

LGA Skills Taskforce roundtable summary: Careers and retraining for a changing local economy

Thursday 7 February 2019

Leading councillors and stakeholders from the skills, education and employment sectors attended an LGA Skills Taskforce roundtable in February to discuss issues around careers and retraining. Below is a summary. It was chaired by Councillor Mark Hawthorne, Leader of Gloucestershire County Council, and Chair of the LGA's People and Places Board. Dr Fiona Aldridge, Director of Policy and Research at the Learning and Work Institute, was invited to introduce the four discussion themes:

- careers advice and guidance;
- an integrated post-16 offer;
- apprenticeships; and
- adult learning.

1) Careers advice and guidance

Introduction: A clear and coherent careers advice and guidance system is essential to help young people and adults navigate the world of learning and work. However, the system is confusing with a range of providers and initiatives being delivered in any one local area. For young people, it is complex and fragmented. It is also critical for adults who want (or need) to progress or retrain, though awareness of the National Careers Service among adults is low and access limited. **Attendees were asked: is a locally relevant and coordinated all-age careers service needed and, if so, how do we get there?**

Key points included:

Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE, former Chair of the National Careers Council:

- An all-age careers advice system would be welcomed, but good advice and guidance will not be possible if cuts to funding continue.
- The 'marketisation' of careers advice is a costly experiment. More and more young people are not receiving the level of support they need.
- Adults with low skills and on low incomes are the least likely to access training, despite needing it most. A recent Social Mobility Commission [report](#) reiterated this.
- We need to begin to shape local places and spaces and provide the support that people need to make informed decisions.

Nicki Jenkins, Nottingham City Council:

- Locally there are high levels of deprivation including second or third generation unemployed. That makes careers advice essential, but councils do not have the levers to bring all those delivering it together locally. For example, the majority of secondary schools are academies. The changes to Ofsted inspections will help in terms of a stronger focus on progression, but there is a long way to go.

Jo Maher, Boston College and Association of Colleges:

- Young people in rural areas face real challenges travelling to learn or access advice.
- Early engagement in schools is essential and way before young people begin their GCSEs, however evidence suggests the 'Baker clause' is not being effectively used.
- Colleges get little information about students arriving from schools, so in effect they have to start from scratch.

Darryl Eyers, Staffordshire County Council:

- Young people are leaving education without core skills and then need to re-sit Level 2 qualifications at College. This is a big issue for the local labour markets.
- Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Local Economic Partnership (LEP) is one of five Career Learning pilots testing how to reach out and engage low-skilled adults in work and whether reduced costs of courses linked to local priorities makes learning more viable. The importance of the council as 'trusted messenger' to engage residents was key.

Elaine Bowker, Liverpool City Region LEP Board:

- Too many young people are not progressing beyond Level 3, limiting their potential in the labour market. Few young people have received independent advice and guidance. Schools with a sixth form should be encouraged to promote alternative learning routes.

Heather Carey, The Work Foundation:

- Many issues businesses face lie with the quality of careers advice and guidance. The Foundation is working with the business sector to look at how to prepare young people for future jobs and ensure 'good' work for all.

Katie Schmuecker, Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

- One of the strongest arguments for local careers advice is joining up advice with real opportunities in local labour markets. There must be a strong connection between careers advice and local industrial strategies.
- It is critical we understand the best ways of reaching out to engage people in low-paid jobs: this is a big challenge.
- Trade unions have a key role to play, but we need to consider how this is done in non-unionised workplaces.

Kamile Stankute, Institute of Directors:

- Work experience is important; perhaps a more formalised approach is needed.

John Cope, Head of Education and Skills, Confederation for British Industry (CBI):

- It is important to advise and guide people to real options. There is a structure for those wanting to study a degree, but for alternative (technical routes), it is confusing.
- Partnership is needed between business, education and Government. The North East '[Be inspired](#)' pilot has seen schools and colleges testing the 'Good Career Guidance' benchmarks, coordinated by the LEP, and is cited as exemplar.

Greg Wade, Universities UK:

- Universities have the potential to make links at a local level and conduct research on local labour markets as part of their contribution to local industrial strategies.
- More must be done to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Bob Pickles, Surrey Employment and Skills Board:

- We cannot afford to ignore the role and influence of parents.

Iain Murray, Trades Union Congress (TUC):

- There is a low level of awareness of the National Careers Service, so even if more funding is invested into it, there is still the challenge of adult engagement.

Jasbir Jhas, Local Government Association (LGA):

- Department for Education (DfE) is hopeful that skills advisory panels could serve as a way of communities having a better understanding of the local labour market.

Summary: Councillor Hawthorne said that there was consensus that the current system needs improvement, more coherence and should be 'locally rooted' to maximise connections. The need for 'independence' is critical, but that the current system cannot work in the way we want simply by legislating; it has to be resourced and incentivised.

