

Learning Agreement Pilots Process Evaluation

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Summary

The Activity Agreement (AA) and Learning Agreement Pilots (LAP) were launched in 12 areas of England in April 2006 for a two-year period. Activity Agreements were designed for young people (aged 16 or 17) not in employment, education or training (NEET) and operated in eight of the 12 areas. Young people had to be NEET for 20 weeks to be eligible. They received an allowance (three variants of which were tested in different pilot areas) and continuous support, in return they agreed to take part in tailored activities designed to help them progress towards an employment or education and training outcome. Learning Agreements were aimed at 16 to 17 year olds in jobs without training (JWT) and also operated in eight of the 12 pilot areas (ie both pilots operated in four areas and they each operated separately in four others). Under a Learning Agreement, young people took part in agreed activities, which included undertaking a designated course.

This summary focuses on findings from the Learning Agreement Pilots.

The Evaluation

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, what doesn't and the reasons for this
- **a process evaluation**, examining the ways in which the pilots have been set up and delivered and the main issues associated with their implementation.

This report focuses on the process evaluation, which comprised three waves of fieldwork in the pilot areas. Respondents included project managers, operational staff from Connexions and local LSCs, and representatives from education and training providers.

Key findings

In the first year, LAP had been slow to get off the ground and take-up rates, even with modified delivery targets, remained a challenge. The first year of the pilot was widely regarded as a set up year, given the delays in policy implementation and low take-up rates that pilot areas faced. Significant progress had been made during the second year of delivery. The decision to extend the pilot for a further year from April 2008 was welcomed, in order to embed the implementation of the pilot, which had largely only begun in the second year of delivery.

- LAP was an opportunity to engage with the young people in jobs without training (JWT) and their employers. LAP has provided an invaluable opportunity to develop a greater understanding of this segment of the youth labour market, which prior to the launch of LAP, had not been a key policy concern. It unearthed labour market intelligence about the JWT group and their employers, as well as developing an infrastructure to support the learning and training needs of the JWT population. This resource will be critical to support the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) agenda.
- Within LAP, young people were able to participate in the initiative within the framework of an agreed set of qualifications and the learner-led agenda became difficult to implement for a number of reasons.

- The focus of responsibility for local LSCs was to fund learning and training provision and to promote the initiative among employers. Connexions staff had concentrated to a much greater extent on identifying and contacting eligible young people. LAP has facilitated closer links between LSCs and Connexions at the local level, as well as developing greater competence among Connexions staff to work more effectively with employers and training providers.
- Take-up rates were highest in areas where provision was dominated by key skills, basic skills and Technical Certificate programmes - that is where young people were largely recruited to provision that had been set up before their entry to the programme.
- While flexibility over provision remained an issue, significant progress had been made in terms of identifying some training providers who could adapt their training delivery to support specific needs.
- The key to retaining young people on LAP was the continued support they received from LAP advisers, and to training providers and their employers. Young people who had support from their employer as well as PA support, were reported to have higher retention and completion rates.
- Attempting to meet the learning needs of young people and, as far as possible, the training needs of their employers within the parameters of the Section 96, which comprises the LSCs learning aims database (see section 6.3), has been a complex arrangement to deliver. The vexing issue of how to reconcile competing demands within LAP policy challenged its implementation.
- The piloting of LAP tested the effectiveness of using a combination of financial incentives, agreements and support to encourage participation in post-16 education or training among the JWT group. Evidence from the process strand of the evaluation of the LAP would suggest that some key lessons have been learnt to inform policy development.

Background

It was widely acknowledged that considerable movement or 'churning' took place among young people in the NEET and JWT groups. This was largely attributed to the nature and content of the employment available to young people in JWT and to the low level of aspirations often found among young people in the NEET group. The delivery of LAP heightened awareness of the strong inter-relationship between local NEET strategies and local economic development.

Management of LAP

The LAP was managed locally by Connexions Partnerships and local LSCs. Joint delivery responsibility for the LAP demanded that Connexions and local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) staff work together to manage the implementation of the initiative. In some cases, this was a new venture. During the course of the pilot, stronger links have been established between the two agencies. In addition, the LAP enabled Connexions Services to work more closely with training providers, since the implementation of the pilot has enabled Connexions staff to become more involved in the management and delivery of training provision.

LAP project managers were based within Connexions. They played a key role in local implementation, in terms of establishing and maintaining co-management roles with their counterparts within the local LSC, as well as taking strategic responsibility for the local implementation and delivery of the initiative.

The task facing project managers was more complex in pilot areas which comprised large numbers of local authority areas and required the need to set up multiple sets of contractual and management structures. Management and organisational structures tended to be more complex where a pilot area comprised a number of local authority areas.

Two models of implementation were in evidence:

1. **Local Area Autonomy** - predominantly in large pilot areas, where project managers within Connexions, had a strategic role in overseeing the delivery of the pilot by operating through a network of local managers.
2. **Central Management** - in pilot areas which comprised a small number of local authority areas, project managers retained responsibility for operational staffing and had a standardised approach to the delivery of LAP.

With regard to potential national roll-out, the demise of Connexions Partnerships and the re-integration of Connexions Services within individual local authority control, would mean that the 'umbrella' role carried out by project managers could not be replicated within any new arrangements.

The implementation of the initiative was also hampered by organisational change, which occurred within both Connexions and local LSCs and which adversely affected staff recruitment and retention to the pilot.

During the second year of the pilot, national LSC guidance had become more consistent and stable and consequently, operational staff at local level were more confident about the LAP 'offer' and how to promote it.

Staffing structures

LAP Advisers within Connexions needed a different skill set, compared with mainstream PAs. As well as being able to work with young people, LAP advisers needed to be able to 'sell' the concept of the initiative to young people and employers. They also needed an understanding of the available learning opportunities. Some new and redeployed Connexions staff found that working with employers and with young people to identify their training needs required new skills and/or challenged their existing skills. Difficulties were reported in recruiting and retaining staff who could work effectively with both young people and employers.

The recruitment of LAP Advisers within Connexions was slower in areas where staffing was managed by local authority personnel departments, due to the time taken to have vacancies and recruitment authorisation approved. This impeded the development of the initiative in some pilot areas. Staff recruitment had been more successful and sustained in areas where managers had employed staff from a wider range of backgrounds - in particular, staff with backgrounds in training and development and/or who had experience of promoting employment and training initiatives to employers and young people.

All areas reported that there had been a shortfall in operational staff recruitment. The delay in notifying pilot areas about the decision to extend the pilot for a further year, had led to some staff on fixed term contracts finding alternative employment.

Contracting provision

Local LSCs had set about contracting with local training providers in a number of different ways. In some areas, an invitation to tender for LAP provision had been issued to all learning and training providers and contracts had been re-negotiated on an annual basis. In four pilot areas, provision was contracted through consortia arrangements, in which the local LSC devolved responsibility for the management and delivery of LAP provision to a group of training providers. Setting up consortia arrangements and subsequent delays in brokering provision had impeded LAP delivery during its first year of implementation.

There were mixed views about the effectiveness of the consortia approach. Even within individual pilot areas, there were differences in performance and in levels of satisfaction with consortia arrangements between Local Authority areas. The consortium model worked well when:

- there was a strong lead provider who had effective communication with other partners, who was committed to the initiative, and had the ability to influence other providers
- there was a good relationship between the providers involved
- the consortia included a representation from all key training providers in the area ie colleges (large and small), voluntary sector organisations as well as private training providers, which could offer a breadth of provision which could be delivered flexibly, and
- the consortia had forged positive links with other local stakeholders, most notably the 14-19 partnership and Connexions.

Management Information

The lack of a uniform and fully operationalised MI system across all pilot areas had weakened the implementation of the initiative. Prior to the launch of any national initiative, a review of current arrangements needs to take place, so as to ensure that any national delivery of LAP is fully supported by one MI system, which is able to deliver data which are timely, responsive, consistent and accurate.

Delivery of LAP

Marketing and Promotion

While there was evidence of a wide range of marketing and publicity activity, it was the one-to-one engagement between LAP advisers and young people and to a lesser extent through employer engagement, which appeared to be the most effective strategies for entry into the initiative. Any future planning for the potential roll-out of the initiative may wish to review the likely added value for take-up rates of expenditure on marketing and publicity strategies and materials.

Using the CCIS database to identify young people in the JWT category had exposed inaccuracies in the data. A key lesson learnt from the LAP pilot, is that infrequent tracking of young people in JWT had resulted in a lack of up-date information about the JWT group and their employers.

A lower than expected number of referrals to LAP had been received from Business Links, local Chambers of Commerce, Train to Gain and other training brokers, despite initial hopes that these agencies would offer a route into the local labour market and more specifically, to employers who employed young people in JWT.

Provision

Take-up rates were highest in pilot areas where provision was established prior to young people's entry to LAP, in particular with regard to the delivery of key skills and Technical Certificate programmes. There were mixed views about the value of this approach. On the one hand, focusing on personal transferable skills equipped young people with the foundations to progress into Apprenticeship training, by enabling them to receive bite-sized chunks of a full framework agreement; it also brought throughput to LAP, in terms of numbers and completions and was fairly straightforward to deliver. On the other hand, there was concern about the extent to which this approach was really learner-led, as opposed to provider-led, and whether these programmes were what young people or employers really wanted and would offer *all* groups of young people routes back into learning.

Most areas had identified that private training providers could be more flexible than colleges, with regard to the delivery of LAP provision because they tended to be smaller organisations, focused on work based training delivery and were not working primarily within the confines of an academic year timetable for delivery.

While the piloting of LAP had provided some opportunity to instigate a limited degree of change to the scope and delivery of provision to young people in work, significant changes to training providers' behaviour had not happened.

Outcomes

During the first year of delivery, the biggest issue facing pilot areas had been securing sign ups to LAP. However, it was reported that retention rates were generally good. One area had a 70 per cent retention rate, which they attributed to the support given to young people by LAP advisers.

It was stated that the propensity for young people to drop out of LAP increased if the young person was not supported by their employer to take part in the programme, or where their employer was not aware that they were doing so.

Some young people were reported to be progressing to Apprenticeships after completing LAP. In addition, some young people were also completing LAP for a second time (sometimes as part of an Apprenticeship programme). Determining accurate retention and progression rates was hampered by the limitations of MI systems.

LAP: the employers' perspective

Participating employers welcomed the Learning Agreements. They felt that the LAP engaged young people in learning in a way that their school careers had not and helped them acquire job-specific, personal and social skills.

Employers signed up to Learning Agreements for reasons relating to: social responsibility, meeting skill needs or to enhance their existing training provision. Employers benefited from being able to take some of the risk out of recruiting an unskilled, inexperienced or possible immature employee. The Agreements paid for and provided a structure for training young employees, as well as encouraging employers to take a chance on employing them. Indeed some employers recruited young people with the Learning Agreement specifically in mind. Many also had a genuine desire simply to help a young person or to be seen as a 'good' employer, to the extent that some were not concerned with whether or not the training was directly relevant to the young person's job role. Having a better skilled and motivated workforce with the productivity improvements that this entailed was a driver but a less immediate or attributable benefit of the Learning Agreement.

Whilst providing free training was seen as important, with a few exceptions wage compensation payments to employers appeared to have little impact on their propensity to take part in the Learning Agreement. In contrast, employers thought that bonus payments to employees were important.

Employers felt that the process of taking part in the Learning Agreement was made very easy for them. In part this was due to the structure of the Agreements, which employers said created very little disruption to their businesses, and also the good quality information and support they received from Connexions staff. The Learning Agreements were therefore a straightforward means by which employers could support young employees.

Implications for national roll-out

- The introduction of LAP had enabled Connexions and local LSCs to work together to develop strategy to support the needs of young people in the JWT category. This is of great significance to any subsequent roll-out of the initiative and to policy makers supporting the implementation of the RPA agenda.
- The pilot has exposed severe problems with regard to the lack of capacity and resources among providers, most notably colleges, to offer a greater degree of flexibility and diversity to their range of provision, in order to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse group of learners.
- In terms of national roll-out, further consideration needs to be given to whether the needs of young people and employers can be successfully met within one initiative.
- Examples of good practice with regard to the lessons learnt from the implementation of LAP should be shared more widely between pilot areas and evidenced for potential national roll-out.

Future considerations

The three visits to the pilot areas constituted the key element of the two year process evaluation of the LAP pilots. The data gathered from these visits provide evidence which should assist policy makers in supporting the implementation of the RPA agenda.

There was substantial evidence to suggest that since there had previously been limited contact with the JWT population and their employers, LAP had been launched hastily. Prior to the implementation of the RPA, a rigorous appraisal of the needs of the JWT group and their employers needs to be undertaken, which should include:

- developing systems which provide up-to-date destination data on all groups of young people, including those in the JWT group
- training Connexions staff to develop their capacity to work with employers
- developing intelligence on local employers who employ young people in JWT
- introducing strategies to strengthen partnership delivery arrangements
- working with providers to ensure that provision needs are accurately assessed and widely available

- establishing some form of accreditation in sectors or organisations where significant amounts of in-house training are already being delivered, rather than persuading young people and employers to take part in other forms of training and development
- reviewing the feasibility of whether the learning and training needs of *both* young people and employers can be successfully delivered within one initiative. The vexing issue of how to reconcile these competing demands within LAP policy challenged its implementation.

In preparation for a post-RPA era, the following systems and structures should be considered:

- Since, one-to-one engagement with a young person and, to a lesser extent their employer, was the key to their participation in LAP, a much wider range of support should be established for young people who choose early labour market entry, including advice and guidance on local labour market opportunities, job placement support and in-work advice on their future learning and training needs
- Engagement with young people should be underpinned by the recruitment of guidance and support workers who are both confident in dealing with employers and competent in their understanding of the needs of young people in the labour market
- A greater degree of flexibility within the qualification framework should be introduced, in order to achieve a more attractive learning offer to all young workers, as well as ensuring that providers, most notably colleges, are required to adapt their delivery arrangements to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse cohort of learners
- Support to meet the learning and training needs of young people in the labour market needs to be located within guidance services, which are well-resourced and which have a clear identity within local authority structures.

