CIRCULAR

**Strategic Planning 2000
and Beyond**

To

Principals of colleges
Heads of external institutions and
higher education institutions
receiving Council funds
Chief education officers
Chairs of regional development
agencies

Circular type

Guidance and request
for information

Summary

Responses to consultation
(Circular 99/11); outline of revised
strategic planning framework; and
request for plans in July 2000

Reference number: 99/32

99/32

Strategic Planning 2000 and Beyond

Introduction

1   This circular summarises the results of the spring 1999 consultation on strategic plans and outlines the Council's revised framework and proposed timetable for receipt of strategic planning information in 2000 and beyond.

2   The consultation was formulated before the post-16 review and maintained its focus on revising the framework for plans to be requested in 2000. However, the outcomes of the review have been taken into account by the Council in developing the proposed timetable, as far as is possible at this stage.

Background

3   At its meeting in December 1998, the Council agreed to review its strategic planning framework for colleges by undertaking a consultation exercise. The reasons for the review were:

- reinforcing the principle that colleges' strategic plans are primarily driven by their own needs rather than by the Council's information needs

- ensuring that the strategic planning arrangements enable the Council to monitor how colleges reflect the government's priorities for lifelong learning

- reviewing the strategic planning process in the context of further minimising the administrative burden on colleges

- assessing the implications of college accreditation for strategic planning

- evaluating the current and future uses of strategic plans (and associated returns) by the Council, other bodies and colleges

- reviewing the schedule whereby strategic planning information is received by the Council (including student number projections, financial forecasts and accommodation strategies)

- reflecting the changing expectations for planning post-16 education through lifelong learning partnerships, taking account of the government's objectives of rationalising provision, ensuring that priority is given to making provision in local areas and meeting skills needs identified in the economic strategies of the regional development agencies (RDAs).

4   Circular 99/11 was published in March with a discussion document outlining the consultation issues. Responses were invited by the end of April 1999. In addition, Circular 99/11 invited college representatives to express an interest in taking part in a focus group to discuss issues in more depth. In the light of the responses received, focus groups were arranged for each region in April and May.

Consultation Responses

5   The consultation attracted a high level of interest: 177 questionnaire responses were received by mid-May 1999, including 30 responses (17%) through the Council's website. In addition, 336 representatives (including government office and RDA representatives) attended regional focus groups. External institutions and higher education institutions were encouraged to respond even though the consultation was primarily aimed at colleges. A small number of responses were also received from other organisations such as local education authorities (LEAs), training and enterprise councils and RDAs. An analysis of responses is provided at annex A.

Key issues

6   The consultation exercise recognised that the context in which colleges operate has changed significantly since they shared their first plans with the Council in 1994, particularly in the terms of the development of lifelong learning partnerships and RDAs.

7   Representatives in focus groups confirmed many aspects of the Council's existing framework, but at the same time expressed concerns about uncertainty about future arrangements following the post-16 review and the requirements of the Learning and Skills Council from 2001. Colleges also emphasised that if student number projections were to be requested by different categories, then a standard method of allocating ISR data to these

categories to provide a baseline would be welcomed, along with software to achieve this.

Proposals

8   In the light of the responses to the consultation, the Council proposes to request strategic planning information in two stages: a strategic plan update from colleges in July 2000 and a full strategic plan from all institutions in July 2001. This has the following advantages:

a.   a single return date for all components of the specification can be achieved, with the 2000 update containing student number projections, financial forecasts and accommodation data (a reduced level of detail would be requested in the latter years of the projection for student numbers and financial forecasts);

b.   the text of the update in 2000 can focus on emerging areas of activity, in particular lifelong learning partnerships and responses to skills needs identified in RDAs' economic strategies;

c.   the July return date is consistent with that of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), thereby maximising the scope for collaboration to minimise the administrative burden on institutions funded by both councils (see paragraph 13 below);

d.   increased time for the Council's management information committee (MIC) to take forward the development of software to facilitate colleges' production of student projections by new categories such as age and qualification level, starting from an ISR baseline;

e.   the request for college accommodation strategies, which colleges had previously been informed were not to be required before 2001, could be brought into line with the receipt of full plans in July 2001;

f.   the new Learning and Skills Council would concurrently receive full strategic plans from both colleges and external institutions (which are currently one year behind the college cycle).

9   An illustration of the relationship between data development and strategic planning timetables is provided at annex B.

Return of information in July 2000

10   Details of the information requested in 2000 will be provided in the funding guidance for 2000-2001. Subsequently, a spring 2000 circular will provide the forms for the return of the financial forecast, student projection information and accommodation data, and detailed guidance on their completion. This circular will also outline the framework for the textual update, including an annex related to HE provision. It is envisaged that the information sought will be broadly similar to current requests.

