

16-19 Review

Initial Summary Findings and Proposed Recommendations

1 Improving outcomes

Findings from the Review

The overall level of outcomes achieved at 16+ is lower in Kent than in our “statistical neighbours” (other authorities with a similar demographic profile to ours). “Outcomes” in this context include not only results from post-16 education and training and progression to higher education, but also progression to meaningful employment, apprenticeships, and “careers with prospects” in general.

A consistent message from work-based providers (and, indirectly, from employers) is that young people are poorly prepared for work and lack the employability and softer skills that are necessary for employment.

What we propose should be done

Clearly all provision should be designed to give young people the best possible outcomes, in terms of attainment, progression, destinations, and life skills. Therefore, we propose that:

- benchmarking data comparing provider performance with that of other local providers and those of our statistical neighbours is collected and published to challenge and raise expectations
- a life skills curriculum is designed and built (or an existing one selected and promoted) to reinforce the skills that young people need to achieve their goals post-16 and post-18, and that schools and other providers are encouraged to adopt it.

2 Raising aspirations through information, advice and guidance [IAG]

Findings from the Review

Concerns were raised that young people’s aspirations are often relatively low and young people do not always appreciate, or are even not aware of, the range of opportunities they might aspire to.

The ready supply of low-level employment opportunities, and pressures on them to earn, encourage some young people to take a job “for the money” as soon as they can – and to pass up opportunities to invest now for a better future.

IAG is not always fully effective, meaning that some young people are unaware of the full range of opportunities available to them at 16+, unable to give adequate consideration to the alternatives open to them, and stay in local provision when they might benefit more from opportunities elsewhere. Where Year 11s were thinking of post-16 opportunities outside their school, they were often not fully supported when exploring these and making their applications.

IAG also needs to be provided earlier. Young people do not appreciate that the choices they made at 14+ could limit their opportunities at 16+ and beyond.

What we propose should be done

We propose that:

- a model IAG curriculum customisable by all pre-16 and post-16 settings is developed to address the gaps we have observed in IAG
- young people are actively encouraged to aspire to high achievement in employment or further education.

Significant progress has been made by the CEC Careers Hub: our proposals will build on this.

The adoption of the "Gatsby" benchmarks, the "Baker Clause" requirement that schools allow access to their pre- and post-16 students by all post-16 providers, and the emphasis that Ofsted is now giving to access to independent IAG as part of the new inspection framework should all help here.

3 Supporting young people's aspirations

Findings from the Review

Our fieldwork has shown that parents and teachers are not always aware of the full range of options available to young people and, to the extent that they are aware, their knowledge is often based on outdated and incomplete information. They can, albeit inadvertently, project their own experiences on to young people, thereby contributing to the low aspirations some have and the inappropriate choice of route some make.

These issues are relevant in Year 9 (when young people are making their choice of GCSEs), in Years 10 and 11 (when young people are considering where to go post-16), and in Years 12 and 13 (when young people are considering what to do next).

What we propose should be done

Specific strategies should be developed for:

- parents, to ensure they have at least a working knowledge of the full range of destinations post-16, and understand that "staying in school" is not the only option
- teachers (including but not limited to those with IAG responsibilities), to ensure they are familiar with destinations other than school sixth forms and the progression opportunities these can in turn lead to, and that they are able to support young people who wish to explore post-16 opportunities away from their pre-16 school.

4 An "area offer"

Government guidance is that the effective size for a school sixth form is in the region of 200 students or more. There are 87 school sixth forms in Kent; only 42 (less than half) satisfy this criterion.

Although outcomes from small sixth forms can be strong, our concerns are that small sixth forms:

- may have small classes; these take a disproportionate share of resources from the school as a whole
- offer a narrower range of subjects, restricting young people's choice at 16 and, in combination with a reluctance to move to provision elsewhere, limiting options at 18
- tend to duplicate the offer of other small sixth forms, rather than expand the choices available to young people in any given locality.

Findings from the Review: qualification reform

The Government remains committed to wide-ranging reforms to qualifications, particularly at Level 3. Currently these reforms will include the de-funding of BTEC Nationals and other applied general qualifications [AGQs] in favour of T Levels, which over time will become the principal alternative to A levels at Level 3. There is also a potential negative impact from the proposed reforms on the International Baccalaureate Career-Related Programme [IBCP].

Many school sixth forms in Kent rely on BTECs, AGQs and/or the IBCP as a central part of their post-16 offer, and there is a concern (nationally as well as here in Kent) that a "gap" will emerge at Level 3, with T Levels proving too demanding for many young people, requiring a level of investment that schools will not be able to make, and requiring a level of employer engagement that many will be unwilling to make.