2) An integrated post-16 offer

Introduction: There has been a great deal of post-16 reform in recent years, and Government reforms to raise the quality of vocational and technical education are welcome. It is critical that young people develop the skills needed to secure sustained, skilled employment, and which meet the needs of our changing economy. However, there is a risk that different pathways are being developed and delivered in 'silo'. Whether you are a young person, a parent or an employer, a coherent and well-communicated offer is critical, but no-one is currently responsible for developing or coordinating this locally. **Attendees were asked: how do we plan an impartial and coherent post-16 offer within local areas, and communicate it, to give the best opportunities to young people?**

Key points included:

Paul Warner, Association of Employment and Learning Providers:

- There is an infrastructure of providers who can do different things i.e. apprenticeship providers could offer and deliver large-scale T-levels placements. Yet this potential is not being maximised, in part because reforms are developed and funded in silo.

Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, Local Government Association (LGA):

- Colleges are concerned about their ability to provide placements for T-levels.

Jo Maher, Association of Colleges:

- It is vital that T-Levels reforms consider learning from the pilot areas, and consider how these will work in rural areas where it may be difficult to secure sufficient placements.

John Cope, CBI:

- There are a wide range of organisations in this space. The CBI recommends that the Institute for Apprenticeships should be the primary body, linking them all.
- We need to consider progression, fluidity and interaction between post 16 options, allowing people to change their mind and move between different routes.
- Businesses have for a long time called for a better technical offer, as there is generally a gap between levels 3 and 6.

Greg Wade, Universities UK:

- Bridging provision is vital, and we must be clear that when encouraging young people on to a T-level, what opportunities it is opening up or closing down.

Deirdre Hughes, National Careers Council:

- England has a different system from the rest of the UK. The Scottish Government's 15 to 24 learner journey review (2018) explored how the learner journey can be clear, transparent and articulated at the local and national level.

Bob Pickles, Surrey Employment and Skills Board:

- The landscape has evolved rapidly over recent years, mostly in a positive direction, but the challenge is joining it up. There is a real risk that employers will be swamped by approaches for placements, so they need to be involved in discussions.

Darryl Evers, Staffordshire County Council:

- There needs to be coherence at national and local level. Solutions need to be local and focused and we need to communicate messages very clearly.

Elaine Bowker, Liverpool City Region LEP:

- Funding and resources is a big issue. Even for a devolved area, it can be difficult to influence things that are done nationally.

Paula Neal, Surrey Employment and Skills Board:

- Smaller employers are unlikely to have the capacity to access information about new policy developments, so how do we communicate better, and is there a need for an intermediary?

Councillor Muhammed Butt, Leader, London Borough of Brent:

- We must do more to support parents to progress in work so that the aspirations of children and young people can also be lifted.
- Nationally there is a danger of creating too much change without considering what the outcomes are that we want to achieve.

Summary: Councillor Mark Hawthorne said while there are positive developments in the post-16 landscape, it is clear that this is not being done in a coordinated or coherent way, and no one has oversight of how it all fits together. There is a strong appetite for collaborative working, but the national and silo approach to funding specific parts of the system is affecting how organisations work together. There is merit in an integrated post-16 offer being developed and communicated locally.

3) Apprenticeships

Introduction: Apprenticeship reforms have changed the way employers manage their skills and training functions. Data published in February showed that the numbers of starts had fallen (119,100 fewer starts in 2017/18 than in 2016/17), though the decline is halting. There has also been a growth in higher-level apprenticeships. Nearly two years after the reforms, many employers believe there is room for improvement, most notably with the Apprenticeship Levy. To its credit, the Government introduced some flexibilities late last year. However, many stakeholders would like to see more. The LGA, for instance, is seeking greater flexibilities, including pooled levy contributions and an extension to the two-year limit to spend on the levy against standards which have only just been approved or are still in development. The Government promised an in-depth review. **Attendees were asked what changes they would like made to the Levy and broadly to all apprenticeship provision, and what can be done locally to maximise its impact?**

Key points included:

Anthony Impey, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB):

- The system has changed significantly and is now more fit for purpose. However apprenticeship funding is running out: £400 million unspent levy in 2017/18, but we are moving towards a deficit. How do we create a system that can fund itself in the future?
- Small businesses find it difficult to navigate the current system. Funding change has made it difficult for training providers to serve the SME community. Pooling Levy contributions is one way local authorities can have a big impact on their communities.

John Cope, CBI:

- In the first in a series of reports, '[Getting apprenticeships right](#)' the CBI recommends that the Institute for Apprenticeships is given the independence and clout to reform and regulate the English skills system. It also wants an appeals process introduced for employers who have been unable to take part through no fault of their own. Over the next few months, it will further explore what can be done to provide more coherence to the apprenticeship landscape, and looking at the size and scope of the levy.

Jo Maher, Association of Colleges:

- The shift away from Level 2 apprenticeships is a concern.
- Pooling the levy will have clear benefits and will help micro-businesses to take part.

