March 2003

Good Practice in Responding to Area-Wide Inspections

March 2003

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Responding to the inspection report

Overall, the area inspection process was seen positively, and recognised as helping bring greater levels of coherence within each LLSC area. No problems were reported in relation to dealing with the inspection findings. This meant that there was ease in the translation of the areas for attention in the OfSTED report into the overarching themes of the action plan. A key issue is ensuring there is information exchange between the partners during the inspection process.

Building local capacity

There is a need for time for partnerships to become established and to build their capacity to deal with the requirements of action planning. The type of issues which need to be dealt with include: developing infrastructure; getting staff in place; ensuring all key players are within the partnership and available for key activities.

Liaison with NLSC and other feedback

The support systems for the production of the plan were welcomed. The NLSC's systems were considered helpful in providing a steer towards funding and policy priorities, including those of Ministers. The input of DfES was valuable in steering actions where there was policy change forthcoming. As part of the ongoing support needs of partnerships, LLSCs would like consistency and sustained contact with designated NLSC link officers.

Guidance

The NLSC and DfES guidance notes were considered helpful and straightforward. The two guidance notes were considered to be different in character. The LLSC intranet was regarded as a potential source of additional guidance.

Partnerships

The composition of partnerships involved the LEA, LLSC, Connexions, schools and FE in all cases. Employers, especially WBLPs not fully engaged, however. The role of Learning Partnerships varied, according to their strength and quality. Most of the case studies used sub-groups to develop a specific area of the action plan, with a lead co-ordinator or co-ordinating group bringing together the final writing process. The level of involvement of senior staff was good, and the representation on the partnership groups consistent.

LEA relationships

Work with LEAs was taking place in all areas, and were well established in a number of areas through Learning Partnerships and other existing partnership arrangements. Protocols for sharing information were in place in some areas, and there was joint chairing of partnerships in some areas. Secondments from LEAs to LLSCs were also taking place. These were helpful for the setting of targets and value added work.

An area where there was potential for new protocols for sharing data relates to the 14-19 agenda.

Staffing

Most areas have secondment arrangements in place to ensure there is capacity to monitor the planning process. The Standards Fund was used to fund these posts. The production of the plan was seen as a development opportunity for LEA staff.

Use of consultants

The use of consultants has been widespread. The roles of consultants varied, and in some areas were successfully used for specialist tasks. Choosing the right consultants for the specific task they were required to carry out was considered to be important. The use of consultants in the longer term was anticipated to reduce, as LLSC staff became familiar with the action planning process.

Funding

Respondents found funding for actions hard to plan. A wish was expressed to have more support for this. Value for money had been considered within the actions for all areas, but some of the more fundamental issues had not yet been addressed, as interviewees considered that more time was needed to plan this.

Learning targets

Access to data was a problem in some areas. Common definitions of targets, and LEA data were not available in all cases. Support was requested on how to set common definitions of starters and completers. Responses to the challenge of target setting included appointing specialist staff to collect and monitor the information, or develop a specialist task-group to put target related data together. Interviewees suggested that they needed time to deal with this aspect of the action planning work. They would welcome more support regarding the 14-19 agenda and the implications for targets setting for LLSCs.

Value Added

A number of initiatives related to VA were being carried out. There was a need to consult widely before embarking on VA initiatives.

Monitoring of action plans

Various different models of monitoring were in place. Most involved a dedicated staff member. The reporting process was seen frequent, and quite arduous. LLSCs would like more opportunity to produce soft data within the process.

Conclusions

The main challenges to date have been:

- managing time pressures on core staff;
- costing actions within the plan;
- setting and monitoring 'hard' targets
- initiating work on value added;
- negotiating the transfer of data between the LEA and LLSC; and
- involving all stakeholders in a full partnership role.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

From April 2001 post-16 non-higher area-wide education and training inspections have been carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). These inspections comply with the *Common Inspection Framework*.

Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs) are required to produce action plans in response to OfSTED area-wide inspections, as set out in the National Learning and Skills Council's (NLSC) *Guide to Area Inspection Action Planning*. Key partners in each area are required to work together to produce the action plan and to implement it.

1.2 Aims and Objectives of the Evaluation

The aim of the ECOTEC study was to identify good practice in writing and implementing post OfSTED action plans.

Specific objectives of the study were to:

- identify common themes and good practice in writing actions plans;
- assess the usefulness of the existing NLSC and DfES guidance on writing action plans;
- evaluate how action plans have been implemented and identify barriers that have affected implementation by key partners;
- assess how the LLSCs have measured progress against the targets set out in action plans; and
- identify approaches to preparing action plans that are deemed to have offered value for money.

The work was structured in two stages.

- Stage one involved a desk review of existing action plans for a cross-section of 20 inspection areas. The research focussed on good practice in writing the action plans, and the key processes and mechanisms that were used.
- Stage two involved in-depth interviews with six LLSCs. The research focussed on how the action plans were developed, and the effectiveness of their implementation. It also evaluated the overall level of progress towards the targets that have been set in response to the area-wide inspections.