Full strategic plans in July 2001

11   The full strategic plans requested from colleges in July 2001 will:

- continue to cover a three-year planning period, subject to any further requirements of the Learning and Skills Council

- include:
    – a financial forecast
    – a full accommodation strategy
    – student number projections by new categories (for example, age and qualification level)

- provide a commentary on at least the following areas:
    – key aims (mission)
    – needs analysis or description of contribution to the partnership's needs analysis
    – key objectives and review of previous objectives
    – curriculum plan/outline of educational programmes
    – human resources/staff development plan
    – quality development
    – information and learning technology strategy
    – operating plan
    – risk analysis

- include specific details about HE provision funded by HEFCE.

12   Confirmation of this request will be published in a circular in 2000, taking into account the transition arrangements for the establishment of the new Learning and Skills Council.

Monitoring Higher Education in Further Education Colleges

13   The Council has consulted the HEFCE and is considering, in the context of the rationale for the review of the strategic planning framework, the most effective way of allowing the HEFCE to monitor the provision it funds in further education colleges.

14   The Council is considering requesting that colleges receiving funding from HEFCE include in their strategic plan update an annex relating specifically to that area of provision. Upon receipt, the Council would share this information with HEFCE. The type of information requested in the annex might include:

- aims or purposes, identifying the college's reasons behind its development of HE provision
- key strategic objectives taking into account local labour market information
- an explanation of the link between the college's overall strategy and its specific objectives for HE
- key operating targets for the current year (and progress towards them), plus targets for the following year.

15   The Council and HEFCE would seek to ensure that the level of detail of such a request would be in proportion to the volume of HE activity undertaken. Those colleges receiving specific funding from HEFCE, for example, for widening participation, might be expected to report on how the additional funding has been used for students from disadvantaged groups.

16   Further consultation with HEFCE will include reciprocal arrangements for monitoring the provision which the Council funds in higher education institutions. Further details will be provided later in the year.

David Melville

Analysis of Responses to Consultation Questionnaire

An analysis of the number of responses received and representatives attending focus groups is provided in appendix 1.

Question 1

Are the purposes and processes of strategic planning, from an institution's perspective, adequately reflected in paragraphs 13, 14 and annex B?

Yes   148 (87%)   No   23 (13%)

Whilst there was a general agreement that the purposes and processes of strategic planning were adequately reflected in Circular 99/11, many respondents raised issues at this stage which they felt should be clarified. These included, in particular, the role of institutions' strategic plans in the wider context of lifelong learning partnerships' plans and RDA's economic strategies. Comments relating to this aspect of the consultation are dealt with under the responses to question 4.

The issue of integrating the strategic plan into the wider context was mentioned by a number of respondents who wished to see the diagram in Circular 99/11 revised (see appendix 2).

Issues were raised about the role of the strategic plan for a college and the differences between the strategic plan and the operating plan. There appeared to be a conflict between those institutions which see the two as separate documents and those which would like to treat them as one document. The latter did not find that the current headings for the Council's framework encompassed all the aspects that they felt need to be included in an operating plan. The comments generally concerned the fact the current strategic planning guidance refers to accommodation, finance and student numbers, but does not refer in the same depth to staff, curriculum and quality improvement. Some of these issues are addressed further under the responses to question 14.

Question 2

Is the purpose for which the Council receives strategic planning information from institutions, set in paragraphs 15, 16 and annex C still relevant?

Yes   164 (95%)   No   8 (5%)

The majority of respondents indicated that the purposes set out in the circular were still relevant for the Council to collect strategic planning information from funded institutions. However, there were some concerns expressed that the information was not always used to its full effect for those purposes and that some of the aims were too general to be fully satisfied.

The issue of defining adequate and sufficient provision was raised and whether individual plans could provide the information needed to reach a conclusion. Some colleges were keen to emphasise that the plans sent to the Council are written to focus on the activity that is funded by the Council and as a result would not describe all the provision being made in a local area. There was a consensus that this issue might be clarified with the emerging role of lifelong learning partnerships and their combined needs analysis.

Many respondents commented on the possible changes that may result in the request for strategic planning information as a result of the government's post-16 review.

The Council has responded to these concerns by requesting strategic plan updates in 2000 and full plans in 2001.

Question 3

Are you aware of any other bodies, apart from those mentioned in paragraph 17, that make use of institution's strategic planning information?

Yes   71 (42%)   No   99 (58%)

Of the 40% of respondents which indicated other bodies in their answer to this question, the main focus of the responses was the sharing of plans with LEAs and partners involved in joint bidding processes (for example, European social fund, collaboration fund and single regeneration budget). Many reasons were supplied for colleges sharing their plans with LEAs, with the need for schools' planning, transport policy and collaborative activity in community education being the main ones.

