National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal
Report of Policy Action Team 18: Better Information

Response from the Further Education Development Agency

Introduction

1. Producing sound research evidence to inform policy and practice is central to FEDA's mission. Increasing educational opportunity in deprived areas is a key concern. We regularly use statistical sources in our research and development work, and our clients and partners – managers and policy-makers in the field of post-16 education and training – are both users and producers of data on a large scale.

2. Many of the problems cited in *Better Information* are familiar to us: a shortage of data assembled on a comparable basis; the need to approach a variety of different agencies to obtain statistics; data which is not up to date; a lack of time series to support judgements on progress; and shortcomings in the scope of information collected. Steps to improve the quality and availability of information on deprived neighbourhoods are therefore to be welcomed and we are pleased to respond to this report.

3. Our main interest in this response is with information relating to post-16 education and training, in a socio-economic context. We concentrate on the first two issues raised in the invitation to comment: whether the recommendations are moving in the right general direction for achieving 'better information', and the proposed scope of Neighbourhood Statistics, including the major challenges for delivering the proposals. We draw attention to points where we think the proposals need further thought and suggest how FEDA could contribute. Finally, we make a brief comment on ethnic referencing.

Observations on the general thrust of the recommendations

4. We **support** the overall objectives of the recommendations, in particular those set out below.

   - The proposal that ONS should lead the initiative at national level, indicating national commitment and a clear responsibility for action.
   - The creation of a broad base of data, including a range of socio-economic as well as education indicators. Making connections between social deprivation, economic conditions and education provision is vital in our field. For example, it is helpful to identify which aspects of learning are most affected by deprivation, in order to devise appropriate interventions.

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- The intention to collect neighbourhood data on a consistent basis. This will help us to make judgements based on reliable comparisons of levels of educational need and impact, and to identify benchmarks. It will assist in highlighting geographic areas and communities which have special or unmet needs. A further potential benefit will be to enable providers and neighbourhoods to work more closely together to devise imaginative solutions to problems.

- The proposal to use ward-level data as the building block for Neighbourhood Statistics.

5. We further support the view expressed in the report that Neighbourhood Statistics should not define "performance measures, management targets, or other indicators of success and organisational competence". There is nevertheless a risk that the published data will be used to compile league tables. This will be difficult to avoid. ONS should ensure that Neighbourhood Statistics are accompanied by guidance to discourage a simplistic interpretation of the data. It is worth emphasising that interventions to improve conditions in deprived neighbourhoods may take some time to show results in improved educational performance.

6. We recommend that further thought be given to the issues set out below.

Local responsibility for data collection and dissemination

7. Organisations which undertake the tasks of creating and collecting education and training data at local level, for use by local organisations as well as for input to Neighbourhood Statistics, will need to be acceptable to the suppliers of data, and to be in a position to take an objective stance. They also require the skills and resources to perform what will be a challenging task, particularly in view of the diversity of providers operating in post-16 education and training. It will be important to clarify who should be responsible, to make this well-known at local level, and to ensure that effort is not unnecessarily duplicated.

8. Which organisations are in a position to take a lead locally? Local Learning and Skills Councils have a clear remit to collect statistics and to act as a catalyst for new data collection. The role of local authorities and Learning Partnerships must also be considered. Local authorities often have substantial and broad based statistical resources. With their remit to assess local learning needs and priorities, Learning Partnerships are making progress in identifying and sharing data. They, in turn, should be aware of the data gathering activities of other local groups, such as the Widening Participation Strategic Partnerships, which have endeavoured to map learning needs and share data sources.

9. The report refers to the need for skills in interpreting and utilising data. Bearing in mind that the quality of data input is all-important, training and technical support may also be needed in **local data collection/creation**, particularly for organisations that do not possess a strong capacity for handling statistics. The

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quality of data input will be improved if suppliers believe that Neighbourhood Statistics will ultimately benefit their service delivery. Promoting Neighbourhood Statistics and providing support at local level will therefore be important challenges for ONS, in collaboration with other agencies.

10. While the proposal for ONS to act as a one-stop shop represents a definite advance, there may be delays in collating data at national level. Moreover, education and training organisations are likely to require locally-specific data not necessarily available in the 'off the peg' version of Neighbourhood Statistics, nor indeed in the 'made to measure' versions. There remains, therefore, an important role for a local body with competence in this field.