1.3 The research framework

Phase two of the research was carried out during January 2003. Six local LSC contacts were identified for interview. The choice of LLSCs was based on the findings of stage one, and through further discussions with the NLSC. The main selection criteria were:

- LLSC areas where the implementation process was sufficiently advanced across a range of action plans to allow comparison and reflection (particularly where plans that both preceded and superseded *Success for All* were in progress).
- LLSC areas that demonstrated specific elements of good practice within one or more key areas of the action planning process in the desk based review of action plans at stage one (e.g. partnership, added value, learning targets).
- LLSC areas that produced a single exemplar action plan for which all elements were of high quality and where a holistic view could be gained of how the plan has translated into practice.

These criteria resulted in the selection of the following LLSCs for interview:

- Birmingham and Solihull LSC;
- Bristol LSC;
- London Central LSC;
- London East LSC;
- Tyne and Wear LSC; and
- West Yorkshire LSC.

1.4 The research process

Research visits were conducted by two members of research staff from ECOTEC, with the most relevant senior contact from the local LSC A standard topic guide was developed, covering the key elements of the implementation process to be evaluated. The full topic guide is appended at annex A.

The main headings covered within the topic guide were as follows:

1. Role of the interviewee in action planning
2. Issues arising from the OfSTED inspection
3. Developing the action plan
4. Feedback on the draft plan
5. Guidance and support
6. Partnership
7. Integration with LEA plans
8. Funding
9. Value for money
10. Setting and monitoring learning targets

11. Value added
12. Monitoring
13. Revision to the plan
14. Use of consultants
15. Consultation process
16. Priorities for the future
17. Any other comments

Semi-structured interviews were held using the topic guide, of approximately one hour in duration. During the interview, the opportunity was provided for LLSC representatives to identify any additional guidance and support needs in developing action plans and reviews in future. ECOTEC staff also collected examples of marketing and publicity materials where available[1].

1.5   Analysis

Analysis of the responses from the LLSCs was undertaken by mapping common themes to emerge from the interviews. The key learning points, barriers, and examples of good practice were then identified under each of the main headings. The initial research specification and discussions with the NLSC provided a steer in completing this process.

1.6   Reporting

The following report identifies the main lessons learned by the partners in implementing action plans and specific areas of good practice. Examples have been provided from the six LLSC areas, to illustrate where a partnership took a high quality and/or an original approach to steering the action plan on course to meet the key targets.

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[1] This included a copy of a CD-Rom mapping tool for the London East Area Inspection Zone.

DEVELOPING ACTION PLANS

2.1 Introduction

This section covers the first four topics covered in the interview process. These were:

- responding effectively to the OfSTED inspection;
- developing the action plan;
- feedback on the draft plan; and
- guidance and support.

2.2 Responding effectively to the OfSTED inspection

Area inspections represent a significant change in the arrangements for identifying, and acting upon, area-wide quality improvement issues for 14-19 provision. Each LLSC area has been required to respond to the findings of OfSTED inspections. This research sought to identify whether partners were in agreement with the OfSTED findings, and the degree to which issues that had not previously been identified arose in the OfSTED report.

Overall, staff at the LLSCs valued the independence of the OfSTED/ALI arrangements, and valued the area-wide nature of the inspection and action planning process. Interviewees tended to see the process as capable of promoting greater levels of integration and coherence within each planning area. There have been 'few surprises' reported in the inspection reports. The inspection exercise tended to affirm local priorities, and provide a firm basis for bringing together different stakeholders.

Good communication between the inspectors, the LLSCs and their partners has proved to be highly beneficial and was maximised wherever possible. The following example illustrates this point.

> London Central LSC involved the OfSTED inspector directly in the partnership forum, to create a link with all local stakeholders in order to discuss the findings. This ensured that good use was made of the inspector's time.
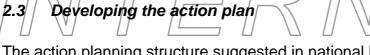
Some partnerships made arrangements for use of LLSC premises by inspection staff to ensure a close association with the process, as in the example below.

> During the production of the Bristol action plan, the partners provided a physical work-base for the OfSTED inspectors within the LSC premises. This kept all parties in touch with the findings as they emerged.

Partnerships had few problems in translating the 'issues for attention' into a workable set of action points within the plan.

The need for a long-term approach to planning had been recognised within a number of areas, and considered the implications across the full three to five year strategic planning period. Partnerships commonly identified that there had been a steep learning curve, requiring initial groundwork and infrastructure development before implementation of more complex reforms.

The action planning process brought new roles and responsibilities to the LLSCs, but this was seen by some partners as a chance to test out new systems and approaches. A number of interviewees hoped that more ambitious actions could be developed in future, following the bedding down of the arrangements.

2.3   Developing the action plan

The action planning structure suggested in national level guidance set the parameters for the plans, and for the shape of the partnership. Local partnerships particularly welcomed the recommendation to use three or four key themes for each action plan, in order to focus the plan. One respondent from a LLSC described the process as *'iterative'* - breaking down objectives into individual actions, with plans to further develop the use of interim targets in subsequent plans.

2.3.1 Preparatory work

Some local capacity building was needed to enable partnerships to begin the planning processes, and the type of development needs identified were around staffing and communication issues. LLSC staff found that it was important to actively network from the outset in order to prepare stakeholders and help ensure a consistent approach to planning.

Partners commonly took the approach of drafting elements of the action plan at sub-group level, before opening discussions at a Steering Group level. A writing group generally finalised the plan, ensuring the widest possible circulation and debate before final drafting.