Other bodies with which colleges shared their plans included the HEFCE, chambers of commerce, and the colleges' banks. Various references were made to the role of lifelong learning partnerships and RDAs in sharing college strategic plans, and these comments have been incorporated into the analysis of questions 4 and 5, which look at these in more detail.

Question 4

What are the implications of the development of lifelong learning partnerships (and post-16 development plans) for an institution's planning processes?

Respondents highlighted the following as the main implications of lifelong learning partnerships for strategic planning:

- shared responsibility for meeting need will result in: more time needing to be spent on strategic planning; a reduction in college autonomy in relation to what they may put in their plans, and an increase in the negotiation required with regional and local partners; potential difficulties as a result of partners operating different planning cycles; and possible conflicts of interest and priorities between partner organisations

- the importance of ensuring consistency throughout the region and between bordering partnerships would increase

- there would be benefits from greater coherence in strategy and provision brought about by the development of lifelong learning partnerships.

Question 5

What are the implications for institutions of the Council's strategic planning requirements in relation to the main features described in paragraph 23?

Many colleges believed that all of the features set out were required for effective planning and that colleges should undertake them as a matter of routine anyway. Some colleges believe that they have well-established planning processes and, consequently, would have no difficulty in meeting these requirements. However, some colleges stated that, as a result of increased partnership initiatives, planning will become more time-consuming.

A number of responses note that institutions will in future need to relate quality assurance planning more closely with target-setting and strategic planning. To do so would help relieve the administrative burden.

Question 6

Should the Council monitor an institution's inclusive learning action plan through the strategic plan? If not, what other mechanism should it apply?

Yes   107 (70%)   No   46 (30%)

Whilst a large proportion of respondents supported the monitoring of institutions' inclusive learning action plans through the strategic plan, there were also strong views expressed that this should not be the case. Concerns were expressed that the area was much more operational than strategic and was not easily monitored on paper, but would be better done through the self-assessment report and inspection process. It was proposed that the intent of the inclusive learning plan should form an integral part of the strategic plan, but that the monitoring should be dealt with in another way.

The Council might expect to see a statement about inclusive learning in any new section on curriculum planning within the strategic plan (see question 14), but would not expect a great deal of detail.

Question 7

What strategies should the Council use to monitor colleges' progress towards achieving government priorities, whilst at the same time aiming to reduce its information demands on institutions?

Respondents highlighted the following suggestions as strategies that the Council should use to monitor government priorities at the same time as reducing information demands on colleges:

- draw down more information from the ISR; use ISR more effectively; make more use of data already collected

- more 'hands on' relationship between the college and the Council, for example, through the college inspector or through the regional office

- obtain more information from lifelong learning or regional partners.

The Council intends to make more use of the ISR data to facilitate the production of student number projections (see questions 20–21).

Question 8

Would it be of benefit to institutions to link the timing of the request for accommodation strategies to that for the overall strategic plan and financial forecast?

       Yes   130 (82%)   No   28 (18%)

The majority agreed with this proposal but expressed concern about the amount of work this might create, particularly for smaller colleges. There was a general view that there was a logical link but that the practicalities might be a problem. The views expressed at the regional focus groups endorsed the proposal to link the timing of the requests, as it was felt that the accommodation strategy otherwise tended to be left with no fixed timing.

The minority view was that accommodation strategies and strategic plans had different cycles and that the former needed a longer lead-time.

The Council's proposed timetable establishes the link between these two elements of the planning process.

Question 9

Would it be appropriate, from an institution's perspective, to link the request for a full strategic plan to the Council's inspection cycle? If appropriate, then should it be before or after inspection? If not, then what other cycle would be more appropriate?

       Yes   78 (49%)   No   81 (51%)

Responses were fairly equally divided. Those who thought it appropriate were also equally divided as to whether it should be before or after inspection.

The majority of participants at regional focus groups rejected this suggestion to link to the inspection cycle because of the amount of resources required to facilitate the inspection process. In addition, it was pointed out that the planning process is a function carried out by colleges to plan development and future resources: it is a separate function from the inspection process.

The Council does not propose to link the collection of strategic planning information to individual college inspection cycles.

Question 10

How many years should a full strategic plan cover?

Table 1. Responses to question 10

No. of years	No. of responses	% of responses
2	6	3
3	107	64
4	36	22
5	16	10
More than 5	2	1

The majority favoured plans covering a three-year period (which is consistent with the HEFCE's planning requests).

The Council intends to continue to request strategic plans on a three-year rolling programme.

Should this differ according to a college's individual circumstances (for example, whether it has accredited status)?

