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**Scoring opportunity or hospital passⁱ? The changing
role of local authorities in 14-19 education and
training in England**

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Editor's Foreword

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Abstract

In 2008, the UK Labour government unveiled plans to abolish the Learning and Skills Council and transfer funding for the education and training of 16-19 year olds in England to local authorities (LAs), with funding for adult skills passing to a new Skills Funding Agency. The transfer of 16-19 funding complements the responsibilities that LAs have already acquired in relation to the raising of the education and training participation age and ensuring that all young people have access to a full 14-19 curriculum entitlement in their area. Such a move might also be read as part of the 'new localism' that has gained currency under the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, as well as an opportunity to rein back from an English education and training system that has become increasingly centralised and 'top-down'. Indeed, some commentators have argued for a new model of governance based on 'devolved social partnership', with input from a wider range of stakeholders and the space for policy levers to be shaped more at local level. Drawing upon interviews with key personnel in LAs and other stakeholders across three regions of England, this article examines the opportunities and challenges that LAs face in their new role, whether this amounts to a genuine devolution of power, and the prospects for 'devolved social partnership'. The article concludes that LAs are being offered 'accountability without control', with 'devolved social partnership' more akin to a distant dream than an emerging reality.

All governments have done it, they have hollowed out local government. Local government is now a creature of Whitehall... I think it is enormously to the disadvantage of the proper balance in this country. We now have a deeply centralised and conformist society.ⁱⁱ

[Lord Heseltine]

Introduction

The erosion in the power of local government in England over the past two decades is widely acknowledged, with local authorities (LAs) said to have become delivery agents for policies formulated in Westminster and Whitehall (see Newman 2001: 77, Harding *et al.* 2008). The ‘hollowing out’ of local government has been evident across a number of policy domains but none more so than in post-16 education and training where England is said to have evolved one of the most centralised systems in the western world (see Keep 2006, also Coffield *et al.* 2008). Following the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992, Further Education (FE) colleges, along with sixth form colleges, were removed from the control of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), in a process known as ‘incorporation’. Funding was channelled through government agencies – the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) – with colleges becoming independent organisations responsible for their own management, budget and course planning, and expected to compete along with schools and private training providers for students and funding.

This process of marginalisation continued after 1997, with the election of a (New) Labour government strongly committed to education and skills and determined to exercise control over a pivotal area of public policy. In 2001, the FEFC and the TECs were abolished and replaced with a national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and 47 local LSCs responsible for planning and funding all post-16 learning outside higher education (see Coffield *et al.* 2005). The result is that locally elected councils have seen their powers and influence over what are now essentially autonomous providers drastically reduced. At the same time, LEAs have been replaced with ‘Directorates of Children’s Services’, responsible for coordinating all services for children and young people in accordance with the government’s *Every Child Matters* agenda and new Children’s Trusts arrangements (DfES 2003). While LAs have continued to play a role

in education and training, not least through their involvement in local ‘14-19 partnerships’ aimed at addressing issues of learner attainment, participation and progression (see Hodgson and Spours 2007a), this is now merely one element within a much broader set of responsibilities.

In recent years, this role has been increasingly acknowledged by government with LAs given responsibility for ensuring that young people have access to a full curriculum entitlement at 14-19 (DfES 2005a, DfES 2007). In June 2007, the Labour government, under the new premiership of Gordon Brown, went a stage further by announcing its decision to transfer LSC funding for 16-19 year olds to LAs, subject to consultation and the necessary legislation. Under new proposals, outlined in the March 2008 white paper, *Raising Expectations: Enabling the System to Deliver*, the LSC will be abolished in 2010 when LAs are expected to take over as the ‘single local strategic leader’ for planning and commissioning 14-19 provision in England (DCSF/DIUS 2008: 22, hereafter *Raising Expectations*).

It is possible to locate these developments as part of the ‘new localism’ that has gained political currency under Brown (see Corney and Fletcher 2008, Hodgson *et al.* 2008). Briefly, the ‘new localism’ holds that complex problems, such as local regeneration, require carefully targeted solutions which those closest to the issue – elected local government and its citizens – are best placed to decide ‘within an agreed framework of national minimum standards and policy priorities’ (see Stoker 2004: 2, Pratchett 2004). Such policy rhetoric has figured prominently in the 2006 local government white paper (DCLG 2006), the Lyons’ review of local government finance (Lyons 2007), and, more recently, the *Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration* (HM Treasury *et al.* 2007).

These developments appear to offer an opportunity to rein back from the centralism of the past, with LAs afforded more space to develop local economic development and regeneration strategies that pull together policies on housing, planning, transport, employment, and skills. The establishment of local Employment and Skills Boards, aimed at integrating the skills and jobs agenda, is seen as another step in this direction. Such moves have garnered strong support from lobby groups such as the Local Government Association (LGA) and the New Local Government Network (NLGN). One

commentator even contends that ‘the time is ripe for an advance, indeed a land grab, in which local authorities pull down to the spatial level at which problems exist and can best be tackled. It’s time for councils to saddle up’ (Hope 2008a).

Such opportunities however require a break with, what Harding *et al.* (2008: 43) describe as, the ‘somewhat Olympian and disdainful attitude to “the local” on the part of the national metropolitan elite, and a tendency by Governments of all stripes to see local authorities as delivery instruments for the routine elements of national policy...’ These discussions are echoed within the skills literature, with some commentators arguing that progress requires a new governance model based on, what they term, ‘devolved social partnership’, allowing greater input from a wider range of stakeholders and the space for policy levers to be shaped more at local level (see Coffield *et al.* 2008, Hodgson *et al.* 2008).

The article explores these issues, focusing on the developing role of LAs in 14-19 education and training in England. How are LAs coming to terms with this new role? What opportunities and challenges do *they* perceive? How is responsibility configured within the new governance arrangements? And, what might these latest reforms tell us about the prospects for ‘devolved social partnership’? Drawing upon interviews with key personnel in LAs and other stakeholders across three regions of England, the article examines current responses and the opportunities for progress. The first section sketches the wider skills policy context in England within which LAs are being asked to take on a strategic commissioning and funding role. Section two then uses the interview data to explore the views of LAs and other stakeholders. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential implications.

The English Education and Training Policy Context – Centralised, Target-Led and Low Trust

The New Labour government placed a high priority on education and skills as ‘key’ to improved economic performance, social inclusion/justice and individual opportunity in a modern globalised ‘knowledge-driven’ economy (see DfES *et al.* 2003). Currently, the policy agenda is set by the Treasury-sponsored Leitch Review of Skills which asserted that ‘skills is the main lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social

deprivation' (Leitch 2006: 2), before going on to recommend ambitious new *qualification* targets for adults aimed at making the UK a 'world-leader' in skills by 2020 (Leitch 2006). These targets have since been adopted in England (see DIUS 2007), although interestingly not in Scotland or Wales where they have received a more muted response (see Payne 2008a).ⁱⁱⁱ

Since the early 1980s, the post-16 learning and skills sector (LSS) in England, as it is now termed, has been subject to considerable institutional and programmatic 'reform', the pace of which intensified markedly under New Labour (see Keep 2006, Coffield *et al.* 2008). The LSC has undergone two major re-organisations in seven years, the latter of which, in 2006, saw the move to a new regional structure, and is now to be phased out. As Hodgson *et al.* (2008) note, the strategic approach adopted by the LSC shifted over time, from the development of a complex planning bureaucracy between 2001-2004 to a 'top-down market model', centred around 'contestability' and high-profile initiatives such as Train to Gain. Following recommendations made by Leitch (2006), a new UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has recently been established whose main role is to advise policy makers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and monitor progress towards the Leitch targets (see DIUS 2007). The 'Machinery of Government' has similarly been reformed, with the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES) replaced in June 2007 by two separate ministries – the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), which deals with post-19/adult skills, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS), responsible for pre-19 education and training.

The result is said to be an LSS driven by 'endless change' (Edwards, S. *et al.* 2007) and which resembles a confusing layer-cake of institutional and programmatic complexity (see Coffield 2008). One 'think tank' talks of an education and skills 'maze' with 'unwieldy' relationships between four government departments – DCSF, DIUS, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) – and no less than 29 agencies or 'quangos' (Haldenby *et al.* 2008). Even the chief executive of UKCES, Chris Humphries, confesses to being baffled by its sheer complexity (see *The Guardian* 2008), a concern shared by employer organisations such as the Engineering Employers Federation (see EEF 2006).