Taken together, the small size of many of our sixth forms and qualifications reform at Level 3 represent an existential threat to an important element of our post-16 provision that currently provides a valuable progression route for many of our young people.

What we propose should be done

If we are to provide a strong, varied post-16 offer to our young people, a comprehensive and effective range of provision must be locally available to all.

We must find a way of increasing the size of sixth forms and addressing the impact of Level 3 reforms. Short of major closures of small sixth forms, which we believe is an inevitability if nothing is done, we consider this has to involve genuine, practical collaboration between neighbouring sixth forms and other providers that amounts to an "area offer".

If possible, the flexibility for students to follow "mixed programmes" – some "A" levels and some vocational qualifications – which has proved so attractive to a significant proportion of high school students needs to be retained and, through closer work with GFECs, improved.

We therefore consider there is a need to:

- set out, and consult upon, what a comprehensive local “area offer” at post-16 should look like
- encourage schools with sixth forms, in conjunction with their local FE college(s) wherever possible, to construct an “area offer” combining academic and vocational programmes to replace the range of qualifications that are to be discontinued
- encourage the strong collaboration at a local level that will be needed to deliver this offer (the exact form that this collaboration will take may vary from place to place)
- review and “kitemark” those collaborations that are delivering an area offer
- continue to lobby Government, both to moderate the impact of its reforms on vocational qualifications, and to ensure that adequate provision is made at Level 3 for those whose Level 2 attainment is insufficient to support progression to T or A levels.

Clearly there are issues to be resolved (travel, enrolment, timetabling, staffing, funding and accountability), but we are convinced that something has to be done.

5 Provision below Level 2

Findings from the Review

There is a significant group of young people who have found, and are likely to continue to find, “conventional” provision in a school or college unsuitable for them; they may have struggled through school or disengaged from learning pre-16. Either way, if they are to fulfil the requirement of remaining actively involved in learning up to 18 and avoid becoming “not in education, employment or training” [NEET], many will need access to some form of alternative provision.

It is difficult to help young people avoid becoming NEET if the appropriate provision is not on offer. Kent’s NEET percentage is stubbornly high and proving difficult to reduce; we think this is due to there being insufficient provision for this group. There are a number of challenges:

- Historically this provision has been funded from the European Social Fund [ESF]. ESF funding is being wound down post-Brexit and alternative UK-based arrangements are yet to be confirmed. “Mainstream” funding through the Education and Skills Funding Agency [ESFA] is available for a range of Entry Level (E1, E2, E3) and Level 1 programmes but this has not been perceived to be suitable for all; other sources are short-term and uncertain
- ESFA does not currently support sub-contracting wholeheartedly, which can make it difficult for smaller providers to enter the market, and also operates a “lagged funding” model that militates against new and expanding organisations
- Providers can be judged harshly when they deliver impressive results for their young people because these do not meet “standard” benchmarks
- It is often difficult for young people to progress from current alternative provision that does not interface with the vocational qualification structure and provide clear progression to mainstream education or training or employment.

Providers who are willing to engage with these young people have to cope with many more uncertainties and difficulties than those engaging with more mainstream post-16s. For some the challenges have proved too great and they are exiting – or have already exited – the market.

What we propose should be done

We must find ways to support further growth and development in alternative provision to stem, and indeed reverse, the current decline. In particular, provision needs to be put on a stable footing with guaranteed long-term formula funding rather than a reliance on short-term applications to multiple funding sources.

We need to:

- identify the extent to which ESFA can support developments in this area by guaranteeing funding, and lobby ESFA to extend the range of programmes it can fund if the current range is insufficient
- investigate options for setting up an “umbrella” organisation, in order to enable more providers to engage without having to carry the associated administrative burden unaided; this has worked well elsewhere in the country
- support new providers wanting to enter the market, whether as part of such an “umbrella” or in their own right, and lobby ESFA to facilitate this
- encourage GFECs to continue to offer a range of entry level qualifications and qualifications at Level 1, and to work to develop pathways back into their provision, recognising that not all young people are immediately ready for a college environment
- support all providers in developing progression routes for successful completers into further vocational (or other) learning or employment.

6 Strategic leadership at 16+

Findings from the Review

Responsibility for post-16 provision is fragmented across a number of organisations and agencies.

While there are a number of local coordinating groups and initiatives that have an interest in 16+ provision, there is at present no one forum that by virtue of its membership can coordinate the entire 16+ system and, in doing so raise issues, work collaboratively and make real progress, nor a team to facilitate this.

