Learning+Skills Council

The impact of area-wide inspections

Final report

Contents

Key Findings

1. A key benefit of the action-planning process has been the increased collaboration between partners, especially between those learning providers which had had little contact with one another previously. Providers now work together to plan courses and staff networks have been established.

2. The action-planning process entailed additional administrative work for staff engaged in it, but they considered this to be a price worth paying for the benefits gained. In addition, this workload was less of an issue when the action-planning process was properly resourced.

3. Providers have been able to develop a broad and coherent 14-19 curriculum through the action planning process. The process has also helped providers to improve their own arrangements for curriculum planning and development.

4. Action planning has been instrumental in raising post-16 participation rates, expanding the range of provision at levels 1 and 2, and introducing a wider choice of provision at entry and foundation level. The provision of vocational courses at levels 1 and 2 as part of key stage 4 has given more coherence to the 14-19 curriculum and has helped to prepare pupils for further vocational study post-16. There is, however, scope for some providers to work more closely together on the implementation of the 14-19 curriculum.

5. Interviewees from most areas agreed with the findings of area-wide inspection. Where there was dissatisfaction with inspection, this usually related to:

   - the lack of detail in inspection findings

   - the inspection process itself

   - the disproportionate emphasis on pre-16 provision.

   Connexions and work-based learning providers voiced most dissatisfaction with the inspection reports and process.

6. For action planning and its implementation to be successful, those involved needed good leadership and they looked to the local LSC to provide this. Lack of sound data on providers' performance has remained a problem in some areas. Without such data, it has not always been possible to find out how much progress has been made in implementing the action plan.

7. Partners identified a number of barriers to effective implementation of the action plan. These included:

   - disagreement with the findings of the inspection report

   - uncertainty about the funding of the implementation of the action plan

   - lack of an established local LSC in some areas to provide leadership and guidance.

   Most of these barriers were temporary and not likely to recur. In general, there was satisfaction with progress made in implementing action plans, though there was frustration in some areas that the action-planning process had got off to a slow start.

8. Action planning has been less effective in furthering collaboration between providers of work-based learning. In some areas, however, providers of work-based are beginning to work together well.

9. Implementation of action plans has led to improved provision of advice and guidance for learners. There has been, however, some incompatibility between the targets of the Connexions service and those in action plans.

10. Overall, the area inspection process has been key to improving provision within the nine areas. More work should be undertaken in the future to gather further evidence of improvement.

Introduction

Background

11.   In its White Paper *Learning to Succeed - a New Framework for Post-16 Learning*, published in June 1999, the Government looked to the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to lead area-wide inspections of 16-19 education and training. Since 2001, these inspections have been carried out in partnership with the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). Prior to that, such inspections were carried out jointly by the former Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) Inspectorate and the former Training Standards Council (TSC).

12.   Since March 2003, area-wide inspections have focussed on provision for learners aged 14-19.

13.   Local Learning and Skills Councils (local LSCs) are required to produce area action plans in response to the findings of area-wide inspections. Each local LSC is required to work together with key partners to produce an action plan addressing issues highlighted in the Ofsted inspection report. Local LSCs are required to co-ordinate and monitor the implementation of the action plan, and report on its progress and effectiveness to the LSC national office and ministers. Area inspection action planning has been supported by guidance from both the LSC National Office and the DfES.

14.   The LSC national office needs to know to what extent the implementation of area action plans has led to beneficial changes in post-16 provision and how the action-planning process can be improved. The LSC national office therefore commissioned ECOTEC Research and Consulting to undertake a study of the impact of area action plans.

Aim

15.   The main aim of this study is the identification of strategic and structural changes in post-16 provision which could be attributed to the implementation of action plans drawn up after area-wide inspections.

Objectives

16.   The specific objectives of the study were the identification of:

- structural and strategic changes in post-16 provision attributable to the implementation of area action plans in nine areas

- any barriers to such changes

- good practice in implementing the area action plans to ensure they lead to beneficial structural and strategic change in post-16 provision

- increased participation rates of 16 and 17-year olds following the implementation of action plans

- any barriers to increased participation of 16 and 17-year olds

Methodology

17. The study was carried out in two stages, each leading to a report. This report provides findings from stage two of the research. Stage one focussed on a review of key documentation relevant to the action-planning process in nine local LSC areas. These areas were selected because they had been inspected early in the inspection cycle. A significant amount of time had elapsed since action plans following inspection had been implemented and it was hoped that sufficient evidence would be available to assess the extent of their impact.

18. The areas[1] where research was carried out were: Bath and North East Somerset, Coventry, Islington, Southwark, North Tyneside, Newcastle, Knowsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Salford.

