



SKILLS DEVOLUTION

Putting communities
in control?

LTE Group is a family of five education and training providers, working together to help communities gain skills that will improve their life chances and grow their earning potential. Across LTE Group we transform lives through the power of education and training, delivering further education, higher education, apprenticeships, professional development and working in prisons to help offenders turn their lives around. Supporting over 100,000 people each year our Group empowers our learners to achieve their full potential and reach their career goals.

The LTE Group Centre for Policy and Research uses insight and research from across LTE Group to support and shape the development of innovative education, skills and employment policy to enable the effective delivery of impactful programmes.

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November 2023

About the author

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FOREWORD

“We’ve worked hard to secure this deal and have achieved a significant breakthrough by gaining greater control over post-16 technical education, setting us firmly on the path to become the UK’s first technical education city region.”

These words were spoken by Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, as he stood alongside national Levelling Up Minister Dehenna Davison at The Manchester College’s state-of-the-art new City Campus Manchester back in March for the signing of the City Region’s trailblazer devolution deal.

As we approach the next General Election, we stand at a crucial moment in the history of further education and skills in England. While the language used by the mainstream political parties, and their precise priorities, may differ, there is a broad agreement across the political divide on the need to build a high-wage, high-skill economy to drive up productivity and enable economic growth. This was summarised neatly when Apprenticeships and Skills Minister Robert Halfon was joined by Burnham for a panel discussion at this year’s Conservative Party Conference taking place in the city on the importance of the skills agenda. As Burnham told delegates: *“No one party’s going to fix it on their own.”*

While the English devolution agenda under the current government has been gradually evolving over the last decade, Labour’s position on devolution has only more recently started to crystallise. In 2022 reports by two influential commissions, chaired by Labour heavyweights Lord Blunkett and Gordon Brown, offered clues as to what the direction of travel could look like. These hints were made explicit at the 2023 Labour Party Conference, when Leader Sir Keir Starmer confirmed his intention to *“give power back and put communities in control”* by continuing the devolution journey, offering further powers to current and future Combined Authorities.

As a national group of skills providers headquartered in Manchester and spanning technical education, apprenticeships, adult education, higher education, professional training and prison education, LTE Group is acutely aware of the need to work constructively across the political divide, collaborating with both the Conservative-run administration in Westminster and the Labour-led administration at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

Different parts of our Group also deliver provision across a number of devolved regions, giving us a unique insight into the differences in how skills policy operates under different Combined Authorities.

Months before voters are likely to go to the polls for the next General Election, it feels like a timely moment to reflect on what changes have occurred so far, how effective they have been and what should happen next. In our own backyard, we are proud to be at the forefront of Greater Manchester Combined Authority’s exciting plans to develop the country’s first fully integrated technical education system alongside our colleagues in the Greater Manchester Colleges Group. And across England, Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) are setting out the skills needs and priority sectors where the skills pipelines must be strengthened.

But there are issues to be ironed out. The move to devolve skills policy from Westminster to the regions has created multiple overlapping layers of accountability and governance for providers to negotiate. The coordinated approaches routinely seen in planning for future school places do not always translate to planning for post-16 capacity. And providers are grappling with the challenge of how to achieve the high ambitions for skills provision they share with commissioners and stakeholders, all the while dealing with the fall out from over a decade of real-terms budget cuts. Equally significant is the need to allow Combined Authorities to innovate

and respond to their own unique economic circumstances, while ensuring that no parts of the country are left behind as a result – this, surely, would be the polar opposite of the aspirations behind the Levelling Up agenda.

This political slogan may be unlikely to survive beyond the next election, whichever party comes to power, but the imperative to deliver a more equal, productive and prosperous society will continue to dominate politics in the decade to come. With this report, I hope that LTE Group’s insight into the challenges we face, the opportunities in front of us and how we can grasp them will help the next government – whichever political party goes on to form it – to make skills devolution the policy success which communities across England so desperately need it to be.