Paula Neal, Surrey Employment and Skills Board:

- Local research of levy paying employers found that apprenticeships are valuable, but businesses and training providers are frustrated with the complicated system. To improve things we could explore locally how to help levy payers get their transfer out.

Greg Wade, Universities UK:

- The Government could possibly save 10-25 per cent of the levy by simplifying the system, but there is no agenda for simplification.

Sophie Wingfield, Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC):

- Many REC Levy paying members are SMEs with large temporary workforces. The Levy could be used on short courses to allow temporary workers to progress.

Paul Warner, Association of Employment and Learning Providers:

- AELP is supportive of the Levy but its focus must be narrowed to start people off on a career, especially as Level 2 apprenticeships are failing. We need to simplify the system as many strands of apprenticeship policy are working in different directions.

Katie Schmuecker, Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

- The Levy objectives are confused. We need more focus on Level 2/3, so this could be an area of focus.
- While in some areas a focus on young people is needed, in other areas the focus may need to be on older people in low-skilled jobs.

Summary: Councillor Hawthorne said it was clear the current apprenticeships landscape is complicated, and there is an opportunity for those around the table to influence this, particularly with the deadline for the expiry of levy contributions fast approaching.

4) Adult learning

Introduction: As working lives extend and our economy changes, adults – those in work and looking for a career change, those vulnerable to redundancy, and those out of work due to ill-health or caring responsibilities – need to be retrained, upskilled and supported into job opportunities. With nine million adults lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills, and adult learners in further education learning halving since 2005/06, we need to understand how to engage adults into further training. **Attendees were asked: how do we ensure different parts of the system align to meet the skills needs of adults throughout their working lives, and how do we engage adults in these opportunities?**

Key points included:

Iain Murray, TUC:

- Funding for the National Retraining Scheme will be crucial in defining what it can do, for whom. Key is understanding how to put in place a system that will genuinely inspire and incentivise adults to retrain, and the Government will need to look at entitlements, for example mid-life career reviews.

Katie Schmuecker, Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

- The NRS has the potential to be a really important policy, but its focus need to be clear.
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund must support adults retrain or upskill, as EU funding does.

Darryl Eyers, Staffordshire County Council:

- The number of adults with no qualifications has halved locally over four years. This demonstrates that by working with local businesses, we can make a difference using combined local knowledge, as individuals see what their 'next step' really looked like.

Jo Maher, Association of Colleges:

- Just 10 years ago, colleges still had thriving evening classes. As 'jobs for life' no longer exists, the need to reskill will become even greater, but the lack of funding for adult education is not supporting that.

Nicki Jenkins, Nottingham City Council:

- The role of councils is key in identifying and engaging people on low incomes, as they tend to be in contact with their council on other matters.

Heather Carey, The Work Foundation:

- The NRS cannot be the only answer to adult learning. LEPs and councils have an important role in helping to connect businesses on this agenda.

Summary: Councillor Hawthorne said supporting people to increase their skills and progress in the labour market is critical to inclusive growth, and should be integral to the development of local industrial strategies. Councils and combined authorities, working with local and national partners, can play a key community leadership role to both stimulate and meet demand for skills development, through targeted engagement and a relevant flexible offer. There is the potential to make a real difference on this agenda.

This was the second of three LGA Skills Taskforce roundtable events. The first looked at 'local coordination of a fragmented employment and skills system' (December 2018). The third will look at 'the future of work' (March 2019). For further information please contact Jasbir Jhas, LGA Senior Adviser (jasbir.jhas@local.gov.uk).

List of organisations represented at the Skills Taskforce roundtable, 7th February 2019:

Stakeholders

Representative	Organisation
Jo Maher, Principal and Chief Executive, Boston College	Association of Colleges
Paul Warner, Director of Research and Development	Association of Employment and Learning Providers
Bob Pickles, Canon UK	Surrey Employment and Skills Board
Paula Neal, Surrey County Council	Surrey Employment and Skills Board
John Cope, Head of Education and Skills	Confederation for British Industry
Anthony Impey MBE, Founder, Optimity	Federation of Small Businesses
Katie Schmuecker, Head of Policy (dialling in)	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Expert: Dr Fiona Aldridge, Director of Policy and Research	Learning and Work Institute
Elaine Bowker, Liverpool City Region LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
Nicki Jenkins, Director of Economic Development	Nottingham City Council
Dr Deirdre Hughes	Director, DMH & Associates Ltd and Former Chair of the National Careers Council
Sophie Wingfield	Recruitment and Employment Confederation
Darryl Evers, Director for Economy, Infrastructure & Skills	Staffordshire County Council and Staffs and Stoke LEP
Iain Murray, Senior Policy Officer	Trade Union Congress
Greg Wade, Senior Policy Officer	Universities UK

LGA Skills Taskforce

Elected member	Local authority
Cllr Mark Hawthorne (co-chair)	Gloucestershire
Cllr Lucy Nethsingha	Cambridge
Cllr Muhammed Butt	Brent
Cllr Colin Spence	Suffolk