1 Introduction

The United Kingdom has one of the lowest rates of post-16 participation in education or employment in Europe, with the problem being particularly acute at age 17. Just under ten per cent of 16 and 17 year olds in England, around 100,000 young people, do not participate in any form of education, training or employment. A further 85,000, around six per cent of the cohort, are in jobs, which do not offer accredited training. This pattern varies across the UK, although the nation has one of the lowest rates of participation in full-time education, especially at age 17, in Europe.

The 2005 Budget announced the piloting of two new initiatives aimed at extending participation in education and training among young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and young people who were in jobs without training (JWT). Sixty million pounds was allocated over two years to Activity Agreement (AA) Pilot to support and encourage disengaged 16-17 year olds back into learning. In addition, £80m over two years was allocated to Learning Agreement Pilots (LAP) for 16-17 year olds in work with no training to increase access to training options for this group. Activity Agreements and Learning Agreements were piloted in 12 areas of England from April 2006 for a two-year period. Young people (and in some areas, parents) were offered a weekly allowance in return for agreeing to a plan and completing activities to integrate them back into learning. In some pilot areas, young people received bonus payments in recognition of their achievements, and financial incentives were paid to employers in some LAP areas. A number of variants of AAs and LAP were piloted, with a view to identifying the most successful models. Table 1.1 sets out the pilot areas and the variants which were piloted.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), formerly the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 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 comprised three strands:

- **a summative evaluation**, which involved the collection of quantitative data in pilot areas and a number of control areas, in order to measure the effectiveness of the pilots
- **a process evaluation**, which explored the local implementation and delivery of the pilots in each area
- **a programme theory evaluation**, which aimed to identify and test the key theories which underpin the policy development. Essentially, this strand looks at what worked or did not work, and why or in what circumstances that was the case.

Table 1.1: Pilot areas for the Activity and Learning Agreement evaluation

AA area	AA variant	LA area	LA variant
Cornwall and Devon	Variant 2 £30 per week to YP	Cornwall and Devon	Bonus payment only
Greater Manchester	Variant 3 £20 per week to YP and £30 per week to family	Greater Manchester	Bonus payment and wage compensation
London East	Variant 3 £20 per week to YP and £30 per week to family	London East	Bonus payment and wage compensation
West Yorkshire	Variant 1 £20 per week to YP	West Yorkshire	Agreement only
Greater Merseyside	Variant 2 £30 per week to YP	Lancashire	Bonus payment only
Tyne and Wear	Variant 1 £20 per week to YP	South Yorkshire	Bonus payment only
Central London	Variant 2 £30 per week to YP	Black Country	Agreement only
Kent and Medway	Variant 1 £20 per week to YP	Essex, Southend and Thurrock	Agreement only

Source: IES / CEI Research Team

1.1 Learning Agreement Pilot (LAP)

The Learning Agreement pilot was a joint initiative between Connexions and the local Learning and Skills Council in each pilot area. The initiative was targeted at young people aged 16-17 who were working but not engaged in any accredited training. A Learning Agreement, which outlined the accredited training that the young person was undertaking, was drawn up between a Connexions Personal Adviser, the young person and their employer. The Learning Agreement was aligned to the following principles, outlined in the Learning Agreement Delivery Specification (December 2005).

- **Personalised:** agreed activities were tailored to the individual and took account of personal needs and abilities, determined by the profiling and assessment process undertaken by the young person with the Personal Adviser.
- **Participation:** focused on encouraging and supporting the young person to participate in accredited training.
- **Flexibility:** ensured, where possible, that learning provision was responsive and flexible to meet the needs of the young person and, where applicable, their employer.
- **Progression:** support and learning provision that provided appropriate progression routes for the young person to achieve higher-level qualifications if appropriate.

The eligible learning provision comprised all qualifications listed which were included under Section 96 of LSC's Learning Aims Database. This included qualifications accredited at Level 2 or above but not standalone NVQs. It contained:

- Apprenticeships
- Advanced Apprenticeships
- BTEC and similar FE courses
- GCSEs
- A-levels.

The provision may have supported progression to Level 2, as long as the learning plan also addressed basic and / or key skills; including:

- NVQ 1
- Technical Certificates
- Basic Skills (literacy and numeracy)
- Short courses over ten guided learning hours (and on section 96).

Stand alone Key Skills qualifications, including wider skills and those which support the LSC's Skills for Life Target, were also eligible.¹

1.2 Extension to the Activity and Learning Agreements

A twelve month extended period of trialling the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots, began in April 2008 and was accompanied by a number of changes to the delivery of both initiatives. These changes to local implementation were designed to increase take-up rates and develop approaches to support a raised participation age. The objectives of the pilots in the extension phase are to:

- test the effectiveness of brokerage and Learning/Activity agreements as a tool for re-engaging young people now and within the context of a Raising the Participation Age (RPA), in particular in relation to those dropping out of learning
- maximise the number of young people in JWT engaging with learning either with their employer or independently
- monitor and understand how the extension is managed and implemented in different areas and to highlight good practice and any problems in the process with a view to inform the current NEET/JWT situation and RPA
- understand what works (or does not work) within the extension: to understand how young people respond to agreements and brokerage and to understand for whom, in what circumstances, and in what respect the intervention has worked for the 'stock' of NEET and JWT and to inform how the approach would work under RPA.

¹ Sources: Learning Agreement Pilot Delivery Specification, December 2005. Learning Agreement Pilots Local/Regional Guidance May 2006. Learning Agreement Pilot Guidance, February 2007.

From April 2008, within the Learning Agreement pilot areas, the existing variants were retained, apart from in areas, which had operated a wage compensation model. A wage compensation model was no longer available to employers/young people recruited to the programme.

1.3 The Report

This report focuses on the presentation of findings from the three stages of the process evaluation, which constitutes the final report on the LAP from this strand of the evaluation (see Maguire et al., 2008, for a review of the first year findings from the evaluation). The implementation and administrative mechanisms through which the pilots were introduced were examined, with particular emphasis on the perceptions of those responsible for the pilots' local management. The views of those involved in the delivery of the pilots about their perceived relevance and impact and how they have been received in each locality, was also collected. In addition, two rounds of interviews were completed with a sample of employers in six pilot areas.

The next section of this report describes the methodology for the process evaluation. Chapter 3 considers the management of the Learning Agreement pilots. Chapter 4 then looks at the delivery of the Learning Agreement pilots. Chapter 5 explores the outcomes and emerging issues relating to the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA). Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the process evaluation.

2 Methodology

The aim of the process evaluation was to understand the local implementation of the pilots, map the context in which the initiatives were being piloted and highlight good practice. The process evaluation had three strands:

- data collection on the local implementation and delivery of the pilots
- the collation of contextual information
- employer research.

2.1 Data collection on the local implementation and delivery of the pilots

Data collection for the process evaluation primarily involved visiting the pilot areas three times during the course of evaluation. Findings from the three visits to the pilot areas are presented in this report.

2.1.1 Initial visits

Initial visits were made to all pilot areas in May/June 2006 and interviews were conducted with local project managers. Early visits to the Activity and Learning Agreement pilot areas enabled evidence to be collected on the initial implementation of the initiative(s), take-up rates and any reported 'teething problems'. A total of twenty face-to-face interviews were conducted with LAP project managers and LSC. The majority of interviews were tape recorded with the permission of respondents and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Findings based on an analysis of the data generated from initial discussions with project managers are presented here. Individual area profiles were drafted, in consultation with local project managers, and updated at the end of second round visits. For most areas, additional information was gained from copies of local delivery plans, and publicity and administrative materials.

2.1.2 Second round visits

A second round of visits to the pilot areas, to interview project managers and a range of other local stakeholders, took place during the latter part of 2006 and early in 2007. In all pilot areas (both AA and LAP), a roundtable discussion was held with project managers and local delivery staff and a maximum of eight face-to-face interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including education and training providers and representatives from Jobcentre Plus and the Local Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In order to provide a better understanding of local implementation models, the number of interviews with representatives from key organisations was extended in six pilot areas.

Most notably, there was an emphasis on expanding fieldwork in pilot areas that encompassed large geographical areas, those that covered a number of local authority areas, those which were delivering both pilots and those where separate management and delivery arrangements were in place to implement each policy initiative. Fieldwork was extended in the following pilot areas:

- Greater Manchester, which includes ten local authority areas and was delivering both the Activity Agreement (AA) Pilot and the Learning Agreement Pilot (LAP).
- West Yorkshire, which includes five local authorities and delivered both AAs and the LAP.

- London East, which is a large urban area (ten local authorities) and is delivered both the AAP and the LAP.
- Cornwall and Devon, which is a large rural area and delivered both AAs and the LAP.
- Greater Merseyside, which is a large urban area (six local authorities) and delivered AAs.
- Kent and Medway, which is an urban/rural area and had 11 access points to AAs across the area.

A range of data-gathering techniques, which were tailored to the particular requirements of each pilot area, were used. These included:

- in-depth face-to-face interviews (maximum of three) / telephone interviews (maximum of six) with representatives from key organisations, such as the local LSC, education and training providers and employer organisations
- scrutiny and analysis of reports and documents (eg publicity material, Learning Agreements)
- when appropriate, observation of procedures and practices, such as meetings between Personal Advisers (PAs) and young people to discuss Learning Agreements, payment issues etc.

This resulted in an additional nine interviews being conducted in each of the six pilot areas which have been identified as requiring additional fieldwork. During the second round visits to LAP pilot areas, a total of 155 respondents were interviewed and this constituted the largest fieldwork phase.

2.1.3 Third round visits

A final round of interviews with project managers and the second phase of the extended programme of fieldwork in six pilot areas was conducted at the end of 2007/early 2008. A total of 60 interviews were also conducted in LAP areas, which excluded the employer sample), during the third round visits to LAP areas.

Roundtable discussions and face-to-face interviews with project managers and other key staff were tape recorded (with respondents' permission), and were either transcribed verbatim or written up by the interviewer for subsequent analysis.

2.1.4 Employer research

A sample of employers was interviewed to examine their experience of, and views on, their involvement in the Learning Agreement Pilots. Interviews with employers involved in the pilot were carried out during the second and third round visits to pilot areas but for the purpose of this section we refer to wave 1 and wave 2 interviews with employers:

- 28 wave 1 interviews took place between January and March 2007
- 36 wave 2 interviews took place between November and February 2008.

Additionally, five interviews took place with employers not involved in the pilot.

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via the telephone.

In the wave 1 interviews, most of the employers that were interviewed were fairly small businesses, often family-run, with little or no experience of formal training or government supported training, from a wide range of sectors. In many cases, the businesses consisted of just two family members (usually father and son) with over two-thirds of all employers interviewed employing 25 or fewer people. Only four employers had more than 50 employees.

This pattern was similar for employers in the second wave of interviews in terms of the size of the companies. Again, only four had more than 50 employees and all but one of the employed 25 or fewer. However, there appeared to be more experience of other formal or government supported training and a smaller proportion (only six) were father/son or similar family arrangements.

3 Management of the Learning Agreement Pilots (LAP)

Key findings

- The introduction of LAP enabled Connexions and local LSCs to work together to develop strategies to support the needs of young people in the JWT category. Links have been strengthened between the two agencies during the course of the pilot.
- Project managers played a key role in local implementation, in terms of establishing and maintaining co-management roles with their counterparts within the local LSC, as well as taking strategic responsibility for the local implementation and delivery of the initiative.
- The task facing project managers was more complex in pilot areas which comprised large numbers of local authority areas and required the need to set up multiple sets of contractual and management areas. In addition, achieving consistency in terms of management and delivery arrangements was more difficult to achieve. This is a key message, which should be reviewed in the event of national roll-out of the LAP and the piloting of future initiatives.
- The implementation of the initiative was also hampered by organisational change, which occurred within both Connexions and local LSCs and which adversely affected staff recruitment and retention to the pilot.
- During the second year of the pilot, national guidance had become more consistent and stable and, consequently, operational staff at local level were more confident about the LAP 'offer' and how to promote it.
- Connexions LAP advisers required a different 'skill set' from mainstream operational staff, including the ability to work effectively with both employers and young people and the confidence to 'sell' the package to both client groups.
- All areas reported that there had been a shortfall in operational staff recruitment. The delay in notifying pilot areas about the decision to extend the pilot for a further year had led to some staff on fixed term contracts finding alternative employment.
- Provider consortia arrangements had taken a long time to establish and made the setting up and delivery of provision cumbersome and over-bureaucratic. There were mixed views about the effectiveness of the consortia approach, although valuable lessons, which should inform any future roll-out of the initiative, have been learnt.
- From the providers' perspective, referrals for LAP training had increased during the second year of the pilot and the providers' sample was more positive about, and more engaged with the initiative.
- The lack of a uniform and fully operational MI system across all pilot areas had weakened the implementation of the initiative. Prior to the launch of any national initiative, a review of current arrangements needs to take place, so as to ensure that any national delivery of the LAP is fully supported by one MI system, which is able to deliver data which are timely, responsive, consistent and accurate.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the context in which the Learning Agreement Pilots (LAP) were delivered, as well as establishing the ways in which the pilot areas set about managing the initiative. It also explores the extent to which partnership working assisted local management of the pilots.

3.1.1 Background

The Learning Agreement pilots were perceived to have offered Connexions Partnerships / Services the incentive to become more involved with young people who had entered jobs without training (JWT) and who, in recent years, had not been a strategic priority. Joint delivery responsibility for the LAP also demanded that Connexions and local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) staff work together to manage the implementation of the initiative. In some cases, this was a new venture. During the course of the pilot, stronger links were established between the two agencies. In addition, the LAP had enabled Connexions Services to work more closely with training providers, since the implementation of the pilot required Connexions staff to become more involved in the management and delivery of training provision.

It was widely acknowledged that considerable movement or 'churning' took place among young people in the NEET and JWT groups. This was largely attributed to the nature and content of the employment available to young people in JWT and to the low level of aspirations often found among young people in the NEET group. The delivery of LAP heightened awareness of the strong inter-relationship between local NEET strategies and local economic development.

