representatives accompanied the Sixth Form Advisers on a small number of visits in each region.

The findings in this final report are based on analysis of qualitative evidence extracted from notes of visit gathered on specific areas of focus as set out in the main chapter headings herein. Interviews conducted were supportive and developmental according to LA needs, not scripted, so there is variation in the focus and content; consequently all percentages and proportions quoted in this report are indicative and should be used only as a guide to overall patterns and trends.

## **Executive Summary**

### **Aims 1 and 2**

- to support LAs in identifying underperforming school sixth forms
- to support LAs in the development of suitable plans to ensure school sixth forms receive the support they need

The breadth, depth and impact of LA engagement with their strategic role in school sixth form improvement varies considerably and whilst there are examples of outstanding practice overall there is a need for significant improvement. All LAs visited through this project have been supported in the development of their plans.

In-school reviews of sixth form performance have taken place in nearly two-thirds of LAs visited; some already had plans in place and others are now developing them to support improvement in sixth form performance. The approach and quality of plans varies considerably; in about half of LAs they are embedded within 14-19 plans and focussed on provision rather than specific sixth form improvement; in others sixth form improvement is addressed through the wider school improvement strategy for the LA. However, nearly every school visited had sixth form improvement planning in place.

There is no standardised dataset commonly used by all LAs, and much of the data arrives too late in the academic year, which leads to confusion, inconsistency and variability in challenge and support. Consequently there is considerable variation in the criteria that LAs use to determine sixth form under-performance and the subsequent support provided.

### **Aim 3**

- to develop plans for SIPs to work with schools that have been identified to secure improvements

Only half of LAs visited have made adjustments to SIP practice to reflect a new focus on sixth form support and challenge. In the majority of cases this adjustment is the addition of a question on sixth form performance on the SIP report template. Best practice was found where LAs had provided additional CPD for SIPs, involved them in strategic planning for sixth form improvement and SIPs monitored and evaluated progress against individual school sixth form improvement plans. Some schools involved in other national improvement initiatives, such as National or City Challenge or Gaining Ground, have additional SIP/NCA time allocated, and there was evidence that this increased capacity benefited school sixth forms.

#### **Aim 4**

- to gather wider information during this project, which would be reviewed by the DCSF to determine the level of need for school sixth form improvement and to inform future support for school sixth forms

Leadership of sixth forms is reported to be more effective where the head of sixth form is a member of SLT. Over 40% of LAs reported that they had networks in operation to support heads of sixth form; however agendas for such meetings tend to concentrate on data, 14-19 agenda and changes in national priorities rather than leadership and management to inform improvement in teaching and learning and sixth form performance. In a small number of LAs, consultants who have thus far supported improvement in schools at Key Stages 3 and 4 are now being deployed to provide sixth form support. Some small LAs have set up shared arrangements with other, larger LAs, where there is better infrastructure to provide support and high quality CPD for school sixth forms.

Of the schools visited, half still pursued a largely traditional academic sixth form curriculum offer of AS/A levels, however more than half have now introduced some applied A levels and or BTEC at L3. Almost three quarters reported some level of collaboration to support development in sixth form provision. Schools and LAs both reported that students find the transition from supported KS4 teaching to more didactic sixth form teaching style and independent learning as challenging to manage and that the move from BTEC courses left them ill-prepared for AS level. Over half of LAs interviewed regarded IAG as a weakness and in need of improvement. These issues were cited as contributing factors to underperformance and in particular to high AS fail rates.

## **Key Findings**

### **LA Leadership and management**

- The breadth, depth and impact of LA engagement and planning vary considerably, and nationally are in need of significant improvement.
- LA reviews of school sixth form performance have taken place in nearly two-thirds of LAs.
- Some LA consultants, who have thus far supported improvement in schools at Key stages 3 and 4, are now being deployed to provide sixth form support
- Over half of LAs interviewed regarded IAG as still a weakness and in need of improvement, often stated as a reason for high fail rates at AS
- Over 40% of LAs reported networks in operation as support for heads of sixth form.

### **Sixth form data**

- There is no standardised dataset commonly used by all LAs, this leads to confusion, inconsistency and variation in challenge and support.
- The late arrival of the data in the academic year is a determining factor in which dataset LAs use and the delay over data is a significant barrier to improved performance management
- There is considerable variation in the criteria that LAs use to determine sixth form under-performance and the subsequent support provided.

### **School Improvement Partners**

- Only half of LAs visited have already made adjustments to SIP practice to reflect the new focus on sixth form performance. A further 20% are planning for this to take place next term.
- Only a very small minority of LAs reported differentiated or additional SIP time specifically targeted at sixth form support.

### **School leadership and management of sixth forms**

- Leadership of sixth form is more effective where the head of sixth form is a member of SLT.
- Half of the schools visited still maintained a largely traditional academic sixth form curriculum offer of AS/A levels with the addition of some applied learning options. The remainder offer a broader curriculum mainly involving BTEC options
- Over three-quarters of the schools reported some level of collaboration to support and broaden sixth form provision.
- Students find the transition from supported KS4 teaching into sixth form teaching styles as challenging to manage; this is cited as one reason for high AS fail rates.
- Small sixth forms are more likely to be deemed underperforming