> Birmingham and Solihull LSC made an effective use of four sub-groups to develop the plan. A Steering Group oversaw these sub-groups. One of the main successes was the appointment of an independent Chair who had credibility in the educational field, and who could be seen to act independently of all partner 'interests'.

In some LLSC areas, the budget for consultancy support assisted the partners in addressing staff capacity issues. However, there was a strong feeling amongst partners that the development of internal staff should be used to a greater extent for subsequent action plans, ensuring their professional development.

2.3.2 Time constraints

The timeframe for developing the plan was a challenge for all areas. Staff found it time constraining to address area planning and partnership building issues simultaneously. This was often more difficult for the early action plans (e.g. coinciding with the establishment of various 16-19 groups or fora).

Partner liaison time was limited by existing commitments and the availability of key staff in the partnership. Staff often minimised potential down time in the planning process by timing collaboration with schools and universities to take place around school holidays.

Effective phasing of the components of the action plan also helped to make the most of the time available. One LLSC found that compiling the tabulated data took the longest, and that over-concentration on the narrative section could cause a problem.

2.4 Feedback on the draft action plan

Feedback was provided from three main sources: the DfES, contacts at the NLSC, and (in some cases) directly from government ministers. The purpose of feedback was to ensure that action plans met with the action planning guidance, and addressed ministerial priorities.

Respondents considered that feedback from NLSC had been very positive overall. There was consensus that there had a steer towards what was important in addressing the inspection findings.

Feedback from the NLSC was felt to reflect the national policy priorities, and was helpful in steering the plan towards policy and funding priority areas. It was also deemed to be in synchrony with ministerial interests.

The quality of ministerial feedback was rated very highly, with a good balance of supportive and challenging comments. Where amendments were identified for

the draft action plan, these generally confirmed the partnerships' own views on planning areas requiring further work.

There were, however, some concerns where feedback was critical of aspects of the action plan for which there had been little initial guidance (e.g. where the size of the budget was deemed *'too high')*.

2.5   Guidance and support

Guidance provided to partnerships by the DfES and NLSC came in two forms: written guidance materials that were provided to partners for the purpose of completing the action plan, and ongoing liaison. The NLSC also made 'link workers' available to partnerships as a direct point of contact at the national office.

2.5.1   Written guidance materials: DfES, NLSC

The DfES and NLSC both provided written guidance materials on the post-area inspection action planning process.

The NLSC guidance proved most useful in providing suggestions for possible common themes for grouping the issues for attention from the inspection report. It also functioned well as a 'checklist' against which the more detailed measures in the action plan could be developed. The stage at which the NLSC guidance was made available varied from area to area due to different time-scales, and some LLSCs identified that they had only obtained a copy after several action plans were already completed.

The DfES guidance was often used in tandem with the NLSC guidance, with partnerships making little distinction between the two. Where a distinction was made, some respondents identified that the DfES guidance was 'not practical enough', and thought that this was the rationale for the NLSC production of additional information.

Respondents underlined the need to avoid unnecessarily complicating the information sources available to them. With guidance from the two sources now established, there was seen to be little need for further additional written sources of information. However, respondents felt that a 'single' consolidated guidance note could provide a more streamlined approach, and eliminate some of the duplication across the DfES and NLSC versions.

The guidance on costing the action plan has proven to be somewhat contentious. In general terms, partners felt they would benefit from more information on the

expected range within which the action plan budget should fall, and more practical advice on sources of funding available. Some partners considered that a separate finance planning section would be a better approach than integrating financial information within the action planning tables.

Overall, the main area that respondents felt required further clarification was the degree to which a standardised format should be used. There has been some move towards this with the new annual progress reports, although the initial guidance materials remain less prescriptive.

2.5.2   Other guidance materials

The NLSC was pro-active in providing examples of completed action plans to illustrate the required format, and flag up areas of good practice. The response to this was mixed - some partners found this to be useful, whilst others found this to be of limited use, feeling that it was contrary to a bottom-up approach based on local issues.

The new NLSC Intranet was identified as a development that could be further tailored to assist the area inspection process. Partners suggested developing the resource as a means of sharing good practice between LLSCs.

2.5.3   Ongoing advice and support: NLSC

Most interviewees have welcomed the level of support provided by the NLSC. They described a culture of co-operation on the basis of *'constructive feedback from professional colleagues'*.

Relationship building is an important dimension of the role of the NLSC's link workers, who were generally pro-active in attending partnership meetings from an early stage. Their role has been especially welcome where there has been consistency in representative, to maximise rapport building with the partners. The degree to which this level of input has been sustained varies between areas - in some instances there has been a decline in frequency of attendance, although this was perceived to be partly due to less intensive support needs.

In several instances, the link worker has continued to be involved at all relevant major meetings, while another LLSC representative felt that they had been too focussed on 'troubleshooting' in their area. In the latter example, the partners were more wary of intervention due to the less continuous presence of the link person. Some LLSCs would also like to see link workers become more involved in sub-area meetings, in addition to supporting specific action plans.

2.5.4 Ongoing advice and support: DfES

The DfES was not perceived as such a primary source of information and guidance for partners beyond the formal ministerial feedback process. However, good use has been made of contact at an area level. Tyne and Wear LSC identified strong representation from the DfES at area-level meetings as a very positive input.