3.2 Management delivery models

This section explores the approaches to design and delivery of the LAP, in particular the joint delivery of the initiative by Connexions and local LSC management.

3.2.1 Delivery plans

LAP delivery plans were drawn up jointly by Connexions and LSC senior management staff. They included proposals to deliver the pilot based on estimated population sizes, which had been calculated at national level. In consultation with national LSC and DCSF, substantial changes had been made to delivery plans. Population sizes had been over-estimated and delivery targets had to be more closely aligned to local estimates of the number of young people in JWT, which, in all cases, was significantly lower than national calculations. Throughout the two-year pilot phase, staffing figures had been re-profiled downwards in response to reduced population sizes and to lower than anticipated take-up of LAP.

3.2.2 Local project managers

Project managers were appointed to develop the initiatives in all pilot areas. In two pilot areas, one project manager oversaw the development of both the LAP and AAs. The role of project managers within Connexions Partnerships was to take strategic responsibility for the local implementation and delivery of the initiative, including the development and management of systems relating to IT and MI, as well as budgeting, marketing and staffing. In addition, LAP project managers had responsibility for establishing and maintaining co-management roles with their counterparts within the local LSC. There was very low staff turnover amongst staff at project management level.

The complexity of the task facing project managers in implementing the initiative varied between pilot areas. In some, the establishment of complex management and contractual

systems was directly linked to the network of local authority areas which co-existed in the locality. In many cases, pilot areas comprised a large number of local authority areas, each of which had separate procedures in place with regard to the Connexions management and delivery. If LAP is to be rolled out nationally, it will be important to establish contractual arrangements which ensure that a consistent level of support is secured across all local authority areas, ie Children's Trusts.

There was evidence to suggest that consistency was sometimes difficult to achieve within pilot areas where some Connexions Services were under local authority control, while others, in the same pilot area, had not completed their integration into local authorities. The delivery of LAP rested primarily on partnership working agreements, as opposed to service level agreements, which made any degree of enforcement more difficult to apply. In addition, in some pilot areas, project managers oversaw the delivery of the LAP across multiple local authority areas. This made the implementation of the initiative more complex, in terms of achieving coherence of delivery arrangements.

In all pilot areas, local steering groups or pilot boards were established at the early stages of the pilot and had, in most cases, continued to meet on a regular basis. They comprised representatives from local stakeholder groups, including education and training providers, sector skills councils, regional and local government offices, employer and voluntary groups and, in some cases, young people. In addition, project managers had regular meetings with local delivery managers and operational staff. In one pilot area, there was a joint steering group for LAP and AAs.

3.2.3 Joint delivery

Joint ownership over the design and implementation of the initiative had required closer working links between local LSC and Connexions staff, which led to enhanced working relationships between the two agencies over the two-year period. In a small number of cases, collaborative links were already well established between the two organisations prior to the introduction of the pilot. In some areas, posts were co-funded by the LSC and Connexions to encourage closer ties, and presentations and publicity about LAP had been planned and delivered jointly by Connexions and LSC staff. In other pilot areas, more formal links had been established to facilitate shared working between LSC and Connexions staff, including the drawing up of protocols that set out individual roles and responsibilities. In all LAP areas, the focus of responsibility for local LSCs was to fund learning and training provision, to promote the initiative among local employers and to develop links between Train to Gain and LAP delivery. Connexions staff had concentrated on identifying and contacting eligible young people for LAP provision and, to a lesser extent, they worked with employers to raise awareness about the initiative. However, second and third visits to the pilot areas found evidence of Connexions staff increasing the amount of contact with employers, as they had sought to enhance participation, and with training providers, as they became more directly involved in brokering and managing training provision.

3.2.4 Support at national level

There was widespread criticism in the first year of the pilot of the many changes to, and versions of, Guidance Notes that had been issued at national level. It was widely asserted that information received from national offices had been inconsistent. This had created confusion about the LAP offer at the local level, with regard to young people's qualification entitlement within the programme and its relationship to other government supported training provision, most notably Apprenticeships. The lack of definitive guidance was reported, by local management and operational staff, to have hampered the development of the pilot.¹ However, final round visits to the pilot areas found evidence that national guidance had become more consistent and stable and, consequently, operational staff at local level were more confident about the LAP 'offer' and how to promote it.

3.2.5 The impact of organisational change

The implementation of the initiatives had coincided with a programme of structural re-organisation for national and local LSCs and within Connexions Partnerships. Local LSC structures had shifted towards a regional agenda, which had resulted in staff levels, roles and responsibilities being changed. The impact of local LSC re-organisation on the delivery of the LAP had been that, in some LSC areas, insufficient numbers of staff were in post to manage and deliver the initiative at the early stages of the pilot, and the staff who were in post were often over-stretched.

Connexions Partnerships / Services were also facing structural change over a two-year period. In each local authority, Children's Trusts had been set up and the funding that goes directly to 47 Connexions Partnerships had been transferred to 150 local authorities. In parts of some pilot areas, this process had already taken place, while in other areas, all services moved within local authority control by April 2008. This led to some changes in the way in which the LAP was managed. For example, in one pilot area, when the Connexions partnership ceased to exist, the LAP contract was delivered by a private company, which found that it could no longer have open access to local Connexions offices, nor to their IT support services, once the Connexions function resided within individual local authority control.

3.3 Staffing structures

Project managers had teams of local managers who line managed operational staff. There were two types of management structure in place:

Type A - Local Area Autonomy

In pilot areas which comprised a small number of local authority areas, project managers tended to have had a direct involvement in staff recruitment and operated centralised control over the delivery of the pilot. In this model, while local managers were responsible for the day-to-day management of operational staff, there was centralised management and standardised delivery of the initiative across the pilot area.

¹ Learning Agreement Pilots Local/Regional Guidance was issued in May 2006. National guidance was discussed at a LAP conference in December 2006 and re-issued in February 2007 to help clarify LAP regulations.

Type B - Central Management

In pilot areas which were made up of a greater number of local authorities, a devolved management structure was in place. While local managers reported to their project manager, they held responsibility for the recruitment of operational staff, and significant variation existed between local areas in the ways in which the pilot was delivered. Third round visits found evidence of re-structuring within local management and delivery arrangements. In two areas, two or more local authority areas had been clustered together and were managed by a divisional manager, who reported directly to the project manager.

Significant delays with staff recruitment were reported in many pilot areas during first and second round visits. Where recruitment was managed within local authority areas, delays were caused when job specifications and staff recruitment had to be routed through centralised personnel departments, as opposed to being undertaken directly by Connexions Partnerships / Services. All areas reported that there had been a shortfall in operational staff recruitment, which was linked to a reduction in staffing needs due to the re-profiling of the eligible population and, in many cases, to problems associated with staff recruitment and retention. In particular, the delay in notifying pilot areas about the decision to extend the pilot for a further year had led to some staff on fixed term contracts finding alternative employment and had exacerbated staffing difficulties. In some areas, staffing levels were scheduled to increase as a result of the extension to the pilot.

Operational staff had been given a number of job titles, including those of Training Adviser, Learning Adviser, Brokers, Personal Adviser, Learning Development Adviser, Learning and Skills Broker, Keyworker and Training Pays Adviser. Within some pilot areas, different job titles existed between local authority areas.

3.3.1 Operational skill needs

The role of 'LAP adviser' was very different to that of the generic Personal Adviser (PA) operating within mainstream Connexions Services. PAs focused on working with young people and had received generic training to recognise and empathise with their personal needs. However, the delivery of LAP required a different set of skills, which included 'selling' the concept of LAP to both young people and employers, and many areas had initially struggled to recruit staff who could effectively work with both client groups. As a consequence, in some areas where LAP staff were employed or redeployed from existing Connexions personnel, problems were reported in relation to their ability and confidence in working with employers and, to a lesser extent, in having the diagnostic skills to identify the learning and training needs of young people in the labour market.

Staff recruitment had been more successful and sustained in areas where managers had employed staff from a wider range of backgrounds - in particular, staff with backgrounds in training and development and/or who had experience of promoting employment and training initiatives to employers and young people. In one pilot area, staff seconded from Jobcentre Plus were effective in using their customer care and employer engagement skills in promoting LAP.

The need for a different skill set among LAP advisers, ie 'selling' skills and the ability to work effectively with both employers and young people, is a key lesson learnt from the delivery of the pilot and will need to be acted upon in a national delivery model if the pilot is rolled out.

Two teams operated in some pilot areas - one concentrating on employer engagement, and the other working with young people.

'It's proved to be a really good mix. Because each are bringing in a particular set of skills and knowledge to share with the other and it has, I'm sure that's contributed a lot to our improved performance over the last six months.' Connexions local area manager

During the course of the two-year pilot phase, it was apparent that Connexions staff had become more confident in both their work with employers and about the objectives of the pilot. In some areas, there concern was expressed about the degree to which LAP advisers were not integrated with mainstream Connexions staff. This was attributed to the following:

- the temporary status of the LAP
- the differences in terms of background and skills between PAs and LAP advisers, and
- the lack of engagement of many Connexions staff with the local labour market and training providers.

'(LAP advisers) feel quite distant from what Connexions do on a day-to-day basis.'
Connexions local area manager

In some pilot areas, initiatives had been introduced to improve communications between LAP advisers and mainstream staff. These included organising communication workshops to help devise strategies to improve links with PAs working in schools and in outreach locations. In another area, monthly meetings had been set up between LAP advisers and school based PAs, to share information about caseloads and to help promote referrals between different groups of advisers.

3.3.2 Caseload targets

Lessons learnt in the first year of the pilot, in terms of gathering a more realistic understanding about the scale of the eligible population, the nature of their employment and the capacity of learning and training providers to match expectations, led to a reduction in the targets set for operational staff. Staff morale had been adversely affected when it had become apparent in the early stages of delivery that significant volumes of inaccurate data had been stored (since young people in JWT had not previously been a priority group), as well as by the amount of time it had taken to make contact with young people.

3.3.3 Location

The majority of LAP advisers were located in Connexions Offices. In some cases, LAP teams were organised either on a geographical basis or in terms of responsibility for young people working in specified occupational groupings. Some LAP advisers were

- located in a range of education and training providers' premises (including Train to Gain)
- based in a range of premises, such as voluntary organisations and partnership organisations which had agreed to act as host sites in each of the local authority areas.

This was reported to have aided networking opportunities with other agencies and had resulted in a system of referrals being established.

In one pilot area, responsibility for LAP recruitment was subcontracted to a range of education and training providers, with the aim of encouraging greater take-up of LAP using their employer links and their contact with young people leaving education and training provision. In this model, delivery staff responsible for LAP recruitment were employed by education and training providers.

3.3.4 Contracting with training providers

Local LSCs had set about contracting with local training providers in a number of different ways. In some areas, an invitation to tender for LAP provision had been issued to all learning and training providers and contracts had been re-negotiated on an annual basis. In other areas, there had been a focus on contracting provision within specific skills sectors where there was a concentration of young people in jobs without training and/or in allocated 'travel to learn' areas. At the early stages of the pilot, there were delays in the procurement of LAP provision in all pilot areas. These were attributed to the restructuring which was occurring within LSC, as this had impacted on staffing and, consequently, on the release of invitations to tender and contracts with local training providers. However, during the second year of the pilot, there was evidence that LAP contracting had 'bedded down' and was functioning well.

Consortia delivery

In four pilot areas, provision was contracted through consortia arrangements, in which the local LSC devolved responsibility for the management and delivery of LAP provision to a group of training providers. For example, in one pilot area, the tender specification for LAP provision stipulated that, within each local authority, there was a requirement for a consortia bid, which included representation from three out of the four key provider types, ie a college, a local authority, a voluntary/community organisation and a private training provider. In addition, it was a requirement that at least one member of the consortium had some experience of delivering Entry to Learning (E2E) provision. E2E is designed to help young people to develop their motivation and confidence, personal effectiveness and basic and key skills, and to give them a range of opportunities to gain vocational knowledge, skills and understanding. The aim is that young people will progress into an Apprenticeship, further learning and / or a job. Each consortium had a partnership lead organisation. While it was hoped that this approach would ensure a breadth of experience to deliver flexible provision to meet the needs of young people who are in jobs without training, consortia arrangements had further protracted contracting arrangements because of the time it had taken for some education and training providers to form partnerships. Delays were also attributed to the LSC's move towards a competitive procurement process. In one pilot area, it had taken 11 months from the start of the pilot to operationalise a consortium approach to the supply of LAP provision. In addition, some LAP advisers felt constrained by consortia arrangements, particularly when provision needs could not be fulfilled within the consortium.

During final visits to the pilot areas, there were mixed views about the effectiveness of the consortia approach. Even within individual pilot areas, there were differences in performance and in levels of satisfaction with consortia arrangements between local authority areas.

The consortium model worked well when:

- there was a strong lead provider who had effective communication with other partners, and who was committed to the initiative, as well as having the ability to influence other providers
- there was a good relationship between the providers involved
- the consortia included a representation from all key training providers in the area ie colleges (large and small), voluntary sector organisations and private training providers, which can offer a breadth of provision and can be delivered flexibly
- the consortia had forged positive links with other local stakeholders, most notably the 14-19 Partnership and Connexions.

Crucially, it was widely asserted that the key to harnessing effective consortia arrangements for training delivery also rested on having 'the right person in charge'.

It's the right person and the right partnership structure.....so that people see that their interest is in the partnership area and not in their own individual kind of financial and promotional drive, or whatever.' Project manager

From an LSC perspective, it was suggested that the lessons learnt with regard to contracting to deliver a consortia approach included the need for future specifications to be tighter, and, in particular, to provide evidence of:

- a clear structure
- a defined brokerage role
- the role of the lead provider
- the roles and responsibilities of individual providers
- time lines for delivery.