It is not just the maze-like quality of the skills system in England that causes anxiety; the system is incredibly centralised with policy decided by a small coterie of senior ministers and civil servants and then delivered through state-created and state-funded government agencies devoid of tripartite social partnership (see Keep 2006, Lloyd and Payne 2007). Unrelenting ‘top-down’ reform has inevitably taken its toll on the LSS. Coffield *et al.* (2008) illustrate how the use of ‘policy levers’ (funding, targets, inspections and policy initiatives) has generated ‘unintended and perverse consequences’ as educational professionals divert time and energy into dealing with bureaucracy and paperwork (rather than teaching and learning), targets skew funding away from vulnerable learners and non-certified adult and community learning, and the space for ‘bottom-up’ professional innovation and locally-tailored responses is squeezed.

It is against this background that the UK government has decided to embark upon a further round of structural transformation. Under new proposals, outlined in *Raising Expectations*, the LSC will be wound up in 2010. Funding for 16-19 year olds, currently standing at £7 billion, will be transferred to LAs who will become the lead body for planning and commissioning 14-19 provision in England. They will be aided in the process by a new ‘slim national’ Young People’s Learning Agency (YPLA), accountable to DCSF. A new National Apprenticeships Service (NAS), operating under DIUS, will have end-to-end responsibility for the funding and management of apprenticeships, including finding places for suitably qualified 16-18 year olds. In terms of post-19/adult skills, a new ‘streamlined’ Skills Funding Agency (SFA), under DIUS, will route funding through a more market-orientated and ‘demand-led’ system, with provision aligned to the ‘purchasing choices’ of employers and learners via an expanded ‘Train to Gain’ programme and new individual Skills Accounts (see DCSF/DIUS 2008). What follows concentrates on the 14-19 element of this reform agenda.

14-19 education and training in England

In England, 14-19 education and training is delivered in a range of institutions including schools, sixth-form colleges, FE and tertiary colleges, and private training providers. High youth unemployment in the early 1980s resulted in an expansion in the proportion of 16-17 year olds engaged in full-time education, a trend reinforced by the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1988. Since 1994,

participation among 17 year olds has stagnated at around the 80 per cent mark, prompting concern among policy makers about the UK's relatively poor showing in OECD league tables (see DfES 2005a, Stanton 2008). This has been reflected in the government's recent decision to introduce legislation which will require all 17 year olds to remain in education or training by 2013, rising to age 18 by 2015 (see DfES 2007).

When it comes to tackling the problem of low participation at age 17, as Stanton (2008) notes, the government's main response has been to focus upon qualification reform. The current 14-19 reform agenda embodies this approach, with the new 14-19 diplomas taking centre stage, the first five of which are being rolled out in schools and colleges from September 2008 (DfES 2005a). These have been described as 'middle-track' general vocational qualifications (Stanton 2008) which are being developed in *lieu* of the single overarching framework recommended by the Tomlinson report (see Working Group 2004). By 2013, young people will have an entitlement to all 14 vocational lines of study as well as three new general education lines that together make up the diploma offer (see Hodgson *et al.* 2007). A new foundational learning tier is also being developed for learners who are currently below level two. In line with recommendations made by Leitch, the government is also planning to expand the number of apprenticeships in England to 400,000 by 2020 (see DIUS 2007). By 2013, every suitably qualified young person will be entitled to an apprenticeship place.

These reforms are being introduced into a context where government policy encourages providers to compete for learners, funding and resources as a means of driving up quality and standards. At the same time, what Fletcher and Perry (2008) describe as the local provider infrastructure or organisational 'ecology' (see also Fletcher and Stanton 2006) varies significantly from area to area, reflecting variegated historical patterns of provision and local politics. In some parts of the country, all schools have sixth forms; in others one finds 'tertiary systems' comprised of 11-16 schools where all post-16 provision takes place in sixth form or tertiary colleges; while others have a 'mixed' pattern of provision (see DCSF/DIUS 2008: 42). Furthermore, while national policy levers (in particular funding) encourage competitive behaviour, policy makers insist that the success of the 14-19 reforms requires a high degree of cooperative endeavour and partnership working (see DfES 2005a, also Ranson 2008).^{iv} The diplomas

provide a case in point, as no one institution can offer all 17 lines of study, thereby necessitating joint planning of provision if learners are to receive a full entitlement.

Current debates

The question of how to improve post-16 participation and achievement has been a central concern within the current academic literature. One issue relates to patterns of institutional provision and, specifically, whether more selective systems, with large numbers of school sixth forms (often small), hinder the participation of less academic learners who do not achieve 5 ‘good’ GCSEs at 16, let alone offer value for money. If so, then, as Fletcher and Perry (2008) note, there may be a strong argument on both *efficiency* and *equity* grounds for moving towards a ‘tertiary system’.

Research on this topic remains relatively limited. Schagen *et al.* (2006), in a carefully qualified study for NFER, found that areas with large numbers of school sixth forms did not differ markedly in terms of participation compared to those with relatively few. Fletcher and Perry (2008: 16, 23) go further, citing the conclusions of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills (House of Commons 2005) and evidence contained in the technical annex of the 2006 FE white paper (DfESb 2005). In the case of students with five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C (i.e. above average attainment) school sixth forms aid participation, with 93 per cent of students in schools with sixth forms opting to stay on compared to 90 per cent in those without. When it comes to students with below average attainment, however, it is a different story. Just 45 per cent of those with one to four GCSEs at grades D-G stay on in schools with sixth forms compared to 59 per cent in 11-16 schools, the gap widening to 27 per cent and 38 per cent respectively in the case of those with no GCSEs (see Fletcher and Perry 2008: 19-20). They conclude that ‘Selection at 16+ appears to have the same detrimental effects as the better-documented selection at 11+’ (Fletcher and Perry 2008: 45). They further contend that government policy is compounding the problem by encouraging schools and 11-16 ‘academies’ to establish sixth form provision in accordance with the ‘presumption right’, embodied in the 2005 Education Act.

Fletcher and Perry (2008: 30-36) also question whether 14-19 partnerships can develop strong collaborative local learning systems that are able to support the needs of all learners across an area. Besides being costly both in terms of resources and

professionals' time, they highlight case study evidence suggesting that partnerships rarely cover all learners and institutions in an area, with the most prestigious schools and colleges often opting not to participate; that provider participation is often motivated more by a tactical defence of 'institutional self-interest'; and a tendency to provide evidence of success in terms of 'process benefits' (i.e. improved trust and understanding among partners) rather than demonstrable improvements in learner outcomes. The fundamental problem, however, is that they remain entirely *voluntary*, rendering *collaboration* difficult to achieve and sustain in an environment where providers are also *competitors* for students and funding. In this context, they argue, 'there is little prospect of partnerships tackling difficult issues where institutional interests strongly diverge' thereby impeding the development of a 'coherent local system needed to ensure opportunity and quality for all' (Fletcher and Perry 2008: 46, 35). Their conclusions echo the work of Hodgson and Spours (2007) who argue that the majority of partnerships are best viewed as 'weakly collaborative'. Both sets of commentators therefore stress the need for stronger policy incentives to encourage collaboration in the interests of *all* learners, such as 'area-wide' targets, inspections and performance measures.

Another important area of debate focuses upon factors *internal* to the learning process and, in particular, issues of qualification/curriculum design and pedagogy. In terms of the 14-19 agenda, commentators have long argued that progress is likely to remain limited without tackling the deep-rooted 'academic/vocational divide' in English education. Here the argument is that only a *unified* curriculum framework, encompassing both academic and vocational qualifications, as proposed by Tomlinson, can build 'parity of esteem' and allow vocational programmes to escape 'the shadow of A-levels' (see Hodgson *et al.* 2007: 8). Others, however, contend that 'the power of the "academic paradigm"' is such that within a single scheme the vocational will always lose out', and that there is 'a need to protect and promote the vocational in its own terms' (Stanton 2008: 42).

In this latter view, the problem with previous government-led qualification reform is that it has been driven by the needs of the assessment regime and the perceived requirements of 'end users' (i.e. employers and universities) rather than those of the learner. Stanton (2008) argues that these failings are in danger of being repeated again

with the diplomas, the development of which has been handed over to Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) with relatively little input from educational professionals. He cites the Diplomas in ‘Society, Health and Development’ and ‘Construction’, which have tended to ‘favour abstract rather than practical learning, with a particular lack of appropriateness for those of below average school attainment’ (Stanton 2008: 7, 28-34, also Webb 2007).