19. Key documents reviewed in stage one included: the Ofsted area-wide inspection report, the area action plan, and progress reports on the implementation of the plan. These documents were looked at in order to identify key issues, action which had proved effective, and also any barriers to the successful implementation of action plans.

20. In stage two, issues were explored in more detail through interviews, in November and December 2003, with representatives from the local LSCs and 33 organisations in the nine areas.

Type and Range of Organisations Interviewed

21. Interviewees were drawn from a range of 33 organisations. Ten were from education and training providers, and included further education (FE) college principals, head teachers of schools and managers from work-based learning providers. Representatives of local education authorities (LEAs), learning partnerships and managers from the Connexions service were also interviewed. Some of those interviewed had additional roles, such as chairing learning partnerships or networks of work-based learning providers. The table shows the numbers of people interviewed and the organisations they represented:

Type of organisation	Number of partners interviewed	Roles
LEA	7	Director of education 14-19 strategy managers Assistant directors
Connexions	7	Operations manager Director of service
FE College	5	Principals Vice-principals Curriculum co-ordinators
School	1	Deputy head teacher
Work Based Learning Providers	3	Regional directors
Community College	1	Head of college
HE provider	1	Assistant director for centre for careers and skills development
Learning Partnership	6	Manager Partnership co-ordinator 14-19 planning manager

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[1] The number of areas add up to 10 but this is because one local LSC was unable to take part in stage two of the study and was replaced by another.

Type of organisation	Number of partners interviewed	Roles
Education Business Partnership	1	Manager
Other	2	

22.   Many of those interviewed were not carrying out the roles shown above at the time of the inspection, and had not been involved in the action-planning process from the outset. Some of the views expressed by interviewees, therefore, were not necessarily based on first-hand experience of action planning.

Producing the action plan

Introduction

23. This section deals with the action-planning process and the factors which can make it successful. It covers:

- partners' understanding of action planning

- the action-planning process

- barriers to effective action planning

- the rationale for action.

Understanding of the area-wide action-planning process amongst partners

24. All partners had a clear understanding of the purpose of the action-planning process. Most partners believed that action planning should be properly co-ordinated, carried out collaboratively, and that its main objective was to improve the quality of post-16 provision. Many also said that good action planning could lead to the raising of post-16 participation and achievement rates.

25. Partners also identified the process as an opportunity for reflection on the quality and effectiveness of relationships between providers and for identifying good practice in collaborative working.

26. Partners maintained that action planning could only be effective if it reflected the strategic priorities of the area. They said that some organisations had failed to take such priorities into account in their action planning.

27. Overall, partners were in agreement that the needs of the learner, rather than the needs of the provider, must be the main focus of action planning.

Initiating action planning

28. Some of those interviewed stated that action planning usually went well. They identified a number of key factors which facilitated good action planning:

- leadership

- involvement of a range of senior personnel from key organisations

- willingness of partners to share data

- establishing sub-groups to write sections of the plan

- comprehensive consultation with providers.

29. Good leadership, by either an individual or a steering group, was viewed as crucial to getting the action-planning process under way and in helping to secure the full involvement of key partners. It was felt that some existing bodies, such as the sub-groups of well-established learning partnerships, had provided good leadership, especially in those areas where the local LSC had not yet become fully operational at the time when the plan was developed.

30. Interviewees felt that the involvement of a range of senior personnel from key organisations including LEAs, colleges, work-based learning providers and Connexions was key to making the action-planning process work well. Such involvement helped to establish an ethos of collaboration from the outset, and this was particularly valuable where difficult issues such as tackling low participation rates and the closure of sixth forms had to be addressed.

31. Interviewees also believed that if action planning was to include the setting of realistic targets, then it was important for providers to be open about their learners' achievements. They maintained that good action planning was dependent upon a willingness to share data and work together to address problems identified through the data. It was acknowledged that it would be impractical to involve all partners and providers in the writing of the plan, especially in view of the tight timescales required. It was felt, however, that all providers should be consulted about the plan so that they might feel they had played a part in drawing it up.

32. The writing of the plan was viewed as a major task that could be fraught with difficulties, especially since area plans were being devised for the first time, and guidance on the action-planning process was still being issued. Partners felt that writing the plan had been made easier by events such as workshops on the action-planning process. Such events had been helpful in leading to the establishment of sub-groups to tackle key themes in the action plan. Again, it was felt that strong leadership was needed if such sub-groups were to work effectively on the plan.

