

Identifying the Contribution of FE Providers to Local Priorities, Partners and Places

27 April 2009



Seminar report

Headline messages

1. FE colleges have a vital role to play in the economic and social well-being of their communities and in the strategic leadership of place which is not yet fully developed or mapped. For example, the case studies discussed illustrated the capacity of colleges to work in partnership with local authorities and police to combat gang culture, to support homeless young people, local businesses and local authority economic strategies, to build a culture of aspiration and fight racism and extremism. The seminar also learnt of FE's contribution to the objectives of the Department of Health. (For discussion, see paragraphs 25-34.)
2. However, such practice needs to be more widespread and awareness should be raised about the importance of working within the local context and taking a role in place-shaping and community development. In addition, their contribution should be enhanced through...

...a clearer narrative from colleges

3. Colleges themselves are best placed to create a powerful narrative about their potential contribution to economic and social well-being. This would capture their contribution to the achievement of the objectives of a range of government departments, as well as to the lives of individuals, and to local communities, society and the economy. It would help to promote effective practice more widely. (For discussion, see paragraphs 29 and 48.)

...better commissioning

4. The various agencies of government, national, regional and local, often commission numerous providers and contractors to deliver similar services to meet the same targets: for example, to address worklessness. This creates waste and confusion and hinders the effective implementation of policy. There is a pressing need for mechanisms that enable commissioning to be truly strategic, and prevent this duplication. (For discussion, see paragraphs 40-43.)

...more flexible budget lines

5. Budgets need to be simpler, more flexible and more amenable to aggregation across public services to allow providers and their partners to make effective interventions at the local level. Currently, most activities have discrete budgets with specific objectives and are not conducive to collaborative projects. (For discussion, see paragraphs 44-46.)

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... ensuring that new funding arrangements encourage and do not frustrate FE's engagement with its communities

6. The operating arrangements of the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the alignment of policy intention with Communities and Local Government (CLG) will be critical to the future capacity of FE and skills providers to contribute effectively to the economic and social well-being of their communities. The sector needs urgently to influence the role and shape of the SFA, for example in such a way that it allows more local discretion and reduces intermediaries. The capacity to cohere local and national policy imperatives and accountability arrangements at the organisational or partnership level is a key challenge. The strains between national and local should be resolved at national level and should not be left for resolution at an institutional level or through local partnerships. (For discussion, see paragraphs 53-58.)

...innovation in models and approaches to partnership

7. More innovation and experimentation in partnership working is needed. This should create new types of political and administrative structures, accountability frameworks, governance arrangements, partnership dynamics, leadership styles, rules of engagement and approaches to collaborative budgeting to support the extension of effective local action. (For discussion, see paragraph 35-38.)

...opportunities for locality-based professional development of public servants

8. Cross-public sector professional and leadership development which is locality-based would help to develop a shared language, culture and ambition and more effective working practices to underpin co-ordinated delivery of shared objectives. The creation of an *Institute of Public Service* could provide a focus for such activity. (For discussion, see paragraph 39.)

...and a clearer supportive narrative from the centre

9. Central government as a whole remains unclear about its intentions for the localism agenda while continuing to espouse it as an idea. Central departments working at the local level do not appear to act in unison. It's not clear where central prescription ends and local autonomy, to implement policy and devise bespoke solutions, begins. It is also unclear what sector functions should be funded from a national purse, and which should be supported from LAA funding. While there was a call among those at the seminar not to wait for permissions, lack of clarity can be disempowering. A clearer narrative from government is essential. (For discussion, see paragraphs 47-51.)

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Introduction

10. The role of FE and skills providers within their locality has been a significant theme in the recent thinking of LSIS and its predecessors. In January 2007, Peter Housden, permanent secretary at Communities and Local Government (CLG) spoke to a policy seminar on the topic of the new agenda for communities and local government and the implications for learning and skills¹ which signalled the opportunities for a new relationship between FE and their localities. This was followed up in September 2007 by a seminar entitled *Further education, communities and local government - exploiting the potential*² which looked in practice at the challenges and opportunities through the experience in Oldham. Subsequently, in other policy discussions, the opportunities and challenges for FE and skills providers of contributing fully to the economic and social priorities of their locality have been a recurrent theme.
11. The theory of public value³ is also relevant to this discussion. This challenges us to think about how we gain legitimacy for our actions as public service leaders, and suggests that this is derived from our relationship with our citizens, customers and stakeholders as well as from the delivery of government priorities. This implies a shift in orientation towards the communities we serve – not just our customers and funding government departments – and towards our relationships with stakeholders such as citizens and other public services where we can make a contribution.
12. We noted in the course of these discussions, that although we could see clearly that power and influence is flowing back toward local authorities and communities, the narrative about the role of FE and skills within that evolving context was not articulated in the public documents of either CLG or of DfES and its successor bodies. Although the role of local authorities in relation to 16-19 funding has become prominent as a result of legislative arrangements, their potential partnership with the FE and skills sector to achieve wider government priorities has only recently become a significant priority and the potential is still not fully articulated.
13. In November 2008, in order to cast a spotlight on the potential role and contribution of FE in the locality, LSIS commissioned a short research project to examine practice in five localities. This report summarises the discussion at a seminar held to consider the initial findings from that research.