A final set of problems lie *external* to the education system and learning process and relate to the obstacles presented to participation and achievement posed by a weakly regulated UK labour market where ‘license to practice’ arrangements are relatively few and there exists a substantial reservoir of low paid jobs which often require little in the way of formal qualifications (see Keep 2005). For those with negative experiences of ‘schooling’, a deregulated labour market offers an ‘escape hatch’ and access to employment which may not be well-paid but may nevertheless still be attractive, economic conditions permitting. As Keep (forthcoming) notes, both of these factors may be significant in explaining why the UK has achieved lower levels of participation in post-16 learning compared to many of its North European neighbours where a level three qualification is regarded as the minimum norm for labour market entry.

Towards ‘devolved social partnership’

Reviewing the current state of the LSS in England, Coffield *et al.* (2008) argue that there is a need for new forms of governance that break with the current ‘top-down’, ‘target-led’ and ‘market-driven’ approach (see also Hodgson *et al.* 2008). Drawing their inspiration from the Nordic countries, they argue for a new model based upon, what they term, ‘devolved social partnership’, with a new educational ‘settlement’ jointly decided by the state, employers, trade unions, education professionals, community groups and elected local government. This would need to give full consideration to collective measures aimed at boosting employer training, such as sector levies as well as licence to practice arrangements. It would also require a rebalancing of the relationship between central, regional and local tiers of governance, with less regulation and more space for the exercise of professional judgement, and LAs afforded the freedom to form ‘local plans’ and develop ‘strongly collaborative local learning systems’ responsive to the needs of all learners. Furthermore, these commentators contend that ‘[d]evolved social partnership is not a remote and idealistic goal; it is already present in debates about how local

government can be reinvigorated' as part of the 'New Localism', and constitutes, therefore, an emergent possibility (see Spours *et al.* 2007: 7, 11). The new governance arrangements and, in particular, the return of a strategic leadership and funding role for LAs at 14-19 provide a perfect opportunity then for examining such a potential.

Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver

The central policy rationale for the transfer of 16-19 LSC funding is that it makes LAs responsible for funding education and training right through to age 19, while also permitting a more integrated approach to children's services in line with the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES 2003).^v This is presented as a logical and rational step needed to support the statutory responsibilities that LAs have acquired in terms of delivering full participation for all 17 year olds by 2013 and ensuring that all young people in their areas receive a full 14-19 entitlement.

From 2010, LAs will be required to develop a local commissioning plan that will form part of the Children's and Young People's Plan. *Raising Expectations* acknowledges, however, that many young people travel to learn with a provider outside the LA in which they themselves reside. It therefore proposes a preferred commissioning model, whereby neighbouring LAs work together in 'sub-regional groupings' or clusters. The expectation is that these groupings will emerge organically and build on existing Multi-Area Agreements, where LAs have already identified a need for collaboration to deliver particular services across a functional area. In order to prevent unnecessary bureaucracy and delay, it is proposed that a 'lead' LA be identified to 'manage a single conversation' with colleges.

LAs will receive support from the YPLA which, according to the white paper, will be a 'slim national' body. Its main role will be to fund local plans, exercise overall budgetary control, and provide technical assistance (e.g. analysis of travel to learn data), while also having reserve powers to step in and commission provision directly from FE colleges where LAs are unable to reach agreement or are deemed to be failing in their duties. The stated intention, however, is that 'there should be progressive devolution of power and authority to the sub-regional level as collaborative arrangements become stronger and more formal' (DCSF/DIUS 2008: 26)

The white paper also makes it clear that funding will follow ‘learner choice’ and be routed to institutions in accordance with the ‘national funding formula’. While young people’s choices are seen as paramount, there is also an expectation that commissioning decisions will reflect local/regional labour market and economic development needs. Sub-regional plans will be subject therefore to approval at regional level in order to ensure that they are coherent, affordable and ‘consistent with the priorities for economic development set out in the region’s integrated strategy’ (DCSF/DIUS 2008: 30). To facilitate this, the white paper proposes the setting up of a regional forum to be ‘co-chaired’ by LAs and the Regional Development Agency and including representatives from the Government Office for the Region, the YPLA and the SFA.

For some observers, rather than a move towards a more flexible, streamlined and devolved skills system, this smacks of unnecessary disruption and additional bureaucracy. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in its submission to the government’s consultation^{vi}, voices a ‘strong concern that shifting responsibility for 16-19 funding to local authorities would not just cause disruption, but that the new system would be more complex and less efficient than currently exists under the Learning and Skills Council’ (CBI 2008). The Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS 2008), London Councils/ALDCS (2008) and the LGA (2008) are understandably more up-beat about the possibilities of devolving additional responsibilities to councils. However, they too have raised concerns about potential bureaucracy and the lack of detail and clarity in *Raising Expectations*. In particular, there are fears that the YPLA will not be the truly ‘slim national’ agency promised in the white paper and that it will take an overly interventionist and directive role in relation to commissioning. Others remain decidedly more sceptical, Coffield (2008: 49) describing the white paper as simply ‘another raft of top-down policies’, dressed up with ‘claims to be devolving power’.

To use a football analogy, then, is this a golden scoring opportunity, or something more akin to a ‘hospital pass’^{vii}, whereby LAs acquire responsibility for the delivery of policies formulated at the centre over which they have little effective input or control? While the proposed reforms have received some commentary, there has to date been little academic research which explicitly addresses the reaction among LAs and other stakeholders. How then do those who are tasked with delivering this new agenda view

the proposed changes and what opportunities and challenges do they perceive? It is to these questions that we now turn.

The View From Below

The research is based on semi-structured interviews with Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) and 14-19 local authority lead coordinators in three regions of England – the West Midlands, the North East and London. Additional interviews were undertaken with senior national and regional LSC officials, a representative of a Regional Development Agency (RDA), an LA economic development officer, an area director with Connexions, and two FE college principals. A total of eighteen interviews were conducted between September and November 2008. The interviews, which lasted between one and two hours, were tape recorded and transcribed in full.

Two points should be emphasised at the outset. First, it needs to be acknowledged that this is still 'policy in the making'. These interviews were carried out at an early stage in the transition to the new arrangements, the detail of which is still being worked through at present. By the time people come to read this paper, it is possible that particular elements may have changed or been clarified. Second, the interviews cannot provide a comprehensive overview of opinion on the new arrangements and are not presented as fully representative. Nevertheless, they do highlight a number of common issues and concerns, and may offer useful insights in terms of the key issues which may need to be addressed if progress is to be achieved.

Origins, opportunities and challenges

The decision to transfer 16-19 funding to LAs was announced in June 2007. However, it had to wait a further nine months, until the publication of *Raising Expectations* in the following March, before any details concerning the new commissioning arrangements were forthcoming. The origin and motivation behind the government's decision is a matter of some speculation. One LA officer commented, 'We are told it goes back to a conversation between two ministers in the back of a taxi, we'll divide this up and parcel this up and that bit can go to local authorities' (DCS3). A senior LSC officer also took the view that 'it was done for political reasons... it allowed the creation of DCSF and

DIUS' (LSC4), while another argued that the decision 'was taken on a political whim... [following] a change of personalities [at ministerial level]... Because there is not a shred of evidence that anybody had done any forward planning... and I suspect many people [in government] now think this is a bit of a mess' (LSC5). Another LA officer, closely involved in the reform process, stated: 'whether the whole thing was thought through at the beginning is not in question – it wasn't' (DCS6). Was this then a carefully planned and rational policy decision to 'devolve power' to LAs, as the white paper suggests, or an attempt to devise a set of commissioning arrangements that could be made to 'fit' a new departmental structure within central government?

Within local government, there was undoubtedly a feeling among some interviewees that this was a 'real opportunity' for LAs. As one DCS put it:

It is an unprecedented opportunity to get a more joined up and strategic system, a great opportunity for different areas to work together to make a more sensible pattern of provision for young people. (DCS1)

Another DCS called it 'a very exciting strategic opportunity', but with 'some very large unknowns that have to be worked through and consulted on for those opportunities to be realised' (DCS4). For one senior local council leader it was 'the first significant returning of powers to local government since they were taken away [in 1992/3] and a real opportunity for us to step up and show that we can deliver' (CL1).

Even among those within LAs who welcomed the transfer of 16-19 funding, such optimism was tempered by specific concerns about how to effectively manage the transition to the new arrangements, whether LAs would have the necessary capacity to cope, how the commissioning arrangements could be made to work in practice, and the threat of political interference from central government. Some senior LA officers went further, however, and questioned the very 'logic' of moving through another period of institutional upheaval to a set of commissioning arrangements that were entirely untried and untested. As one DCS put it, 'I've watched the TECs go, the LSC set up, the LSC being reorganised, the LSC being demolished all inside a period of seven years. Nobody can tell me that makes sense' (DCS3).