3.4 Management of LAP: the providers' perspective

Second and third round visits to the pilot areas included a number of interviews with education and training providers, which delivered LAP training. At the end of the first year, frustration was expressed at the lack of referrals that had materialised through LAP. Many respondents, in particular among representatives from consortia-lead organisations, felt that an enormous amount of time had been spent preparing bids and setting up consortia, which had, in the majority of cases, resulted in marginal delivery of LAP provision.

Referrals for LAP training had increased during the second year of the pilot and the providers' sample was more engaged with the initiative. Some respondents felt that Connexions staff had developed a stronger involvement in directing young people to providers. In addition, a basic skills provider felt that LAP had been an effective tool for establishing Skills for Life within the workplace and for extending the provision to groups of young people who would not normally access it.

There was also some concern among providers that were operating outside of local consortia arrangements about a lack of referrals, which was attributed to requests for training not being passed beyond consortia members. In some areas, providers would also have welcomed more engagement with employers and in setting up initial Learning Agreements with young people, as opposed to being solely involved in training delivery to young people.

'I think we could get more involved in setting the milestones, because really, the Learning Agreement is all agreed before we get involved.' Private training provider

3.5 Links with other stakeholders and employers

The implementation of LAP has enabled Connexions staff and, to a lesser extent, LSC staff, to strengthen their links with local stakeholders, most notably local authorities, Business Links, local Chambers of Commerce, Train to Gain and other training brokers. In addition, it enabled closer links with many national and local employers to be established.

A lower than expected number of referrals to LAP were received from Business Links, local Chambers of Commerce, Train to Gain and other training brokers, despite initial hopes that these agencies would offer a route into the local labour market and, more specifically, to employers which employ young people in JWT. In some areas, local referral systems included a fixed payment for each employer contact. The shift of responsibility for Connexions to local authority control had sometimes brought with it the need for project managers to raise awareness among local authority managers of the existence of LAP, as well as the roles and responsibilities of LAP delivery staff. In addition, in some areas, the shift in responsibility for Connexions had enabled project and local managers to identify that local authorities could be doing more to employ young people, especially through the Apprenticeship route.

One of the greatest challenges facing LAP delivery was employer engagement. Two specific issues were raised in relation to this issue. Firstly, since LAP was a pilot initiative and operated in a small number of areas, there were on-going issues related to securing the inclusion of national employers, in particular, national retailers and fast food chains. While some areas had negotiated the cooperation of local managers of national companies in LAP delivery, many local managers would not engage with LAP, since agreement had not been secured at national level. While there were 'pockets of success' with national companies, it was suggested that stronger links need to be established with the National Employers' Service. One pilot area was planning to appoint a National Employers' Coordinator to develop a database and to develop closer links with large companies working in the local area.

Secondly, securing the engagement of employers which employ young people in JWT, many of whom had rejected any engagement with other training incentives and/or attached any real value to training young people, was an on-going issue. While significant progress had been made in many areas, most respondents concluded that they still had a long way to go in terms of persuading employers who did not see any value training, to participate in LAP.

'I do agree that the employers are difficult, especially our harder to reach employers that don't train with the lower skill jobs. They are very, very difficult, and how we are ever going to convince them, you know, someone just picking and packing in a warehouse, you know, needs skills.' LSC representative

'In terms of employer engagement, I think it's a really valid project, but it's extremely challenging because - particularly for the SME, the type of employers that we're targeting - because of their issues in terms of releasing young people during work time.' LSC manager

3.6 Management information requirements

'MI has been a pain since day one of the pilot. It's on every meeting, every agenda.'
LAP project manager

Most project managers reported that MI requirements had been difficult to manage and time-consuming throughout the life of the pilot. On-going changes to data requirements at national level had meant that 'add-ons' had to be incorporated into the CCIS system, which made data delivery onerous and cumbersome. In addition, it was reported that many LAP advisers were not familiar with the operation of the CCIS system, and this had also impeded MI delivery. It was widely felt that LSC at national level had not fully appraised their own data needs or understood the parameters of Connexions data systems. Consequently, the on-going changes to data requirements had become a source of deep frustration at local level. It was also reported that the MI system was further complicated by both Connexions and local LSC providing monthly reports. While Connexions submitted the majority data return, the LSC return had a different set of rules and regulations attached to it.

There was a consensus among respondents, about the demand for a clear definition of data requirements at national level, as well as some feedback on why certain types of data were needed. This would ensure that data were recorded in a consistent way across all pilot areas, thereby enabling performance between areas to be measured in an accurate way. For example, confusion and inconsistency had arisen over definitions of a 'sign up', the 16 hour rule and employer engagement.

One respondent suggested that a centralised MI system that had been developed for E2E data collection, and was based on Lotus Notes, should also be explored for LAP. This system enabled all parties, including providers, to access the system. Young people can be referred directly to providers through the system, as well as having the ability to issue notices about non-attendance via e-mail alerts.

4 Delivery of the Learning Agreement Pilots (LAP)

Key findings

- While there was confusion among delivery staff in the early stages of the pilot about the LAP 'product', operational staff were confident about the implementation of LAP in the second year of the pilot.
- The CCIS database was widely used to identify the eligible population in the JWT category, although it had exposed inaccuracies in the data stored. A key lesson from the LAP pilot was that infrequent tracking of young people in JWT had resulted in a lack of updated information about the JWT group and their employers.
- Direct contact with young people and, to a lesser extent, their employers, was the primary recruitment strategy to LAP.
- While most pilot areas had held discussions and/or set up agreements with Train to Gain brokers, Business Link advisers and representatives from local Chambers of Commerce, a small number of referrals had been received from these organisations.
- Marketing and promotion materials and events supported direct engagement activities with young people and employers. However, any future planning for the potential roll-out of the initiative may wish to review the likely added value for take-up rates of high expenditure on marketing and publicity strategies and materials.
- Take-up rates were highest in pilot areas where provision was established prior to young people's entry to LAP, in particular with regard to the delivery of key skills and Technical Certificate programmes. There were mixed views about the value of this approach. On the one hand, focusing on personal transferable skills equipped young people with the foundations to progress into Apprenticeship training by enabling them to receive bite-sized chunks of a full framework agreement; it also brought throughput to LAP, in terms of numbers and completions and was fairly straightforward to deliver. On the other hand, there was concern about the extent to which this approach was really learner-led, as opposed to provider-led, and whether these programmes were what young people or employers really wanted and would offer all groups of young people routes back into learning.
- Most areas had identified that private training providers could be more flexible than colleges, with regard to the delivery of LAP provision, because they tended to be smaller organisations, focused on work based training delivery and were not working primarily within the confines of an academic year timetable for delivery.
- While the piloting of LAP had provided some opportunity to instigate a limited degree of change to the scope and delivery of provision to young people in work, there had been no significant changes to training providers' behaviour. This was attributed to:
 - LAP numbers, and hence associated funding, being too small to warrant change among providers; and
 - the targets set by LSC on an annual basis not demanding the changes to delivery that LAP policy was initially seeking.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the issues that emerged during the evaluation team's three visits to the pilot areas, in relation to the delivery of the LAP. In particular, it focuses on marketing and brokerage of the LAP, application and payment processes and identifying and procuring LAP provision.

4.2 Marketing and brokerage

Marketing and publicity of LAP targeted at young people was largely driven by Connexions, since they were the main budget holders for this area of implementation. Pilot areas had been very active in identifying target populations, raising awareness and informing potential applicants about the existence of the provision. Direct contact with young people and, to a lesser extent, their employers, was the primary recruitment strategy. During the course of the pilot, expertise has been developed in recognising the times in an annual cycle when marketing should be targeted at young people (ie over the Summer / Autumn months when school leavers are entering the labour market) and other periods of the year when more attention should be directed at the employer route. Direct contact was supported by an array of marketing and publicity materials and events, in order to raise awareness of the initiative and to stimulate self-referrals.

4.2.1 Direct contact with young people

The main tool used within Connexions services to identify the target population of young people was the CCIS database, which stored destinations data on young people. The first year operation of the pilot exposed severe problems with regard to the reliability and accuracy of CCIS data on the JWT group. Since young people in JWT had not previously been a priority group for Connexions, in terms of conducting regular follow-ups of their status following the completion of compulsory education, the data stored on the JWT group was often out of date when young people were contacted about joining LAP. The use of CCIS data to market LAP to young people exposed a need for ongoing, rather than one-off, follow-up for all groups of young people, not only those who were defined as NEET.

During the first year of the pilot, there was widespread frustration felt by LAP advisers with regard to the slow progress that had been made in identifying the eligible population and in encouraging young people, as well their employer, to sign up to LAP. They often made multiple telephone calls to young people before some contact could be established and evening and weekend working was required in order to maximise the chances of young people being available. It was found that a substantial number of young people who were reported to have been eligible for LAP had either changed their destination status, most frequently by becoming NEET, or were unable to be contacted.

However, despite the difficulties, direct contact with young people was the most effective route to securing participation in LAP. During the second year of the pilot, Connexions personnel had reappraised their expectations of the CCIS database, and had developed a greater understanding about when, and where, young people could be contacted in order to maximise their chances of securing sign-ups. In essence, their level of understanding about young people in JWT and their employers had increased greatly as a direct result of LAP delivery. This understanding will also have direct benefit to the RPA agenda in that LAP delivery had effectively 'taken the lid off' the issues and challenges of identifying and working with the JWT population and their employers. As the pilot developed, LAP advisers were also working to a much greater extent with school based PAs, in order to promote LAP to young people before they completed Year 11, and with community based PAs. An increasing number of referrals were secured from training providers, in particular E2E providers, who had contact with young people who were leaving training programmes and moving directly

into employment. A limited number of referrals were achieved through 'word of mouth' recommendations, and a payment/gift voucher was being offered in some areas to young people who had successfully referred a friend to the programme.

'We've tried radio advertising, we've tried press advertising, we've done all sorts really but to be quite honest for us, nothing has worked better than picking up the 'phone to those young people and saying 'We believe that you are in work. Would you be interested in this?' Connexions local manager

The most effective engagement tool was the day-to-day work of LAP Advisers contacting and working with young people and their employers to explain the initiative and to promote the importance of training.

It was suggested by one Project manager that the accuracy of data on the JWT group could be improved by the reactivating of a statutory instrument called F2404, which required employers to notify Connexions if they employed a 16/17- year old school leaver.

4.2.2 The employer route

The employer route into securing sign ups to LAP had generated a lower than expected response to the initiative. While most pilot areas had held discussions and or set up agreements with Train to Gain brokers, Business Link advisers and representatives from local Chambers of Commerce, there was disappointment at the small number of referrals that had been received. This was attributed to LAP being a pilot initiative and to 16-18 year olds not being a key part of their targets within their overall business strategies.

In some pilot areas, concern was expressed about the lack of co-ordination with regard to contacting and working with employers. In some cases, LAP advisers, Train to Gain Brokers, LSC staff and representatives from LAP training providers retained some responsibility for local employer liaison. There was a risk that duplication of effort had occurred and that some employers, in particular small firms, had received multiple visits/calls, which may have contributed to negative outcomes. Despite the efforts made to raise awareness about LAP, in a number of pilot areas it was felt that a lack of awareness, understanding and credibility had continued to surround the initiative amongst many employers. In addition, it was asserted that Train to Gain had failed to share local labour market intelligence about the extent to which local employers were known *not* to recruit young people. This would have saved significant amounts of time and effort on the part of LSC and Connexions staff.

Second and third evaluation visits showed increasing evidence that LAP advisers and managers had developed strategies to work more closely with employers and other organisations, including LSC, in order to secure other referral routes into LAP. This included:

- LAP advisers 'cold calling' employers to raise awareness of the initiative
- promotional events
- commissioning telemarketing agencies to undertake a telephone recruitment exercise with local employers

- celebration events were organised to recognise the achievements of young people on LAP. Employers and LAP advisers also received awards, in recognition of the support they had given to young people. In one pilot area, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills attended the event as guest speaker.

Promotional and celebration events were successful in raising awareness about the existence of LAP in the local area, rather than securing immediate sign-ups to the programme. There was evidence that the telemarketing approach had resulted in very few referrals.

In one pilot area, an Employer Engagement Team has been set up to work across local authority areas to generate LAP referrals. They worked with Train to Gain and other brokers, Sector Skills Councils and local Chambers of Commerce, as well as 'cold calling' from employer databases. In addition, they accompanied Connexions staff on employer visits. The team was staffed by JobCentre Plus personnel, who had the experience of employer engagement work and it was managed by a senior Personal Adviser.

4.2.3 Marketing and publicity strategies

There were abundant examples of different types of marketing and publicity strategies which had been developed, and of good practice. The main challenge had been the pilot nature of the initiative and the inability to move beyond local branding.

'They do kind of think, "Oh it's just another initiative".' Connexions manager

In some pilot areas, marketing and publicity groups had been set up to develop promotional events and materials. One involved a marketing coordinator being appointed to cover both AAs and LAP delivery. LAP promotional events and materials developed within pilot areas included:

- circulating briefing sheets about the LAP to Connexions PAs
- briefing sessions for local Connexions staff and management committees
- briefing sessions/visits to local stakeholders, including Chambers of Commerce, training providers and other brokerage groups
- the production of information folders for young people and employers
- media coverage, including radio and cinema
- mailshots to employers, including use of e-mail
- publication of case studies
- purchase of the Thompsons Employer Database
- locating LAP advisers (who promote LAP) in providers' premises
- establishing a weblink from the Connexions website about LAP
- placing LAP advertisements on local buses

- publicity in commercial magazines targeted at SMEs
- targeting specific sectors of employment where there are known to be a number of young people in jobs without training, eg hospitality and catering, manufacturing and construction.

Other ideas included focus groups of young people, as well as employers and employer organisations being commissioned to gain feedback on the most effective forms of LAP marketing and publicity.

One pilot area had developed a Best Practice Framework, which aimed to capture good practice. Nominated senior staff led themed groups (eg marketing or recruitment), which comprised staff from each of the local authorities within the pilot area. In most areas, performance reviews were also conducted by senior Connexions / LSC staff in order to monitor progress, to determine best practice and to identify training needs. A Best Practice Day was also organised.