       Yes   23 (19%)   No   97 (81%)

Only 19% of respondents suggested that the time period covered by the plan should differ according to the status of the college. Examples suggested included four years for an accredited college, three for those not causing concern and two for those that are.

The Council considered that, in practice, this would be difficult to implement because of the movement of colleges between these categories during any strategic planning cycle.

Table 2. Responses to question 11

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Number of responses	4	6	15	54	15	23	60	9	1	2	0	3
% of responses	2	3	8	28	8	12	31	5	0	1	0	2

Question 11

What would be the most appropriate time of year, in relation to an institution's own planning cycle, to request annual strategic planning information/data?

The majority of responses suggested months during the third term of the teaching year (April to July) with some associated issues being highlighted. There was a general consensus that by February colleges were well advanced with their general planning for the following year as they would be preparing for the Council's funding round. It was agreed that all colleges are able to have analysed their performance in previous years by April and, in the case of sixth form colleges particularly, are able to make reasonable predictions of enrolment levels for the next year. However, in terms of financial forecasts, the consensus was that colleges would prefer to continue to return the financial forecasts in July. The justification for this was that the forecast return date coincided with:

- the time that colleges set their budgets for the following year
- governors' meetings
- negotiations with the TECs in April for the following year.

Those colleges which recommended a July return for all strategic planning information highlighted the importance of knowing their FEFC funding allocation before finalising the plan and indicated that governors would usually meet during July to approve the budget and plan.

The responses suggest that those colleges which requested an April return would not have much difficulty in producing a plan for July, those which requested to make the return in July would not feel able to do so in April as they would not have the confirmed funding allocation on which to base their strategic plan.

The Council has decided that the strategic planning return will be requested in July each year, in parallel with HEFCE's request.

Question 12

Would it be helpful if the request for annual strategic planning information/data coincided with the revision of college:

a. charters;

Yes 75 (48%) No 82 (52%)

b. disability statements?

Yes 70 (48%) No 76 (52%)

Respondents were 52% against this proposal and took the view that the link between these items and the strategic plan was not obvious. They reported that many colleges update these documents annually to suit internal timescales and these may not fit in with the fixed annual return dates of strategic planning information.

Those in favour provided few supportive comments for the proposal, but seemed supportive as they could not see it posing a problem for their individual institution.

The Council has decided not to request that charters and disability statements be sent with the strategic planning return. However, it will be a requirement that institutions inform the Council through the strategic plan of the timetable when these documents will be produced and updated.

Question 13

What are the implications of collecting some elements of strategic planning information/data at different times of the year?

The majority of respondents did not favour the idea of collecting information at different times of the year. The main problems with this approach concerned discontinuity with the planning cycles, confusion, lack of cohesion, fragmentation and work overload. Those who favoured the proposal thought it important to have clear annual timetables for returns to the Council, so that their workload might be planned more effectively.

The Council's proposed timetable seeks to collect strategic planning information at a single point in time in July.

Question 14

Are the broad headings of the Council's existing college strategic planning framework for colleges (annex A) still appropriate?

Yes   146 (87%)   No   21 (13%)

Whilst the majority of institutions indicated that they felt that the broad headings were still appropriate, many respondents made suggestions for additional headings. The most common of these was a section on collaborative work already taking place and which could take place in the future (this would link in with the role of lifelong learning partnerships and the various associations shown in the figure at appendix 2). Other common suggestions for headings included:

- human resources
- on-line delivery and flexible open learning; ILT strategy
- initiatives funded at the institution from sources other than the Council
- curriculum and quality development.

The respondents who indicated that the headings were still not appropriate were generally suggesting a reduction in the number of headings by suggesting that needs analysis would be supplied by lifelong learning partnerships in future and saying that quality assurance issues should be dealt with within the inspection process rather than as part of the strategic plan.

The over-riding message was that the headings should be left broad and flexible to enable institutions to write plans which met their own needs as well as supplying the required information to the Council.

The Council's guidance for strategic plan updates/ full plans will reflect these suggested areas.

Question 15

How should the development of joint needs analyses by lifelong learning partnerships influence the Council's request for strategic planning information from individual institutions?

Responses to this question fell into broadly opposing categories with around half the respondents indicating that lifelong learning partnerships' needs analyses would remove the need for colleges to share individual needs analyses with the Council, while the other half felt that individual needs analyses would still be crucial and should be shared in the same way as before.

Various comments were made to highlight that views on this subject varied, depending on the expectation of the lifelong learning partnerships' success and also the size of the partnership, as there appeared a general consensus that larger partnerships were more likely to produce an analysis which is not local enough to remove the need for individual institutions' analyses.

The Council will continue to expect a section on needs analysis in individual institutions' strategic plans.