A diversity of perspectives was also found among LSC interviewees. One regional officer saw the decision as making:

...real sense of the whole 0-19 agenda, whether it is about child poverty, housing for young people, whether it is about employment opportunities ... it puts it all in once place and for me that is an undeniable rationale. (LSC1)

Others, however, questioned the government's decision to abolish the LSC and replace it with a set of commissioning arrangements that were seen as extremely complex, bureaucratic and unwieldy, with a 'topsy-turvy' logic of 'if it isn't broke, fix it' (see also Coffield 2008). As one regional officer noted:

The thing Whitehall does not like is independence from itself and success is not a criteria. The LSC is not a perfect organisation by any means but... it met all its PSA targets and did what was required of it. But that counts for nothing because (a) we have ran out of new shiny and sexy things and (b) we are independent of government. (LSC5)

These perspectives are explored more fully below.

Commissioning arrangements – the devil is in the detail

The majority of interviewees expressed concerns about the potential bureaucracy that they saw as being embodied in the proposed commissioning arrangements. The need to reach agreement between LAs and other stakeholders across various levels (regional, sub-regional and local) was seen as overly cumbersome, with the danger of the commissioning process becoming a 'bureaucratic nightmare' (FE2). An RDA officer saw the proposals as creating a 'bureaucratic quagmire' by 'taking one organisation across a region – the LSC – and putting some of that into a multiplicity of local authorities and a national agency [the YPLA] with a role in the region' so that each LA effectively becomes 'a microcosm of the LSC' (RDA1). A local LSC officer agreed, commenting:

You are creating 147 different varieties effectively and then adding on top of that a sub-regional level, another layer of bureaucracy, and then bringing all of those people around a table so that they can agree on funding at a regional level in order to match a national budget... (LSC3)

The same interviewee also questioned whether FE colleges would have any faith or confidence in these new commissioning arrangements, commenting, 'If you are a college... and you have got learners coming from ten local authority areas, and you want a single conversation with someone that is going to be really difficult' (LSC3).

Such issues figured prominently during the interviews with two FE college principals, one of which was concerned about 'how many different bureaucracies this

college is going to have to deal with and it could be up to five because we have students from five different local authorities... it just feels like a lot of bureaucracy to me' (FE2). Another college principal agreed, stating 'it looks very complex... I would rather have stayed with the old LSC system than to see the government, at a time of significant pressures on public funding, investing in a new one which is untested and unproven' (FE1). In some regions, where the LSC was seen to have functioned quite effectively, there was a questioning of the 'logic' of replacing the LSC. One DCS commented for example:

At the moment, I have to say I fail to see what was sensible about demolishing the LSC... There has to be some regional infrastructure to make all of this work, which looks, by any other name, like the LSC. But we are not allowed to let it be the LSC. So, in effect, we have to demolish the LSC only to reinvent it and do what the LSC did and in this region very successfully. (DCS3)

For others outside of LAs, there was a concern that the process of joint commissioning risked being further complicated by 'local council politics'. One LSC regional officer pointed out that 'the sub-regional groupings have no statutory aegis... [and] are entirely voluntary', with ultimate responsibility for commissioning residing 'with individual LAs' (LSC5). For them the critical question was: '[w]hat happens when... the DCS goes back to their cabinet and they say sorry you haven't got enough money, we want more money, what about our schools?' (LSC4 regional officer). Another LSC regional officer made a similar observation:

If a cluster of LAs resorts back to every individual LA cabinet to make their own decisions, you have got the world's most bureaucratic and unwieldy system and a system which will be driven by the lowest common denominator... [Our area] which would have been the easiest place to try this five years ago now has Lib-Dem councils in the middle of it... you're in a position whereby I don't think any individual LA... will cede authority to any other, so you're back to individual councils (LSC4).

The officer added, 'That's why government wants to maintain a small but strong YPLA – to try to exercise control where it is difficult... Good luck to them... it's going to be difficult everywhere' (LSC4). For these reasons, the interviewee remained sceptical as to whether 'they [LAs] will actually do the commissioning at the end of the day. The money will go through them but it is ring fenced, they can't use it for anything else'. A DCS in London expressed the concerns of many colleagues when voicing the fear that

‘the LAs role will simply be to pass out to local providers a resource that is calculated on a national basis’ (DCS2).

It will be particularly interesting to see how the new commissioning arrangements will work in London, where there are 33 Boroughs and extremely complex and fluid travel to learn patterns. London Councils and the Association of London Directors of Children’s Services (ALDCS) have argued that fixed sub-regional groupings are essentially unworkable in this context and that coherence would be best achieved if commissioning were vested with a pan-London Regional Planning Forum led by LAs (London Councils/ALDCS 2008). The argument for a regional approach in London appears to have carried the day, although government continues to insist on a ‘co-chairing’ role for the London Development Agency.

The question remains, however, as to how successful LAs will be when it comes to taking ‘hard decisions’ around de-commissioning and institutional rationalisation in the interests of learners across a sub-regional area. An LGA officer commented for example, ‘there could be perverse incentives about trying to retain funding in your LA when those courses are better delivered elsewhere... because you want your colleges to do well and the capital funding which goes with that’ (LGA1). There is also the issue of whether LAs will take ‘tough decisions’ with regard to de-commissioning small, inefficient school sixth forms, a point we return to below.

Funding – the elephant in the room

For many within LAs, a major ‘grey area’ in the white paper was funding. As one DCS put it, ‘The biggest challenge - the elephant in the room if you like - is what happens if there isn’t enough money to fund the provision that we actually need?’ (DCS1). Another remarked, ‘At some point you have to make decisions like have we got too many priorities for the funding we’ve got? Who is going to say that? Who is going to determine which funding priorities either don’t go forward or go forward with fewer resources?’ (DCS4).

It had not escaped the attention of some interviewees that such choices were being ‘devolved’ to LAs at a time when public sector finances were under severe pressure as a result of the current financial crisis and economic downturn. As one DCS noted:

...what are the elected members going to win? As far as they can see, nothing. What is being devolved, through a very circuitous route, is responsibility for funding at a level which [providers] currently expect. So in my view LAs will just get a huge responsibility to try and maintain confidence and sustain relationships with institutions... As far as I can see LAs have just been handed a poisoned chalice. (DCS3)

An LA lead 14-19 coordinator commented, 'the part of the chalice that I don't like is that... LAs will find themselves in a position whereby they will have to say do I fund special needs properly post-16 – very expensive – or do we look at those high tech programmes in an FE college, or do we look at the more general vocational programmes or diplomas' (LA1). These concerns, coupled with complexity and workload involved in the actual process of commissioning, prompted this interviewee to comment, 'they [the LSC] can have the job back, I don't want it.'

Local authority capacity

It should be emphasised that 14-19 commissioning is an extremely complex process requiring the handling of sophisticated data around learner choices and travel to learn patterns as well as the management of an intricate funding and accounting system. It goes without saying that this is new territory for LAs. The government acknowledges that the transfer of commissioning responsibility places an additional demand on LAs in terms of their expertise, staffing and resources. In September 2008, the DCSF duly established a Commissioning Support Programme specifically to aid LAs during the transition period to 2010. LAs are also being encouraged to work with the LSC in order to familiarise themselves with the commissioning process and develop 'shadow' arrangements. At the same time, the government recognises that the retention of LSC skills and expertise, together with their subsequent transfer into LAs, is essential if this transition is to be effectively managed (DCSF 2008: 78).

Although LAs are not expected to take on commissioning until 2010, the new proposals *already* require them to undertake various forms of preparatory work. At the time of the research, all LAs were being required to submit proposals on their 'sub-regional groupings' to the relevant Government Office by 26 September 2008, or had just done so, and were being asked to supply evidence concerning their proposed operational and managerial arrangements by the end of the year. Some LA interviewees commented

that this had already involved a ‘huge amount of preparatory time which is very necessary but comes with no additional resource’ (DCS5).

Moreover, there were concerns about whether the transfer of LSC staff into LAs would take place as expected. Initial surveys of LSC staff revealed that many have serious misgivings about working for an LA, with the majority stating that their preference was to remain within the newly-created government agencies. Consequently, efforts have been made to put on conferences to provide LSC employees with an insight into what working for an LA is like. One local LSC officer, who had previously worked in local government, argued that LAs were often perceived as being ‘extremely hierarchical’ (LSC3), adding ‘many LSC staff are working quite closely with LAs now and they don’t always like what they see.’