A wider role was also identified for the DfES in helping LLSC staff to become more fully aware of 'schools' agenda as part of the new 14-19 arrangements. There remain knowledge gaps amongst certain partners in making the transition from 16-19. Several respondents also commented on the value of a keynote event chaired by DfES, which helped to clarify the emerging 14-19 framework.

Effective partnership work

3.1   Introduction

This chapter reviews the discussions with interviewees regarding the process and effectiveness of partnership working. The chapter covers:

- involving key players;
- partnership structures;
- staffing issues;
- information sharing;
- integration with LEA plans; and
- use of consultants.

3.2   Involving the key players

Action planning partnerships were found to be broad in scope, with the exact composition varying from area to area. Representation from the LLSC, LEA, schools, FE colleges and Connexions was generally consistent, however.

The local situation determined the level of involvement of other partners. In particular, a need was identified to improve the involvement of 'weaker' partners to build their capacity to contribute where participation of a specific sector is low.

In several cases the partnership was designed to tap into a wider secondary net of local agencies beyond the core partners. One senior member of LLSC staff identified that *all* players from each sector should have the opportunity to input, not just representatives from these sectors, implying very wide initial consultation. Nevertheless, the level of ownership this promoted was considered invaluable.

> London East LSC identified that the use of area meetings played an important role in building the local partnerships. A small team was formed by the LLSC, including the Lead Officer, to get all stakeholders into 'area inspection mode'. Issues such as awareness of national policy and terminology were addressed[2].

The following identifies some of the main characteristics of the partners involved in action planning.

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[2] For example, the move towards greater use of 'floor targets', and 'value added' mechanisms.

The LLSC/LEA relationship is still perceived as a sensitive area. Early involvement of the LEAs was a particularly important factor. Some local partnerships introduced joint chairing arrangements for the partnership to enable the LLSC and LEA to build shared leadership responsibilities.

Use was also made of both various stand-alone meetings and new fora to anticipate working arrangements. At a national level, the initial residential event for LLSC and LEA staff received very positive feedback from participants.

> Birmingham and Solihull LSC worked with the Steering Group for the post-area inspection action plan, to establish a '14-19 Policy Forum'. This has yielded positive results in linking with schools and information sharing.

Prior engagement with LEAs was often well developed amongst non-LLSC partners. In some cases, an LEA review of education had already generated discussion with the LLSC, and areas for action were already assigned before area inspection arrangements took effect.

Progress was made towards a chairing/joint-chairing role to oversee plans in some areas, with secondments between LEAs and LLSCs generally proving to be successful. Beyond strategic LEA involvement, representation from schools was also important to build capacity for responding to 14-19 arrangements within the area-planning framework.

> In implementing the Bristol action plan, the West of England LSC took the approach of employing an LEA secondee to work alongside LLSC staff in the local office. The benefit of this approach was to shore-up knowledge gaps in relation to school issues, and to secure continuity in relations with the LEA as a partner.

Two of the most difficult areas to negotiate have been:

- access to, and exchange of, information between the LLSC and LEA;
- agreement over respective 'leads' in relation to the new 14-19 agenda.

Several LLSCs considered the issue of formal information sharing protocols to address the former issue, but encountered some potential difficulties in creating a binding document. It is widely felt that some caution over sharing of schools data is *'inevitable'*.

Learning Partnership involvement in the action planning process differed across LLSC areas. In some areas, there was more than one Learning Partnership each with different capacity to co-ordinate or contribute to the plan.

Several of the respondents considered that the role of Learning Partnerships in the planning process needs further clarification. Views were divided between the following:

- respondents who felt that the level of practical engagement required in a lead role might not be suited to a 'strategic body' such as a Learning Partnership (i.e. a 'partnership leading a partnership' scenario);
- respondents who considered the Learning Partnership to be a key source of leadership, and cited evidence at a local level that this had been possible.

Based on these responses, there appears to be scope for Learning Partnerships to take a lead role. Such a lead would be appropriate where the Learning Partnership is well established, involves all the key partners, and where it has credibility with key stakeholders. The Learning Partnership would also need to be able to act quickly and effectively to the requirements of action plan production.

Employers are yet to be fully engaged across the local partnerships. In particular, respondents felt that Work Based Learning (WBL) providers are daunted by the prospect of becoming involved in a forum with much larger local stakeholders. The need to point the partnership towards representative organisations rather than individual employers was noted as important for the partnerships.

Higher Education (HE) sector involvement has been mixed, with successes relying significantly on existing relationships at LEA level. One LLSC respondent identified that Higher Education involvement had increased within the area as a larger number of plans came on-line. *Regional Development Agency (RDA)* involvement was perceived to be dependent on capacity at sub-regional level.

> In London Central LSC, interest in the forthcoming 14-19 sub-regional group was used to raise awareness of area inspection arrangements amongst HE partners. The LLSC hopes that the Sector Skills Councils and Trade Union representatives will also become involved as the new agenda is rolled out.

Where *voluntary sector* involvement was strongest, partners reported a positive impact on the capacity to address race and diversity issues within the plan. The use of consultants with expertise in engaging voluntary and community representatives was noted by some respondents as the primary means of including a strong racial equality dimension to the plan.