Question 16

Is the Council's software application on disk for making financial returns useful, in relation to colleges' own processes for preparing forecasts?

Yes   113 (72%)   No   44 (28%)

There was a mixed response on the usefulness of the financial forecast disk in terms of a college's own processes. For internal presentation, colleges generally use a different format for forecasts to that used by the Council and it was felt that the Council format had limited use for non-finance college staff. Generally, however, participants concluded that the Council's software application was useful. The current application comprises five forms of data and detailed supporting schedules. On balance it was felt that the Council should continue to provide the detailed schedules for colleges to complete where colleges required them but also to have the facility for only completing the forms.

In general colleges felt that too much information was requested in years 2 and 3 of the forecast return.

Many colleges found the format of the current financial forecast application difficult to use. Colleges were advised at the regional focus groups that some of these concerns had already been addressed in the 1998 to 2002 financial forecast return. This version works in Windows 95 and is effectively an Excel workbook. This information was well received.

A large number of colleges expressed an opinion that the Council should allow colleges to make the return using the Internet.

The Council is keen to make the best use of technology, particularly if this benefits colleges and will look at receiving returns via the Internet. The Council will make available two versions of the application; one with detailed schedules and one without.

Question 17

Would the need to respond to occasional requests for financial information be an acceptable approach, if the level of detail in the financial forecast and finance record was reduced?

Yes   84 (54%)   No   71 (46%)

The response on the need to make occasional requests for information if the level of detail in financial forecasts was reduced was evenly balanced. The main concerns were that requests should not simply spread the current level of detail over a longer period and that any requests for information should be clear and give a reasonable timescale for response.

Some colleges made the point that they would not mind such requests because they believed that the Council was entitled to clarification and further information about the data in the forecast.

Colleges put forward the view that if changes were to be made to the format of the returns it would be useful if the finance record matched the audited accounts more closely.

The Council has decided to look at reducing the level of detail in years 2 and 3 of the financial forecast (from July 2000 onwards) and to use occasional requests to gain any further information required. The Council has noted the concerns of some colleges about this approach and will be aware of these when asking for additional information.

Question 18

Are there any difficulties, from the institution's perspective, in supplying the information about accommodation strategies as proposed at annex D?

Yes   6 (4%)   No   156 (96%)

The majority of respondents supported the proposal to supply the information in annex D of Circular 99/11. A couple of points were raised in seeking clarification as to what was being requested.

The Council intends to collect this information in July 2000 and will issue the forms and associated guidance in a spring 2000 circular.

Question 19

Should the return of accommodation strategy update information coincide with the request for strategic planning information/data in April?

Yes   109 (68%)   No   51 (32%)

There was significant support for bringing the return date for the accommodation strategy update in line with the main strategic planning return. Those that did not support this indicated that they would prefer the return to be in July.

The Council intends to collect update data in July 2000 and a full accommodation strategy in 2001.

It is worth noting that the focus groups commented that, as in other areas of the strategic planning process, there are few examples of good practice with regard to the production of accommodation strategies. There was a general feeling that more examples of good practice and guidance would be appreciated.

The Council will consider ways of facilitating this in future.

Question 20

How easy would it be for institutions to provide more detail on current year student numbers and one-year projections by:

a.   **16–18 year olds and adults;**

b.   **NVQ level equivalent;**

c.   **subprogramme area?**

For all three aspects to this question, respondents highlighted that these could be produced, but that they would, in some cases, require more time and effort.

There were a number of colleges which claimed that these would actually be easier to produce than the current strategic planning numbers as the institution uses a system that holds data in these forms anyway. However, other institutions felt that it would require more work and produce less accurate data. Many respondents to the circular asked whether the Council could produce the required data from the ISR and the focus groups built on this idea by suggesting that the Council could produce software to provide strategic planning baseline information from the ISR.

Responses to this question obviously varied depending on the type of institution — the main example of this being in the area of the split between 16–18 year olds and adults, which was fully supported by sixth form colleges but less so by general FE colleges.

Concerns were expressed for the NVQ level equivalent and subprogramme area data that the information currently supplied by the Council would not allow these data to be compiled fully. Several references were made to the fact that not all qualifications on the Council's qualification database have NVQ levels assigned to them and many institutions feel that the definitions of subprogramme areas are not precise enough.

The Council has decided to ask its management information committee (MIC) to produce some detailed proposals on a standard method of producing an ISR baseline from which to produce student number projections. In line with the Council's approach to making such methods widely available, software houses could then develop applications for colleges. However, due to the development time required, it is unlikely that this work will be completed before 2001.

Question 21

What level of detail for projected student numbers in years 2 and 3 could institutions provide with a reasonable level of accuracy?