4.3 Identifying, procuring and managing provision

Within LAP, the responsibility for the procurement of provision rested with the local LSC. Local LSCs had either set about contracting with a range of providers or had set up consortia arrangements (see section 3.3.4). While many providers tried to be more responsive to individual needs, this had not proved cost-effective or practical in many instances. Furthermore, the low numbers entering the pilot meant that many providers which had shown great enthusiasm towards the initiative when it was first launched, were reluctant to invest large amounts of time and effort to develop tailored packages of learning for young people and, in some cases, to change their patterns of working when they had other large contracts to deliver - most notably Apprenticeships and Train to Gain. In essence, there was concern about the mismatch between how and where the pilot required learning to be delivered and the capacity of learning providers to meet those needs.

While there were examples of provision which had an individualised approach to learning, the bulk of learning provision within LAP consisted of key skills, basic skills and Technical Certificate programmes, where there was an emphasis on establishing contracts and courses with providers prior to the recruitment of young people.

Frustration was felt by Connexions staff when they could not access a suitable programme of learning, despite having successfully recruited young people and their employers to the programme and having identified their training/learning needs. The reasons given for this were: specific courses not being available in the area; courses being unavailable at the time they were needed; and/or courses not being offered on an individual basis. Specific difficulties centred around September start dates for courses delivered by FE colleges and the lack of flexibility in the delivery of courses which were in high demand, such as construction skills programmes.

Issues of a lack of flexibility with regard to the types of provision available, as well as their delivery arrangements, continued during the second year of the pilot. In addition, LAP provision continued to be driven by a 'supply led' agenda.

'They tend to go and take what the available provision is and try to influence the employer and the young person to take that on board.' LAP project manager

However, some pilot areas did report that some progress had been made during the second year of the pilot. For example, most areas had identified that private training providers could be more flexible than colleges in the delivery of provision because they tended to be smaller organisations, focused on work based training delivery and were not working primarily within the confines of an academic year timetable for delivery. Colleges which had appointed a LAP coordinator or had a Work Based Learning Coordinator who could work across college departments and different campus sites, were found to be more responsive to the needs of the programme. Some college coordinators had made joint visits to employers with LAP advisers.

There were mixed views about LAP provision being dominated by Key Skills delivery. On the one hand, some respondents argued that Key Skills offered young people a route and a stepping stone back into learning, either to Apprenticeship training, by enabling them to receive bite-sized chunks of a full framework agreement, or into full-time learning. On the other hand, there was a weight of argument which suggested that Key Skills delivery was largely driven by its ability to be offered flexibly and within a short time frame, rather than being demanded by young people or their employers. Some young people were reported to be embarrassed by undertaking a Key Skills programme, since they felt that there was stigma attached to having perceived difficulties with numeracy and literacy. In one pilot area, a consultant had been appointed to assist training providers to integrate Skills for Life provision within vocational skills provision, in order to contextualise learning. In another area, key skills delivery was offered to young people through home visits or at Connexions offices, in order to broaden out the options about where learning might take place and to make it more attractive.

The piloting of LAP had provided some opportunity to instigate a limited degree of change to the scope and delivery of provision to young people in work. For example, two pilot areas have worked together to develop the offer of Level 1 construction training to young people on-site, as well as within a totally flexible timetable for delivery. However, significant changes to training providers' behaviour had not happened. This was attributed to the LAP funding being too small to warrant change and because the targets set by LSC on an annual basis did not demand the changes that LAP policy was initially seeking.

'I think the flexibility of provision, the sort of Martini effect – any time, any place, any where. We don't quite expect that, but we expect something to move towards it.' LAP project manager

The lack of flexibility in LAP made the initiative more difficult to market and promote to young people and their employers and the concept of 'shoehorning' young people and their employers into existing provision was essentially sustained.

'We've got two kids starting in January that will start GCSE English that they'll do on an evening.....I think they do that on a Monday night. Just being able to fit them kids into what's available at the time, you know. So yes, there is a lot of part-time... which is mainly what we're looking at. Yes, ...slot them into it.' Senior LAP adviser

There were demands for more flexibility to be introduced to Section 96 (LSCs list of approved qualifications for LAP delivery), especially for taster programmes and part NVQ qualifications, which would act as a 'hook' to engage young people. The creation of a Discretionary Fund (similar to that which is available within the Activity Agreement Pilots) would have enabled LAP advisers to broker provision, as well as given them the capacity to offer young people assistance with travel and equipment costs, where this was needed. A number of pilot areas reported that young people were unwilling to travel to access training and some of this reluctance was attributed to the costs that would be incurred, which cannot currently be met within LAP funding. In addition, during the second year of the pilot, it was reported that LAP

advisers were more confident about working with individual training providers to broker provision, especially in areas where they had previously relied on consortia leads to organise training.

Another area of tension surrounding the implementation of LAP was reconciling young people's demands for learning/training with those of their employers. It was reported that, in some pilot areas, employers supported young people's choice of learning whether it was vocationally relevant to their work or not, while in other areas young people were largely unsupported by their employers. This variance in attitude was not linked to the payment of incentives. It was often stated by respondents that the financial incentives on offer within LAP did not determine employers' willingness to participate in the initiative. In contrast, it was the employer's commitment to support the young person that made the difference. There was a demand from LAP advisers for a mixture of provision, in order to capture the demand made by both young people and their employers.

'the thing is when you're dealing with 16/17-year olds who are in jobs without training, they haven't necessarily gone to work in a fish and chip shop because they're passionate about selling fish...they need the money. So we are...quite a few sort of aspirational courses for them to move on maybe into what they really want to do.'
Senior LAP adviser

Demands for training which could not be delivered within LAP included taster courses, short courses, such as food hygiene, food safety and first aid and vocational courses, such as carpet fitting, horticulture, and landscape gardening. The demand for construction courses remained largely unfilled, due to the demand for places and the inflexibility of colleges towards offering roll-on roll-off programmes. Some areas were offering young people Key Skills programmes as interim provision until they could access construction programmes, which tended to start in September.

4.4 Application processes, monitoring and payment systems

Applications from young people for entry to LAP were managed by Connexions. When a young person had expressed a willingness to join the pilot, either as a result of telephone canvassing or by referral from another organisation, a LAP adviser arranged to meet them to discuss the programme in more detail. In some areas, an APIR was conducted. This was followed up by a visit to their employer, either by the LAP adviser or by a training provider (in some areas, joint visits were made). The first stage of the application process was completed when a Learning Agreement was signed by the young person, their employer and the LAP adviser. If an employer was not involved, they were not included in signing the Agreement. In all areas, the number of Learning Agreement completions was significantly higher than the number of activated ILRs, due to the time taken to trigger training activity and complete MI procedures. If training provision was readily available, it was reported that the average length of time taken to complete the application process was approximately four weeks.

LAP Advisers were spending significant amounts of time tracking eligible young people and conducting regular follow-ups of those who had expressed indifference or uncertainty about the pilot at the first point of contact. The number of sign-ups to LAP often failed to reflect the effort that had been made to track and engage eligible young people and their employers.

Monitoring

Both LAP advisers and training providers were responsible for monitoring the progress of young people on LAP. LAP advisers either visited young people (usually while they were undertaking their off-the-job training) or conducted telephone/text message follow-up. The frequency of follow-up contact varied between monthly and three-monthly. Contact with

young people also varied, depending on whether they were completing an Apprenticeship programme as part of LAP. Young people on Apprenticeship programmes received more on-going contact from their training providers. Training providers were responsible for submitting young people's attendance data and progress reports to Connexions and, in some areas, standardised systems were being developed to facilitate this process.

Payments

In pilot areas where payments were made, monitoring activity preceded payments to young people and employers. Bonus payments to young people were made at different milestones, such as when the Learning Agreement had been signed or when training activity had started. Some respondents felt that more guidance should have been issued regarding the payment of bonuses, so that greater levels of consistency could be achieved both within and between pilot areas.

In the second year of delivery, changes had been made to payment processes. While many initial payments had been made at the sign-up stage, a number of young people had failed to start their training, which may have begun a few weeks later. In order to reverse this trend, initial payments were transferred to the beginning of the training period.

Payment procedures to young people were reported to be efficient, since they are made at intermittent intervals. In contrast, in areas where wage compensation was paid to employers, it was described as an 'administrative nightmare' to manage payments. Records of training attendance from training providers, as well as single claims from every employer on wages lost as a result of young people attending training needed to be collected and verified before payments could be made. The collection of accurate and timely data from both training providers and employers had been difficult and, consequently, significant delays in making payments had occurred. A simpler procedure would have been to offer employers a standard payment and to seek quarterly returns from training providers on young people's attendance records.

5 Employers and the Learning Agreement

Key findings

- The Learning Agreements were welcomed by participating employers who recognised that there were a range of potential benefits. For the employee these benefits included the acquisition of job-specific, personal and social skills as well as engaging them in learning in a way that their school careers had not. The motivations for employers to get involved can be described as falling into three categories: social responsibility; meeting skill needs or enhancing their existing training provision.
- The LAP was successful in engaging with a number of employers who had not previously engaged with government supported training initiatives.
- Many employers had an altruistic view and simply wanted to help a young person or to be seen as a 'good' employer, to the extent that some were not concerned with whether or not the training was directly relevant to the young person's job role.
- The main business benefit cited was to take the risk out of recruiting an unskilled, inexperienced or possible immature employee. The Agreements paid for and provided a structure for training young employees, encouraged employers to take a chance on employing them and some employers recruited young people with the Learning Agreement specifically in mind.
- Having a better skilled and motivated workforce with the productivity improvements that this entailed was a driver, but a less immediate or attributable benefit of the Learning Agreement according to employers. Instead, it seemed that the Learning Agreements supported employers to continue to address skills needs which they had identified, or were addressing, irrespective of the LAP.
- Providing free training was seen as an important benefit of the LAP, however, with a few exceptions wage compensation payments to employers appeared to have little impact on their propensity to take part. In contrast, employers thought that bonus payments to employees were important.
- Employers felt that the process of taking part in the Learning Agreement was made very easy for them. In part this was due to the structure of the Agreements, which employers said created very little disruption to the business, and also the good quality information and support they received from Connexions staff. The Learning Agreements were therefore a straightforward means by which employers could support young employees.

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we look at the role employers have played in the Learning Agreement. This chapter is based on 69 employer interviews (see section 2.1.4 for details) and also the views of Connexions and LSC staff involved in delivering the Learning Agreement Pilots. For many employers who took part in the study, this was their first experience of a formal government supported training programme for young people. Therefore, the LAP was successful in engaging with a number of employers who had not previously engaged with government supported training initiatives. Making contact with employers, especially many small firms, through their young workers had provided another route into securing employer engagement in formal training activity.

Around one in three employers in the wave 1 and half in the wave 2 said they had some previous experience, mostly of NVQs although a handful had been involved in Apprenticeships and some also mentioned previous involvement with Youth Training Schemes. Train to Gain was cited twice in each round.

Broadly speaking the findings from both rounds of interviews were similar. Where there appeared to be differences between waves or regions this has been made explicit.

5.2 Approaches and attitudes to training

Most employers who were interviewed about Learning Agreements did not have formal work-related training programmes in place for their employees and, in particular, for young people working in their establishments. Despite this, as might be expected from their involvement in the Learning Agreement Pilots, they expressed a broadly positive approach to employee training. A small number of employers had experience of Investors in People but many more spoke of the benefits of training for employees and, to a lesser extent, for the business.

In many cases, because of the size of the business, there was no personnel or human resource function within the company, and thus training was relatively unstructured. What training there was, tended to focus on the immediate needs of the business rather than on the broader needs or longer term ambitions of the employees. However, many interviewees recognised that they could do more.

'Probably not very good in the past, but we hope to improve that in the future. We've just relied on what training we can give them regarding [their job role]. But today there is much more that we can get involved with.'

'Very informal. It's not a particular priority because we've not normally had the need to train people - our staff have been fairly static. So our desire to train people and our ability to train people is fairly low at the moment. We will train them as we require without any problem. But train from the employee's point of view, what they may require? No we're not concerned with that, we train them to particular jobs within our business.' Employer

For some respondents, cost was an issue - both in providing the training and in giving employees time to do it - and a few explicitly said that they preferred to recruit suitably trained and / or qualified members of staff rather than provide training. However, this brought its own problems.

'We were thinking about whether to have a trained person, but it can be hard to get those to come for the wages, so we thought it would be best to get a trainee and train them up.' Employer

Most employers felt that training was most pertinent for their younger employees since, they said, many older employees were already experienced and skilled enough. Some felt that younger people were more flexible in their approach, wanted to gain experience and were keen to acquire skills. Some employers used this willingness to mould the young people into the kind of employees they needed. They felt that since both sides benefited it was not a cynical or exploitative move, rather it was a pragmatic response to problems that they perceived or experienced.

'You've got to employ young people if you want to train people up.' Employer

'Largely because you cannot get people to do the job - people in their 50s and 60s are going to be non-existent in the future so you need to bring young people in through the ranks, train them up and give them qualifications and turn them into skilled professionals.' Employer

Many employers used induction or training to ensure that the young people learned to work in what the employers saw as the best way. One common way in which new staff, and young people particularly, learned how to do their jobs was by 'sitting with Nellie' ie working alongside a more experienced member of staff.

'We have the way we do it, and we think that's right so we'll stick to it' Employer

A few companies however, did have more structured training programmes and plans in place for new recruits which covered, for example, customer service and basic food or manual handling. Others were happy to provide specific training where there was a statutory requirement, such as fork-lift truck certificates or health and safety training. Although these were probably NVQ equivalent programmes, they were usually designed and provided in-house, without formal recognition. Indeed, more than one employer commented that they did have training in place already but that the Learning Agreement had been used to accredit it.

Some employers taking part in the interviews said that they saw training as important both to the individual and to the company's bottom line - one said explicitly that they had seen an increase in the company's productivity as staff became more skilled.