¹ See the following links to the presentation and report - [Peter Housden - The new agenda for communities and local government - implications for learning and skills](#); [Notes of seminar four discussion](#)

² The report is available here

<http://www.lsis.org.uk/PolicyServices/Discussion/SeminarSeries/FEcommunitiesLocalGovernment.aspx>

³ See *Public Value and Leadership - exploring the implications* -

<http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/PublicValueLeadership.sflb>

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14. The discussion was stimulated by videos and comments from the principals of three of the colleges in the case studies - namely Nick Brown OBE of Oldham Sixth Form College, Richard Chambers of Lambeth College and Graham Moore OBE of Stoke-on-Trent College.
15. The research also examined practice through interviews and case studies with Maggie Galliers, Principal at Leicester College and Asha Khemka, Principal at West Nottinghamshire College⁴ which will be part of the final research report and on-line resources. The primary focus of the research was on FE colleges and that is reflected in the report that follows. Further stages of research could usefully examine the role of other providers.

Policy background

16. Over the last decade, Labour has made extensive changes to the structure, funding, powers, and responsibilities of local government in England. The 'Blair years' were characterised by an approach to improving delivery of public services through a process designed, driven and monitored from the centre including the intensive use of public service agreements (PSAs) translated into large numbers of specific targets at the frontline.
17. More recently, government policy has made the case for and declared its commitment to greater decentralisation of power, and a new emphasis on local government as a major agenda-setter in a wide range of policy areas, most notably economic development, health and welfare, education, social exclusion and community cohesion. Power and influence is beginning to flow back slowly toward local authorities with policy previously controlled from the centre being opened up to increasing discretion at the local level to enable greater responsiveness to citizens' actual needs and desires.
18. This trend towards greater localism can be traced back at least as far as the Lyons Inquiry into local government, published in December 2006, which established a new vision of how local government should be conducted. Lyons assigns local government a new focus for the 21st century, a broad agenda he calls '*place-shaping*,' which he defines as '*the creative use of powers and influence to promote the well-being of a community and its citizens*'.

⁴ Video clips are available here <http://www.evanswoolfe.com/player/lisis.html>. Learning materials associated with the studies and the final research report will be available on the LSIS website when available <http://www.lsis.org.uk/LSISHome.aspx>

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19. The *Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper*⁵, published in 2007, incorporated the government's vision of how 'place-shaping' would be accomplished, with local authorities becoming co-ordinators of public services in the locality. The centrepiece of this policy is the local strategic partnership (LSP), a body brought into being by the local authority, involving a range of bodies including NHS and Children's Trusts, police authorities and similar bodies that are under a legal duty to co-operate. As of 2009, FE colleges are also under a duty to co-operate, a role previously assigned to the LSC on behalf of the sector. It is the LSP that shapes the 'local area agreement' (LAA), the set of locally determined priorities that in turn determine local strategic planning.
20. Early evaluation of LAAs shows that they are developing as a successful mechanism for co-ordinated action and more recently Multi-Area Agreements have been introduced to operate over a wider geographical area to address, in particular, economic development and skills deficits.
21. The Treasury also commissioned and published a *Sub-national Review of Economic Development and Regeneration*⁶, which proposes the devolution of more responsibility for economic planning and development to local authorities. This includes encouraging local authorities to join multi-area agreements (MAAs), which are similar in form to LAAs, but cover a whole region. The Government has also proposed a 'community empowerment' agenda, which is designed to increase citizen participation in local government and includes requiring councils to consider citizen petitions and increased funding for community groups.
22. More recently, and closer to the FE and skills sector, the Machinery of Government changes resulting from the reconfiguration of departmental structures introduced by Gordon Brown in June 2007 have resulted in legislation that takes responsibility for funding 16-19 provision away from a national funding body and places the responsibility on local authorities from 2010 when the LSC ceases to function. The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill 2008-09 which will enact this change is currently progressing through parliament.
23. We were informed at this seminar⁷ of latest amendments to this Bill which include the introduction of a proposed duty on colleges to have regard to the objective of promoting the economic and social well-being of the people who live or work in the locality of their institution, in the exercise of their functions. The duty is intended to make colleges more accountable to their local areas and communities and enable them to play a greater role as leaders, providers and partners in the development of their local area and communities.

⁵ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/886045.pdf>

⁶ http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/5/subnational_econ_review170707.pdf.