John Thornhill
CEO, LTE Group



DEVOLUTION: THE JOURNEY SO FAR

Between 2015 and 2018, the Conservative government agreed a series of devolution deals with regional authorities in England. These deals included responsibility for allocating the adult education budget (AEB) to providers to develop the skills that local employers needed. The aim was threefold:

- to reduce skills shortages
- to boost productivity and economic prosperity
- to improve wellbeing.

The authorities to which powers have been devolved determine what skills are needed by employers in the regional economy, using analysis and by referring to the priorities set out in their regional Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) drawn up by designated employer representative bodies, most commonly the local Chambers of Commerce.

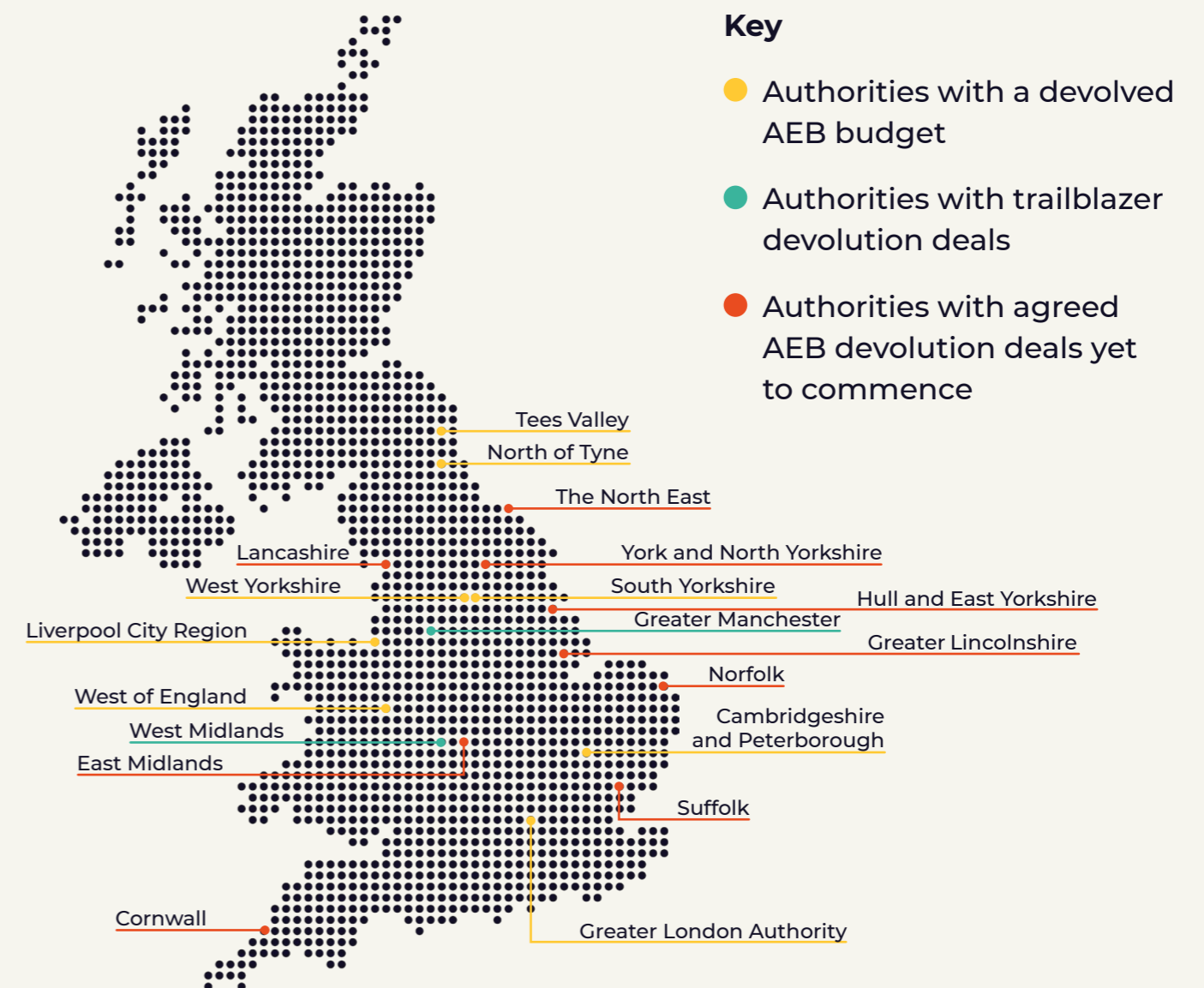
Adult education functions began to be transferred to the first wave of mayoral Combined Authorities, as well as being delegated to the Mayor of London (acting through the Greater London Authority), between 2018 and 2019. Over the two years that followed, the devolved authorities became responsible for the exercise of these functions and the associated budget. **By 2022-23, approximately 60% of England's AEB was being devolved to Combined Authorities and the Mayor of London.**