Barriers to effective action planning

33. Partners identified a number of barriers to effective action planning. These included:

- the absence of a well-established local LSC and the consequent lack of leadership

- disagreement with the findings of the inspection report

- insufficient involvement of key partners in the action-planning process

- funding difficulties

- a state of flux in some areas of provision.

34. Many partners reported that where the local LSC had not yet been formed, or was not yet well established, there had been significant problems in getting the right people to write the action plan. In one area where this was the case, interviewees felt the writing of the plan had lacked direction and that partners did not know what their role was in the action-planning process. In some areas, partners had attended various meetings to discuss the plan but these had not been handled well. Key issues had not been addressed and individuals had not been assigned requisite tasks. The action plans produced had not been accepted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the planning process had had to start again.

35. Partners in areas where there had been disagreement about the inspection report found the writing of an action plan difficult. Action planning had proved particularly problematic in one area where the achievement data used in the inspection report was found to be unreliable. A number of partners, mainly schools with sixth forms, were reluctant to address the issues for attention because they felt that the inspection report lacked credibility.

36. Some areas reported that it had taken time to get partners fully involved in the action-planning process. Getting active senior personnel from the LEA to become involved proved to be problematic in a minority of areas. Their reluctance to engage in action planning was seen as a barrier to producing a practical plan in areas where much provision was based in school sixth forms. Interviewees from most areas said, however, that LEAs have now become more involved

in action planning. In some areas, it was also difficult to get work-based learning providers involved in action planning. Securing their involvement in the planning process even proved problematic in areas where there was a high number of such providers. Work-based learning providers often felt that they did not have sufficient resources to enable them to participate fully in the action-planning process.

37.   Problems with the funding of provision hindered effective action planning across some areas. For example, inspection reports often drew attention to issues related to provision for learners under the age of 16. Local LSCs, however, do not have access to funding for pre-16 provision, and this has to be found from other sources.

38.   In many areas, action planning to improve provision of advice and guidance had proved problematic because the Connexions service was not yet well established. Key personnel were not yet in post, and there was a lack of clarity about what role Connexions staff would play in supporting young people.

Rationale for action

39.   Partners considered that in most cases there was consensus about the action chosen, although this was sometimes only reached after extensive negotiation. Achievement of consensus on action was usually attained when partners were given clear leadership and were willing to accept change. Many partners were working on such an action plan for the first time and sometimes found it difficult to agree the level of detail needed in the specification of each action.

40.   Where there was disagreement amongst partners drawing up the action plan, it usually related to:

- the best way of carrying out a particular action

- what constitutes a broad and balanced 14-19 curriculum.

41.   Partners reported that some sub-groups working on the action plan managed to arrive at a consensus more easily than others. For example, one interviewee felt that one sub-group of providers had been unwilling to make changes to provision because they believed that they were already offering all that was necessary.

Conclusions

42.   Respondents who felt that the action-planning process had gone smoothly, identified a number of key factors that had enabled this to happen. The most important of these was good leadership, and where this was lacking, effective action planning had proved more difficult. Since some area-wide inspections had been completed before the establishment of the LSC in April 2001, subsequent action planning was problematic.

43.   It was considered that for action planning to be effective, it should involve people who held senior positions in their organisations who could authorise action, and who also had the executive responsibility to carry such action out. It was also essential that representatives from different organisations were willing to share data.

44.   Partners identified a number of barriers that initially impeded the action-planning process. These arose from problems with:

- acceptance or interpretation of findings in the inspection report

- identifying sources of funding for proposed action

- some local LSCs and other key bodies being in the early stages of formation.

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Such problems, however, are not likely to recur.

The area-wide process

Introduction

45.   This section covers:

- the benefits of the area-wide inspection and planning process

- barriers to effective area-wide action planning

- issues related to bureaucracy and administration

- funding, staffing and resourcing

- monitoring progress in implementing the plan

- other key activities.

Benefits of an area-wide action-planning process

46.   Respondents identified a range of benefits of the area-wide action-planning process.

47.   Most considered the main benefit to be the establishment of partnerships to plan provision and said it was the first time that staff from work-based learning providers, FE colleges and schools with sixth forms had come together in this way. The interviewees suggested that the main benefit of the new partnerships was the initiation of co-operation, rather than competition, between providers in relation to the recruitment of learners and the securing of funding.

48.   Interviewees also felt that the area-wide action-planning process had allowed different types of organisations to gain a better understanding of each other's work. In addition, professional networks had been developed, people were working together more and were building better working relationships. This was felt to be especially true in respect of work-based learning providers, with which schools and LEAs had had very little previous contact. The action-planning process had enabled staff from schools and LEAs to gain a clearer understanding of the work-based learning provider's role. In some areas, this understanding has been strengthened by the establishment of 14-19 planning groups, with representation from a range of providers.