## 1 Background

- 1.1 For a number of years there has been growing concern around the issue of underperforming school sixth forms. This was highlighted to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) as long ago as December 2006 in a letter from Bill Rammell, the Minister for Skills at the time.
- 1.2 A review carried out jointly by the DCSF and the LSC in 2008 revealed a lack of clarity about the accountability and performance management arrangements for school sixth forms both at institutional and local authority (LA) level, and that consequently school sixth forms were not receiving consistently effective support and challenge to improve.
- 1.3 In September 2009 ministers agreed that local authorities should take strategic ownership of this work going forward. All LAs received a letter from Sue Baldwin at the DCSF, School Sixth Form Support and Challenge – September 2009 (annex 1), in which they were requested in the first instance to identify by 30 November 2009 those school sixth forms in their area that needed additional support to improve outcomes. The Learning Plus UK (LPUK) data dashboard for every school sixth form was provided to all LAs to support this activity and provide a degree of consistency and alignment to the process whereby all parties were using the same dataset. This did however rely on LAs using and being confident with interpretation of the data dashboard, which was reported to be not always the case.
- 1.4 The DCSF contracted the National Strategies (NS) to provide support to local authorities to identify underperforming school sixth forms and to support development of suitable plans to ensure school sixth forms receive the support they need, in particular through their School Improvement Partner (SIP). In addition the DCSF stated that the information gathered by the NS during this project would be reviewed to determine the level of need for school sixth form improvement and to inform future support for school sixth forms
- 1.5 Discussions with LAs and schools were based initially on the validated 2007 and 2008 data provided through the LPUK Data Dashboard, to provide a two year trend in outcomes, however many LAs supplemented this data with their own and unvalidated data from 2009.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Project management**

- 2.1.1 The National Strategies deployed a team of Specialist Sixth Form Advisers from January to March 2010 to work with the LAs and schools. A short CPD programme was provided for these advisers by NS, including an update on 14–19 agenda and the use of the LPUK data dashboard. A set of common priorities was agreed with the DCSF and these inform the main findings discussed in this report. A common reporting framework for LA and school visits was used by all Advisers.
- 2.1.2 All School Sixth Form Advisers worked with the NS regional teams including the Senior Regional Director (SRD) and the Secondary Senior School Improvement Advisers (SSIAs), who facilitated contact with LAs and provided local knowledge and context specific information. The National Strategies Secondary School Improvement Programme Director, (SI PD) and National Director for School Improvement (ND SI) managed the project centrally and provided quality assurance.

### **2.2 Sample**

- 2.2.1 The initial returns from LAs in response to the DCSF request identified 187 school sixth forms as under-performing, across 56 LAs; the remaining 82 LAs where there is school sixth form provision provided a nil return.
- 2.2.2 In response to the returns the School Sixth Form Adviser team contacted as a priority the 56 LAs where a positive return of underperforming sixth forms had been made. The advisers made arrangements to interview the key personnel with responsibility for sixth form performance management in the LA and to review and support planning. A further 52 LA interviews were carried out, either in LAs where analysis of the data dashboard indicated that there was sixth form underperformance but a nil return had been received or, in a small number of cases, where there was prior knowledge of outstanding practice that could be captured and shared. The advisers also carried out 32 direct school sixth form visits and supported two further LA-wide performance reviews for sixth forms.
- 2.2.3 The project provided an evidence base of 108 LA and 32 school interviews, 140 reports in total, covering the nine Government Office Regions across three territories. No Academies or FE/training providers were included within the sample. Government Office representatives accompanied the Sixth Form Advisers on a small number of visits in each region.

## **2.3 Reporting process**

- 2.3.1 A note of visit was produced for each LA or school interview; the note was generated to a standard template by the advisers, agreed and signed off by the relevant LA officer and then copied to SI PD and the SSIA for the region concerned.
- 2.3.2 The findings in this final report are based on analysis of qualitative evidence extracted from notes of visit gathered on specific areas of focus as set out in the main chapter headings herein. Additional supporting documents were shared by some LAs, some of which have been shared as examples of good practice when visiting other LAs with less well developed strategies in place..
- 2.3.3 Due to the nature of the enquiry and sensitivities around identification of underperforming school sixth forms, a standard framework for the reports was used as a guide for the interviews. However the interviews conducted were developmental in nature rather than scripted, so there is variation in the focus and content; consequently all percentages and proportions quoted in this report are indicative and should be used only as a guide to overall trend. In addition, since those LAs identified with underperforming sixth forms were interviewed as a priority, and not all LAs were interviewed, the sample should be considered as skewed towards lower performing school sixth forms.

## **2.4 Quality assurance**

- 2.4.1 The work of the Adviser team and their reports were quality assured by the NS SI PD, an appointed QA manager for the team, and the SSIA for each region in which the School Sixth Form Advisers were deployed.

## **3 LA strategic leadership and management of school sixth forms**

This section describes the outcomes from the 108 LA interviews and provides details on the level and type of LA leadership and engagement with school sixth form performance management and the steps being taken to provide effective challenge and support to improve performance. Key areas addressed are:

- Leadership and management of sixth forms, strategic planning and support.
- Access to and strategic use of data to inform challenge and support and drive improvement.
- Monitoring and evaluation of school sixth form performance.
- LA deployment, training and support for School Improvement Partners (SIP) in order that they may provide the best service to school sixth forms.

- Wider issues of provision related to collaboration, quality of Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) and reduction in those young people Not in Education Employment and Training (NEET).