A national LSC official echoed this sentiment, commenting, ‘The initial staff survey was pretty negative about LAs... and I do think LAs have a got a big job to do in terms of selling themselves as an employer’ (LSC2). In Warwickshire, these challenges are compounded by the presence of the national LSC office in Coventry, which will house both the SFA and YPLA, thereby providing LSC staff with more alternative employment options locally. Given the commitment to retain all LSC staff under TUPE transfer arrangements, there is clearly a danger that LAs will find themselves forced to draw upon a shrunken and demoralised ‘rump’ of LSC officials whose skills and expertise may not match their actual requirements.

Local authority leadership

Opinions were divided as to whether voluntary 14-19 partnerships led by LAs afforded a sufficiently robust vehicle for bringing about significant improvements in participation and achievement and meeting the needs of all young people locally. In the North East, partnership arrangements are generally regarded as relatively strong, with the region having been invited to host various 14-19 learning visits and share good practice with other authorities. This was acknowledged by several interviewees, an LSC regional officer (LSC1) citing the example of Sunderland, a tertiary borough with 11-16 schools and a large general FE college, where the decision had recently been taken to establish joint school/college sixth forms with the support of local head teachers and the college.

However, a colleague, while accepting that there were ‘many good examples of partnership working... in the North East’, still had ‘doubts about whether schools which are increasingly independent of local authorities and FE which is fifteen years away from LA control can be bound into a 14-19 plan’ (LSC5). An LA officer agreed, commenting:

we have good partnerships in the North East, that’s true... [but] there isn’t a whole system of control. What you have at the moment... is government thrashing around for mechanisms to facilitate, encourage and indeed require a level of collaborative endeavour... If I was a head [teacher], I am not sure how far I would have gone down the diploma route. I would be waiting and seeing. (LA1)

In Warwickshire, an LA officer explained how the attitude among high performing schools and grammar schools towards the diplomas was still one of ‘it doesn’t affect us, we don’t want to know... we are happy offering GCSEs and A-levels. We’re working our way through that but it’s taking a long time and I don’t think government recognises how tough that message has been to sell’ (DCS5). The officer added, ‘there are parts of the system that are not amenable to LA control.’ For one senior LSC officer, ‘being reliant upon single institutional models of governance and management’ was just ‘plain crackers, it’s bad economics and it’s bad curriculum’ (LSC5). This interviewee also spoke of the need to place such arrangements on a much stronger footing, with ‘some kind of regulatory instruments to get schools and colleges to collaborate more’ (LSC5).

There were also concerns that where local consortia had begun to work quite well, these were now in danger of being disrupted during yet another period of institutional turmoil. A senior figure with the Connexions service in one area described how the LSC had played a very important role in getting ‘colleges, providers, Jobcentre Plus, the LSC and Connexions sitting around a table’ to address the needs of young people, building relationships over time which were now at risk of being ‘pushed to one side’ as structures changed and individuals moved (C1). An LA officer also referred to the ‘danger... that the cart will be thrown up into the air again’ (DCS5). Indeed, the disruption created by constant policy churn was a continual refrain among virtually all interviewees: ‘we sit in chaos with all the initiatives around us’ was how one FE college principal described it (FE2).

Among colleges, there were also concerns that the removal of the LSC and shift to LA leadership could disrupt the internal dynamic of partnership working, with colleges

losing out to schools. As one college principal in Warwickshire noted, while there was ‘a good model of partnership working’, ‘I have to work extremely hard to keep the college perspective in their [the LAs] mindset’ (FE2). The principal also referred to how the local LSC had regularly ‘spoken up on behalf of the college’ at meetings of the 14-19 strategic partnership. However, ‘When you come to the debate about whether a school should have a sixth form a hundred yards away from a college where it is being done really well and everyone’s happy, the school argument wins.’ A local LSC officer also spoke about how the LA remained ‘rather school centric’ to the point where they would have to ‘regularly ring them up and remind them that they haven’t invited colleges to their events’ (LSC3).

Many interviewees also referred to how government policy in respect of ‘sixth form presumptions’ remained problematic in terms of LAs’ ability to structure appropriate patterns of provision. One DCS in the West Midlands described how they had been ‘forced’ to accept a new sixth form in their area, following telephone calls from ‘the minister and cabinet member’, even though they had ‘certainly wriggled on the hook’ (DCS6). An FE college principal also explained how such political interference could go against the grain of ‘what made sense locally’:

We are now facing the prospect of three sixth form presumptions, one of which has been granted, another is on the way and the other is likely... We are looking at a situation where there will be some small, probably non-viable, sixth forms, delivering a mix of vocational and academic, not equipped either through staff or physical accommodation for the vocational and in an area where [college] provision is classed as outstanding by Ofsted. (FE2)

Many interviewees welcomed therefore the commitment in the white paper to review the ‘presumption right’ (see DCSF/DIUS 2008: 43), although they often remained sceptical as to whether government would alter its position significantly.

Other interviewees questioned to what extent LAs, even in the absence of political interference from the centre, would be *willing* to exercise strong leadership and take ‘hard decisions’ when it came to dealing with poor quality school sixth form provision, arguing that this was again complicated by ‘local politics’. One LSC officer in Warwickshire noted how:

The LSC is repeatedly told get back, it’s the LAs role to improve school sixth forms but we don’t see that happening really... They will have that power but

will they take it? Local councillors don't want their schools to lose a sixth form and they have to somehow wade through all of that. (LSC3)

A regional LSC officer in the North East agreed, commenting, 'They need to close some sixth forms but I can't see them doing it. My experience is that it's hugely not a vote winner' (LSC4).

Centralism versus localism – the heart of the problem

For many interviewees, the 'presumption' question crystallised the tension between the *rhetoric* of LA leadership and the *reality* of centralised control. One LSC regional officer expressed it particularly starkly:

...the policy is completely contradictory. You are saying – the whole rationale for getting rid of the LSC at 14-19 is you want a single organisation to look at commissioning and integrating education and children's services up to 19 – and in the same breath you are taking whole strands of the system out [of LA control], through bribery and corrupt investment in academies. It is bad enough giving them away to sponsors for tuppence because it is only tuppence – 2 million quid is absurd – giving over the governance of these institutions. All of that is bad enough but to then give disproportionate unit costs to academies to compound the inequity in the system and then to manage them all from the centre when you are supposed to have one single organisation, well they're taking the piss, aren't they? (LSC5)

In the view of this regional officer, all LAs had been given was 'a pig in a poke... a partial planning role that has been progressively eroded by policies made in Whitehall and kept in Whitehall, especially through academies and presumptions.'

The Whitehall civil service is at the heart of the problem for all areas of public policy...We engineer structures not systems. What drives it? Whitehall. Political whim in Whitehall, ministers who want to make their mark with shiny new initiatives. The Whitehall civil service cannot leave structures alone, the word 'radical change' always gravitates towards structures, the TECs lasted ten years, the LSC eight, look at the NHS, bloody hell it's up in the air again. (LSC5)

A local government officer also commented, 'There is still this belief [in government] that when in doubt we change the structures' (LA1).

For one local LSC officer, it was also the case that 'central government likes to control the show... the intention now is to be more localised and devolve power but there is always this strong pull back to the centre' (LSC3). This tendency for government to

try to exercise control from the centre was not considered to be always consistent with effective policy making ‘on the ground’, as this interviewee went on to explain:

...I will be in London tomorrow and I will sit down with very junior people [civil servants] who are shaping the new agencies and they will have a very tiny bit of it to deal with. And someone like me who has been in the game over 30 years will say to them ‘well actually that won’t work’... They think that by involving themselves in the detail of implementation they will get better outcomes and that is not the case. (LSC3)

Another interviewee commented, ‘It’s easy to make big policy pronouncements... but... I am shocked at just how impractical it all is at times and what they [the civil servants] say to me is well someone needs to be making all these decisions at a macro-level’ (LSC4).

Accountability without control

The exclusion of school academy funding (which is funded directly by DCSF) and the ‘presumption right’ raise fundamental questions as to how far LAs can be held accountable if parts of the system are outside their control and government policy operates on ‘the premise that one particular sort of provision is inherently better than another’ (DCS6). Several interviewees also argued that LAs, rather than the SFA, should have responsibility for the performance management of FE colleges. As one DCS put it, ‘We have the performance management responsibility for schools and are responsible for their outcomes, why not colleges?’ (DCS4).