3.3   Partnership structure

The model of a Steering Group, with the use of sub-groups, has translated well into practice. Sub-groups have made good use of specialists within the sector/area, and in a number of cases also included high-level curriculum development staff. One of the key benefits of this approach has been the level of flexibility that it brings to the partnership structure. Where effective feedback mechanisms existed, partners were able to make recommendations for change quickly and effectively through the sub-group inputs.

In several instances, the membership of the Steering Group was already formed prior to the first round of inspections (e.g. following a 16+ joint review, or LEA education review). This provided a natural grouping around which to base the action planning Steering Group, with the key players already in place.

> In developing the action plan for the Bristol area, the West of England LSC ensured that separate terms of reference were drawn up for its five partnership sub-groups from the start of the process. This helped to keep groups focussed on the key action points from the plan, and manage the complexity of the overall partnership.

Respondents commonly identified that the partnership structure has further evolved during implementation. In particular, there has been a growing focus on 'sub-regional' arrangements, and embedding action-planning issues within the LLSC Strategic Area Review.

3.4   Staffing issues

Given the newness of the area action planning process, partners acknowledged the need for a 're-engagement' process to define new roles, and bring existing staff up to the required level of policy knowledge.

Respondents felt that the level of senior staff involvement in the planning process had been good. Many of the lead officers for action plans are at director level. At the highest level, Chief Executive involvement has also been promising, although LLSCs with a larger number of plans have found less capacity for this.

The funding of a co-ordinator post for each action plan was highlighted as particularly important to the partnerships. While consultants were occasionally deployed in this role, a practitioner background was found to bring greater credibility, and strengthen ties with local providers. The involvement of the LLSC Marketing Manager also added value in one area, supporting the group towards an end product with a strong local identity.

Turnover of staff representation on partnerships has been a relatively common occurrence. Partners felt that existing networks are effective enough to identify suitable replacements at short notice, but that conditions attached to the use of the Standards Fund did not make this process an easy one[3]. A priority was identified in most areas to balance the use of secondments with internal staff development in the longer term to boost core capacity. The use of consultants was identified as another means of addressing this issue. However, interviewees identified that support will be needed from the National Office to address longer-term staff development within LLSCs. A key issue in this respect will be to attract quality candidates for part time posts on the action planning team.

3.5   Information sharing within in the partnership

There is consensus amongst partners over the need to create common ownership of the action plan. Communication has been a priority in ensuring that this level of input is sustained both during development and as the plan is implemented.

During the implementation phase, the lead officer or co-ordinator post for each plan was vital in liaising between partners and overseeing internal communication systems. This includes face-to-face contact, email, and use of videoconferencing in some cases.

> West Yorkshire LSC facilitated weekly meetings, with the involvement of senior staff from a broad range of sectors (HE, WBL, FE, and schools). An 80% attendance rate was achieved during the development phase. Key factors were reported to be trust amongst partners, and a willingness/ability to commit time.

Release of data for use by all members of the partnership was also an important and sensitive issue. Terms of reference for the partnership tended to be most effective where they addressed protocols for information sharing from the outset, with transparency in the commitments that are expected from each partner.

3.6   Integration with LEA plans

Active LEA involvement was reported in writing individual action plans. This had the advantage of ensuring that the plan was fully aligned with Education Development Plans. Respondents identified that LEA plans formed just one of a host of other local plans that needed to be factored into the process.

There was a perception that there had been a general overload of plans. In particular, the timeframe for separate local plans was often found to differ,

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[3] The Standards Fund is under review, though at the time of this research it was possible to fund secondments and consultants through the fund, but not to recruit new 'core' staff.

leading to some issues around synchronisation. However, several LLSCs sought to maximise the opportunity provided for synthesising other planning documents within the area inspection framework. By actively reviewing all other plans, it was possible to draw upon as wide as possible a platform of existing knowledge of the relative strengths and weaknesses in local provision.

One of the main challenges has been to ensure continuity in responding to plans developed under 16-19 arrangements, given recent 14-19 policy developments. The more effective partnerships allocated a role for tracking policy developments, to ensure that the plan is responsive to change.

3.7   Use of consultants

Most areas had used consultants to increase the capacity of the partnership. They have been employed in the main to support specific tasks related to action planning such as consultation.

Consultants had been used to:

- carry out community based consultation exercises;
- chair the partnership meetings;
- write the action plan; and
- support the initial dissemination of the inspection findings.

The advantages of using consultants was thought to be:

- their ability to deliver within a short timescale;
- to support partnerships where human resources were too stretched to carry out the planning and monitoring process; and
- to deliver on specific issues where expertise was lacking within the partnership.

Although most areas had used consultants in some capacity, the comment was made that '*all rounders are hard to find'.*

For consultants to be involved in all the tasks involved in action planning is thought to be impossible, as they need to have writing skills, facilitation skills for events, credibility with all the partners, and also need to be familiar with current educational policy and thinking.

At least one area had been very disappointed with the use of a consultant to write the action plan which had significantly set the writing process back.

There was a feeling that more would be done 'in-house' in future, and that the use of consultants was not ideal for tasks such as writing the plan or monitoring progress against actions.

Funding issues

4.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the responses of interviewees on issues related to funding. The sections of the chapter include:
- planning funding for actions;
- funding streams; and
- value for money.

4.2 Planning funding for actions

Interviewees pointed out that planning of funding for actions was one of the most difficult areas to develop for the action plan. Years one and two were generally considered to be easier to plan than years three to five, where funding regimes and the local situation may change considerably.