In March 2023, deeper 'trailblazer' devolution deals were signed with the Greater Manchester and the West Midlands Combined Authorities, which will deliver:

- greater flexibility with regard to skills bootcamps and free courses for jobs from 2023-24 onwards
- the devolution of non-apprenticeship adult skills funding from 2024-25
- a new joint governance board to oversee post-16 technical education and skills and evaluate local careers services.

In addition, six further county-wide devolution deals were agreed in 2022. Skills devolution for the North East is due to commence in May 2024, with the other five deals due to come into effect in August 2025. The 2023 Autumn Statement confirmed plans for four more devolution deals. The Levelling Up white paper published in 2022 also made a commitment that every county and unitary authority seeking a devolution deal would have one by 2030.

Combined Authorities in England with devolved skills powers



Funding allocations for 2023-24

Region	Funding
Greater London	£322.2m
West Midlands	£133.5m
Greater Manchester	£97.5m
West Yorkshire	£67.2m
Liverpool City Region	£54.0m
South Yorkshire	£40.6m
Tees Valley	£30.9m
West of England	£15.5m
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	£12.1m
North of Tyne	£23.8m

Source: Analysis by Association of Colleges

LABOUR AND SKILLS DEVOLUTION

While full details of Labour's policy agenda will not become clear until the publication of the party's General Election manifesto, several recent announcements and reports offer insights into the wider party's policy thinking around skills and devolution.

Labour Party's policy pledges

One of Leader of the Opposition Sir Keir Starmer's Five Missions for a Better Britain is "**Breaking down the barriers to opportunity at every stage**". The mission states:

By pushing decisions on skills spending out of Westminster we'll ensure local communities are able to join up training and job opportunities, with training routes coordinated between colleges and universities.

At the 2022 Labour Party Conference, Starmer outlined plans to:

- Turn the apprenticeships levy into a 'Growth and Skills Levy', enabling firms to spend up to 50% of their levy contributions, including current underspend, on non-apprenticeship training, including modular courses and functional skills courses
- Better align skills policy with regional economic policy and local labour markets by devolving and combining various adult education skills funding streams to current and future combined authorities.
- Establish a new expert body, Skills England, to oversee the national effort to meet the skills needs of the coming decade across all regions.

At the 2023 Conference, Starmer offered further detail:

- Further education colleges will be able to bid to become specialist 'technical excellence colleges'.
- Universities and local government will be involved in LSIPs.
- Powers for adult skills provision will be extended to all Combined Authorities to "**give power back and put communities in control**".



Council of Skills' Advisors Report, October 2022

This report sets out a policy agenda for *“generating growth and accelerating productivity”*. Instead of leaving skills provision at the mercy of market forces, which *“inevitably revert to short-term solutions for short-term gains”*, the Council, chaired by Lord Blunkett, calls for *“sensible cooperation and an enabling government, working with business at every level”*.

Decision making and spending, the report argues, *“should be decentralised and devolved to regional and sub-regional level wherever possible”*.