### 3.1 Strategic planning and management

- 3.1.1 The breadth, depth and impact of LA engagement with their strategic role in school sixth form improvement varies considerably and whilst there are examples of outstanding practice overall there is a need for significant improvement. In at least 15% of cases the response to Sue Baldwin's letter of September 2009 was to carry out an immediate strategic review of all sixth form performance across the LA. Overall two-thirds of LAs reported that reviews of sixth performance had taken place and the LAs had worked with schools to identify priorities and provide support with planning and improvement. The type and level of LA engagement with their role in sixth form performance management varies; in the best LAs a full strategic review had taken place a year or more ago. In those LAs every sixth form now has a personalised targeted improvement plan with agreed support from a trained consultant team to achieve outcomes, and plans are reviewed and reported on regularly by the SIP. However in the least prepared LAs, engagement and planning are embryonic in most aspects. There is considerable variation in the criteria LAs use to identify underperformance and even where these criteria are clear they are not necessarily shared with schools.
- 3.1.2 All authorities have plans specific to 14–19, about half stated that their school sixth form development is embedded within them; a further third indicated that the sixth form improvement was included in the wider school improvement strategy; the remaining LAs were still developing their strategy or stated that they dealt with individual sixth forms on a needs basis. Evidence suggests that LAs are now using, or plan to use, their existing risk management systems to categorise, track and support underperforming sixth forms.

In one LA the sixth form improvement plan is shaped and driven by a Post-16 Focus Group which includes all the main stakeholders (Heads, FE, SID, ERA, LSC, Connexions etc). This work is in addition to the work of the school improvement division's secondary strategy which includes a range of approaches (provision of data and related CPD, post-16 evaluation programme, subject reviews, tailored intervention programmes, subject and heads of sixth networks, dissemination of effective practice etc).

- 3.1.3 In around a fifth of LAs it appears that 14–19 strategy is managed separately from School Improvement, which can lead to a disjointed model of support and performance management for school sixth forms. In the best LAs there is complete

alignment between 14–19 provision and School Improvement strategy, with actions to support 14–19 strategy equally beneficial to sixth form achievement and 14–19 provision as a whole.

- 3.1.4 In around a third of LAs it was stated that there was limited capacity to support school sixth forms in addition to other national priorities, which have been on KS2 and KS4 performance; LA challenge, support and target setting have focussed almost exclusively on 5 -16 age range. In a small number of LAs a major restructuring programme is causing considerable disruption and distraction from sixth form performance management. Indications from several other reports are that more restructuring programmes are planned
- 3.1.5 Of the 138 LAs with school sixth forms nationally, 68 LAs have National Challenge schools, 79 have Gaining Ground schools, and 42 LAs are involved in City Challenge. Additional support to improve performance is primarily provided via additional time allocated to the SIP or National Challenge Adviser (NCA). However evidence emerged that LA consultants, who have thus far supported improvement in schools at Key stages 3 and 4, are now being deployed to provide sixth form support. This is evident in about 5-10% of the LAs interviewed; some of these LAs stated that they had provided specific training in sixth form support for the consultants.
- 3.1.6 The allocation of a new specific role of lead for post-16 improvement was reported in around 15% LAs, which provides more time and expertise for a specific focus on effective sixth form performance management; however only larger LAs have budget and capacity to provide this support. 20% of LAs specifically requested further information on where to find currently available expertise to commission in specialist subjects support for improvement in sixth form teaching and learning,.
- 3.1.7 Large shire counties have the capacity to develop different models of support, which meet the geographical spread of the county e.g. a 14–19 consortia model. In one authority each of the four consortia has appointed a director with responsibility for sixth form performance management. A pre-requisite of this arrangement, which is proving advantageous to overall sixth form performance management and improvement, is an authority-wide integrated approach with clarity about leadership, management of sixth form learning, alignment of the data used and the work of SIPs and LA advisers.
- 3.1.8 One issue many LAs reported that they are facing is disruption to their LA-wide planning as a direct consequence of the increasing number of Academies, trusts

and extended schools through addition of new sixth forms (sixth form presumption). Such structural changes are out of LA direct control but have a direct impact that unbalances LA-wide provision and undermines the validity of the LAs strategic plan. LAs state that new sixth form provision is not necessarily in appropriate locations or even required. Sixth form presumptions for High Performing Specialist Schools are often a response to local preference without recognition of the area-wide need for the provision, which can impact on value for money and also the quality of the experience for some learners.

### **3.2 Impact of size on sixth form performance**

- 3.2.1 Many LAs report that cohort size is an unavoidable consequence of geography and population density, however in others it is an avoidable consequence of local political consideration and context.
- 3.2.2 About 25% of LAs report issues with and underperformance of small sixth forms. There is evidence in a small number of reports that small cohorts and underperformance are tolerated in some faith schools, or other schools for local political reasons supported by parents and governors concerned to maintain a traditional sixth form and believing in the importance of the academic AS/A level offer.
- 3.2.3 Of the 1791 school sixth forms nationally identified on the data dashboard, 478 (nearly 30%) have fewer than 50 students present at end of AS/A level courses and are therefore categorised as small sixth forms. Of the 187 sixth forms immediately identified as underperforming by LAs in this project over half, 111, were defined as small according to the data dashboard. Further analysis suggests many more of the small sixth forms on the overall list do have a number of characteristics of underperformance. However as is explained in more detail in section 3.4, the lack of a single nationally accepted dataset with clearly defined performance standards and targets makes judgement of whether a sixth form is underperforming subjective as it depends which parameters and which dataset are chosen. On balance though evidence supports the conclusion that small sixth forms are more likely to underperform. This finding needs to be balanced against a concern in some LAs that any move to set minimum sizes would remove flexibility within the system, particularly where small sixth forms are working in partnership with others and/or are providing a service in a rural area.