One respondent commented that actions should not be funding-led – the action plan should be developed based on need, funding required for this should be then be estimated and only then should the funding be found. This was balanced against realism in working within the likely funding available. As action planning has progressed, more guidance on funding available to support action planning has been forthcoming, and so recent action plans have been more ambitious, and expectations have been higher.

The level of funding available was suggested to be less of a problem than *spending to profile*. The LLSCs suggested that as a point of good practice, a contingency should be built in for this.

> London Central LSC intend to employ a finance co-ordinator to produce a more tightly costed workplan, with a budget allocated to each key milestone.

4.3 Funding streams

A number of questions arose in relation to the Standards Fund and the funding of schools based activities. This was reported as becoming a more significant issue in relation to the 14-19 agenda.

Most interviewees agreed that the availability of the Standards Fund for seconded posts to support the action planning and implementation process was a significant improvement on the previous situation. A number of interviewees did comment that this situation could be further improved if the secondee did not

have to come from within the partnership, as partners did not always have the staff available.

The use of the Standards Fund to support secondments from partners to the LLSC to lead on the development, monitoring and liaison role regarding the plan is a cost effective way to support the action planning and implementation process. However, the Standards Fund is under review, and all of these comments should be considered in the light of the possible changes. A number of other funding streams were identified as possible sources of additional funding for actions. However, these cannot be assured and bids are time consuming to prepare.

4.4   Value for money

The development of action points to improve value for money (VFM) in provision has been addressed in a number of areas. Post-OfSTED review was described as '*quite fundamental'*, making value for money high on the agenda. A number of respondents suggested that unless there had already been a review of VFM within an area, VFM would have to be considered *'further down the line'*. Actions identified by LLSCs as supporting value for money reviews include:

*   rationalising provision;
*   addressing class sizes; and
*   seeking economies of scale.

Learning targets

5.1   Introduction

This chapter reviews the discussions with interviewees regarding the development and setting of learning targets. The section covers the following issues:

- target setting in the context of change;
- definitions;
- access to data;
- timing;
- tracking progress towards targets;
- the 14-19 agenda; and
- regionalisation of targets.

5.2   Target setting in the context of change

The overall feeling from respondents regarding learning targets was that they were desirable, but problematic. One interviewee called target setting:

'*The single most difficult and contentious area of the whole action planning process*'.

An issue which was pointed to by a number of interviewees was the changing nature of the national picture on target setting. This could make the planning process difficult when partnerships were aware that they would be required to review targets soon after completion of the action plan. The inclusion of the 14-16 age group within the planning framework is an example of such change.

5.3   Definitions

The starting point for development of targets is the setting of common definitions. Some LLSCs had achieved working definitions, but some had not managed to achieve this within the time available. One interviewee pointed out where their problems lay in this respect: colleges, schools and work based learning providers all have differing definitions of what counts as a starter or completer, making it difficult to have common definitions on which to base targets:

'*The definitions are just absolutely, totally, totally different…when it comes down to it you can't set a target for everyone, as everyone does it differently. We were reluctant to set targets for the sub-sets of the partnership when what we are all*

about is the collaborative partnership approach …You almost have to set targets at the individual institutional level.'

The feeling amongst interviewees was that more guidance was needed on the target setting process, and that there was a need for a clear steer at national level about how to overcome these problems of definition and information sharing.

5.4   Access to data

Access to data for the setting and tracking of progress against targets was reported to be problematic in some areas. One interviewee felt that there is a need for more definite protocols concerning the requirement for collection and reporting of Management Information (MI), both in relation to local data and the National Learning Targets. More information can be found in the section on partnership regarding these protocols between the LEA and the LLSC.

5.5   Timing

The time limit of three months for the preparation of the action plan had proved problematic in some areas where target setting had not previously been addressed. Although the action plan could be prepared in this time, the targets were considered to need longer. The areas where there had been significant progress in the target setting process, especially where they had progressed as far as setting aspirational targets as well as floor targets, were areas where work on target setting had been worked on *before* the action planning process began. In the following example, the necessary protocols for the sharing of information were already in place, and the method of collection was established within the partnership.

> In Birmingham and Solihull LSC, the target setting process had begun *prior* to the action planning process. Aspirational floor and ceiling targets were set. The targets that have been set for 14-19 are longitudinal so that impact can be assessed.

5.6   Tracking progress

The development of tracking arrangements for the monitoring of progress towards targets falls to the LLSC in most cases. This was reported to have had significant implications for staff time and resources. One area is appointing a data manager to collect, interpret and present data related to target setting and achievement. LLSCs have dealt with this though dedicated task groups or appointment of staff to support the data collection process to support tracking against educational targets.

> Central London LSC has set up a 'Data Group' across the seven boroughs in Central London. This has worked well in freeing up access to data across the partnership.

5.7   14-19 agenda

A particular challenge has been provided to LLSCs through the introduction of the 14-19 agenda, making key stage 3 increasingly important. Some areas are able to obtain schools data via the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) database. Pro Achieve software has been used in another area to look at the achievements for learners at an individual level.

> The inclusion of the 14-16 targets has been effectively managed in a number of LLSC areas where a DfES representative was included in the action planning steering group. This representative was able to point to the forward agenda of educational policy.