It also calls for:

- A “substantially enhanced role for further education, reinforcing collaboration and a seamless link with higher education, apprenticeships and progression within work”.
- The development of Individual Learning Accounts, which “would share the cost of learning between the individual, the employer and the state – and, where appropriate, the devolved budgets to Combined Authorities and elected Mayors”.
- The break up of the “departmental compartmentalisation of the broader agenda relating to skills and lifelong learning”, bringing greater clarity over which part of government is responsible for what, and a “collaborative and joined-up approach” across national and devolved commissioners.
- A National Skills Taskforce to simplify the “patchwork” of local bodies with responsibilities for skills (combined authorities, LEPs, opportunity areas, local authorities, employers) and to assist central government in deciding how best to give local decision-makers the means to tailor training for the needs of their local economy. Mayoral and combined authorities should be able to “take the lead in a revamped, more collaborative and co-operative approach”.
- Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) to be an ongoing process, not a one-off exercise.
- Disparate funding streams should be drawn together under the control of Metro Mayors or local authorities to reduce complexity and bureaucracy.
- Pilot programmes for devolving 16-19 provision to Combined Authorities to be developed.

Report of the Commission on the UK's Future, December 2022

The Commission, chaired by Gordon Brown, makes the case for a **“radical devolution of power”** to put **“power and resources in the hands of communities, towns, cities, regions and nations, to make their own decisions about what will work best for them”**.

Towns and cities, it argues, should be given new powers to **“drive growth and champion their areas”**, including:

- New responsibilities for linking local employment needs to local skills training, including the devolution of the Jobcentre Plus network and freeing further education colleges from central control.
- Funding streams such as the Shared Prosperity Fund and Multiply should be merged with the existing AEB budget and devolved to mayors, Combined Authorities and economic partnerships, with representatives from FE colleges, universities and local businesses coming together to ensure qualifications meet local skills needs.
- LSIPs, led by local Chambers of Commerce, should be drawn up by mayors and Combined Authorities (in devolved areas) or agreed with local government (in non-devolved areas).
- The National Careers Service should be co-commissioned by partnerships of local authorities, Combined Authorities and Metro Mayors, and local leaders should play a role in careers advice.
- The administration of Jobcentre Plus should be devolved, bringing together information, advice and guidance, skills, apprenticeships, and employment support in one place, and with local accountability.

Case study: Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester Combined Authority plans to build “the UK’s leading technical education city-region through the creation of an integrated skills system”. The wide-ranging proposals include the creation of the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) for technical education, which would sit alongside the existing English Baccalaureate (EBacc). While the latter offers a clear route to university, the MBacc would, from the age of 14, guide students towards advanced technical study through developing skills needed in the Greater Manchester economy. Young people on the MBacc route would take subjects such as Engineering, Business Studies and Art and Design alongside the core of Maths, English and Computer Science – or an ICT equivalent. As part of the proposals, Greater Manchester’s Apprenticeship and Careers Service (GMACS) platform will also be enhanced, sitting alongside the UCAS system available to university applicants, as a one-stop-shop for applying to both apprenticeships and technical education courses.

AN UNEQUAL PLAYING FIELD

While the strength of the devolution agenda comes through allowing Combined Authorities to innovate and respond to regional needs, a weakness which is only starting to emerge comes through fragmentation and the potential for gaps to emerge between different parts of the country.

Funding

Significant differences have already emerged between the AEB funding rates on offer in different parts of England. While some commissioners have set funding rates far higher than the national AEB rates for non-devolved areas set by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), others have made less use of the flexibility at their disposal. At the two extremes, Greater London offered a 13.5% uplift on the national AEB rates in 2022-23 (increasing to 15% in 2023-24), while several Combined Authorities kept the funding rate at the same level as the ESFA's national rates.

Combined Authority	Uplift on AEB national rate for 2022-23 (%)
Greater London	13.5
West Midlands	10
South Yorkshire	10 (level 2 and below)
West Yorkshire	10 (level 2 and below)
Greater Manchester	5
Liverpool City Region	5
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	Targeted support in specific areas
Tees Valley	0
West of England	0
North of Tyne	0

Source: Analysis by the Association of Colleges

While Greater Manchester's Mayor, Andy Burnham, has hailed plans for an "integrated technical education system" in the City Region as a "game-changer", the consolidated 5% in-year uplift for 2022-23 in Greater Manchester (increasing to 6.5% for 2023-24) is significantly lower than the rates on offer in the West Midlands and Greater London, highlighting the risk of the level of funding available for providers becoming a postcode lottery.