Issues of ‘accountability without control’ have also figured prominently in early commentaries upon the reform proposals. Corney and Fletcher (2008), together with Hope (2008b), highlight that funding for 16-18 apprenticeships will not be devolved to LAs, leaving them without control over one of the key budgets which government regards as critical to the raising of the participation age. It is questionable, however, whether LAs should have responsibility for apprenticeships given that they have never previously had a role in work-based learning. Indeed, there is a danger that such a move could risk further over-burdening many LAs who, as we have seen, are already stretched in terms of their capacity.

Leaving aside concerns about the variable quality of apprenticeship programmes (see Fuller and Unwin 2003, 2008) – which range from those which provide a first rate vocational preparation to others which offer little or no ‘off-the-job’ training – the critical

issue revolves around employer engagement and whether there will be sufficient places made available to meet demand from young people. Stanton (2008: 8) notes that, 'The promise of an entitlement is risky, since government cannot guarantee the availability of suitable employers in all sectors and all regions'. The majority of interviewees acknowledged that delivering more apprenticeships represented a real challenge and one that was set to become even harder as the economy entered a period of recession. As one LSC officer put it, 'We are going to have a system where a limited number of vacancies will be advertised and in this region particularly you will have hundreds of kids trying to get those vacancies and I'll bet they're peripheral at this stage' (LSC4). Employer preference for more mature adult apprentices further compounded the problem. The issue of employer engagement also relates to diplomas, given the requirement for industry to provide 'work placements'. The same interviewee noted, however, that 'no 14-19 partnerships have any real employer engagement at all. I don't think I could name any even in this region [the North East] other than work-based training providers and occasional attendance by a member of the CBI or chambers [local chambers of commerce]' (LSC4).

It should be reiterated that while LAs are responsible for ensuring that all young people have access to a full range of 14-19 entitlements, they do not have any control over the design of qualifications or the curriculum, which remain firmly in the hands of central government and its non-tripartite agencies. As previously noted, in relation to the diplomas, some commentators have questioned their suitability and attractiveness, both to learners *and* employers, with concerns that they are too theory-based and unsuited to the needs and motivations of learners who would benefit from more practical forms of learning (see Webb 2007, Stanton 2008). At the same time, the diplomas have to compete not only with the 'gold-standard' of A-levels but also with other more 'tried-and-tested' vocational qualifications, such as BTECs, which are popular both with employers as well as those wishing to pursue more applied studies. The worry then is of 'a real risk of a first and second class system continuing' (LSC5), with the danger that 'they [diplomas] could fall terribly flat' (DCS5).

While the jury is still out on diplomas, the initial signs do not augur well. Only 12,000 teenagers started one of the five new diploma lines launched in September 2008.

This was below the 20,000 anticipated by the government, a figure which itself had to be revised downwards over the summer from an original, and rather hopeful, estimate of 50,000. Take-up was so disappointing that ministers were forced to publicly defend the diplomas against accusations that the whole exercise had, in the words of Liberal Democrat Education spokesman, David Laws, proved ‘a complete flop’ (*The Independent* 2008).

Of course, these are still early days for the diplomas. Over the longer term, their fate will depend upon whether they meet the needs of learners and are valued by employers in the labour market. While a great deal has been made of the diplomas being developed *by* employers *for* employers, in reality their design has been undertaken by Diploma Development Partnerships (DDPs) appointed by the relevant Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) whose contact with employers is, in many cases, quite limited (see SSDA 2006, Payne 2008b, Stanton 2008).

Furthermore, across large parts of the service sector, particularly in areas such as retailing and hospitality, there is evidence that many employers are looking to recruit people on the basis of their personal/social ‘skills’ or attributes (see Nickson *et al.* 2004). The central question then revolves around the value that employers will place on say a level two diploma in sectors such as retailing and the extent to which employers will need to rely on such qualifications when meeting their actual recruitment needs. If the response from employers proves lukewarm, this will clearly undermine their status and appeal among young people.

For those young people working below level two, many of whom confront multiple barriers to learning rooted in their social, familial and peer environment and who often require highly bespoke forms of provision, the expectation is that their needs will be catered for through the new foundation learning tier (FLT). Stanton (2008) argues that the FLT is potentially very ‘flexible’ and has the ability to accredit young people’s learning experiences in ways which value their achievement and provide for further progression. However, as Hodgson *et al.* (2008: 128) note, its development has so far proceeded ‘at snail’s pace’. As one local LSC officer commented, ‘We’ve got this foundation learning tier which seems to be being developed for three years now... but I can’t see that happening at present and it seems a very long time in coming’ (LSC3).

Insofar as the government's policy of raising the participation age is predicated upon attracting increased numbers of learners into apprenticeships, the diplomas and the FLT, there are already indications that this may not play out in the way that policy makers expect. If this does happen the question then becomes one of where does ultimate accountability lie – with those responsible for designing the policy and framework or with the 'lead strategic body' charged with local implementation and delivery?

Integrating learner and employer demand

A central tension running throughout the white paper is that between supporting 'learning choice' and ensuring that the wider needs of the economy and local labour market are met. One interviewee referred to the famous '100 hairdressers' question - when a 100 people apply for a course in hairdressing but you know there are only going to be 10 jobs in hairdressing... do you say "we are not going to train you but if you would like to work in adult social care... that's an expanding sector" and they say "I don't want to do that I'd rather go home and watch telly" (LA1).

What is not clear is to what extent the white paper proposes some form of *planning* in order to match supply and demand, an approach rejected by Leitch (2006) as unworkable in relation to adult skills owing to the inability of both individuals and employers to accurately articulate their skill needs. The research uncovered a variety of viewpoints on this question, along with some confusion. One regional LSC officer highlighted the key role of the RDA as 'co-chair' of the regional planning group who 'will be able to say we have got a real pressing demand for a key sector in our local economy over the next five years but when we look at the aggregate of your plans are we sure we will have enough young people coming through to meet that demand' (LSC1).

A local LSC officer took a different view, raising serious questions about whether such planning could be made to work:

People have been trying to do that for a very long time. [In this city] we know that there is going to be a lot of growth in retail over the next ten years, putting the Credit Crunch aside and assuming it sorts itself out. But it is very difficult to commission to get people trained up for that with any accuracy... We could say we'll buy 200 retail places at level three [at college X] but if nobody turns up for those courses, what do you do then? (LSC3)

In this officer's view, 'the idea that the regional economic strategy... will shape the commissioning process for young people [in this city] is absolutely cloud cuckoo land. It might give a picture so that people... can make choices but will it affect the commissioning because if it does you are back to a planned system not a learner-led system' (LSC3).

Others argued that the problem was not planning *per se* but what one DCS referred to as 'death by poor planning' (DCS2). What was needed was 'not some complex Soviet planning machine', as in the old LSC model, but 'an accurate and sensible assessment of local need' to guide the commissioning process:

We need the agencies [i.e. the Sector Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies] to say these are the areas where we need to have skilled people. I am not saying give me 7000 more tunnelling engineers because there can never be that degree of specificity. (DCS2)

In addition, 'there are whole areas of the new economy where we could be taking the lead, whether it's around the new green economy, or engineering or technology for new sewerage systems... At the moment, the labour is coming principally from abroad, migrant labour, therefore further missed opportunities for local people' (DCS2).

Several interviewees emphasised the importance of effective Information, Advice Guidance (IAG) and the need to inform both parents and young people about labour market opportunities at a much earlier stage. As one local council leader put it, 'there is no point in telling a kid at 16 that they can... train to be a civil engineer because we need tunnellers... Part of the coherence that this will bring will be about informing young people much earlier in the process about what the labour market is going to require in the future' (LC1).

This raises the question of the effectiveness of the IAG function, in particular Connexions, which has recently been transferred back into LAs, and whose role has, until now, been mainly about advising young people at risk of 'dropping out' or becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training) on learning options rather than labour market trends. More fundamentally, there is the issue of whether accurate labour market information of this kind is available. The most obvious source is the labour market intelligence collected by SSCs to inform their sector skills strategies and the RDAs which have regional observatories specifically for skills forecasting. As noted above, many

SSCs have relatively weak employer engagement (especially in the case of SMEs), along with limited staff and resources, and are already overstretched by having to deal with four devolved nations. It is open to question, then, both how accurate such forecasts are, particularly in a period of recession, and whether SSCs have the capacity to service Multi-Area Agreements and sub-regional commissioning.