### 3.3 Monitoring and evaluation

- 3.3.1 In nearly two-thirds of LAs full sixth form reviews had taken place in the last year informed by analysis of a variety of datasets and wider information. In direct response to the DCSF letter in September a small number of LAs immediately commissioned comprehensive reviews of sixth form performance. The evidence base for the reviews included a number of datasets, the Data Dashboard and LAT 2009, OfSTED and SIP reports and feedback from questionnaires. Reviews not only support LA planning and performance management arrangements but often result in monitoring and evaluation processes that schools can learn from and utilise to support and inform self evaluation and improvement.

In one LA a very thorough report resulted in three categories of schools which would benefit from support being identified. In the first category were four schools in need of more immediate support, and these were put forward for intensive support. The schools were contacted; the heads, senior staff and SIP/NCA were invited to a workshop session covering key areas requiring improvement. Subsequently they drew up an improvement plan, and the SIPs prioritised and commissioned support. The four schools in the second category were asked to draw up similar plans, and it was decided to closely monitor the progress of the vulnerable schools in the third category. A particular consideration was the drawing up of an effective strategic plan for improvement in each school, and the involvement of the SIP. The LA is devolving £2000 to each school to support staff release time for the formulation of this plan, and will also fund an extra day for the SIPs to identify the issues and assist with the plans.

- 3.3.2 20% of LAs report some degree of dissatisfaction with Ofsted evaluations of sixth form performance. In some LAs schools have used a positive Ofsted evaluation of sixth form performance to justify a rejection of support or intervention by the LA. In other LAs there is disagreement with the Ofsted judgement overall; the data used by the LA indicates the sixth form is underperforming but Ofsted do not recognise this in their judgement. LAs state this as further evidence for the need for a nationally recognised and standardised dataset or further.

### 3.4 Strategic use of data

- 3.4.1 All LAs interviewed had interrogated the data for their sixth forms and could identify those sixth forms that in their opinion were underperforming. Only 55 LAs opted to identify their under-performing sixth forms in response to the original DCSF request. A further 50 LAs shared details of sixth form performance in discussion with the sixth form advisers; two LAs avoided naming any school but were prepared and able to discuss the performance of each in detail.

- 3.4.2 The agreed and accepted judgement of whether a sixth form is underperforming is complex as there is not one nationally accepted dataset or method of data analysis. Even though the data dashboard was supplied to all LAs, this does not completely resolve matters as for any sixth form there are a number of parameters that can be considered in a number of different combinations and ways and can leave the final outcome open to interpretation, particularly where there is a greater use of vocational qualifications across the LA sixth forms.
- 3.4.3 Over 90% of LAs had used the LPUK data dashboard to some extent to analyse sixth form performance, many had augmented the data analysis with 2009 figures using other commercial packages such as ALPS and ALIS. Around 50% of LAs use ALPS data, which seems to be the preferred source as it is available early in the academic year, even though LAs report dissatisfaction with the limited subject coverage.

“ALPS data would be more effective if it could also cover a wider range of L1/2 and vocational sixth form provision, not just ‘league table’ qualifications”

- 3.4.4 About 60% of LAs combine use of ALPS with LAT or Data Dashboard, less than 10% with Fischer Family Trust or ALIS.
- 3.4.5 The key finding on sixth form data is that LAs want a dataset that is timely, provides adequate coverage of vocational and AS/A level qualifications and takes account of level 1 and 2 entries as well as level 3. At the moment this is not the case for any single dataset available and this mitigates against clear universally accepted criteria for underperformance.
- 3.4.6 LAs report a degree of confusion over the sometimes conflicting outcomes from the various datasets. This lack of confidence is transmitted to schools, who therefore use the dataset that they understand, find easiest to interrogate, and is available as early in the academic year as possible.
- 3.4.7 The majority of LAs state that the late arrival of the data in the academic year is a determining factor in which dataset they use and the delay over data is a significant barrier to improved performance management and subsequent good tracking in schools.
- 3.4.8 Where LAs are aware of or involved in the pilot for the Framework for Excellence (FfE) they hope this will result in an improvement in the quality, validity, accessibility and timeliness of data. However where FfE is mentioned in reports LAs say they

need better and more frequent communication and information on the progress of FfE.

One authority (in the West Midlands) stated that the LA is aware that data provision and the analysis of data needs to be improved within the LA and officers consider that they are at the beginning “of a journey” in terms of collecting and analysing data related to sixth forms. This authority is utilising colleges who are considered to be more rigorous in their use of data to share good practice. A college representative will be leading a session on the FfE at a post-16 network meeting.