Another difference to emerge is in the proportion of funding allocations which the different Combined Authorities have been top slicing to cover their administration and oversight costs. The percentage being retained by some authorities is more than three times higher than others. The amount of funding involved is by no means insignificant: Greater London, for instance, has set aside over £7.4m to cover management and administration costs for 2023-24.

Combined Authority	Budget retained for administration and oversight in 2022-23
West of England	3.5%
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	3.4%
Liverpool City Region	2%
Greater Manchester	1.6%
West Midlands	1%

Source: Association of Colleges analysis

While the responsibilities and duties required of AEB commissioners are unquestionably significant, this variation serves to underline the challenge the next government faces in ensuring that, as officials strive to go further and deeper in the devolution agenda, funding is spent effectively in ensuring that no communities are left behind.



Pay

Since colleges were removed from local authority control in 1993 through incorporation, individual institutions have been free to set their own pay and conditions for staff. Meanwhile, FE funding levels have lagged behind inflation for more than a decade, resulting in a real-terms drop in post-16 education funding. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, spending per 16-18 student fell by 14% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2019-20. Even after extra funding announced in the 2019 and 2021 is factored in, college spending per student in 2024-25 will still be around 5% below 2010-11 levels in real terms.

When it comes to adult education, funding pressures since 2010 have been even more acute. Even when planned funding increases in the run up to 2024-25 are taken into account, total adult skills spending will remain 22% between 2009-10 levels in real terms, according to the IFS.

The consequences for colleges are significant:

- Salaries on offer in colleges have fallen well below those in schools. The IFS has found that in 2010-11 the median salary (in today's prices) was around £48,000 for a school teacher and £42,500 for a college teacher. Median pay now stands at around £41,500 for a school teacher and £34,500 for a college teacher. This means that between 2010-11 and 2022-23, the median salary for a school teacher fell by 14%, while the median salary for a college teacher fell by 19%.
- Pay gaps between different parts of England have also begun to emerge. Experimental data published by the Department for Education found that in 2021-22, the median teacher salary in general FE colleges varied widely, with the figure for colleges in Yorkshire and Humber standing at £30,400 – almost a fifth lower than the equivalent figure for London (£37,697).
- Significant pay gaps do not just exist between regions: they can even exist between neighbouring colleges. While the Association of Colleges holds national pay negotiations with the unions representing college staff, any agreements reached are simply recommendations, with individual institutions free to table a pay rise higher or lower than the nationally agreed figure, based on their own financial circumstances.
- Colleges across England are struggling to recruit and retain teaching staff, especially qualified professionals with current industry experience who are required to teach technical and vocational subject areas. A 2022 survey by the Association of Colleges found that the average number of vacancies per college was 30, with 96% of respondents reporting that the high level of vacancies was creating increased pressure on existing staff.
- Funding challenges for colleges have led to numerous instances of industrial action in recent years. The University and College Union launched a national strike ballot in September, having called for a 15.4% pay rise, a national workload agreement and binding national pay negotiations. The fact that there are no binding national pay deals for colleges means that there is a risk that their staff miss out on government pay deals awarded to the rest of the public sector, with college leaders all too often having to make efficiency savings to find sufficient resources to fund even modest pay rises for staff.





Apprenticeships

Despite prolonged campaigning by a number of Metro Mayors, apprenticeships funding has not been devolved to Combined Authorities. However, ahead of the next General Election it is worth reflecting on the challenging marketplace providers currently face.

- A drop in starts. In spite of a raft of reforms to the apprenticeship system over the past decade to address the quality, length and content of apprenticeships, not to mention the introduction of the levy, the take-up among employers has actually declined. The most recent government figures reveal that the number of apprenticeship starts between August 2022 and April 2023 was down by 4.6% on the same period in the previous year. This is by no means a new problem: analysis by NFER found that the total number of apprenticeships starts fell from 509,000 in 2015-16 to 393,000 in 2018-19. They then fell further to around 320,000 over the following two years, primarily due to the pandemic, before recovering in 2021-22 to 349,000. The figures mask major differences between programmes at different levels: while starts at level 2 and level 3 have declined in line with national trends, starts at level 4 and above have increased sharply, with levy-paying employers favouring higher-level programmes for existing employees at the expense of lower-level apprenticeships.
- Insufficient funding. As well as reduced appetite among employers, providers are also struggling to maintain delivery levels in the face of rising costs such as energy bills, materials and salaries. An exceptional funding band review by the ESFA published in June led to rates being increased for 10 apprenticeship standards. However this has done little to address concerns across the sector, with several high-profile providers reducing or even pulling out of apprenticeship delivery altogether.