FE–HE split   **age 16–18/adults**
full-time/part-time   **subprogramme areas**
programme areas   **notional NVQ level**
funding sources   **qualification length (for example, short/other)**

Table 3 shows the responses for each aspect of detail referred to in the question along with the number of respondents who indicated that the data could be produced with a reasonable level of accuracy for years 2 and 3 of the projected data.

Table 3. Responses to question 21

Level of detail	*Number of respondents indicating that they felt a reasonable level of accuracy could be produced in years 2 and 3*
FE–HE split	132
Full-time/part-time	128
Programme areas	96
Funding sources	89
Age 16–18/adults	85
Qualification length	57
Notional NVQ level	56
Subprogramme areas	41

A large number of respondents qualified their answers by indicating that they felt data could be produced which would be reasonably accurate. However, this would depend on the consistency of approach taken by the Council to funding certain qualifications and would need to assume certain levels of funding being available for future years. These comments were underlined by those attending the regional focus groups who emphasised that without the Council providing assumptions to aid the strategic planning process, different institutions base their plans on different assumptions and further invalidate the projected data. It was felt that there needed to be clearer links between student numbers, units of activity and the funding generated.

The Council intends to reduce the level of detail requested in student number projections for years 2 and 3 of the projection period in the information it requests in 2000.

Question 22

If future strategic planning data collections were to focus on the most important dimensions discussed in annex F, which should they be?

FE–HE split   **age 16–18/adults**
full-time/part-time   **subprogramme areas**
programme areas   **notional NVQ level**
funding sources   **qualification length (for example, short/other)**

Table 4. Responses to question 22

Dimension	Number of respondents indicating that they felt the dimension was one of the most important aspects of future strategic planning data collections
Full-time/part-time	113
FE–HE split	95
Age 16–18/adults	95
Programme areas	85
Funding sources	78
Notional NVQ level	63
Qualification length	58
Subprogramme areas	39

The data dimensions currently collected formed four of the top five highlighted by respondents, with age split registering the highest out of the newly proposed dimensions. Interestingly, this was also the dimension which received the most negative comments, mainly by large institutions which did not feel that it was possible for them to project numbers in this way beyond the current year.

The Council will ensure that MIC is mindful of this when formulating their detailed proposals (see question 20).

Question 23

Should the request for franchised-out student numbers/projections with the strategic planning data be withdrawn in light of the strengthened link between the ISR and ADD-CP data collections?

Yes   124 (79%)   No   32 (21%)

The majority of respondents supported this proposal, which many considered to be duplication of data supplied to the Council. Some institutions expressed concerns that levels of franchised work should continue to be monitored closely.

The Council is satisfied that it can obtain the data it requires from the ISR and so will implement the proposal to remove the request for franchised-out student numbers/projections with the strategic planning data.

Question 24

Is it practical to provide course level information about withdrawal of provision during the current teaching year and withdrawals planned in the forthcoming year?

Yes   119 (73%)   No   43 (27%)

The main theme of responses was that it would not be too difficult to provide withdrawals information for the current teaching year as the decisions would have been made and the enrolment details would be known. However, many respondents questioned the ability to predict withdrawals for the forthcoming year, underlining the fact that withdrawals are often not planned, but occur naturally due to lack of enrolment for particular courses. In some of these cases, the courses lie dormant rather than actually being withdrawn and so would not be recorded by many institutions anyway.

The other issue highlighted in many responses was a feeling that the Council should be able to monitor the withdrawal of courses by using ISR data and therefore the completion of the CHG form was a duplicative exercise.

The Council acknowledges that this is the case for historic withdrawals (although there is a significant timelag before all institutions have made the relevant ISR return and the data has been analysed), but the ISR cannot be used to monitor projected withdrawals and the possible adequacy and sufficiency issues that may arise as a result.

The Council is likely to retain the CHG form during 2000, pending the work of MIC to more fully utilise data from institutions' ISR returns.

Question 25

If the Council were to seek information about the unmet needs of students (for example, those with learning difficulties), then should this be collected with the withdrawal of provision information?

Yes   88 (57%)   No   66 (43%)

Opinion was divided, with many indicating that they felt the data would be useful, but uncertain as to how they would compile it and where it would fall within the strategic planning framework. Amongst supporters and detractors of the proposal there seemed to be a consensus that the definition of unmet needs would need to be carefully drawn up to make the data both useful and collectable.

A number of respondents indicated that they felt this work fitted in better with college's needs analysis rather than with any withdrawals information. It was also suggested that the task of collecting data on unmet needs could only be done through the lifelong learning partnerships as opposed to individual institutions. The partnerships could play a key role in determining whether unmet needs identified by one provider are actually being met by another local provider within the partnership, or whether it is a need which requires addressing by the partnership.