### **3.5 School Improvement Partners (SIPs)**

- 3.5.1 Overall there is considerable variation in the levels of support that SIPs provide to school sixth forms, both in expertise and quantity. In almost half of LAs it was reported that changes had already been made to the management of SIPs and a further 20% reported plans to make changes. These changes have largely been around reporting requirements, where sixth form evaluation has been specifically included in reports and the agenda for SIP visits should include sixth form evaluation at least once a year. There have also been some limited CPD developments in 20% of LAs around improved understanding of the data and a further 10% on other sixth form specific performance issues.
- 3.5.2 LAs generally reported that they believe that SIPs do not have sufficient time and capacity to give sixth form performance the focus it requires. In a small proportion of LAs (< 10%) an addition of an extra day SIP time had been allocated, but most LAs do not wish to fund this model.
- 3.5.3 Initiatives such as Gaining Ground and National Challenge have allowed the SIP role to be extended and given more time to focus on sixth form issues in those schools. The benefits of this approach are that the NCA/SIP has more time with the school, knows it well and can use the successful approaches in National Challenge to support sixth form improvement. In a small number of cases sixth form development is included in the RAP or a few have recently created a sixth form specific addition to the RAP.
- 3.5.4 The spring term is often selected to have a focus on sixth form work including discussions with Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) as new data becomes available e.g. LAT and the data dashboard and in response to the LA’s analysis of verified schools’ performance data.
- 3.5.5 There was no evidence reported of SIPs specifically brokering additional support for sixth forms but there was evidence through LA discussions of LA intervention in

terms of support for the removal of heads of sixth form, additional data support and full sixth form performance reviews, which included SIP input.

- 3.5.6 In 20% of authorities there is a commitment that all SIPs for schools with sixth forms shall have sixth form experience. In a small number of LAs additional sixth form expertise is brokered in to supplement the SIP role, mainly from other headteachers within the LA. Alternatively in one LA they have the model where a sixth form “expert” SIP supports the other SIPs in this aspect of their role.

### **3.6 Sixth form CPD**

- 3.6.1 Over 40% of LAs reported networks in operation for heads of sixth form, some through the 14–19 partnership route, others are more informal. Agendas for such meetings generally target specific areas against national or local strategic priorities such as developments in the 14–19 agenda, provision or partnerships rather than school improvement specifically. These networks were more likely to be found in large LAs.
- 3.6.2 Small LAs that have few sixth forms report that they are less able to support a head of sixth form network. This is the case in the North-West where reduced opportunities to share knowledge, skills and approaches has led some small LAs to set up shared arrangements with other, larger LAs, where there is better infrastructure to provide support and high quality CPD.
- 3.6.3 Discrete sixth form specific CPD was reported to have taken place in around two-fifths of LAs including training on topics such as: use of data; monitoring and evaluation; UCAS; Gifted and Talented; and curriculum mapping.
- 3.6.4 The support appears to be provided either in response to an LA-led sixth form review or to a request from the school; there was little evidence of overall strategic planning for and commissioning of support for sixth forms. 15% of LAs have facilitated support from other schools or colleges; however this type of sharing more often arises more informally through other local partnership and networks. Specific support for sixth form teaching and learning including use of NS consultants, ASTs or through support materials was reported in over 20% of LAs. However the quality and expertise of the support is unclear as training for the consultants was only explicitly mentioned in about 5% of reports. National training for LA consultants through the National Strategies has focused exclusively on KS2-KS4 and will not have addressed sixth form specific needs and issues.

- 3.6.5 LAs can use external support programmes to enhance capacity. In one authority a tailored 14–19 Workforce Development Strategy is underway focussing on: leadership and management skills for heads of sixth form (e.g. enabling them to effectively challenge heads of department on sixth form attainment); teaching and learning; use of data, monitoring and tracking.

### **3.7 Governance**

- 3.7.1 LAs report that support and challenge by governors for sixth form performance overall is not generally good. Given the range and inconsistency of available data it is no surprise that understanding and interpretation of sixth form data is an issue for governors. Good practice was cited where the impact of governors of schools in the Gaining Ground initiative was improving and LA staff and governors have benefited from the National Strategies “Stronger Governance Systems” resource.
- 3.7.2 A small number of LAs reported governing bodies working to retain a strong focus on a traditional curriculum model sixth form in the face of under-performance and small class sizes.
- 3.7.3 One authority stated that the school governing bodies have not been pro-active in promoting better opportunities for sixth form learners and where proposals for rationalising provision have been made; governing bodies have at times been an impediment to the progress of the agenda.

### **3.8 IAG and NEETs**

- 3.8.1 Almost half of authorities interviewed regarded IAG as a weakness and in need of improvement. There is a developed IAG strategy in place and reported in less than 30% of LAs
- 3.8.2 Good practice was reported by LAs where schools have a dedicated Connexions Personal Adviser (PA) and have made a commitment to meeting IAG quality standards. However some PAs are insufficiently integrated in schools’ career education and guidance programmes.
- 3.8.3 LAs are aware of the importance of the 5+ A\*-C GCSE including English and mathematics and the correlation to L3 performance and discussions concerning the need for appropriate entry standards onto L3 courses were reported by several LAs.
- 3.8.4 From analysis of the data dashboard it is revealed that 147 of the 187 schools identified by LAs as underperforming had AS fail rates above the national averages and of these almost 100 have fail rates at 25% or greater, that is twice the national

average. It was reported by a number of LAs that consistently high AS fail rates are a consequence of weak IAG. The reasons cited for this by LAs vary; sometimes it is as a result of learner demand or limited breadth of offer but also caused by a desire by some young people to remain in the same institution. Most LAs have prioritised development of IAG as they see this as important factor in reducing NEETs at 17, which evidence here suggests is believed to be one consequence of high AS fail rates. A small number of LAs reported concerns around lack of understanding in schools of the implication of Raising the Participation Age (RPA) with regards to impact on both IAG and NEETs.