'Well I'm just a big believer in training and development of staff. It's very important for the business. I would say the profits have actually increased with people in the right positions with the right training.' Employer

Others saw indirect benefits in terms of improving recruitment and retention. The larger employers were most likely to say there was a culture of, though not necessarily a formal structure for, training and development whilst some smaller companies took great pride in their approach to learning and skills.

5.3 Motivation for participation in the Learning Agreement

It seems that employers have taken part in the Learning Agreement for three main reasons:

- social responsibility: to benefit the particular young person involved
- meeting skill needs: to fill a particular staffing gap or support expansion of the workforce
- enhancing existing provision: to fund existing training or formalise it, for example through offering an accredited qualification.

5.3.1 Social responsibility

In this instance, employer participation was driven by the wishes of the young person. Respondents reported that the young people had approached them expressing a desire for training; some of the young people knew about the Learning Agreement whilst others went on to find out about it through discussions with Connexions.

Many employers said that their young employees had not enjoyed school and had often left without qualifications. The Learning Agreement provided a way for young people to gain some recognition for their skills and learning, often for the first time, and employers wanted to support this.

'I don't think she particularly liked school from what I understand, but she wants to learn more. I think she's bright enough to and she certainly is willing to.' Employer

Many of employers interviewed said that these employees were family members (usually sons) which would naturally increase the tendency for the employers to agree to the young person's request. One employer reported:

'It wouldn't bother me that much that I wasn't getting paid for it but that's only because he's my stepson I suppose. If he was just a normal lad that I'd employed I wouldn't be so keen to let him go for a day when I need him.' Employer

However, there were also numerous examples where employers genuinely appeared to have the young person's best interest at heart. This was particularly true in the wave 2 interviews where there were fewer family connections.

Even where employers recognised that there were positive benefits for the business, these benefits were a positive spin-off, rather than the main objective:

'Historically, we feel we like to have someone fresh from school, invest in that person and hope they will continue to work for us and develop according to our requirements... We like to support local youngsters.' Employer

5.3.2 Meeting skill needs

A smaller, but significant, number of employers reported that they had taken part in the Learning Agreement for business-related reasons, often tied in with the recruitment and the development of staff. Some were explicit in saying that LAP had helped them to expand their workforce whilst minimising costs or to mitigate the perceived risk associated with taking on an inexperienced young person.

'The main attractions for the company was getting the grant... we were saying 'yes we will take this extra person' because we more or less covered a big chunk of their wages. And it was beneficial that basically we were getting that extra person, they were getting an education. It was a win-win.' Employer

'Mainly because it gave us the opportunity to take more staff on with financial aid. It was very good.' Employer

There were examples of employers approaching Connexions with a recruitment or training need, having been referred to Connexions by a training provider or hearing of them whilst searching for suitable learning and skills solutions. Advisers familiar with the Learning Agreement were then able to raise it as an option and employers, seeing benefits for both parties, become involved.

There was also some evidence from the employer interviews to suggest that a number of young people were recruited into companies with the Learning Agreement specifically in mind - almost like a package - or at least started the Learning Agreement very quickly thereafter following discussions about training needs.

'I approached Connexions and said I was looking for more staff and she came and visited and got involved... we had a need and had it fulfilled.' Employer

This was particularly common where there was a personal relationship involved, usually between the employer and employee but not always. In one case an employer's need for an apprentice coincided with a customer's search for training and employment for their son. The employer had contacted Connexions about the possibility of employing an apprentice. At the same time, a customer had contacted the employer to see if there was an opportunity for his

son to do an apprenticeship. Discussions between employer and Connexions led to the young person being taken on under the Learning Agreement.

5.3.3 Enhancing existing provision

Employers had also used the Learning Agreement to meet gaps in their own training provision identified during appraisal or more general discussions with employees, Connexions and / or training providers. Some employers recognised that they needed training for particular roles, one employer even specified which qualification she would like the young person to do: this was an NVQ Level 1 with a view to completing Level 2 'if things worked out'. She knew that this qualification met the needs of the position:

'I did [the same qualification] myself so I knew it covered all the basics we would need.' Employer

'We had already discussed taking on and training [the young person], but we did not have a position available. But when we heard about the LA it shone a new light on it. It gives employers an incentive to take on younger people.' Employer

Again, the Learning Agreement in itself was not the prime motivation, rather it was a vehicle for fulfilling an employee or employer recognised need and came into play following advice from Connexions or a training provider. However, the structure of Learning Agreement was a significant factor in leading them to this route. In one case the employer initially explored Train to Gain¹ but found it too complex and unsuitable for their needs. In contrast, the Learning Agreement appeared straightforward, flexible and unlikely to disrupt the business.

'I realised that the time that we were going to give them to attend this training was not that significant to the running of the business – you know it wasn't a day release or three days a week off. Two or three hours one day a week was not a problem.' Employer

Some employers also thought that the direct link between the learning and the workplace was beneficial for those young people who had often not enjoyed the more rigid or formal school learning environment.

'[The training] is one-to-one and it is personal and direct. For someone like my daughter [who has learning difficulties], also the fact that she doesn't have to go out on her own or travel around.' Employer

5.4 Setting up the Learning Agreement

The role of Connexions was pivotal in setting up many of the Learning Agreements discussed in our research. Connexions advisers were the subject of many positive comments, regarding the quality of information received, their guidance regarding training programmes, and their commitment to both the young person and the employer.

¹ We recognise that Train to Gain and the Learning Agreement target different learners, however, employers who were not specifically seeking to train a young person would explore all the available options to meet the perceived gaps in their training provision.

Although not the focus of the research, it appears that employers were increasingly aware of Connexions and how the service could support employers. Our sample of employers was extremely positive about the service they received from Connexions personal advisers. In almost all cases Connexions and training providers were reported to respond well to requests for assistance from employers looking to recruit or train young people.

There were several different models for the initial contact but all were variations on three basic formats:

- a young person approached their employer for approval to participate in the Learning Agreement; this usually followed up with discussions with a Connexions PA who has recently helped them find employment
- Connexions approach an employer with information about the Learning Agreement to enquire whether the employer had any suitable young people
- the employer had approached Connexions or a training provider to discuss a staffing or training need. The Learning Agreement was highlighted in subsequent discussions and deemed appropriate.

5.4.1 Process and information

Set-up procedures appeared to operate very smoothly. The LAP was explained to employers clearly and none had any significant complaints about the process of establishing the programme.

'I can't really recall [the process]! It must have passed by unnoticed really. It's been quite friendly, meetings whenever, and the lads themselves have been happy - it's not been a problem.' Employer

'He [Connexions adviser] was there about an hour, he explained everything in great detail, how the company would be compensated for the day this young person had off. He explained everything in great detail to this young man...he was very good actually.' Employer

There were isolated problems with the setting up process but these tended to be minor and at a local level. For example, one employer felt that the college's admissions form was quite complicated. Only one employer had any real complaints about the level of information they received about the Learning Agreement, although they did not blame the adviser for what they described as the withdrawal of the wage compensation part-way through the programme¹.

'I think with hindsight we probably would have been better to have more information. But I get the feeling that the gentleman who came to see us from Connexions gave us all the information he had. We don't think he was withholding any information, I think it's just that circumstances have changed since.' Employer

¹ In total three employers said that they had been told by Connexions that wage compensation was due to be withdrawn, in at least one case this happened after the Learning Agreement had been set up. It is too soon to comment on the impact of the withdrawal of wage compensation but this may be a feature of the planned evaluation of the extension to the Learner Agreement Pilots.

Employers were also content with the length of time the programmes took to set up. This could be anything between a few weeks and 3-4 months from the initial contact to the start of the training, but no employer complained about the length of time it had taken to establish the programme. However, a small number of employers complained that their payments did take too long to process. This was seen as frustrating for employers who were paying salaries to employees who were away from the workplace.

'It was about 4 months, 5 months before we actually saw any of the grant money [ie wage compensation] coming through. It does seem to be a bit too long really.'
Employer

Two employers said that their young person had not been able to access the particular programme they wanted, in one case to ensure that the employee was not at college on the same day as two other (non-LAP) trainees and another to avoid a delay to the start of the programme. In these and other cases Connexions had been flexible, knowledgeable and helpful and the young people were following suitable programmes.

5.4.2 Identifying training needs

Many employers, those in the wave 1 interviews particularly, reported that they played a largely hands-off role with regards to the Learning Agreement and were happy for the provider and young person to determine the content of the training. Some of the interviews with employers and managers suggested that they did not fully understand exactly what the young person was doing or what qualification they were working towards. Whilst this might appear as a very unsupportive approach, the employers' comments further reinforced the altruistic angle to their involvement in the Learning Agreement. They were happy for their employees to embark on training, even when they recognised that this might mean they move on to better paid jobs with other companies. It also confirmed the views expressed by pilot personnel who reported that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, employers supported young people's choice of learning, irrespective of whether or not it was vocationally relevant to their work.

'The thing is, it's all took out of your hands, you put the person forward and it's all done for you, it takes the hassle out of it. I think it's a really good scheme.' Employer

The hands-off approach was apparent for some employers in the wave 2 interviews, although more chose to be more actively involved alongside their employee. Some employers joined the young people in meetings with Connexions and/or the training provider whilst others were employer-led, largely to ensure that the training focused more closely on business needs.

There was no consistent pattern between the young person's involvement in selecting the training programme or training provider, and whether or not the Learning Agreement had been initiated by the young person, Connexions or the employer.

In most cases the young people went to college for part of working day, this could be one day a week, a few hours a week or once a month. In a small number of cases, the learning took place in the workplace, supported by visits from trainers, supervisors and Connexions. Isolated cases included evening study or a programme of work shadowing, the latter to be followed by a period of day release later in the programme. The overwhelming view from employers was that the programmes were delivering the right kind of training, in an appropriate form, and with little disruption to the day to day activities of the business.

5.5 Benefits of participation in a Learning Agreement

Employers reported many benefits from taking part in Learning Agreements, for both employer and employee, including:

- improved attitude and approach to work and to learning
- more independent thinking about what they are doing and why
- gaining vocational and work-related skills
- better company reputation as an investor in people.

An increase in the young people's vocational and job-specific skills was clearly in evidence. Training on the job was likely to have taken place regardless, but the Learning Agreement meant that more experienced employees were freed up more to do their own jobs whilst still supporting and enriching the young person's learning. It also meant that young people were able to gain the skills they needed more quickly

'Some of them have grasped things that might have taken another year.' Employer
'She's learning things quicker, so she can progress more. Yes, so anything that can help her get to where we want her to be quicker, that's got to be good.' Employer

However, the Learning Agreements were doing more than just giving young people narrowly focused skills for their job. Employers felt that young people were developing a more rounded understanding; perhaps about how the young person's role related to the business as a whole, or being able to answer customers' questions more fully and with more confidence. Some continued onto higher level courses which may have been unlikely without the first step to learning provided by the Learning Agreement.

The benefits to the employees, in terms of their skills and ability to do the job, had clear business benefits which many employers recognised. None said explicitly that they had seen an increase in productivity from the young person following the programme, but many did expect to reap rewards in the future.

'Just experience isn't it. The more experienced people you've got the better quality of work you'll turn out in long run.' Employer

Many employers reported that the attitudes of their young employees had improved as a result of taking part in a Learning Agreement, often over a very short period of time. Managers notice that young staff seemed more committed to their jobs and were thinking more for themselves.

Young people had also gained in confidence. Whilst this was usually described in terms of personal or social skills, it also meant that young trainees grew to question things more. Others had developed the confidence to apply their learning and tackle real problems which occurred in the workplace.

'I was able to go on maternity leave for four weeks and leave him in the office on his own - he was competent and confident enough to handle this by that stage.' Employer

Employers felt that they were also benefiting from a better reputation amongst staff and reported that other employees perceived the company to be one that invested and trained its staff. One manager thought that the Learning Agreement was not only helping the particular trainee to develop but that it had also encouraged other members of staff to request and take up learning opportunities. Other staff had seen how the Agreement had benefited the young person and not interfered with the work of others or their spare time - this was as a great benefit for employer and the young person's colleagues. Only one employer expressed concern about the prospect of an increased demand for training, and subsequent loss of staff time and productivity, as a result of this increased awareness.

The evidence pointed to employers taking a more proactive role in the employees' training. They felt that they were much better informed about what help was available for training, and many thought that they would start to do more formal training in the future.

'I know there's things out there now, you know, if you find somebody who's worth sending off to college because you know that they're actually going to be quite dedicated, yes, I think it's quite a good thing.' Employer

Only a very small number expressed reservations either about becoming involved again and most said they would, or already had, recommended the programme to others. Two employers who said they would not recommend it were those still waiting for the funding to come through whilst another felt that the employee gained more than the employer. Whilst others shared this view it did not prevent them from endorsing the Learning Agreement.

Some employers preferred to reserve judgment about the specific benefits that were brought about by the Learning Agreement. This was less prevalent in the wave 2 interviews since programmes were better established and some employers had seen young people complete a programme. The overwhelming view was that there was much to gain and little to lose.

'I just think it's very, very important that these Learning Agreements are actually in place, 'cos I think for people like [trainee], he's very good with his hands, and mechanical things like that...I don't think going to college or full-time is for everybody.'
Employer

5.6 Bonus payments and wage compensation

Overall, the interviews with employers showed that the wage compensation had little effect on employers' decisions but employers thought that the bonus payments did encourage young people to participate in training. There was, however, some disparity between the views of employers.

A number of non-employer interviewees argued that small firms often felt under pressure when releasing a young person to undertake off-the-job training provision, because of the impact it had on the running of their business.

'It's not so much the money for these employers but the disruption it causes to the business, especially if they have two or three members of staff ... some employers would prefer to spend £400 on a one-off day-long course for one of their staff than to pay nothing but to allow an employee to go out for one day a week for a whole year.'
Employer

This view was supported by a small number of employers who felt that the wage compensation was therefore a driver in getting involved in the Learning Agreement.