49.   Interviewees said that one positive outcome of action planning was the establishment of networks for providers of the same type. For example, the three FE colleges in Salford have come together to form 'the Salford Plait' where the colleges meet to discuss ideas and plans. Similarly, work-based learning providers in Knowsley have established a network (with a co-ordinator) with the aim of ensuring that their strengths are put to best use instead of striving to compete with each other. This network has proved to be very effective, and the providers have collaborated to submit a bid to the local LSC to participate jointly in the Entry to Employment (E2E) initiative.

50.   In some areas, action planning has led to the securing of additional funding for the improvement of provision. In two areas, 14-19 Pathfinder funding from DfES has been obtained and interviewees felt that action planning had been a key reason why this had been granted. As part of its action plan, Southwark Education Business Alliance included the development of vocational General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses and has secured European Social Fund (ESF) monies to finance this.

Barriers to area-wide action planning

51. Partners identified a number of barriers to effective area-wide action planning. These included:

- not having the right people in post

- insufficient time to implement proposed action

- lack of reliable data

- insufficient funding for implementation of action.

52. In a number of areas, there were specific and localised problems.   For example, in one area, the LEA had been awarded low inspection grades by Ofsted and a private company had been brought in to implement the action required of the LEA in the action plan. Those interviewed said that the company was doing little to implement the plan, thereby putting the LEA's 14-19 strategy on hold.

53. In some areas, there were comparatively few providers of work-based learning, and a lack of vocational learning routes. In one area, there was only one work-based learning provider. Partners promoted general and non-vocational education and there was little awareness of the importance of work-based learning. In another area, there were very few work-based learning providers and learners had travelled to a neighbouring borough for work-based provision.

54. One factor that inhibited effective action planning was the reluctance of some providers to acknowledge they had any problems. They feared that if they admitted they had problems, news of these might spread and they would fail to attract learners. Some interviewees believed, for instance, that some schools with sixth forms offered post-16 learners a narrow range of courses and were reluctant to develop and offer vocational courses. In one area, those interviewed suggested that publicly-funded schools were keen to promote and nurture General Certificate of Education (GCE) A Level provision as this is what many parents want for their children and because they were in competition with thriving independent schools. In one area, representatives from schools felt action planning focussed on what FE colleges could provide and that funding favoured FE rather than schools.

55. In some areas, interviewees stated that there had been difficulties in working with Connexions in implementing and developing the action plan, as the Connexions service was in its early stages of formation and had only become established after the plan had been written. Many partners, including Connexions, felt that there was a mismatch between Connexions' targets and the action specified in the plans. Connexions staff acknowledged that there were problems. For instance, the young people for whom Connexions is contracted to provide priority advice and guidance, are not necessarily the same young people schools and colleges want Connexions to help. In some areas, Connexions staff are represented on area-wide management groups and try to ensure that targets in the action plan are compatible with those of the Connexions service.

56. Lack of funding was seen as a barrier to effective implementation of action plans (in some areas), particularly where action related to 14- 16 provision, because local LSCs cannot fund pre-16 provision. Greater Merseyside LSC has sought a number of ways to address this problem. For example, it has funded an information and communications technology (ICT) centre, based at the local FE college, which is used by pupils from local schools. Partners also reported that having separate funding systems for pre-16 and post-16 provision, militates against co-ordination of planning and action, because different partners are working towards different targets in order to comply with the funding regulations which apply to them.

57. A number of barriers to effective implementation of the action plan are attributable to problems with data. Difficulties in implementing the action plan have arisen where partners have disagreed with the data used in the inspection report or have felt that the data was unreliable. The West of England LSC has appointed a data manager to ensure that all information is thoroughly analysed and verified before it is distributed.

58. Some partners suggested that The Data Protection Act has made partners wary about sharing data on learners' progress and achievements. The 14-19 Forum in Southwark, which leads the implementation of the area-wide action plan, required better data about learners than that available, in order to find out whether the plan was proving effective. Therefore, Connexions received funding to help it develop an improved system for monitoring learners' performance. Problems relating to data remain however. In some areas, there is uncertainty whether data on learners' performance should relate only to learners resident in the area, or cover those learners who travel into the area for their education and training. However, the Supporting Children and Young Peoples Group (formerly The Connexions Service National Unit) gives guidance on these issues, of some which Partners may not be fully aware.

Bureaucracy and administration

59. Interviewees who were representatives of local LSCs accepted that area-wide action planning was a bureaucratic process. They felt, however, that the process for national monitoring of the implementation of action plans had become unnecessarily time-consuming and excessively bureaucratic.