Moreover, even where *broad* areas of potential job growth can be identified, getting young people, and indeed adults for that matter, to prepare and train for those openings is not always straightforward. This is particularly the case where the projected expansion is in services, such as retail and hospitality, where pay is often low and progression opportunities limited (see Lloyd *et al.* 2008). A national LSC officer acknowledged the challenge, drawing upon his previous experience as an LA officer in Northampton:

Northamptonshire was essentially a low skill, low wage economy. It has large volumes of warehousing, distribution and financial services, like Barclaycard, so what employers in Northampton were saying by and large is what we want is a low qualified workforce. Is it right then for us to persuade lots of young people to go and work in those jobs? (LSC2)

The collapse of traditional industries, in areas such as the North East, has resulted in local concentrations of high unemployment and social deprivation, where family and community breakdown combine with a local labour market to create a culture of ‘low aspirations’ among those on welfare benefits (see North *et al.* 2008: 26). As one LA officer put it:

One in three children in Newcastle now lives in a household where nobody works. The big challenge is telling young people that they need to do well in school... and one day this will lead them to getting jobs and having a good life. And, I am parodying but they must just look at us and say who do you think you’re kidding? (DCS3)

Here, ‘the trick’ was simply ‘keeping them in learning of some sort’ even if not linked directly to a qualification that was ‘going to lead to a job’ (DCS3). Another DCS in the North East explained how it was precisely these challenges that had forced LAs to re-think the problem they were confronted with and move towards a ‘whole systems approach’:

...what we see is a low skill, low wage economy, poverty of aspiration... [there] is now increasingly an awareness that it is the economy stupid, and if we are going to deal with a problem like poverty of aspiration you need a

whole systems approach. So schools can't solve it... it can only be solved if we address some of the socio-economic issues as well. (DCS4)

The five Tyne and Wear authorities (Newcastle, Gateshead, Sunderland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside), together with Northumberland, enjoy a strong tradition of partnership working and have already signed a MAA to work cooperatively to address these issues. For them, the white paper presented 'some big opportunities... in bringing together the education, skills, employment and economic elements, the demand-side and the supply-side... We don't think we can impact in the way we would like without all of those components being addressed. And we believe the changes potentially give us that opportunity to bring all of those components together into a framework that might be underpinned by the Multi-Area Agreement or something which emerges from it' (DCS4). A national LSC officer also argued that, 'The key has to be shaping the labour market and realising more high quality jobs, linking skills and economic development.' However, the officer added, 'But we are not good at that... a lot of people and agencies mess around the edges of it [economic development] I think... It should be an aligned collective investment... all the LSC can do at the end of the day is fund qualifications and actually that may not be what we need' (LSC2).

To what extent, then, is such a strategic and integrative approach beginning to take shape? One 14-19 lead coordinator in the North East commented how they had 'brought the local economic development people into this conversation we are having around commissioning, so yes they are involved... there is an opportunity to put these together but I wouldn't put it any stronger than that at the moment' (LA1). Others argued that there was a lot of pressure on LAs to get the commissioning right, or as one LGA officer put it, 'not drop the ball' (LGA1), such that the opportunity to move beyond the LSC model and develop a more integrative and strategic approach was yet to be fully grasped. An RDA officer put it bluntly, 'I think LAs will get the frighteners put on them about maintaining delivery... rather than looking at the economic need and seeing if we can restructure... at the moment the focus... is all on transition... we are in danger of recreating small microcosms of what we've already got and I believe the LA groupings are currently mapping identically onto what the LSC groupings were... we hear from discussions with government that this is not about recreating the LSC but you don't hear that on the ground' (RDA1).

One DCS in the North East commented that there ‘are links between the 14-19 partnerships and what is going on inside the LA in terms of economic development and also the RDA. Is it good enough? I doubt it because this hasn’t been a leadership role local government has been asked to play so we are looking at our capacity to provide that’ (DCS3). An LSC officer in the region, whose previous background was as a local authority planner, argued that simply ‘getting a DCS to sit down with their economic development department’ was a challenge in itself (LSC4).

In Warwickshire, an FE college principal noted that they had ‘practically no involvement... with the economic development part of the council... it is run in silos and it’s a frustration’ (FE2). The principal added, ‘[Given] the chaos that is... involved around the transfer of commissioning... it will be I think a tick-box exercise, let’s just get this thing right and up and running, get the money to the right place.’ An LGA officer argued that problem was compounded by ‘a shortage of people with strategic skills within LAs’ following years of central regulation during which ‘it has not really been about strategic thinking, it’s been about how do we meet targets and the scope for decision making and professional judgement within that has been very limited’ (LGA1).

Discussion and Conclusions

Some interviewees within local government welcomed the transfer of 16-19 funding to LAs and the potential opportunities that this presented for a more locally responsive and ‘joined up’ approach to 14-19 commissioning. Such optimism was tempered, however, by concerns about the design of the new commissioning arrangements, the precise role of the YPLA, funding, and fears that the commissioning process could become mired in bureaucracy. The majority of those interviewed also referred to serious resource and capacity issues and expressed anxiety that the transfer of LSC staff, with the necessary skills and expertise to support the commissioning process, would not take place as expected. There are clearly important and immediate policy implications here in terms of how this transition is managed and the level of resources and support that is made available to LAs going forwards.

The findings lend considerable support to those commentators who question how far LAs are in a position to ‘lead’ strong collaborative 14-19 partnerships in a context

where institutions remain autonomous, national policy levers encourage competition for students and funding, and central government continues to be biased in favour of particular patterns of provision, notably school sixth forms. While the government's decision to review the 'presumption right' is a welcome step, it will still need to be translated into a concrete shift in policy position if there is to be consistency with the rhetoric of LA leadership. This, in itself, however, would not resolve the more fundamental tension or challenge of how 'to get rid of the competitive culture that still exists and turn it on its head' (C1).

This will certainly not be easy given existing political constraints. As Ranson (2008: 214, *emphasis added*) notes, the current 'duality of policy' might be read as part of a 'neo-liberal' model of educational governance and an attempt 'by the state to regulate different class interests and concerns'. This regulation involves 'satisfy[ing] the possessive individualism of the advantaged, providing them with the positional goods to secure their relative advantage in the spaces of the mobile *global* economy', while providing 'wrap-around' care and a collaborative practice at 14-19 'to secure the adaptation of disadvantaged children and families *to the changing demands of local labour in its place*.' This is further compounded by a deregulated labour market, where there are fundamental tensions between the pursuit of 'flexibility' and 'decent work', and where the distribution of 'good' and 'bad' jobs remains spatially uneven, further constraining the opportunities available to young people within particular local labour markets (see North *et al.* 2008).

Another issue which has perhaps received less attention within current academic commentaries is the extent to which LAs might, even allowing for some relaxation in central government prescription, be *willing* to take 'hard' decisions around the closure of small, inefficient sixth forms, especially where these remain electorally unpopular and difficult to 'sell' to council members. How far LAs will be able to set aside the vested interests of their own local providers and colleges in order to allow funding and resources to flow freely across administrative boundaries also remains to be seen.

As noted above, in part these questions turn on the fundamental issue of 'centralism versus localism' and the extent to which central government is prepared to trust LAs to develop their own forms of provision in accordance with local need. When

it comes to the design of qualifications and the curriculum, however, it is clear that LAs are expected to work with a set of 14-19 entitlements which have been designed at the centre and over which they have little effective control. There are already concerns for example about whether a sufficient number of apprenticeship places will be available to meet demand from young people, particularly during a period of economic recession.

The government's solution here is to offer young people a 'programme-led' apprenticeship with a training provider or college who will endeavour to find them appropriate work experience or put them on a full-time diploma until they can access employment. However, these are 'apprenticeships' in name only as trainees lack employed status and, in many cases, may have very little contact at all with an actual employer. While there are certainly some very good examples of programme-led provision, much depends upon the particular training provider and the quality of its facilities, where again there is considerable variation (see Fuller and Unwin 2008). One danger is that some of these programmes may not constitute a high quality offer and instead function mainly as a form of 'social warehousing' at a time of rising youth unemployment, not unlike the Youth Training Scheme 'mode B' of the early 1980s. Understandably, some commentators worry that the apprenticeship 'brand', which continues to have a strong appeal to many parents and young people, may be further tarnished and undermined as a result (see Stanton 2008: 41).

The government's policy of raising the participation age is predicated not only on delivering enough apprenticeship places but, critically, attracting increased numbers of learners into the new diplomas. Here too there are concerns that the policy may not play out in the way that policy makers expect. It might be argued, then, that what is being devolved to LAs is not so much power as the *responsibility* for administering an extremely complex commissioning function, tough decisions around resource allocation and 'who gets what?' in a period of fiscal constraint, and the task of delivering increased participation through a set of 14-19 curriculum entitlements determined by central government. In short, while LAs have *accountability without control*, policy makers have *control without accountability*, and a ready-made 'get-out-of-jail free-card' if policy backfires.