'He's going to get qualifications and he can put in for a few courses and it's not going to cost me anything. If I do lose then they're going to compensate me for it, so I didn't see any, you know, a bit of a no-brainer really.' Employer

'I thought it was good because it wasn't costing me any money! I wouldn't do it if we weren't getting paid and I wouldn't have given him the time off.' Employer

More frequently, however, employers felt there to be little disruption to the business and thought that the benefits to the young person or to the business were reason enough for the employer to become involved. Furthermore, the fact that the training was effectively free of charge to both employer and employee meant that another barrier was overcome.

Many of the employers interviewed reported that they had not been particularly influenced by the inducement of wage compensation and did not discuss it as a notable feature of the Agreement. It was appreciated as recognition of their contribution but appeared to be far from essential in motivating them to participate. Whilst employers have not said no to the compensation, many maintain that they would have participated in the Learning Agreement without it, supporting the prevailing view among pilot personnel that it was their commitment to supporting the young person that was key. Several employers agreed that the compensation was attractive but then went on to say that it *'wasn't the main concern'*.

Some employers described the wage compensation as bonus payments and reported that they would be handing over the payment to their head office or to the trainee themselves, or putting it towards a staff party. One employer showed just how little an incentive the wage compensation was by saying that they had not even claimed the money whilst others recognised it as a low priority.

'[The compensation] wouldn't be a reason for us to stop him going to training because we do have other apprentices who we don't get funding for.' Employer

'The bonus payment to employers was not an incentive, we would have done it anyway, it was neither here nor there, although it was very nice to have...it is more important that [trainee/daughter] gets the input and that she gets the support she needs.' Employer

In contrast, employers felt that the bonus payment to the young person, where they were payable, was an incentive.

In two of the areas where employer interviews took place, neither wage compensation nor bonuses were paid. In these areas employers were still positive about the Learning Agreement but did stress the importance of the training itself being funded. Where the idea of payments was discussed hypothetically, employers supported the view that payments to the employee, rather than the employer, would have some effect.

'Any incentive that can be given to them has got to help. Because the lads are obviously not naturally inclined to go into further education. So they do need a bit of encouragement.' Employer

Some pilot personnel felt that while employers in non-payment areas were willing to support young people's learning activity, there appeared to be a greater propensity for young people to undertake their learning outside of working hours. There was a little evidence to support this, two of the eleven employers in the wave 2 interviews reported that the training took place only in the workplace compared with one of the remaining 25, yet much more extensive research on this issue would need to be done to confirm it with any confidence.

6 The LAP, its Outcomes and Emerging Issues relating to the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA)

Key findings

- The LAP provided an invaluable opportunity to work with and to develop a greater understanding of the motivations and needs of young people in JWT. This intervention was timely, given subsequent proposals to extend the age at which young people will leave compulsory learning.
- The decision to extend the pilot for a further year from April 2008 was welcomed, in order to embed the implementation of the pilot, which had only really begun in the second year of delivery. The first year of the pilot had been mainly dedicated to understanding the evolving policy and the characteristics and nature of the client groups, ie young people in JWT and their employers, as well as setting up delivery mechanisms.
- The inclusion of the Apprenticeship offer within LAP was welcomed, since it had broadened out the programme and improved take-up rates.
- The delivery of LAP showed that one-to-one engagement with a young person and to a lesser extent their employer, was the key to their participation. Wider marketing and publicity activities and materials played a supplementary role.
- While flexibility over provision remained an issue, progress had been made in terms of identifying some training providers who could adapt their training delivery to support specific needs. In addition, Connexions staff had developed greater confidence in working directly with training providers in order to broker provision.
- The key to retaining young people on LAP was the continued support they received from LAP advisers, training providers and their employers. Young people who had support from their employer, as well as from their PA, were reported to have higher retention and completion rates.
- The LAP wrestled with the dual responsibilities of engaging with both young people and wherever possible, their employers. Due consideration needs to be given, within the RPA, to whether young people, their education and training needs, should be the focus of attention or whether the needs of the labour market/employer should take priority.
- Increased throughput within the programme had, to a large extent been achieved by 'shoe horning' young people into existing provision, most notably Key Skills and Technical Certificate programmes. The extent to which this approach met the learning requirements of the majority of young people in JWT and their employers' training needs was questionable.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the implementation of LAP, in terms of the relevance and capacity of the policy to encourage young people who are in JWT to engage in education and training activity. The perceptions and views of local stakeholders are drawn upon to examine the appropriateness of the initiative in meeting its policy aims and to explore the success of LAP in progressing young people in JWT into some form of education or training. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the emerging issues from the implementation of LAP which relate to the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) agenda.

6.2 LAP policy and desired outcomes

The principle of working with young people in JWT and offering accredited packages of training to meet their needs was welcomed. It was acknowledged that the opportunity to work with and to develop a greater understanding of the motivations and needs of young people in JWT was timely, given proposals to extend the age at which young people will leave compulsory learning.

There was evidence to suggest that since there had previously been limited contact with the JWT population and their employers, and the pilot had been launched hastily. As a result, considerably more time should have been spent on:

- developing systems which provided up-to-date destination data on young people, including those in the JWT group
- training Connexions staff to develop their capacity to work with employers
- developing intelligence on local employers who employ young people in JWT
- introducing strategies to strengthen partnership delivery arrangements for LAP between Connexions and local LSCs
- working with providers to ensure that provision needs were accurately assessed and widely available.

The decision to extend the pilot for a further year from April 2008, therefore, was perceived to be an opportunity to embed the implementation of the pilot, which had only really begun in the second year of delivery. The first year of the pilot had been largely dedicated to understanding the evolving policy and the characteristics and nature of the client groups, ie young people in JWT and their employers, as well as setting up delivery mechanisms.

At its inception, the principles underpinning LAP were that the pilot would focus on encouraging young people who were working but not engaged in any accredited training, to do so. The training needs of their employers were also expected to be considered. This was to be achieved through offering young people personalised, flexible learning packages that included progression (if appropriate), to encourage their participation and retention in learning, as well as testing the principle of offering financial support (in some pilot areas), coupled with signed agreements, support and monitoring.¹ Many respondents from Connexions, local LSCs and providers felt that these objectives had largely been displaced from a 'learner led' agenda, in favour of an increasing focus on driving qualification attainment within LAP, including learning that either directly equated to, or contributed towards a full Level 2 entitlement, ie an Apprenticeship outcome. LAP was described as being less creative and more prescriptive than was originally envisaged.

Attempting to meet the needs of both young people and, as far as possible, their employers, within the parameters of the Section 96, which comprises the LSCs learning aims database (see section 6.3), was a complex arrangement to deliver. The vexing issue of how to reconcile these competing demands within LAP policy challenged its implementation. The pilots also faced the delivery of a complex policy arrangement on a segment of the youth labour market where there was a dearth of information about the characteristics of young

¹ Learning Agreement Pilot Delivery Specification, December 2005.

people in JWT and their employers. However, despite these issues, significant progress had been made during the second year of the pilot.

6.3 Interaction of LAP policy with Apprenticeship delivery

While there had been little policy intervention in recent years targeted directly at the JWT group, there co-existed labour market interventions aimed at offering training programmes to young people and boosting qualification attainment among the workforce, most notably government support for Apprenticeships, and the national qualification framework and targets. In some pilot areas, notably those where wage compensation was offered and paid to employers, concern was expressed by respondents from local LSCs and providers that LAP had risked displacing young people from Apprenticeships. In areas where wage compensation and bonus payments were offered to employers through LAP, it was felt that efforts to encourage employers to assume responsibility for training costs under Apprenticeship agreements had been undermined. Subsequent changes to guidance in LAP delivery had blurred the boundaries between the two programmes, in that Apprenticeships became part of LAP delivery during the course of the first year of LAP implementation, as well as including employers who had previously participated in Apprenticeship delivery.

Apprenticeships were offered within LAP, either when the training provider had filled their quota of Apprenticeship numbers within their agreed standard contract with LSC, or if the employer had not previously engaged in government supported training provision, ie they were a new lead. The rigidity applied to these rules appeared to vary between pilot areas. However, the inclusion of the Apprenticeship offer within LAP was welcomed, since it had broadened out the programme and improved take-up rates. Apprenticeships were offered as a small part of LAP within all pilot areas, although the initiative was more widely used as pre-entry route into Apprenticeships, thereby offering young people Key Skills or Technical Certificates, which form part of the Apprenticeship framework. It was widely believed that this provided a good 'selling point' to young people, since mainstream Apprenticeship entry was competitive and LAP offered another route into accessing Apprenticeship training.

While a much greater degree of consistency had been achieved with regard to qualification entitlement within LAP delivery in the second year of the pilot, at the outset, confusion about what could, and what could not be offered within LAP had resulted in some Agreements being offered in the first year, which included standalone NVQ qualifications at Level 2. Apprenticeships comprise Level 2 qualifications, as well as key skills and a Technical Certificate, ie a full framework agreement. Consequently, there was anxiety that delivery of standalone NVQs at Level 2 would undermine the credibility of the Apprenticeship offer, despite it being widely reported that they were highly sought after by young people in JWT and their employers. Subsequent changes to the national guidance on the delivery of LAP had clearly set out the boundaries of the qualifications that can be offered, although delivery staff widely asserted that this offer did not necessarily equate with the qualification demands of young people and their employers. The inability to offer standalone NVQs was reported to have adversely affected LAP take-up.

6.4 LAP take-up rates and progression

In the first year, LAP had been slow to get off the ground and take-up rates, even with modified delivery targets, remained a challenge. Delays in policy implementation and low take-up were attributed to the following reasons:

- the short lead-in time to deliver a policy targeted at a group of young people and a segment of the labour market, which had not been a policy priority for some time

- delays in staff recruitment within Connexions and local LSCs
- on-going changes to LAP regulations, which created confusion about the product, particularly among operational staff who were responsible for its promotion
- organisational change which had occurred within both LSC and Connexions
- difficulties in identifying and tracking young people in the JWT group, due to inaccuracies in MI data
- apprehension about wider publicity of LAP because of the delays by local LSCs in procuring relevant education and training provision
- operational staff in some Connexions Services lacking experience and confidence in working directly with employers
- a lack of flexibility in the content and delivery of provision.

Given the breadth and number of issues that pilot areas faced, the first year of the pilot was widely regarded as a set up year. Significant progress had been made during the second year of delivery, notably:

- LAP had made a substantial contribution to defining and understanding the needs of young people in JWT and their employers
- while staff retention has remained an issue throughout the pilot, the implementation of LAP has shown the need for, and in many cases, successfully developed, Connexions staff to have different skill sets, in order to work effectively with both young people and employers
- regulations surrounding LAP implementation had stabilised and operational staff were more confident about the LAP 'product', as well as its delivery
- the inaccuracies in CCIS data had exposed the need for regular follow-up of young people in JWT
- the delivery of LAP had shown that one-to-one engagement with a young person and to a lesser extent their employer, was the key to their participation. Wider marketing and publicity activities and materials had played a supplementary role
- while flexibility over provision remained an issue, progress had been made in identifying some training providers who could adapt their training delivery to support specific needs. In addition, Connexions staff had developed greater confidence in working directly with training providers in order to broker provision.

There were significant variations, both between pilot areas and within pilot areas, with regard to levels of take-up. Respondents were concerned about the extent to which the success of the pilot would be judged on take-up rates, given the time it had taken to set up and implement the policy. The shift towards offering key skills, basic skills and Technical Certificate programmes and provision which had been procured before their entry to the programme had significantly enhanced take-up rates. In contrast, areas where provision had been identified and procured on an 'individual needs' basis in the first year and difficulties had been encountered in both finding bespoke provision and establishing roll-on roll-off admissions, had scaled down this approach, in order to increase take-up rates.

6.4.1 Reasons for not taking part

Respondents were asked to provide feedback on reasons why young people in the JWT group had refused to take part in LAP. Reasons for refusal included:

- participation in casual and / or informal working
- an unwillingness to provide employers' details
- lack of parental support
- lack of support from employer
- the lack of assistance with transport costs within LAP to access training provision
- participation in temporary work and waiting to join the Armed Services
- a demand for standalone NVQs and/or qualifications which fell outside the LAP qualification specifications
- pregnancy or caring responsibilities.

In addition, it was asserted that some recent school leavers associated participation in training activity with negative school experiences and rejected the LAP offer on that basis. It was also felt that 18-year olds would be more motivated to participate in training activity, compared to 16-year olds who had recently left school and were 'still finding their feet'.

'At 16 they're only just starting to work and they're probably just thinking 'Oh I'll have six months or a year doing this and then I'll think about what I want to do.' Whereas, when they're a bit older I think they're more willing to go back into training and develop themselves.' Connexions senior manager

Crucially, some young people in the JWT group were already in receipt of on-the-job and company training provision, which they valued over and above the accredited provision available within LAP.

Concern was expressed by respondents in a number of pilot areas about the lack of inclusion of 18-year olds in the LAP initiative. Since Train to Gain targeted adults over the age of 19 years, it was felt that 18-year olds were falling through the 'policy net', by not being able to access support with their training needs if they happened to fall outside the parameters of the Apprenticeship training programme.

6.4.2 Retention and progression

The key to retaining young people on LAP was the continued support they received from LAP advisers, training providers and their employers. The findings point to the significant role that LAP advisers had in both initiating and sustaining the participation of young people in training. Furthermore, the dialogue between the young person, the provider, the employer and the adviser was the key to keeping them on track and confident about their programmes of learning.

The biggest issue facing pilot areas had been securing sign ups to LAP and it was reported that retention rates were generally good. One area reported a 70 per cent retention rate, which they attributed to the support given to young people by LAP advisers.

'I think the mentoring and support that key workers can give young people, when appropriately applied, is a really important element of taking a group who actually after all turned their back on education in the recent past, into it and on to success.'

LAP consultant

It was reported that the propensity for young people to drop out of LAP increased if the young person was not supported by their employer to take part in the programme, or their employer was not aware that they were doing so. It was recommended that young people without employer support should receive more regular follow-up calls or visits from their advisers / training providers.

Some young people were reported to be progressing to Apprenticeships after completing LAP, while some were completing LAP for a second time (sometimes completing an Apprenticeship). Determining retention and progression rates was hampered by the limitations of MI systems (see section 3.6).