60. Most of the interviewees from local LSCs believed that reporting arrangements had become increasingly complex. They also thought it excessive and unnecessary to have to produce three reports in a year (this is a ministerial requirement), especially as these often had to be written before learners' examination results and achievements were published.

61. It was also felt that the action-planning process had increased the overall workload for many individuals, especially those on working groups. This additional workload was felt to be acceptable when staff were given proper support and adequate resources.

Funding, staffing and resourcing

62. Interviewees expressed a range of differing views about how much funding is needed to implement action plans effectively. Most said that there is never enough funding. Representatives of local LSCs were in agreement that the funding of action relating to pre-16 provision was problematic. In order to fund implementation of action designed to benefit learners aged 14 to 16, local LSCs had to exercise ingenuity.

63. There was consensus that, for planning to be effective, all partners must know when funds will be available.

64. Many partners, particularly smaller providers, said that it had been difficult to release staff to engage in action planning and collaborative activities.

65. Representatives of local LSCs felt that there had been a lack of clarity at the outset of the action-planning process about the sources of funding for implementation of the action plan. Initially, it had not been possible to use Standards Fund money to pay for staff, and in some areas there was a need to appoint a co-ordinator to oversee implementation of the action plan. When subsequently co-ordinators were appointed, many partners felt that they played a most valuable role.

66. Partners who considered existing funding levels to be appropriate, had in most cases been able to obtain funding from several sources, including: 14-19 Pathfinder funding, ESF, the Local Initiative and Development Fund (LID), the LEA and the local LSC.

Implementation of the action plan

67. Most partners, including local LSCs, were very satisfied with the progress made in implementing the action plan. They felt that action planning had resulted in:

    ● better planning of the curriculum to ensure learners' needs are met

    ● more work-based learning and provision at levels 1 and 2

    ● recognition by all partners of a shared responsibility for the needs of young people

    ● better partnership working between agencies in the area

    ● closer involvement of schools in planning provision across the area.

68. Most partners reported that they were satisfied with progress that has been made in implementing the action plan, especially in terms of collaboration between providers and increasing the range of options available to learners.

69. In a number of areas, however, partners said that there had been slow progress in implementing the action plans. Some of the prescribed action had not been completed within the required timescale. Interviewees commented that some timescales for actions were unrealistic.

70. Interviewees from one LSC area felt that there was still some way to go before implementation of the action plan would be complete. Although partners were willing to implement the plan, there was still a need for them to work together more closely and reach consensus on what should be done. In another area where implementation of the action plan had begun four years ago, partners had commissioned an independent report on what progress had been made. This report gave the implementation of the plan a much-needed impetus by highlighting what had been achieved and what still needed to be done. Partners have been able to reassess priorities and ensure the action plan remains relevant in the light of current issues.

Meeting aims and objectives

71. Many interviewees said that action planning had been instrumental in helping them meet the aims and objectives of their own organisation.

72. Representatives of local LSCs believed that action planning had helped individual organisations focus on ways of responding to the imperatives of *Success for All.*

73. Partners from Connexions expressed a variety of views on the impact the action-planning process had had on them. One representative felt that the targets in the action plan for raising learners' aspirations and levels of attainment and achievement matched those of the Connexions service. Some representatives from Connexions felt, however, that the action-planning process had had little, or no, impact upon the work of the service, and were not quite sure what they had got out of it. One Connexions provider felt that action planning had not affected the organisation's choice of objectives as it was a very local initiative that will have no impact on national policy for the provision of advice and guidance.

74. LEAs also had mixed views about the action-planning process. Most representatives felt that action planning accorded with their own LEA's aims and objectives and had been useful in

building relationships between partners. The representative of one LEA, however, felt the whole process had had little impact on the authority.

Strategic area reviews (StARs)

75.   Most representatives of local LSCs welcomed the introduction of the StAR as it provided partners with an opportunity to review what the action-planning process had achieved, take stock and consider how it might be improved.

The 14-19 curriculum

76.   All partners were in agreement that the action-planning process had facilitated greater compatibility between 14-16 and 16-19 provision. Most providers and local LSC representatives stated that they were now able to offer young people a wider range of options after they had completed their GCSE courses. For example, school pupils could now begin foundation 'taster' programmes in engineering during key stage 4 with the aim of easing their progression to post-16 vocational courses.

77.   It was widely believed that the action-planning process had been instrumental in helping LEAs to work together more collaboratively with their partners to plan a coherent 14-19 curriculum. Prior to the introduction of action-planning, many LEAs did not have a plan for post-16 provision.