The Council supports this view and will request information on unmet need as part of the needs analysis which lifelong learning partnerships will be asked to share with the Council. Individual institutions may wish to refer to this in their own strategic plans to comment on any initiatives being undertaken to address the areas of need highlighted by the lifelong learning partnership.

Question 26

Is the current feedback provided to colleges on strategic planning and financial health helpful, in the form of:

a.   the national analysis circular;
b.   the regional analysis booklets;
c.   the college accounts/finance records?

Table 5. Responses to question 26

Method of feedback	Helpful	Not helpful
National analysis circular	119 (77%)	36 (23%)
Regional analysis booklets	62 (76%)	20 (24%)
College accounts/ finance records	75 (88%)	10 (12%)

For all three returns referred to in this section, there was a general consensus that the information was useful. However, many institutions commented on how it could be improved. Issues such as the speed of publication, use of electronic and downloadable formats and more local and specific analysis will be looked at by the Council as it produces the data in the coming year and institutions may continue to offer feedback through the normal processes as data are published.

Colleges welcomed the use of the Internet for feedback from the Council. It was suggested that the Council make benchmarking information available on the Internet and that the information be updated periodically.

The Council is considering ways in which it can respond to colleges' requests. These include:

- *making greater use of the website to make data more quickly available rather than in printed form (for example, regional booklet analyses)*

- *individual college benchmarking data from the financial forecasts will be sent to colleges by 31 October, along with any feedback from the regional finance director on the financial forecast*

- *regional, college family and sector feedback from the financial forecasts will be published on the Council's website in 1999, along with strategic plan information*

- *more detailed guidance on the guidelines used for assessing the financial health of colleges will be published*

- *colleges have asked for more guidance on the detailed analysis of such items as pay costs to enable greater consistency in benchmarking data; the Council will (through the college finance directors group) consult a number of colleges on this issue.*

Question 27

What further information could the Council provide to assist institutions with:

a.   financial target-setting and forecasting;
b.   student number projections;
c.   identifying whether their local priorities are being met;
d.   other aspects of planning?

Many respondents made comments under this final section to request supporting information from the Council to assist with the strategic planning process. While a number of these have been addressed through earlier questions in the consultation, there remained some issues which have been raised by the sector for the Council to consider as future support for institutions.

The majority of the issues are fairly general and involve many aspects of the Council's work and, in many cases, require involvement from other agencies. Examples of these include the request for

schools data, skills requirements and knowledge of future government funding. Some of these issues may dissipate as the lifelong learning partnerships become fully operative and data are shared more readily than has been the case.

There was an overwhelming request for the Council to provide as much as possible as soon as possible in terms of planning assumptions for financial forecasts. This included requests for long-term financial projections from the Council.

The Council noted that many institutions commented on the difficulty of producing strategic planning numbers before the receipt of the final funding allocation and it is hoped that collecting the data at the end of July will help to alleviate this problem.

Responses to Circular 99/11

Questionnaires

Region	*Paper*		*Website*		*Total*	
	No.	*%*	*No.*	*%*	*No.*	*%*
Eastern Region	14	10	3	10	17	10
East Midlands	8	5	6	20	14	8
Greater London	18	12	5	17	23	13
Northern Region	10	7	1	3	11	6
North West	20	14	3	10	23	13
South East	24	16	5	17	29	16
South West	15	10	2	7	17	10
West Midlands	17	12	2	7	19	11
Yorkshire and Humberside	21	14	3	10	24	14
Total	**147**	**100**	**30**	**100**	**177**	**100**

	No.	*%*
Colleges	165	93
External institutions	7	4
Higher education institutions	1	1
Other (for example LEAs, TECs, RDAs)	4	2
Total	**177**	**100**

Focus Groups

Region	*No. of attendees*	*Colleges represented that:*	
		responded	*did not respond*
Eastern Region	29	9	8
East Midlands	35	8	7
Greater London	27	14	9
Northern Region	25	5	8
North West	74	15	11
South East	21	10	11
South West	25	7	2
West Midlands	40	15	0
Yorkshire and Humberside	60	15	9
Total	**336**	**98**	**65**

Other organisations represented included: external institutions (1), higher education institutions (2), RDAs (2), FEDA and NATFHE

