

Area reviews of post-16 provision in England

A parliamentary briefing

January 2016

This briefing provides background for parliamentarians on the policy that underpins area reviews, the process and timescales to which the reviews are working and the main concerns raised by the University and College Union..

THE GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSALS

INTRODUCTION

- 1 In July 2015, the government announced a new review of further education provision in England. The document is called 'Reviewing post-16 education and training institutions' and represents the start of a process of area reviews which are likely to mean the biggest change within the sector since colleges were removed from local government control and incorporated in the early 1990s.
- 2 This briefing provides background on the policy that underpins this review, the process and timescales to which the national and area reviews are working, and the University and College Union's main concerns about the reviews.

THE KEY PRINCIPLES

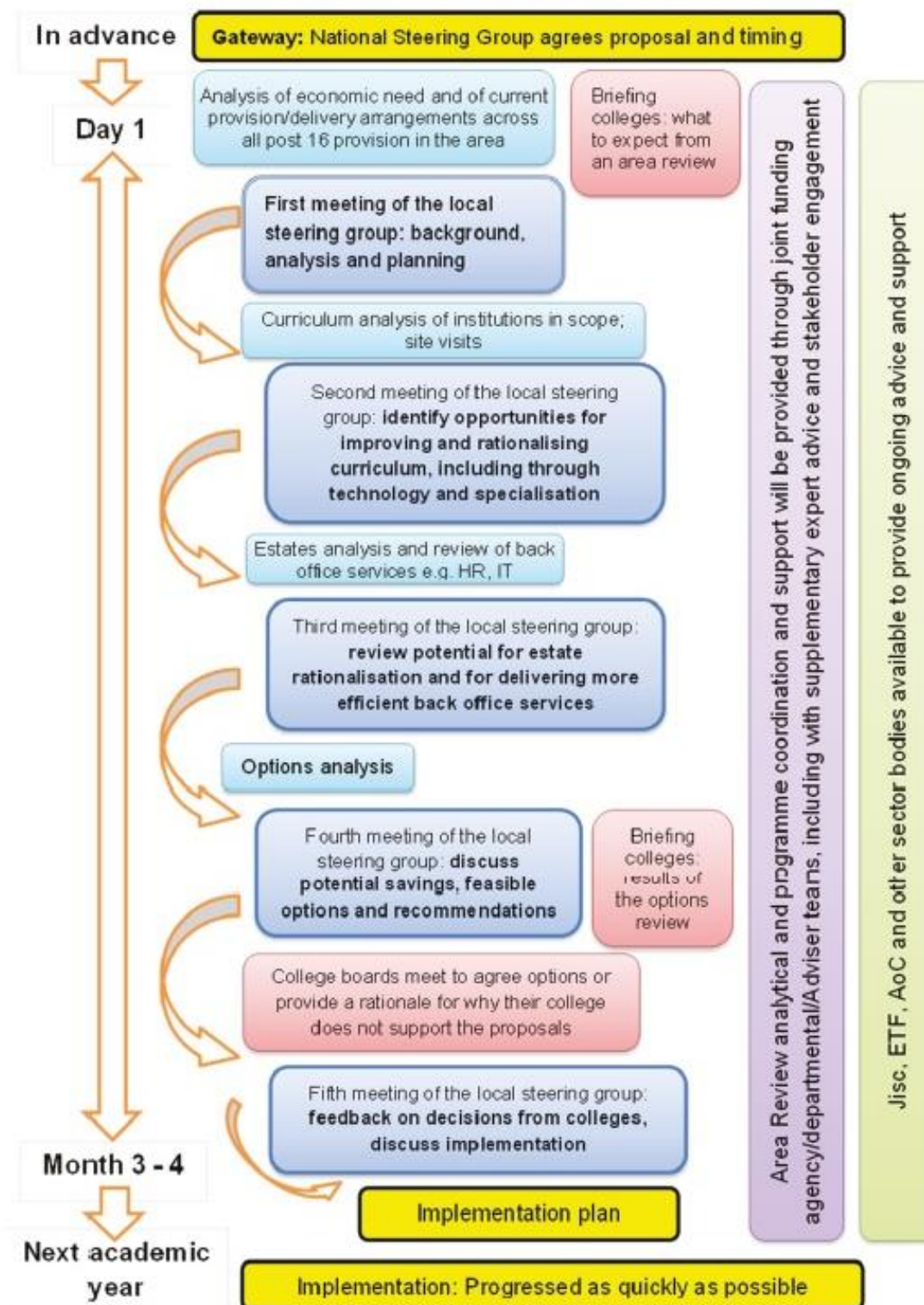
- 3 The reviews aim to 'establish the appropriate set of institutions to offer high quality provision based on the current and future needs of learners and employers within the local area'.
- 4 While each area review will be different to take account of local circumstances, the government has a clear vision of what this process will mean for the further education sector:
 - **Fewer, larger, and more financially resilient institutions** which are viable, sustainable, and efficient, and deliver maximum value for public investment, and reflect the findings of a review by BIS, DfE and HMT which identified wide variation in costs at FE colleges, indicating potential for greater efficiency especially in terms of administration costs.