78.   Partners also felt that the action-planning process had been a catalyst for helping partners to develop the 14-19 curriculum in accordance with government policy. Interviewees pointed out, however, that there are so many parties involved with the 14-19 curriculum, it is not clear where respective responsibilities lie. For example, city academies have been introduced in some areas but these are not necessarily closely involved in the action-planning process because they are accountable to the DfES and are subject to different monitoring arrangements from other organisations offering 14-19 provision. Partners have been reassured, however, to know that local LSCs with a city academy in their area have been united in expressing their concern that city academies should take account of the aims and objectives of local action plans for 14–19 provision. These early action plans were developed before the 14-19 agenda was fully articulated and were in essence 16-19 action plans. As the 14-19 agenda has unfolded, increasingly the action plans have been developed to reflect this. However, this approach is less clearcut than developing a 14-19 action plan from the beginning.

79.   Work-based learning providers tended to be less interested in promoting a coherent 14-19 curriculum. Some felt that the action-planning process in respect of pre-16 provision had been largely 'hijacked' by schools and there was some concern that funding would favour schools at the expense of post-16 providers.

Conclusions

80.   A key benefit emerging from the action-planning process has been the development of clear arrangements for the planning of provision. Other benefits include the establishment of productive relationships between different types of providers and especially between schools and work-based learning providers which previously had had little contact with one another.

81.   Some interviewees said that the action-planning process entailed an administrative burden for those involved. This was a price worth paying, however, in view of the benefits that action planning brought, such as improved working relationships between partners. When the action-planning process was properly funded and resourced, the additional workload for participants was less of an issue.

82. Most interviewees expressed satisfaction with the progress made on implementing action plans. In some areas, however, where local LSCs had not been fully operational from the outset, there had been frustration with the slow start in instigating action.

83. Other benefits attributable to the action-planning process have included the introduction of StARS, better planning of the 14-19 curriculum, and improved planning of provision by individual organisations.

Impact of the action-planning process

Introduction

84. The study aimed to identify what impact the implementation of the area action plan had had on the following:

- post-16 participation rates

- availability of work-based learning provision

- availability of provision at levels 1 and 2

- advice and guidance services.

85. Each of these is looked at in more depth below.

Participation

86. Most partners were in agreement that action planning had helped to raise participation rates but that hard data to substantiate this claim was not yet available. Furthermore, much of the action to increase participation was recent. It was also agreed that higher participation rates were due to a number of factors, of which the action-planning process was only one.

87. Good methods of collecting reliable data were seen to be essential. Partners could not always agree on participation figures. For example, in one area, the LEA stated that participation had remained static, whereas the Local Learning Partnership said that it had data to show that it had increased. Some areas were still struggling to generate common systems of data collection and were uncertain whether participation had increased or not.

88. Interviewees from a number of areas, however, said there had been an increase in participation. In those areas where the action plan focussed strongly on pre-16 provision, there had been an increase in participation. This increase was attributed to an improvement in pupils' achievements at key stage 4, which in turn had resulted in more learners moving on to post-16 provision. In another area, data showed there had been a reduction in the number of young people not in employment, education or training, following the implementation of a pilot initiative contained in the area-wide action plan.

89. In one area, the proportion of school pupils progressing to FE had increased from 48% to 61%. It was felt that this increase in post-16 participation was due to a number of factors, of which action planning was only one. These factors included a strong commitment by all partners to widening participation and reaching out to those who were hard to help, and also the impetus to improve provided by the area-wide inspection.

90. In another area there has been an increase in participation of 3% since 2002. The increase is primarily at levels 1 and 2.

91. Participation has also increased following providers' joint introduction of a wider range of subjects and courses. Learners can start with vocational courses at key stage 4 and progress to further post-16 courses.

Example of good practice: North Tyneside LSC

North Tyneside LSC has identified that partners' failure to have reliable methods of collecting sound data is a "huge issue". Different partners were uncertain what information was needed and in what format data should be produced. The local LSC has addressed this issue by appointing a learning data manager, who is responsible for collecting all data relevant to the implementation of the action plan.

Example of good practice: 'The Southwark Guarantee'

This guarantee offers the following:

A post-16 progression route for all learners who are successful on a 14-16 option, offered by all providers;

More 'off site' provision, especially of vocational options;

Review of GCE Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and A2 courses across the borough to improve their timetabling and find out how the range can be widened through the collaboration of providers.

Work-based learning

92. Interviewees from most areas felt there was a need to build on the progress that had already been made and improve the quality and range of work-based learning.