Decision making on data creation

11. Steps should be taken to ensure that local providers of education and training play a part in decision making about the kinds of information to be assembled at local level. This should extend to decisions on new research and survey work, including qualitative research. Good qualitative evidence is increasingly used in management and policy decisions to set alongside quantitative data, and can be costly to collect. Recommendation 12, for Government to develop 'Standard questions and methodologies' will be useful to assist area comparison, but creative local approaches will also be valuable. Involving local providers will help ensure that statistics and other evidence do advance providers' understanding of their learning markets and help them to target and tailor education and training programmes more closely.

Access to statistics

12. We are encouraged by the recommendation that cost must not be a barrier to access. This will be especially important in the case of smaller education and training providers who lack the capacity and resource to collect and analyse data. Learning Partnerships can play a useful role here in encouraging the sharing of data among stakeholders. If charges are introduced for Neighbourhood Statistics, it may be necessary to consider waiving them for certain categories of data users.

Information to inform individual choice and community participation

13. The report is oriented towards Government and service providers. However, individuals play a vital role in determining their own learning choices. Community groups are active in influencing local services and working with them on neighbourhood renewal strategies. Consideration should therefore be given to how Neighbourhood Statistics will assist people in finding out about education and training services in their area, making choices for themselves or lobbying for change in their communities.

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The scope of Neighbourhood Statistics

14. The report invites comment on the nine domains and 51 sub-themes proposed for the coverage of Neighbourhood Statistics. FEDA has a strong interest in two of the nine domains:

    • Education, skills and training
    • Access to services.

15. We should be pleased to assist in developing these categories, with particular reference to post-16 education and training (including work-based training). The report acknowledges that development work is needed on the coverage of the statistics. We outline below some of the issues which should be addressed in relation to the two domains of most concern to FEDA.

16. Education, skills and training

    We would argue for greater detail and differentiation here. For example:

    • Data is needed both on *provision* and on *individuals' performance* and the two should be distinguished

    • All sectors of post-16 education and training providers should be incorporated, and differentiated (public, private, voluntary; further education colleges, schools, universities)

    • Evidence on *numbers* achieving different *levels* of qualifications are needed, correlated with age bands (16-18, 19-25, 25+, 50+)

    • Ward level information on expenditure will be helpful, including information on government initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones, Employment Zones, Single Regeneration Budget.

17. Access to services

    The scope of this domain should be widened to cover the full range of post-16 education and training provision and associated services. In addition to schools, further education colleges and universities should be added. We also suggest including adult and community education centres, information and learning technology centres offering access to the Internet, UfI learning centres, and library/resource services. Access to childcare and transport –both of which influence participation in education and training – also belong in this category. 'Cultural facilities' (museums, galleries, concert halls, theatres) are an important omission: the term 'leisure facilities' does not properly convey the range of amenities to which communities should have access.

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18. Since low educational aspirations are associated with social and economic deprivation, we recommend the inclusion of 'Attitudes towards learning and perceptions of education services' in the 'Community well-being/social environment' domain. A link should be made between this theme and participation in post-16 and adult education.

19. An important task in making the data meaningful will be to cross-reference the different domains and sub-themes; for example, indicators of 'work deprivation' and data on education, skills and training.

Data on individual learners

20. Currently, educational institutions generate much of the data relating to individual learners, with the result that data relates to the populations of institutions rather than neighbourhoods. Since institutional catchment areas may not match wards, a further challenge for ONS will be to collate education and training data on individuals and to aggregate this to ward level.

Ethnic referencing

21. We support the recommendations to ensure that more administrative data is coded by ethnicity and that Neighbourhood Statistics are capable of analysis by ethnic group. We recognise that the collection of data on ethnic origin is a sensitive matter and that reliable recording cannot be guaranteed. This is partly an issue of raising awareness of the purposes served by this data and the benefits to be gained from increasing its comprehensiveness and reliability. Efforts to raise awareness may be a task for those who collect and administer statistics at local level, including members of Learning Partnerships, local authorities, local Learning and Skills Councils, as well as ONS itself.

Conclusion

22. Neighbourhood Statistics represents a welcome initiative, offering the prospect of better tools for decision making in education and training. It should enhance the capacity of policy makers and managers to assess the needs of deprived areas, devise well targeted services in collaboration with local communities, and evaluate impact with greater confidence. For this to happen, local organisations must be fully engaged in the process of creating area-based data, removing barriers to access, and enhancing the capacity for analysis.

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