However, interviewees pointed out that this is relatively new territory for LLSCs. In addition, data relating to educational achievement in schools is sensitive, and requires strict protocols to determine how and what is shared. One interviewee suggested a *'common national tracking database'* taking into account sensitivities around '*schools information'* was required.

5.8   Regionalisation of targets

Prioritisation at a regional level to determine which targets *'really count'* in each LLSC area was recommended by one interviewee. Target setting in their area had taken into account the varying demographics within the region, and appropriate sub-sets of targets had been developed for different areas within the region.

Value added

6.1   Introduction

This chapter reviews the discussions with interviewees regarding VA work, and how this has been addressed in each of the case study areas. The areas covered are:

- a nationally recognised system;
- pilot projects;
- area wide systems;
- data sharing; and
- issues covered by VA systems.

6.2   A nationally recognised system

Interviewees considered that having a nationally recognised system which can measure value added would support efforts to improve provision within their area. Such a system would support them in benchmarking progress, and could show for the first time where particular provision is not profitable.

6.3   Pilot projects

A number of areas have been working on the VA issue and have established VA pilot projects. Two areas had not carried out any work in relation to VA. An example of VA related work being carried out in Bradford is given below.

> Bradford area gave the following examples of the use of VA in the local area:
> • at Level 3 (A levels plus) a pilot has been carried out which is in the reporting stage;
> • pilot work at Level 2;
> • using the A Level Performance system (ALPS) developed by a local college (Greenhead College); and
> • a local college (Shipley College) has developed a VA system which looks at people of all abilities.

6.4   Area wide systems

Some areas had tackled the issue of VA at a regional level. The important factor in developing an area response was consultation on the issues and systems required. Bristol LSC had begun this process through a conference with all local stakeholders:

West of England LSC held a conference in October 2002 which included 70 local providers, including community learning, and Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG). The conference had national speakers, and included sessions such as working towards common systems. The outcomes from this conference are being used as a basis to develop common measures of VA across the West of England.

6.5   Data sharing

The issue of data sharing came up once again in relation to this issue. In one area a detailed 'data sharing protocol' had been agreed between the LLSC and LEAs in order to facilitate a pilot project. However, there have been funding delays which have meant this project did not begin in time for this action planning round.

6.6   Issues covered by VA systems

Bristol area action plan included measures for 'Learning for Personal Effectiveness' and looked at accrediting and measuring learners' progress in self development as a VA measure.

Monitoring and Implementation arrangements

7.1   Introduction

This chapter reviews the discussions with interviewees regarding their monitoring and implementation arrangements for their action plans. The areas covered include:

- monitoring arrangements;
- the monitoring process;
- the monitoring tools; and
- data types.

7.2   Monitoring arrangements

The arrangements for monitoring progress against the action plan vary from area to area. A number of the local models are described below.

The London Central LSC 14-19 forum is responsible for the monitoring of the action plan. They commented that the LLSC is *ultimately* responsible for monitoring, however, and that senior officers have tended to step in if required.

In Birmingham and Solihull LSC, the Quality Standards Manager (QSM) is responsible for organising the mechanics of monitoring the action plan. An internal briefing is organised for all staff members contributing information to monitoring reports. The lead person for each action provides updates the QSM regarding progress. Once this information has been collected a draft monitoring report is written, from which information gaps are identified, and then filled through contact with the relevant person.

In Tyne and Wear, there is a dedicated action planning manager based within the LEA. They lead on the monitoring process, feeding into the 14-19 sub group of the Learning Partnership (which is the lead body for action planning in this area). The working group will discuss why actions have not happened as expected and are responsible for rescheduling or removing barriers to implementation where they exist.

In Bradford, the area inspection manager is responsible for reviewing the action plan. The intention is to appoint a secondee to support the process. A number of task groups have been developed to drive the implementation process:

- Centre of excellence;
- Federation;
- Young persons entitlement; and
- HE strategy.

7.3   The monitoring process

A number of LLSCs referred to the need to dedicate specific resources for the monitoring process. Interviewees noted that there is a great deal of *'chasing around'* to gather all the information required, thus pointing to the need for a specific person dedicated to this task.

The monitoring process is seen as being quite arduous at three times a year, though none doubted its use in taking stock and allowing reflection time. One area reported that the partners have found some of the data that is required in the progress report to be difficult to collect especially the *'hard data'* related to targets.

> West Yorkshire LSC are carrying out risk assessment on the action plan to identify high risk areas, enabling them to concentrate resources on specific areas of the action plan where more input is needed.

7.4   The monitoring tools

The monitoring guidance tools and materials provided by NLSC were generally reported to be useful. However, not all areas had the same level of experience in using these, depending on when their plan(s) was approved.

One area which had more experience of using the materials made the following comment:
'reporting mechanisms vary according to area 'need' i.e. some areas are more well developed in relation to their ability to report on activity on others. Factors such as the strength of the local partnerships and the relationship between the LEA and the LLSC are central in allowing the monitoring process to go smoothly'. This was summarised as: *'One size does not fit all'.*

Another area suggested that they would like to see the NLSC's link officers more involved in assisting with the production of these reports. They were keen that the reports were not used as '*a stick to beat us with'.*

7.5   Data types

One interviewee commented that they would like to see more flexibility in the reporting format. They considered that good progress had been made in obtaining 'soft data' (especially in relation to WBL), and there should be greater recognition of this within the monitoring process. Soft data was could include:

- strategic links forged;
- engagement with schools;
- strengthening of the vocational route; and
- attitudinal change.