### **3.9 Collaboration/Partnerships**

- 3.9.1 All LAs reported that they supported the formation of partnerships between schools as part of a strategy for improvement, mainly to extend the range of the curriculum offer available to learners in an area rather than as a strategy for improvement in leadership and management and teaching and learning. All LAs described some level of collaboration, which ranged from informal partnerships to highly structured formalised consortia models. All were seen to provide some degree of benefit to the overall 14–19 strategy and curriculum offer. Many LAs reported an increasing trend for schools to establish collaborative teaching arrangements, with students travelling between institutions to study their preferred course.
- 3.9.2 Common timetabling is rare as there are a number of difficulties of a practical nature, including securing transport in rural areas and establishing common starting times for the school day.

One LA did a study on the impact on students of learning in an alternative establishment, which showed students achieved the same results as predicted in their home school. Travel is also contributing to breaking down community barriers. The LA surveyed learner voice, and showed that young people valued and enjoyed collaborative working that broadened their horizons and helped get them ready for college.

## 4 School level sixth form leadership of improvement

### 4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 This section describes the level and type of overall school leadership, provision and improvements in school sixth forms and the steps being taken to improve outcomes for all students. Key areas addressed are:

- Leadership and management of improvement in school sixth forms
- Access to and use of data to inform challenge, support and learning to drive improvement
- Teaching and Learning
- Monitoring and evaluation of school sixth form performance
- Sixth form provision
- Governance
- Student Voice.

4.1.2 For this project Sixth Form Advisers carried out 32 direct school visits, representing a range in size, type and performance of sixth forms, arranged through LA officers.

4.1.3 A finding from a number of LA interviews was that their time and resource had been diverted away from sixth form performance management by the national agenda to improve KS2 - KS4. Evidence from other LAs and the school visits suggest a degree of benefit to sixth forms for those schools involved in other DCSF led improvement drives such as National Challenge and to a lesser extent Gaining Ground. This was thought to be due to the increased SIP/NCA time and support provided but also due to transfer of good practice from KS4 into sixth form.

4.1.4 The overall distribution of schools with school sixth forms that are also supported by the National Challenge, involved in Gaining Ground partnerships or supported through City Challenge is indicated in the table below:

	All	National Challenge	Gaining Ground	BCC	GMC	London
Number of <b>LAs</b> with school sixth forms (SSF) on LPUK data dashboard 2008	138	68	79	4	8	30
Number of <b>LAs</b> with positive returns underperforming (SSF)	56	27	24	3	2	9
Number of <b>SSF</b> listed on LPUK Data Dashboard 2008	1791	253	207	49	32	265
Underperforming <b>SSF</b> identified by LAs	187	62	36	20	3	21

## 4.2 Leadership and management of sixth forms

- 4.2.1 There is strong evidence of action being undertaken to support improvement in sixth form learning. Schools increasingly see the role of head of sixth form (Ho6) as focussing on academic issues rather than just a pastoral role. Where there is good sixth form leadership overall, the Ho6 is more often a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and contributes to strategic planning and self evaluation at a whole school level. Of the 32 schools visited 60% reported that they had a Ho6 who was attached to SLT; in such cases the role normally had a strong academic/curriculum planning and monitoring function. Schools usually allocate additional non-contact time to the Ho6 role. Only 10% of schools reported retaining a more pastoral role, one of which was a high performing grammar school.
- 4.2.2 Leadership of sixth form is reported by schools and LAs to be more effective where the head of sixth form is a member of SLT. In these cases priorities related to sixth form are considered as part of the whole school improvement agenda, not in isolation. Only 20% of schools reported that the Ho6 was a non-senior leadership position; in most of these cases there was a small sixth form and line management by a deputy head. There were other more unique models such as a sixth form specific management team, which included the head teacher, deputy head and director of sixth form and deputy director.
- 4.2.3 All schools reported an increase in the profile of the Ho6 and a move towards sixth form improvement priorities after a long period of focus on Key Stage 3 and 4.
- 4.2.4 About half the schools still maintained a predominantly academic AS/A2 level curriculum in the sixth form; 20% included some applied learning options at level 3 but it was less common to find level 2 opportunities available in the sixth form

except for re-sitting GCSE examination entries to improve grades achieved in KS4. Over half the schools provided BTEC options to complement and broaden their curriculum offer.

- 4.2.5 Nearly all schools visited had a sixth form improvement plan; about a third were separate and specific to the sixth form, including three RAPs, the other two-thirds had sixth form improvement priorities embedded in the school development plan.
- 4.2.6 Over three-quarters of the schools had some level of collaboration in place to support sixth form provision. Ho6 met as a group to share and improve practice, this was reported as a significance source of sixth form specific CPD.
- 4.2.7 CPD specific to sixth form improvement had been delivered in 40% of schools, with half of this focussed on understanding and using data, and the remainder on other aspects of the sixth form including leadership and management and teaching and learning.

The CPD plan supports teacher and department development. Each year a tailored 6<sup>th</sup> form CPD plan responds to the priorities identified in the annual subject audit and teacher review. Good practice in Teaching and Learning is also identified and examples are made available to all teachers through the VLE.

### **4.3 Data and student tracking**

- 4.3.1 In schools the tracking of sixth form students is reported to be improving but has lagged behind the improvements in tracking established in KS4, which is mainly due to the issues around availability and quality of data. Of the schools visited 40% used ALPS, 20% used ALIS, both at times supplemented by the LAT, FFT or the data dashboard. The earlier the data is available in the academic year the more likely the school is to use it. Again there were issues around the limitations of each of the different datasets, with regards to subject coverage, inclusion or not of BTECs and other vocational qualifications, and the lack of recognition for sixth form level 2 awards. There was almost no awareness of FfE reported at school level.
- 4.3.2 There was a general indication that the quality of tracking is improving and some good practice from Key Stage 4 is being transferred to the sixth form. 15% have individual learning plans in place for all students, the majority of other schools described student academic mentoring programme through tutorial sessions with discussions based on good quality data. Over 50% of schools reported 4-6 data collection points per year.