Planning Influences on Post-16 Providers for 1999-2000
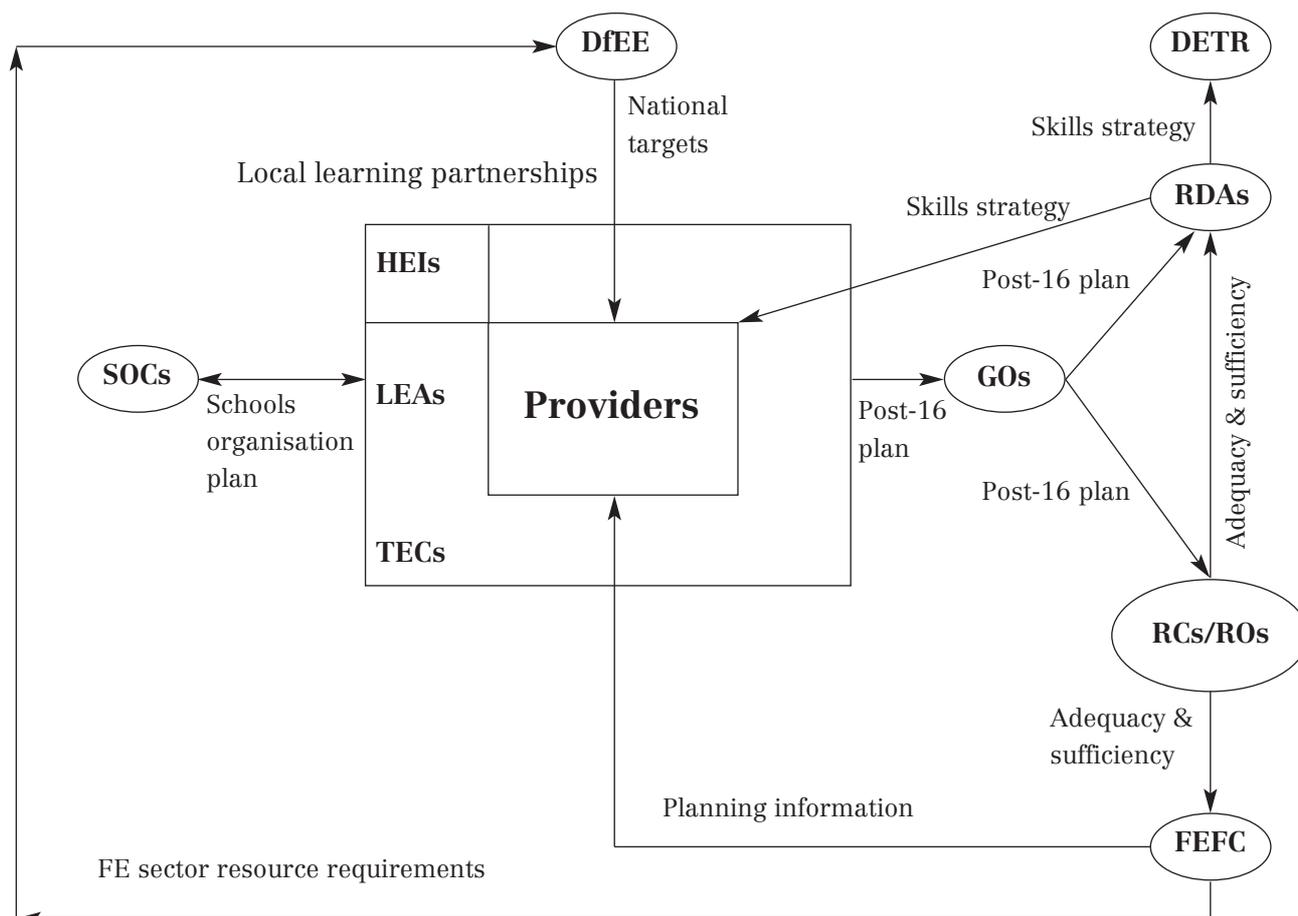
Abbreviations

DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DETR	Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions
RDAs	Regional Development Agencies
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
SOCs	School Organisation Committees
LEAs	Local Education Authorities
GOs	Government Offices
TECs	Training and Enterprise Councils
ROs	Regional Offices
RCs	Regional Committees

Proposed Timetable for Strategic Planning Process 1999 to 2001

Data development			Strategic planning
Projection (from ISR baseline) to accompany strategic plan	**Jul**	**2001**	Strategic plan (full) return
	Apr	**2001**	National/Local Learning & Skills (Council(s))
Implement projection method (and software)	**Feb**	**2001**	Funding round 2001-02
	Nov	**2000**	Adequacy and sufficiency report to Council
	Oct	**2000**	RDA/LLP data matching
Pilot projection method (and software)			
	Jul	**2000**	Strategic plan (update) return*
	Feb	**2000**	Funding round 2000-01 – basic student numbers to be provided
MIC produce proposals for standard projection method	**Oct**	**1999**	RDA economic strategy – matching with April strategic plans data to produce adequacy and sufficiency reports for regional committees and Council
	Jul	**1999**	Strategic plans circular Council report
	Jun	**1999**	Announcement on post-16 review

to include financial forecast, student number projections, accommodation data and textual information