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- **Identification of scope to make efficiencies** including removing duplication in curriculum, reducing management and administration costs, making more efficient use of the land and buildings controlled by the sector, and enabling more efficient and effective use of technology both in terms of teaching, support and assessment, and back office systems.
- **A local learner offer** that meets each area's educational and economic needs. This will result in closer links between colleges and employers and provision which adapts to the current and future needs of employers and learners and, in particular, ensures individuals have the relevant up-to-date digital skills increasingly required in the workforce, as well as the basic digital skills needed to engage in an increasingly digital world. This offer will be assessed against 'success measures' currently being developed by the government.
- **Providers with strong reputations and greater specialisation.** Providers should focus on what they can deliver effectively and to a high standard. An important outcome of each review will be the establishment of clearly aligned progression routes, from schools through to specialised institutions including new institutes of technology and national colleges.
- **Sufficient access to high quality and relevant education and training for all** including 16-19 year olds, adults and learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), both with and without high needs.
- **Provision which reflects changes in government funding priorities** and future demand and, in particular, creating the capacity to support the delivery of three million apprenticeships nationally by 2020.

THE TIMETABLE AND THE PROCESS

- 5 Pilot area reviews took place in Suffolk and in Nottingham, and the first wave of reviews commenced in September 2015. Wave 2 is starting in January 2016 with three further waves confirmed for later this year. A list of the affected areas in each wave is [available on the BIS website](#).
- 6 While the time it takes to do an area review will vary, a typical timescale will be around 3-4 months. The government anticipates that all area reviews will be completed in around 18 months, by March 2017. However, several reviews in wave 1 are currently reported to be [behind schedule](#).
- 7 The reviews themselves will be led by steering groups consisting of chairs of governors, local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and local authorities, FE and sixth form college commissioners and regional schools commissioners. The government states that the first task of each steering group will be to undertake an assessment of the economic and educational needs of the local area.
- 8 The flowchart overleaf shows the various stages of a review.



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CRITICISMS OF THE AREA REVIEW PROCESS

- 9 UCU has real concerns about the government's proposals. In particular we are worried about:
 - the impact upon learners of rationalisation and increased specialisation, particularly with regard to hard-to-reach groups and those in rural communities
 - the impact upon the jobs of teaching staff should rationalisation lead to fewer, larger colleges
 - the predominance of narrow economic needs as the basis for local provision
 - the over-reliance upon apprenticeships as part of the education offer to the local community
 - the failure to include school sixth forms, private training providers, free schools and other institutions within the scope of the review
 - the focus upon further efficiencies in a sector which has already seen public funding fall substantially since 2010
 - the introduction of changes which could make it easier to increase the reach of profit-making organisations in the sector.
- 10 In a survey by FE News, 89% of college principals who responded said they were unhappy with the terms of the government's review. In particular the survey identified unhappiness with the rushed nature of the consultation; with the fact that colleges themselves would be asked to pay any restructuring costs, and with the partial nature of the reviews.
- 11 Nonetheless, we are concerned that the very existence of the reviews will lead to colleges starting to think about their own rationalisation or merger plans in a bid to pre-empt being subject to a full review.

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UCU'S POSITION

- 12 UCU has serious concerns about the direction of government policy. We believe that further and adult education is a crucial part of our society and economy and that it should be invested in properly.
- 13 The sector is very diverse already and has adapted to many policy changes at government level over the past three decades. However, we are concerned that the reviews will lead to the end of the general FE college, based in the community, which has for many years been a vital part of most major English towns and cities.
- 14 We have made these representations to government and to the head of the national steering group and we will continue to campaign in favour of a broad, local curriculum available to all who would benefit. We are also working to engage with the reviews at a branch and regional level.

ABOUT US

The University and College Union is the UK's largest trade union and professional association for academics, lecturers, trainers, researchers and academic-related staff working in further and higher education.

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