93. Partners in some areas felt that that work-based learning provision had been made more relevant and attractive to young people and their parents and that better advice and guidance about work-based learning were now available. Prospectuses which will cover all post-16 options available to learners in their localities are planned.

94. Many of those interviewed said that through action planning, work-based learning providers had been brought together to identify better working practices and rationalise provision. Networks of work-based learning providers had been set up in many areas.

95. In another area, a consortium of work-based learning providers has been formed, but participation rates for work-based learning have remained unchanged. Those interviewed said that work-based learning had a poor image in the area and that employers were reluctant to promote, or become involved with, work-based learning programmes.

96. In some areas, there were few providers of work-based learning. It was recognised that it would take time to increase their number. In one area, where many young people progressed to GCE A Level courses at the age of 16, there had been only one work-based learning provider at the time of the inspection. Now, however, there are two work-based learning providers in the area.

97. In many areas, surveys have been undertaken to find out what provision is required and to identify the needs of the local labour market.

98. Providers of work-based learning have collaborated effectively to implement the E2E initiative. In one area, however, providers worked well together on E2E but tended to neglect the 14-16 curriculum. In one area, it was proposed to establish a work-based learning sub-group but this has not been formed as work-based learning providers have indicated they would not be able to spare staff to attend meetings.

99. Many interviewees said that work-based learning data was inadequate or unreliable. Work-based learning providers' data collection systems have not been as well developed as those used by schools and colleges. It was felt that work-based learning providers needed more guidance on efficient and effective ways of gathering, storing and interpreting data.

100. Interviewees said that where there were several work-based learning providers in an area, their representation on the action planning working groups and at meetings could be problematic. Given the strong competition which can exist between providers, it was not necessarily appropriate for one provider to represent all the others.

Example of good practice: North Tyneside

Work between partners in raising the profile and status of work-based learning has been particularly successful in North Tyneside where work-based learning providers have collaborated with the LEA to draft a work-based learning strategy for the area.

Example of good practice: Southwark

The 14-19 Forum in Southwark has launched a successful marketing campaign to attract more learners from minority ethic groups to work-based learning. There has been a large increase in the number of learners from minority ethnic groups taking up modern apprenticeships in the area.

Example of good practice: Islington

Good progress has been made in identifying what work-based learning providers in the area can offer. Work-based learning providers now play a key role in the operation of the new 'vocational skills centre' established with the aim of improving the quality, and widening the range of, work-based learning opportunities available to young people in the area.

Example of good practice: Rotherham

The local LSC has recruited an industrial links officer who has responsibility for ensuring that providers of work-based learning meet the needs of local employers. In addition, a modern apprenticeship scheme which has proved successful in Sheffield, has now been introduced in Rotherham.

Provision at levels 1 and 2

101. Interviewees from all areas felt that there has been progress in making more provision at levels 1 and 2 available to learners, and in improving its quality.

102. Where significant progress has been made in extending the range and scope of provision, this has usually been achieved through providers' collaborative working. Schools and colleges have worked well together to ensure learners benefit from a coherent 14-19 curriculum and are able to progress easily from pre-16 to post-16 provision. For example, pupils in schools have been able to take vocational subjects which they can continue studying in college after the age of 16.

103. Interviewees in some areas said they had visited other areas to look at good practice in running courses at levels 1 and 2.

104. Schools and colleges have worked together to offer learners a coherent 14-19 curriculum. A number of partners stated that the costs of collaboration were often underestimated. Some said that there was a shortage of staff qualified to teach on courses at levels 1 and 2.

105. There was more collaboration in some areas than in others in provision of level 1 and 2 courses. Interviewees in one area said that action to provide vocational programmes at levels 1 and 2 was taken largely on the initiative of individual schools. Collaboration between schools was inhibited by competition between those with sixth forms, whilst collaboration between schools and colleges was impeded by differences in working practices.

106. Some interviewees said, however, that there had been a marked improvement in the quality and availability of provision at levels 1 and 2. For example, partners in Salford said that collaboration between FE colleges was very good. All colleges have introduced more level 1 courses which have attracted more learners and success rates have risen. In addition, individual colleges were providing for learners with special needs more effectively.

107. The representative from the Connexions service in Southwark said that there had been positive feedback from learners taking courses at levels 1 and 2 in FE colleges. Learners felt that these courses were good and met their needs. It was believed that the introduction of good courses at levels 1 and 2 in Southwark would reduce the number of learners who went outside the borough to seek provision.