Demographic challenges

With many parts of England facing a rapidly growing number of school leavers in the coming years, as well as an increasing number of students needing to resit GCSE English and maths, limitations in the capacity planning process for post-16 education are becoming an increasingly pertinent issue. While local authorities have well-established processes for forward planning of sufficient primary and secondary school provision, the fragmentation of post-16 provision across national and regional commissioners can bring challenges in ensuring the timely delivery of a sufficient number of places for academic, technical and vocational provision for post-16 learners. Particularly when City Regions are grappling with an acute shortage of places, the necessity of accessing different funding streams and capital funding pots, each with differing criteria and timescales, risks leaving students without education places to progress to.

The problem risks being compounded by limited availability of capital funding. Since the reclassification of colleges into the public sector in November 2022, institutions have become largely reliant on Department for Education grants and loans to pay for new facilities, instead of being able to raise funds through commercial borrowing. The complex requirements and rules pertaining to the awarding and receipt of capital funding do not always enable the most timely and cost-effective construction of badly-needed new teaching facilities.

Looking beyond employers

LSIPs are designed to “place employers at the heart of local skills systems”. They provide an “agreed set of actionable priorities that employers, providers and other stakeholders in a local area can get behind to drive change”. The role of the designated employer representative bodies (ERBs) tasked with leading the LSIPs – usually the local chamber of commerce – is to set out the key changes needed in a local area to make technical education and training more responsive to employer and local labour market needs.

The crucial role of employers in driving up economic growth and, in turn, living standards across the country is indisputable. However meeting the immediate needs of businesses currently in the marketplace should not be the sole basis on which long-lasting policy decisions are based; the long-term good of residents and communities should be at the forefront of the decision-making process.

Criteria which should be factored into regional skills planning include:

- How changes to the regional workforce could be impacted by both inwards and outwards migration, both within the UK and internationally.
- The wider wellbeing of a community. What provision could be delivered to make a positive difference to the community? What role could adult and community learning play in enabling regions to flourish?
- Opportunities for individuals distant from the labour market. For instance, more than 46,000 prisoners were released between April 2022 and March 2023, with more than 2,500 individuals released on temporary licence. By bringing representatives from the prison education and justice sector into LSIPs, new opportunities to boost economic growth while also reducing reoffending and enabling social mobility can be explored.
- The planned introduction of the new Prison Education Service offers an opportunity to more closely align prison education and employment support with regional skills provision commissioned by Combined Authorities to meet the needs of regional economies.
- The mental and physical health of a community. A 2018 report by the Department for Education concluded that there was “promising evidence” that community-based adult education “positively impacts mental health and wellbeing”. While the evidence base was limited, research demonstrated participation in education improved mental health for adults in general, as well as for those with identified mental health needs. There is also evidence that devolved policymaking can have an impact on the physical health of individuals. For instance, a 2022 research paper found that life expectancy in Greater Manchester rose faster than in comparable areas between 2016 and 2019 when the City Region took control of its health and care spending. Greater coordination across education, health and other sectors could lead to broader range of positive outcomes than focusing purely on socio-economic outputs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prioritise commissioning, not control

The move to devolve skills policy from Westminster to the regions has created multiple layers of accountability and governance for providers to negotiate. While several Combined Authorities already have control over commissioning AEB funding, Metro Mayors have repeatedly signalled their desire to see their powers extended to 16-19 provision or to the apprenticeship levy. Similarly, placing LSIPs in the control of Chambers of Commerce means that skills planning has become dominated by the needs of employers currently in the marketplace. While Combined Authorities and Chambers of Commerce rightly have a significant say over skills provision, it is important to remember the difference between commissioning and control – not least as 16-19 provision and apprenticeships, for instance, remain commissioned and funded by national government, which has been at pains to ensure 16-19 learners are offered a choice of what and where they can study. As a result of incorporation in 1993, colleges are legally constituted as autonomous institutions, and are best placed to navigate the varied and, on occasion, conflicting demands placed upon them by commissioning bodies.