Conclusions

This report has outlined the common themes and good practice emerging from responses to area-wide inspections. It presents the findings of fieldwork and analysis carried out in stage two of a two-stage research study, with a specific focus on *implementing* action plans. The findings were based on information collected from in-depth interviews at six LLSCs, and presented under six thematic headings relating to key aspects of the action planning process.

On balance, the report presents an upbeat situation at local level, with LLSCs, LEAs and their partners adapting quickly and effectively to the changes entailed within the Common Inspection Framework. The arrangements for action planning have given rise to considerable local variation, but with all the key stakeholders engaged to a degree in the areas covered by the research. The move to the new area level inspection process was generally viewed as necessary and worthwhile by LLSC staff, although there has been a continual adjustment process to build on plans that were completed earlier in the process.

The more specific findings of the research can be summarised against the six thematic headings in the report as follows:

8.1 *Responding to the area inspection*

The issues for attention from the inspection report generally offered few surprises, but helped to provide structure to local priorities and integrate the myriad of other relevant plans. Partnerships were more effective where a close working relationship was built up with inspection staff.

Capacity building and development work has been a priority area in developing action plans. An early priority was to identify suitably experienced staff to co-ordinate elements of the partnership. Secondments and the use of consultants were both effectively managed, although core staff development is a future priority within LLSCs.

Guidance and feedback from the DfES, NLSC and from Government ministers was viewed positively overall. Partners expressed satisfaction that the NLSC approach reflected national policy priorities.

The NLSC link worker role is particularly important. Partners emphasised a need for a developmental rather than troubleshooting role, and for a consistent representative. Little further written guidance is now deemed necessary. A more effective use of ICTs would be welcomed for post area inspection arrangements, for example via the NLSC Intranet.

8.2   Effective partnership work

The 'multiplayer' character of local partnerships has been strong, with consistent representation from the LLSC, LEA, schools, FE and Connexions. The role of Learning Partnerships remains under-developed in many local partnerships, but there is potential for a 'lead' role where the LP has a higher profile. HE involvement has been more varied.

Engaging employers in the core partnership process is one of the key challenges. LLSC staff identified a greater need for partners to take collective responsibility where key sectors remain under-represented. The use of consultants has been important in engaging partners, with particular benefits for voluntary sector involvement.

Local partnerships made good use of the suggested model of a Steering Group, with additional working groups. Successful use of these groups brought greater flexibility in delivering the local plan, with regard to decision making and monitoring. More recent partnerships have become focussed on sub-regional arrangements.

Information sharing and access to data remain key issues. Partners widely expressed a need for further guidance from the NLSC on information sharing protocols between the LEA and LLSC in particular. Further awareness raising and dissemination by both the NLSC and DfES would also be beneficial in ensuring that all staff are briefed on 14-19 issues.

8.3   Funding issues

Funding of actions has proven one of the most difficult areas of the planning process to address. Partners identified a need to be led by local priorities rather than funding availability. Some local partners have found a lack of guidance on the budget size to be difficult, whilst more effective workplans included a tight costing framework for each milestone.

Value for money has been high on the agenda in responding to area inspections. Examples were in evidence across most of the key areas of the action plan. However, where a prior VFM review had not been undertaken, some LLSCs identified this as an issue to be addressed later in the implementation process.

8.4   Learning targets

Partners have recognised the need for targets, but found the changing national policy guidance to represent a 'moving target'. Key areas to address are: access to data (especially 14-19), effective use of floor targets, planning for 'early successes'. LLSCs have taken the key role in tracking data in most cases. The use of a 'Data Group' approach proved successful in one instance.

Partners identified a need for greater rationalisation of targets. Recommendations at LLSC level included the use of prioritisation, to link the achievement of targets to local need. Definitions used may need additional guidance to achieve greater consistency.

8.5   Value added

Value added measures were required by the national guidance, but this issue has been postponed in many LLSCs pending the development of a common nationally recognised system. Some VA pilot activity has been undertaken at a local level to show for the first time where provision may not be profitable. There are some sensitivities around the implications for providers.

8.6   Monitoring and implementation

There is significant variation in monitoring arrangements at local level, although LLSCs have ultimate responsibility. Key approaches have included the use of a dedicated member of staff at managerial level to co-ordinate the process, and the use of a specific working group.

The feedback from LLSCs on the NLSC monitoring tools was generally positive, but there is a need to recognise local circumstances and needs; 'one size does not fit all'. There was strong feedback in relation to the need for a higher profile for 'soft' data.

ANNEX A: Glossary of Terms

Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)
A Level Performance System (ALPS)
Common Inspection Framework (CIF)
Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
Education Development Plan (EDP)
Further Education (FE)
Higher Education (HE)
Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)
Local Education Authority (LEA)
Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs)
Management Information (MI)
National Learning and Skills Council (NLSC)
National Learning Targets (NLT)
Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED)
Pupil Level Award School Census (PLASC)
Quality Standards Manager (QSM)
Regional Development Agency (RDA)
Value Added (VA)
Value for Money (VFM)
Work Based Learning (WBL)