108. Interviewees from most areas said that achievement rates on courses at levels 1 and 2, and GCSE courses, had risen. For example, the GCSE achievement rate in Islington had risen by 6% and was above target. Interviewees said, however, that they were uncertain whether the improvement in learners' performance resulted from the implementation of the action plan or other factors, such as 14-19 Pathfinder or Excellence Challenge initiatives.

109. Some interviewees stated that a lot of work still needed to be done to ensure that teachers in schools had a better understanding of vocational programmes of study. It was felt that in many schools, vocational courses were regarded as a "sink option" for difficult and less-able learners. Education Business Partnerships have played a role in some areas in helping teachers to become better informed about vocational options and the progression routes they offer young people. In some areas, some schools were developing courses leading to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) at levels 1 and 2.

Example of good practice: Bath and North East Somerset

Staff from schools and colleges have taken part in 'learning raids', which are visits to other schools and providers outside the area to find out how they plan, organise and implement provision at levels 1 and 2. For example, teachers have visited a school in Portsmouth where pupils complete key stage 3 in two years, in order that they may start preparing for their GCSE work a year early. Staff have also visited the Knowsley Collegiate to learn more from a collaborative approach with a vocational emphasis.

Example of good practice: Knowsley Collegiate

All providers in Knowsley are members of Knowsley Collegiate which has been established to offer the 14-19 curriculum across the borough. Through the collegiate, approximately 600 learners at key stage 4 are working towards vocational GCSEs, including GCSEs in photography, catering, and electronics. Knowsley Collegiate is run by an executive board with representatives from providers and also Jaguar and QVC, the largest employers in the area.

Example of good practice: Southwark

The borough has a 14-19 Forum which has set up a 'South Summit Group' to address gaps in provision in the south of the borough. The group plans to establish a new 14-19 centre in the south, to expand provision at levels 1 and 2.

Advice and guidance

110. Some interviewees believed that it was the responsibility of Connexions to provide learners with advice and guidance. Representatives of the Connexions service, however, said that it was the responsibility of everyone involved with learners to offer them advice and guidance. In some areas, Connexions staff have worked effectively with providers to identify when learners need help most, such as the time GCSE results are published.

111. Interviewees who were Connexions staff said that personal advisers take printed information about post-16 provision with them into schools. They believed, however, that in some schools, information about provision, other than that offered by the school, was not made fully available to pupils. To enable pupils to find out for themselves what is available to them in an area, prospectuses giving details of all types of provision have been published electronically on the Internet. In addition, some Connexions staff have worked successfully with teachers in schools with the aim of helping them give informed and impartial advice to pupils on options open to them.

112. Many partners pointed out that the Connexions service became fully operational part way through their action-planning process. They felt that the targets of the Connexions service and those targets in the action plans were not always compatible. An interviewee from a college said that Connexions did not complement the college's own advice and guidance services adequately. The needs of learners which Connexions had targeted were not the same as those the college aimed to meet.

113. Some partners work well with the Connexions Service to ensure that learners receive the support and guidance they need. Such collaborative working was especially effective when senior managers from Connexions were closely involved in monitoring implementation of the action plan.

114. Interviewees said that it was essential that guidance and advice were available to young people at any time, during school holidays for example, and especially when GCSE results are published.

Example of good practice: Rotherham

One school in Rotherham has achieved the quality mark for careers advice and guidance and is currently helping other schools to establish minimum standards for their provision of advice and guidance.

Example of good practice: Doncaster

Partners in Doncaster have sought to make progression to post-16 provision easier for learners through a common entry system. A prospectus of all post-16 options is being developed and careers events and conferences on post-16 opportunities have been held.

Example of good practice: Knowsley

All personal advisers from Connexions have contacts at the local LSC to whom they can refer any concerns about provision learners may have raised.

Example of good practice: Newcastle

In Newcastle, Connexions staff ensured that advice and guidance were available to young people throughout the summer after they had completed their GCSE or FE courses. The staff contacted all young people on their database.

Conclusions

115.   Most interviewees agreed that implementation of the action-planning process had resulted in a wider range of provision which had led to higher participation rates.

116.   Some work-based learning providers have been reluctant to collaborate with other partners, but where they have done so, learners have benefited.

117.   Action planning has led to an expansion of provision at levels 1 and 2. The introduction of vocational courses at levels 1 and 2 as part of key stage 4 work in schools has proved particularly beneficial to pupils in preparing them for further vocational study post-16.

118.   In many areas, action planning started before the Connexions service was fully operational. There has been some incompatibility between the targets of the Connexions service in respect of providing advice and guidance for young people, and those of action plans. In some areas, there is increasing collaboration between providers and Connexions. Some successful initiatives have been launched for keeping in touch with young people at all times, including school and college holidays.