There is also the issue of whether LAs might still be able to forge a more strategic approach that integrates 14-19 commissioning with the wider role that LAs are now being expected to perform in relation to economic development and regeneration through the SNR.^{viii} This is a huge and important question which lies outside the scope of this present paper. Suffice it to say, however, many interviewees were sceptical as to how far this kind of strategic approach was beginning to emerge. Furthermore, much of the extant literature points to a diminished role for LAs in economic development since the 1980s, with LAs now positioned as a 'strategic enabler' working alongside the RDA and the LSC in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Sub-Regional Partnerships (SRPs) (see Bennett *et al.* 2004: 267, Pike and Tomaney 2008). According to North *et al.* (2008: 53-54), there is 'considerable variety between LSPs and local authorities in their relative engagement with local economic activity', while '[t]heir limited power, funds and statutory functions related to economic intervention have given such activities a low priority within local authorities, and their ability to link into and inform sub-regional and regional strategies remains limited.' Furthermore, examples of LAs working together across boundaries, for example through MAAs, to address issues of local economic development and regeneration are said to be 'sporadic and limited in extent' (North *et al.* 2008: 54).

Joining up 14-19 commissioning with local and regional economic development also assumes an ability to draw together, and analyse, multiple evidence bases which can often be limited in terms of their predictive accuracy – skills forecasting being a case in point. The SNR also requires LAs to navigate their way around diverse funding streams in order to draw down resources from the regional level in support of local economic development and regeneration activity. What needs to be emphasised, however, is that the *capacity* and *confidence* of local politicians and professionals to make professional judgements of this nature has been progressively eroded by thirty years of centralism and a performance management culture in which 'governance' is reduced to meeting measurable targets and 'judgement' seen to be the preserve of inspectors and regulators (see Sullivan 2007: 33). No wonder then that some commentators worry about the 'potential over-burdening of local authorities' and the possible widening of existing

capacity gaps as some LAs prove more adept at securing resources than others (see Pike and Tomaney 2008).

If integrating skills policy within a broader economic development agenda remains critically important, the question then becomes one of how potent LAs are as an agent for economic development. Clearly, they have a role in terms of land use planning, infrastructure development and building a local skills profile attractive to business and inward investment. However, as suggested above, there is also the issue of how to improve the operations of *existing* firms who currently remain wedded to low wage competitive strategies and low skill forms of work organisation (see Wilson and Hogarth 2003, Lloyd *et al.* 2008, Payne 2008a). Research suggests that LAs role in direct ‘hands-on’ business improvement of this kind is rather limited (see North and Syrett 2008), with such responsibility residing mainly with a restructured Business Link whose effectiveness, particularly with regard to small firms, has itself been questioned (see Edwards, P. *et al.* 2007), along with SSCs and RDAs which also remain limited in terms of staffing and budgets.

This is not to suggest that LAs do not have the *potential*, given the necessary support and resources, to play a more active role in business/workplace development around a skill utilisation agenda (see Payne 2008a). It is still the case that 20 to 30 per cent of UK employment is in the public sector and in some regions, such as the North East, this figure is closer to 45 per cent. As both a major local employer and, through their public procurement role, a substantial purchaser of goods and services from the private sector, local government could take a stronger hand in promoting better forms of work organisation, employee involvement and skills development and usage (see Newman 2007).

However, as long as flexible labour market policies give the green light to firms wishing to pursue low value added production strategies (see Lloyd and Payne 2002, Keep *et al.* forthcoming) there remains a substantial policy chasm which LAs may find it hard to fill. With New Labour also eschewing national industrial policy measures on the grounds that this is tantamount to ‘picking winners/backing losers’, there is clearly a danger of devolving responsibility for economic development to a local actor whose capacity to deliver may at present be quite limited. What is needed then is for national,

regional, sub-regional and local policies to pull together around a policy agenda that engages employers in the development of better quality jobs, not least for those at the lower end of the labour market.

Finally, it is important to end this paper by returning to its central point of departure, namely how to develop a more localised, flexible and efficient skills system equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century. As one LSC interviewee commented, ‘I guess it all comes down to trust... and trust at all levels’ (LSC2). Unfortunately, English policy makers have configured a highly centralised system where trust is in very short supply. While Coffield *et al.*’s (2008) more trust-based model of ‘devolved social partnership’ makes strong appeal, therefore, the prospects of such a model being developed in England look extremely remote at present. England now has not one but two ministries explicitly devoted to skills policy, a set of ambitious national qualification targets based on international skills benchmarking (not actual employer demand) – what might be regarded as a form of centralised planning by another name (see Wolf 2007, Payne 2008b) – and is in the process of replacing the LSC with three new unelected ‘quangos’, all devoid of anything remotely resembling social partnership.

Finally, this paper has had very little to say about the proposed governance arrangements for post-19 adult skills which are, as they say, another story.^{ix} If anything, however, centralisation would appear to be even more marked here following the creation of the SFA as a ‘Next Steps Agency’ under DIUS, with what look to be like ‘planning’ functions at a regional and sub-regional level (for an early assessment, see Hodgson and Spours 2008). As one senior LSC officer put it, ‘In the adult area, it certainly isn’t devolution, it’s the opposite, centralisation... for the first time ever, in my view, you have a department – DIUS – who will be responsible for designing the policy, designing the structures to deliver that policy and for the first time ever actually delivering it. The SFA is part of the department it’s not even a quango! At a time when you have the sub-national review and all this talk of devolution, the adult agenda is going in the other direction’ (LSC4).

Neither does the potential arrival in office of a Conservative government led by David Cameron, whose favoured model would appear to be one of academies and a Further Education Funding Council (see Conservative Party 2008), give much cause for

optimism among those looking for a fundamental rebalancing of the relationships between central and local government. It does, however, place a question mark over whether the current experiment with LA commissioning will ever live to see the light of day. Either way, advocates of 'devolved social partnership' and 'new localism' may have very little to cheer about if the glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel turns out to be the headlights of the old centralist train.

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Footnotes

ⁱ For those not familiar with this term, a ‘hospital pass’ is used in Football or Rugby to describe the ball being passed so as to invite a crippling tackle or challenge that results in the player needing hospital treatment.

ⁱⁱ Uncorrected transcript of oral evidence to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry into ‘The Balance of Power: Central and Local Government’, 8th December 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Education and training policy is a devolved issue in the UK, with the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having their own arrangements, programmes and strategies.

^{iv} As Ranson (2008: 214) notes, education policy in general ‘remains fundamentally fractured between one strategy which asserts that achievement is improved through strong independent institutions which compete effectively in the market place of parental choice, and another which proposes that only a collaborative community of practice can create the conditions for all to achieve.’

^v The *Every Child Matters* green paper (DfES 2003) and subsequent Children’s Act of 2004 re-fashioned education as a children’s service and stressed the integration of education, health and social services around the needs of the whole child.

^{vi} The publication of *Raising Expectations* on 27 March 2008 was followed by a period of consultation, including a series of regional seminars, which lasted until 9 June. The government received 443 written responses, which it summarised as ‘cautiously positive’. Many respondents were said to welcome the creation of a single framework for commissioning education and training to age 19 and the opportunity for a more integrated approach to education and children services, in line with the government’s *Every Child Matters* agenda. However, it noted a number of concerns, particularly with regard to local authorities’ capacity to cope with additional responsibilities and the need to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy in the commissioning process. A brief glance through some of the written submissions, however, such as that of the CBI, begins to question the government’s summation of a ‘cautiously positive’ response.

^{vii} See Note i.

^{viii} The SNR, *inter alia*, places a statutory duty on LAs to undertake local economic assessments and also requires the RDA to devolve funding to LAs to pursue local and sub-regional economic development (see HM Treasury *et al.* 2007, also Newman 2008).

^{ix} Many commentators referred to the challenges for FE colleges in having to deal with multiple funding streams including LAs, the YPLA, the SFA, Train to Gain and Skills Accounts, with some interviewees of the opinion that some colleges would respond by seeking to specialise either in pre- or post-19 provision. Other problems highlighted included the failure to build adequate progression routes from diplomas into apprenticeships; the lack of spatial alignment between the pre-19 and post-19 parts of the system; and the challenges for employers in interfacing with a set of arrangements for 14-19, which are overwhelmingly local, and another set for adults that are predominantly national and regional. One commentator referred to a system of such complexity where ‘the wiring’ was ‘sticking out of the walls’ and employers risked being ‘completely confused’ (LSC5).