One LA has recently introduced, as a piece of developmental work, a post-16 tracker which can be populated when the October census information is available. Use of summary sixth form reports in schools is replicating good practice at KS4. The LA has also produced a simple audit tool for gauging the effectiveness of a school's system for tracking and improving sixth form achievement (with specific reference to the Ofsted Framework).

- 4.3.3 Collegiate structures require specific protocols for sharing data. Some school collaboratives have developed such protocols supported by shared systems and processes for data sharing (YH, SW, WM, NW).

#### **4.4 Teaching and learning**

- 4.4.1 The quality of sixth form teaching and learning is a common area of concern. There is general recognition that the support and good practice provided up to Key Stage 4 is seldom replicated in the sixth form. There is limited evidence of transfer of good practice into the sixth form and substantial evidence that students find the transition from supported KS4 teaching into more independent study and didactic less interactive teaching styles in the sixth form as challenging to manage. 25% of schools cited this as being a main contributor to high AS fail rates.

- 4.4.2 There appears to be little understanding or recognition of sixth form specific pedagogy across schools and LAs, and limited evidence of CPD in relation to improving the quality of teaching and learning. In 10% of the schools there was a strong strategic approach to improving teaching and learning, quality was good or better across the sixth form and priorities for improving teaching and learning were implemented through from KS3 to sixth form, including objective led lessons and AfL.

The CPD plan supports teacher and department development. Each year a tailored sixth form CPD plan responds to the priorities identified in the annual subject audit and teacher review. Good practice in teaching and learning is also identified and examples are made available to all teachers through the VLE.

- 4.4.3 Teaching is recognised by schools as tending towards didactic with schemes of work tending to be syllabus driven and not sufficiently building up a learning skills base. There is a growing awareness in schools that BTEC/OCR vocational qualifications at level 2 do not provide students with a good foundation of learning skills for AS/A2 courses.

A series of A5 booklets for post-16 students covering:

- 1) Organisation of Learning
- 2) Research, Reading and Writing Skills
- 3) Information-seeking Skills
- 4) Note taking
- 5) Vocabulary Improvement Skills
- 6) Referencing Skills
- 7) Presentation Skills
- 8) Revision and Exam Techniques
- 9) Personal Development Planning

The LA reports that the booklets are extremely popular with students and are widely used.

- 4.4.4 Networks for Ho6 are reported to provide some opportunities for practice transfer in subjects, but this was not commonly reported by schools. Schools in larger LAs also had access to a limited range of subject networks, which at times had a sixth form teaching focus, but again this was not commonly reported.

In one school the Transforming T&L Group is developing exemplar lessons as a basis for internal inset through the formation of “good practice groups” and teachers working in pairs, described as a form of “mini inset” to refresh practice and often conducted during twilight sessions.

- 4.4.5 Schools and LAs requested subject-specific adviser support for sixth form specialist subjects and reported that they had few specialist resources available to support their own improvement.

#### **4.5 Monitoring and evaluation: sixth form reviews and intervention**

- 4.5.1 Sixth form reviews were reported to have taken place in over half of the schools visited; this practice is often led by LAs as part of their authority-wide commitment to support improvement in both provision and achievement. Schools had used the outcomes from the reviews to set priorities and draw up sixth form improvement plans. Monitoring and evaluation was stated as good in 30% of the schools interviewed, but 10% of schools reported accountability arrangements were less strong and there were plans to introduce more robust monitoring and reporting systems.
- 4.5.2 All schools reported that there were regular cycles of lesson observation as part of whole school performance management arrangements; most specifically included sixth form lessons particularly where concerns had been raised about particular subjects or staff. The outcomes from monitoring fed into curriculum leader meetings for further discussion and planned actions. A very small number were unclear about the focus of lesson observations or the subsequent evaluation and action to be

taken. Several reported a lack of subject advisers available to support teachers identified in need of support through the monitoring processes.

One school had taken part in systematic school/LA review of sixth form provision in the school and this has informed its sixth form RAP and action plan. This plan provides a model of clear priorities and tailored actions that can be implemented within the timescales allocated. The plan is also rigorous in its expectations concerning the use of data to inform sixth form improvement. This plan is also shared with the SIP and LA team who advise on specific commissioning of support

## **4.6 Provision**

- 4.6.1 The majority of schools visited were part of a collaborative, partnership or federation of some type. All schools had taken this option for collaboration in order to broaden the curriculum offer for students. For some schools this was at a minimum, for example sending the least able to the local college. For 10% there was a much more strategic approach with data sharing and curriculum mapping to provide the best range of opportunities possible between and across schools and other post-16 providers. Of the schools visited about half still maintained a predominantly academic AS/A2 level curriculum in the sixth form; 20% included some applied learning options at level 3 but it was less common to find level 2 opportunities available in the sixth form except for re-sitting GCSE examination entries to improve grades achieved in KS4.
- 4.6.2 Over half the schools provided BTEC options to complement and broaden their curriculum offer. Only one school reported use of the diplomas into sixth form – difficulties with achieving success in functional skills was cited as a reason for not taking up diploma options.
- 4.6.3 Of the 32 schools visited 18 had above average AS fail rates; 14 schools were deemed to be small having less than 50 students at the end of AS/A2 and 10 of these were part of the above average fail rate group. Advisers explored some of the underlying reasons and in general the reason given concerned either match of curriculum offer to cohort ability profile or student ability to adapt to AS learning and skills requirements and teaching styles.