6.5 Lessons from the LAP and emerging issues relating to RPA

Published in March 2007, the Green Paper *Raising Expectations; staying in education and training post-16*, established plans to ensure continued participation in education or training for all 17-year olds from 2013 and for all 18-year olds from 2015. If this target is to be achieved within legislative plans, strategies which ensure that education and training options are available and attractive to young people who enter JWT and who are at risk of, or become NEET will need to be in place. The piloting of LAP provided the opportunity to test the effectiveness of using a combination of financial incentives, agreements and support to encourage participation in post-16 education or training. Evidence from the process strand of the evaluation of the LAP would suggest that some key lessons have been learnt to inform policy development for the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA); these are described below.

An increased knowledge about what JWT really means

The LAP enabled 'the lid to be taken off' the destinations of young people who leave school at the end of Year 11 and enter the labour market. While evidence had been available about 'the churn' between young people in JWT and NEET, the LAP facilitated a broader and more complex picture to emerge about the structure of labour market opportunities, which are available to young people at the end of compulsory schooling. The JWT group are not a homogeneous group, but comprise different groups of young people who have varying degrees of access to, and attitudes towards education and training.

'So we're picking up a forgotten group of young people, but a very vulnerable group of young people.' Connexions local manager

The role of financial incentives to promote engagement in learning

There were mixed views about the extent to which financial incentives really made a difference to young people and to employers' behaviour. While wage compensation and/or bonus payments proved to be an effective engagement tool and the 'Agreement only' model was a more difficult concept to sell, there was a consensus of opinion about the need to challenge and change the behaviour of employers' who fail to offer any accredited training to young people and /or who see no benefit in doing so.

'It's about values isn't it, and whether an employer is really committed to investing in that young person.' LSC representative

It was among sectors such as hairdressing or care services, where minimum wage levels were more prevalent, and among small firms, most notably family business, where wage compensation made a difference to take-up rates.

Furthermore, young people in JWT were not always 'without training'. For example, some large national companies, particularly within the retail sector, offered significant amounts of training to young people. In sectors or organisations where this was happening, steps should be taken to establish some form of accreditation, rather than to persuade young people and employers to take part in other forms of training and development.

The importance of on-going support to encourage and sustain participation in learning or training

The LAP wrestled with the dual responsibilities of engaging with both young people and, wherever possible, their employers. Due consideration needs to be given, within the RPA, to whether meeting the education and training needs of young people will be the focus of attention, or whether the needs of the labour market/employer will take priority. The LAP straddled both agendas. In some circumstances, young people were undertaking 'independent' learning from their work responsibilities, either with or without the support of their employers, while in other cases, young people were undertaking company specific training. The small sample of employers included in the study comprised firms which were generally positive about LAP, in terms of it offering the opportunity to meet young people's individual learning needs and / or specific company training needs. However, the extent to which the education and training needs of each young person in the work place will be a priority in *all* business settings, as opposed to the need for companies to meet the immediate skill needs of their businesses, is an issue which warrants further research and investigation, prior to the implementation of the RPA. In essence, further consideration needs to be given as to whether a 'learner led' agenda will take precedence over a 'skills' training agenda for the JWT group within RPA planning and delivery and, if so, how this will be received among all types of employers.

Evidence from the process evaluation would suggest that young people benefited substantially from on-going support from LAP advisers and this is a key finding. In addition, where employers had supported young people with their Learning Agreement, this had helped to sustain and to increase retention and completion rates.

The accessibility, suitability and availability of education and training provision to young people in JWT

The LAP exposed the inflexibility which exists in the current education and training provision, in terms of meeting the needs of young people in JWT and their employers. Increased throughput within the programme had, to a large extent, been achieved by 'shoe horning' young people into existing provision, most notably Key Skills and Technical Certificate programmes. The extent to which this approach met the learning requirements of young people in JWT and their employers' training needs is questionable. Within RPA plans, consideration needs to be given to achieving a greater degree of flexibility within the qualification framework, in order to achieve a more attractive offer, as well as ensuring that providers, most notably colleges, are required to adapt their delivery arrangements to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse cohort of learners.

Finally, respondents were unanimous in their belief that LAP lacked 'clout', largely due to its pilot status. There was a recommendation that LAP should be linked to Train to Gain targets.

This would raise the profile of the JWT agenda. However, this would rest on any roll-out of LAP being employer-led, rather than moving forward as a young person-focused initiative. In conclusion, evidence from the process evaluation would support the case for further policy development based on the lessons learnt from the LAP.

'The Learning Agreement is needed, or something like it...takes training of 16-17-year olds as being important and gives young people support. Yes, it's appropriate but I would say it's appropriate for everywhere.' LAP project manager

'I think in pure policy terms I think yes, it's right that a government should say it is worth spending X amount of money to address the potential problem to save millions of pounds later on if they become long-term unemployed, and therefore have become a greater cost to the state. I think certainly the pilot was worthwhile and I think it still needs to be something available to encourage those young people to access qualifications.' LSC manager

7 Conclusions

This final section sets out our conclusions at the final stage of the process evaluation and some future considerations for the third year of the pilots, which will involve some modification to current delivery arrangements, ie the withdrawal of wage compensation.

7.1 The LAP

In relation to the implementation of LAP, the initiative was welcomed as an opportunity to engage with the JWT group and their employers. In the first year of the pilots, delivery was hampered by a lack of preliminary work done prior to the launch of the pilot, to gain a better understanding of the nature and needs of the eligible populations (both young people and employers). Due to the lack of previous engagement with the JWT group, the delivery of LAP had, in the majority of cases, exposed problems in developing accurate assessments about the size, nature and needs of the JWT group and their employers, and this in turn undermined the implementation of the pilot. However, significant progress had been made in the second year of delivery with regard to these issues. Consequently, managerial and operational staff would have welcomed more opportunity to work together across pilot areas, in order to share good practice and their growing expertise and knowledge about young people in JWT and their employers.

7.2 LAP management and delivery

Joint delivery responsibility for the LAP demanded that Connexions and local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) staff worked together to manage the implementation of the initiative. In some cases, this was a new venture. During the course of the pilot, stronger links were established between the two agencies. In addition, the LAP enabled Connexions Services to work more closely with training providers, since the implementation of the pilot enabled Connexions staff to become more involved in the management and delivery of training provision.

During the first year of delivery, organisational change within the Learning and Skills Councils meant that they found it difficult to play a full role. Delivery issues were compounded by the ongoing changes that were made to LAP guidance and regulations. Guidance and staffing issues had been largely addressed during the course of the second year.

The complexity of the task facing project managers in implementing either one or both of the initiatives varied between pilot areas. In pilot areas comprising a small number of local authority areas, project managers tended to have a more direct involvement in staff recruitment and operated centralised control over the delivery of the pilots. The task facing project managers was more complex in pilot areas which comprised large numbers of local authority areas and required the need to set up multiple sets of contractual and management areas. In addition, they were required to establish and maintain links with LSC at local and national level.

There was increasing recognition that LAP advisers needed to focus far more heavily on the selling and promotion of the initiative, which demanded the ability to work effectively with both young people and employers. Staff recruitment had been more successful and sustained in areas where managers had employed staff from a wider range of backgrounds – in particular, staff with backgrounds in training and development and/or who had experience of promoting employment and training initiatives to employers and young people. As a result of the LAP delivery, Connexions staff reported increased levels of competence and expertise in working with both employers and training providers.

7.3 The LAP offer

During the second year of the pilot, managerial and operational staff were more confident in their understanding about the LAP 'offer'. LAP had initially been a difficult policy to deliver for a number of reasons:

- firstly, attempting to meet the needs of young people and their employers at the same time proved, in some cases, to be a complex arrangement to deliver
- secondly, there co-existed a range of other government training programmes, most notably Apprenticeships, which could potentially have been displaced or undermined by offering young people (and their employers) total flexibility over their learning agendas
- thirdly, there was a lack of flexibility in the content and delivery of provision
- finally, through the amendments that were made to the LAP regulations, there was confusion among many delivery staff about the constitution of LAP, which made it a difficult concept to sell to young people and their employers.

Significant progress had been made during the second year of delivery, particularly with regard to the following:

- regulations surrounding LAP implementation had stabilised and operational staff were more confident about the LAP 'product', as well as its delivery. In addition, the inclusion of the Apprenticeship offer within LAP had improved the profile and take-up of the initiative
- the delivery of LAP had shown that one-to-one engagement with a young person and, to a lesser extent their employer, was the key to their participation. Wider marketing and publicity activities and materials played a supplementary role
- while flexibility over provision remained an issue, progress had been made in identifying some training providers who could adapt their training delivery to support specific needs. Connexions staff had also developed greater confidence in working directly with training providers in order to broker provision.

There were significant variations, both between pilot areas and within pilot areas, with regard to levels of take-up. The shift towards offering key skills, basic skills and Technical Certificate programmes and towards recruitment where provision had been procured before their entry to the programme had significantly enhanced take-up rates. Increased throughput within the programme had, to a large extent, been achieved by slotting young people into existing provision, most notably Key Skills and Technical Certificate programmes. The extent to which this approach met the learning requirements of the majority of young people in JWT and their employers' training needs was questionable. There remained an on-going demand from young people and employers for qualifications outside Section 96 (LSCs' list of approved qualifications for LAP delivery), in particular, short courses, taster programmes, as well as, part and stand alone NVQ qualifications. Table 7.1 outlines starts to LAP by variant during the first two years of delivery. In addition, between April and June 2008, which comprised the first quarter of Year 3 of the programme, the number of signs ups to LAP exceeded the re-profiled targets for the first time.

Table 7.1: Starts To Learning Agreement By Variant

		2006/07	2007/08	Total
Total Variant 1	Re-profiled Starts	2,173	702	2,875
	Sign-ups	1,796	911	2,707
	Sign-ups / Starts (%)	82.7	129.8	94.2
Total Variant 2	Re-profiled Starts	471	913	1,384
	Sign-ups	401	613	1,014
	Sign-ups / Starts (%)	85.1	67.1	73.3
Total Variant 3	Re-profiled Starts	915	910	1,825
	Sign-ups	735	532	1,267
	Sign-ups / Starts (%)	80.3	58.5	69.4
Totals	Re-profiled Starts	3,559	2,525	6,084
	Sign-ups	2,932	2,056	4,988
	Sign-ups / Starts (%)	82.4	81.4	82.0

Source: LA Management Information, DCSF, 2008

7.4 LAP: the employers' perspective

The Learning Agreements were welcomed by participating employers who recognised that there was a range of potential benefits. For the employee, these benefits included the acquisition of job-specific, personal and social skills, as well as engaging them in learning in a way that their school careers had not.

Employers benefited from being able to take some of the risk out of recruiting an unskilled, inexperienced or possible immature employee. The Agreements paid for and provided a structure for training young employees, and encouraged employers to take a chance on employing them. Indeed, some employers recruited young people with the Learning Agreement specifically in mind. Many also had a genuine desire simply to help a young person or to be seen as a 'good' employer, to the extent that some were not concerned with whether or not the training was directly relevant to the young person's job role. Having a better skilled and motivated workforce with the productivity improvements that this entailed was a driver, albeit a less immediate or attributable benefit of the Learning Agreement.

Whilst providing free training was seen as important, with a few exceptions wage compensation payments to employers appear to have had little impact on their propensity to take part in the Learning Agreement. Wage compensation was received gladly but was not decisive. In contrast, employers thought that bonus payments to employees were important. Employers felt that the process of taking part in the Learning Agreement was made very easy for them. In part, this was due to the structure of the Agreements, which employers said created very little disruption to the business, and also the good quality information and support they received from Connexions staff. The Learning Agreements were therefore a straightforward means by which employers could support young employees.

7.5 Outcomes

Young people were reported to be progressing to Apprenticeships after completing LAP. Some young people were also undertaking LAP for a second time (sometimes completing an Apprenticeship as part of a second LAP). Determining retention and progression rates was hampered by the limitations of MI systems (see section 3.6).

7.6 Implications for national roll-out

- While the implementation of LAP in its first year was surrounded by a number of delivery issues, the initiative provided a valuable opportunity to appraise the requirements for working effectively with young people in JWT and their employers. This is of great significance to any subsequent roll-out of the initiative and to any plans to extend the age at which young people leave learning to 18.
- The introduction of LAP enabled Connexions and local LSCs to work together to develop strategies to support the needs of young people in the JWT category.
- The pilot exposed severe problems with regard to the lack of capacity and resources among providers, most notably colleges, to offer a greater degree of flexibility and diversity to their range of provision, in order to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse group of learners.
- In terms of national roll-out, further consideration needs to be given to whether the needs of young people and employers can be successfully met within one initiative.
- Examples of good practice with regard to the lessons learnt from the implementation of LAP should be shared more widely between pilot areas and evidenced for potential national roll-out.

7.7 Future considerations

The three visits to the pilot areas constituted the key element of the two year process evaluation of the LAP. The data also provide evidence which should assist policy makers in their deliberations over proposals to Raise the Participation Age (RPA) to 18 from 2013, in particular with regard to the importance of the three key strands to LAP policy - financial incentives, learning contracts and support - in securing effective implementation of an initiative targeted at young people who are JWT. The evaluation of the extensions to the pilot, which will run from April 2008, should:

- continue to monitor take-up, retention and progression rates
- determine the extent to which the withdrawal of wage compensation impacts on take-up rates and to the level of support given to young people by their employers
- evaluate the impact of on-going organisational change on the delivery of the LAP pilots, in particular the movement of all Connexions provision into Children's Trusts
- continue to monitor the relationship and interaction between LAP and other local and national initiatives, most notably Apprenticeships
- consider progression routes from LAP and how these are defined
- monitor the extent to which partnership working between key players is further developed

- examine whether LAP provision becomes more responsive, in terms of meeting the needs of young people and employers in their localities
- obtain perceptions about further developments between the local implementation of LAP and Train to Gain
- evaluate the extent to which changes to MI systems are implemented and are able to deliver data which are timely, responsive, consistent and accurate.

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