A framework to bring commissioners together in a coordinated way, while retaining colleges' autonomy to balance the demands of national and regional funders as well as their own stakeholders and governors, would enable colleges to flourish as anchor institutions at the heart of their communities.

2. Facilitate coordinated post-16 capacity planning

There is a well-established capacity planning process for primary and secondary school places, which in the overwhelming majority of cases ensures that all students have access to a place at a school in their local community. In contrast, the lack of coordination across local authorities, school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, FE colleges and other specialist post-16 providers to plan for shifting demographic trends can result in shortages only coming to light too late, leading to sub-optimal quick fixes to ensure sufficient places or – in the worst case of all – students ending up missing out on their preferred programme or place of study.

The fragmented nature of delivery being commissioned by both regional and national government only exacerbates this challenge, not least when it comes to colleges accessing capital funding, having to juggle different bidding windows, requirements and timescales to try and adhere to multiple sets of conditions.

In each Combined Authority region, a strategic capacity planning process, bringing together FE providers, schools and national and regional commissioners, should take place annually, to ensure that capacity can meet current and future demand – and that no student misses out on a place in post-16 education or training, whether they wish to pursue an academic, technical or vocational pathway. Closer coordination between capacity planning and capital funding processes across funders would facilitate more strategic, long-term planning.

3. Ensure funding stability – while enabling innovation

The dual commissioning system, in which national and devolved funding streams coexist for different aspects of skills provision, creates an inevitable tension in the system. Variability between funding rules and rates across English regions will only increase as more Combined Authorities come on stream with their own devolution deals. While flexibility to allow Combined Authorities to respond to skills needs in their regional economy is to be welcomed, the risk is that the differences in funding available between devolved and non-devolved areas, and even between different devolved areas establishing diverging approaches and rules, results in the quality and range of provision in some areas falling behind that on offer in other parts of the country, creating wider socio-economic gaps.

Guaranteed inflation-based annual funding uplifts for all apprenticeships and AEB-funded provision, alongside the protection of Combined Authorities' ability to adapt their own funding rates and rules to respond to regional need, would provide a sustainable framework for the high-quality education and skills provision needed to boost regional economies and drive up national productivity.



4. Guarantee fair, sustainable pay

After more than a decade of real-terms funding cuts which has seen both 16-19 and adult education spending lag below 2010 levels in real terms, the limitations of a splintered pay structure in which a significant proportion of colleges deviate from nationally-agreed recommendations have been laid bare. This is no easy issue to resolve: 30 years after incorporation, colleges find themselves in vastly varying states of financial health, with huge variation in the type of provision they offer, the funding rates they receive and how much they can afford to pay their staff. This fragmented system has made it all too easy for ministers to overlook colleges when awarding public sector pay deals. This year's announcement by Education Secretary Gillian Keegan that colleges would receive a funding increase intended to enable them to match the 6.5 per cent pay increase awarded to teachers in schools offers long-overdue grounds for optimism.

Colleges, representative bodies and unions should form a working group to develop a new approach to pay and conditions in the sector to attract the high-skilled professional specialists needed to pass on industry-standard skills to young people across England. The next government should commit to closing the gap in average teacher pay between schools and colleges within five years.

5. Ensure the employer-led system takes a broader view

It is vital that employers are at the heart of any devolved skills system: their expertise is crucial to building high-skill, high-pay regional economies to drive up economic growth and living standards. However, focusing too narrowly on the current needs of businesses could result in other key factors being marginalised or ignored in the policymaking process.

As well as exploring current and projected growth areas and skills gaps, LSIPs should draw on a broader range of evidence when making recommendations for future skills provision. This should include migration trends (both within the UK and internationally), physical and mental health in the wider community and the need to address in-work poverty and support over-50s back into the workforce. The planned Prison Education Service should also be closely aligned to regional economic priorities through collaboration with Combined Authorities.



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