## **4.7 Governance**

- 4.7.1 Governance was reported to be supportive and challenging in 30% of the schools visited, with some examples of very good practice where governors have a sixth form monitoring group and a link governor for sixth form who visits and talks to staff and students. Other schools reported that governors had set sixth form improvement as a performance management target for the head teacher. Training

for governors on sixth form data had been provided in about one third of the schools.

#### **4.8 Student voice**

- 4.8.1 Of the schools visited over 50% reported a strong commitment to student voice and the importance of this, not only as a means of monitoring and evaluating the impact of improvement strategies in lessons and in provision, but also as an instrument to develop new and creative ways of working. The range of student involvement varied from pupil surveys and school council to full involvement in the strategic direction of the school. In one school sixth form students lead action teams, made up of School Council members, on ECM issues, Healthy Schools, engaging the community, teaching and learning. Overall the reports indicated a growing appreciation of the need for and value of student voice.

## 5 Appendices

### Appendix 1



30 September 2009

Dear Directors of Children's Services

#### **School Sixth Form Support and Challenge**

This letter sets out a number of actions relating to school sixth forms which need additional support to improve. As you know a review carried out jointly by the Department and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2008 revealed a lack of clarity about the accountability and performance management arrangements for school sixth forms both at institutional and local authority level and that consequently school sixth forms were not receiving consistently effective support and challenge to improve.

Following a request from Jim Knight MP (then Minister for Schools and Learners) in November 2008, the LSC has been working with local authorities to analyse data and discuss the quality and performance of school sixth forms with a view to identifying those school sixth forms in need of additional support to improve.

Ministers have now agreed that local authorities should take strategic ownership of this work going forward. This letter therefore sets out the key actions that local authorities will need to take forward to do this. These actions have been agreed with representatives from the Association of Directors for Children's Services, Local Government Association, Ofsted, National Strategies and the LSC.

1. **By 30 November**, local authorities through discussions between their 14-19 leads, school improvement leads, priorities conversations with SIPs and those partnership directors and managers nominated to transfer to the local authorities, should agree those school sixth forms in their area which need additional support to improve outcomes.

We expect local authorities to base their discussions on the validated 2007 and 2008 data provided by the LLUK Data Dashboard to give a 2 year trend. Whilst we accept that schools will have more recent 2009 data, this will be unvalidated and is subject to change. As such the data should not automatically rule them out of needing additional challenge and support as indicated through the validated trend data. National Strategies will be given the 2007 and 2008 dashboard data for all local authorities. They will provide support to local authorities to help them in making sure school sixth forms receive the support they need.

2. **By 4 December**, local authorities should inform their National Strategies regional team of the school sixth forms receiving support in their area and confirm that action planning has taken place. SIPs should work with the schools that have been identified to prioritise and commission support resources and sign off improvement plans.

National Strategies in turn will provide reports to DCSF detailing the school sixth forms receiving support in their local authorities and confirming that improvement plans are in place.

The LSC and DCSF are working with LGA and ADCS to agree how the quality improvement cycle fits with local authorities' new commissioning roles and drives the commissioning of quality provision. This will be reflected in the National Commissioning Framework, which is being published for consultation shortly. More immediately, details of specific support to local authorities and school sixth forms, together with information about future development work, are attached in the annex to this letter.

I have been grateful for the partnership working between local authorities and local LSC teams over the last academic year. It is now important for local authorities to continue to drive this work forward to ensure positive outcomes for all learners in every school sixth form. If you have any queries about this work please contact Linda Rose on 020 7340 8023 or e-mail at [Linda.Rose@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Linda.Rose@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk)

Sue Baldwin  
Director Young People's Participation and Attainment Group

## Support

The following central support has been put in place, or is being developed to assist local authorities and school sixth forms:

- the data dashboards which have been made available to all LAs have provided a comprehensive, user friendly data set for performance management. The LSC are contracting with Learning Plus UK to provide data for 2009, and longer term to include the dashboard as part of the YPLA data pack made available to LAs;
- DCSF is investigating how to provide comprehensive post 16 data through Raiseonline;
- SIPs have a clear remit through the Schools White Paper to monitor school performance including the sixth form;
- National Strategies will provide strategic support to LAs in working with those school sixth forms that need support; and
- NCSL have reviewed their Leadership Pathways course to ensure it is suitable for heads of sixth form. In addition they are piloting a sixth form project in London looking at sixth form specific issues. Once the pilot is evaluated DCSF will consider with NCSL how to roll this out more widely.

Local authorities should also be making the best use of the support available from high performing schools and should be drawing up a clear and costed menu of support for school improvement, empowering schools to invest in school improvement using local and national organisations from the public, private and third sectors.

## Future development

Future work on the alignment and convergence of performance assessment across the post-16 system will continue as part of the 16-19 transfer process, the establishment of the YPLA, and the further development of the Framework for Excellence. A key factor in the new post-16 performance assessment framework will be a renewed focus on improving the dataset to be more consistent and inclusive and for it to be available earlier. LSC is therefore working with DCSF, Ofsted, React and local authorities to develop the Framework for Excellence and processes for managing performance to ensure coherence and consistency and provide effective commissioning across all post-16 providers.