Previous Government sponsored arrangements – most recently the Learning and Skills Council; before it the Training and Enterprise Councils – have all been discontinued and not replaced. We consider our post-16 provision has suffered from the lack of a body that has an overview of the sector. The Review Steering and Working groups have shown the value of bringing together colleagues with an interest or direct involvement in 16+ provision and we are keen to see this continue post-Review.

What we propose should be done

We propose that:

- a 16+ Strategic Board is formed, both to take forward the recommendations of this current Review and, subsequently, to take a strategic oversight of the coordination and development of 16+ provision throughout Kent

- this Board has a small secretariat, headed by a principal officer, and funding to promote its activities and ensure that work streams are owned and taken forward.

7 Supporting mental health

Findings from the Review

Throughout our fieldwork for this project, our attention has been drawn to increasing concerns about young people's mental health and the impact that mental health issues can have on their learning, particularly in non-work-based provision. The issue is two-fold:

- identifying and supporting young people with mental health issues in appropriate ways – including those not in mainstream settings
- reviewing and modifying teaching styles, making them more appropriate to a student population where mental health issues are increasingly common.

Although the NHS does make provision for young people's mental health support (principally through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service [CAMHS]), waiting lists are, and always have been, exceptionally long and the delays in providing direct support have significant consequences for students' progress.

Some additional national funding for work in this area has recently been announced, but arguably (at £1,200 per school) it is not enough.

What we propose should be done

We consider there is a need to:

- research, identify and promulgate best practice pedagogy to create a learning climate that supports learning in a mental health-friendly way for all students. We are aware of practice elsewhere in KCC upon which we may be able to draw
- ensure that colleagues are aware of the full range of support already available
- ensure that providers are able to offer "frontline" support to individual young people with mental health issues where such approaches are appropriate and proportionate
- consider further investment in a "second line" support service, for example a team of qualified counsellors operating on a District basis, to address cases where in-school support (however enhanced) is likely to be insufficient but where a referral to CAMHS may not be entirely necessary.

8 Access and travel

Findings from the Review

If young people are to have access to the full range of post-16 opportunities in a large and partly rural county like Kent, some of them are likely to have to travel a reasonable distance to take part their chosen provision. For those willing to make the investment, this has consequences in the time and cost of commuting. For many others, in practice it restricts the range of options they have available to them.

The support KCC offers for post-16 travel to learning is more generous than many counties; however, it has no statutory responsibility to do this and there are pressures on budgets. Further funding for post-16 travel, and learner support more generally, was delegated some years ago to individual providers and each determines how best to spend its allocation to support those of its students it considers to be in need. There is no entitlement to support, and students cannot rely on it being available to them when applying for their chosen provision.

If we require students up to the age of 18 to participate in meaningful education, training or employment, then logic would suggest that we have to enable them to travel to the provision best suited to their needs and aspirations, if cost considerations are not to impact on choice. This is particularly so if they are not yet earning an adequate wage, and if their or their families' financial circumstances are limited.

What we propose should be done

There is a need to:

- prioritise support for those whose choice of post-16 destination is contingent upon the receipt of financial support to enable them to travel to it
- ensure the design of (student) travel arrangements takes account of the local collaborative "area offer", including travel between schools where this is required, and for vocational education more widely (see recommendation 4. above)
- continue to lobby Government to support travel for post-16 education, training and employment in the same way as it supports travel to school for pupils.

9 Learning from lockdown

Findings from the Review

The pandemic and associated lockdown has had many effects on young people's learning; it has obliged providers to consider new ways of working and perhaps make a step change towards "blended learning" and other technology-informed learning styles and delivery – methods that might have taken far longer to introduce incrementally. Some, especially the harder to reach young people, have found these arrangements to be particularly helpful.

We are concerned that in some instances there is a rush to return to pre-pandemic modes of delivery, and that what we have learnt and the opportunities that have been created will rapidly be lost. We have the opportunity to identify and consolidate the experiences of new ways of teaching and learning gained during the last 18 months, and evaluate how they can contribute to a richer variety of styles into the future and help to (re-)engage those who have become detached from learning.

If "blended learning" becomes more prevalent, students may not need to travel every day: this may help the available support for travel to learning stretch further (recommendation 8).

What we propose should be done

We propose that:

- the lessons to be learnt from lockdown are identified whilst the knowledge gained about these is still fresh in our minds
- a minimum standard of requirements for home-based learning is developed, including software, hardware and broadband access: this should guide 16+ providers and their students when implementing blended learning approaches
- circumstances in which students might be given a “right to request” remote or more blended learning (e.g. illness, challenging personal circumstances, etc.) are agreed and protocols are established to encourage students to make these requests
- students’ use of remote learning is tracked to see whether blended learning does in fact meet the needs and address the issues – and if it does how it might further be developed.