⁷ The slides used by Nick Rousseau, Team Leader, Learners and Communities Unit, DIUS, to stimulate thinking about the implications of this clause can be found here

<http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/StrengtheningtheConnection.sflb>

and additional information circulated following the seminar can be found here

<http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/BriefingonStrengtheningtheConnection.sflb>

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24. This proposed new legislation can give salience to the role of FE colleges in particular in their locality, and provide the impetus for an ambitious narrative about their role in achieving wider public value outcomes. We hope that this report can stimulate thinking and support the sector to seize this opportunity.

The discussion

What colleges contribute...

25. FE colleges play a critical institutional role in the community and there is scope for this to develop further. Attendees were eager to develop their leadership roles in LSPs, Local Area Agreements (LAAs), Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs) and other, similar partnership bodies. There is a definite desire in the sector for more collaborative local partnership working and a greater community leadership role – indeed for colleges to be ‘*key players*’ in local strategic forums.
26. Colleges are major employers in their own right, and a significant proportion of the youth and adult populations attend or work at colleges at some point in their lives. They are ‘*social glue*’. As such, they have enormous power and reach within their communities, and can serve as a very useful ‘*tool*’ to implement a wide range of Government policies such as economic development, health and welfare, social mobility and community cohesion. The case studies illustrated the capacity of colleges to work in partnership with local authorities and police to combat gang culture, supporting homeless young people, supporting local businesses and local authority economic strategies, providing a bridge between private and public sectors, generating a culture of aspiration and fighting racism and extremism.
27. It was noted that partnership working allows providers to deliver services in areas that they would not be able to offer from their own resources. By relying on the combined strength of the partnership, they can participate in anti-crime programmes or social services for which they would not be able to get central government funding by themselves. If providers tried to offer these programmes alone, they’d soon overstretch their resources.

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28. A colleague from the Department of Health described an ambitious education programme – the Healthy FE Programme – being run through college partners, which seeks to *‘develop a strategy to improve the well-being of learners and staff, integrating health into organisational structures and creating an effective learning and working environment’*⁸. The programme will provide a self-assessment tool against which institutions can assess their current level of service and determine future priorities, establish a website resource and a regional network to enable sharing of good practice and support the professionalism of practitioners.
29. However, this potential is not systematically recognised by policy-makers and nor is it consistently articulated by colleges themselves. A clearer narrative that articulates the potential of their contribution and promotes innovation and experimentation would help to extend effective practice more widely⁹.

Partnerships are tricky...

30. Obstacles to effective and purposeful local partnership working were identified. At a strategic level, it can be hard to really focus on the life-changing matters and not be side-tracked by the detail and less important matters. A strong sense of the personal or organisational objectives to be achieved through partnerships can help to maintain focus.
31. At the more practical level, some partnerships fail simply due to a lack of commitment and attendance by senior staff from the constituent bodies. Senior staff members don't attend regularly, or send junior staff in their place who lack the authority to make decisions on behalf of their employers. Ultimately, the partnership dies from neglect. In Oldham, this problem was overcome by creating a small six-member Public Service Board which set strategic priorities, which were then adopted by the local council. The board contains the leader and chief executive of the council and four representatives of the partner bodies (including the police, the primary care trust and the college). The Board members have the authority to act swiftly.
32. Oldham illustrates the power of establishing *‘shared values and a shared plan’*. This requires determination and persistence in many instances and some suggested there is no alternative approach. However, it was argued that the culture of some local councils is such that they demand the *‘last call’* on local plans and they often *‘distribute’* local roles. Local politicians want to be seen to be in control, not least for electoral reasons. There was also an impression among some that local authorities tend to work in *‘silos’*. However, delegates noted that culture and attitudes vary greatly between different authorities.

⁸ Ranjan Sen, Healthy FE Programme, Department of Health, outlined the programme. Information can be found on the Healthy FE Programme web pages hosted on the Excellence Gateway:

<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/hfep> and through the progress report available here <http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/StrengtheningtheConnection.sflb>

⁹ LSIS is meeting with DIUS to consider how we can take forward work in this area. This report will also be sent to the FE Reputation Group for consideration.

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33. Oldham also illustrated that effective partnership working sometimes entails *'giving something up'*, as well as getting involved in new areas and activities. For example, Oldham Sixth Form College has passed over the running of the new University Centre to Huddersfield University, having played a leading role in getting it established.
34. One attendee suggested that we consider the potential of placing colleges back under the aegis of local authorities. This delegate argued the point to illustrate that, if local authorities were forced to choose between fulfilling partnership priorities that benefitted colleges, and meeting schools targets, they'd prioritise their work with schools, as they view the schools are *'theirs'*. However, one delegate asked *'what could be more important than skills to a local council?'* calling into question whether councils could ever ignore colleges in their strategic planning. Skills developed by colleges help other organisations to achieve their targets.

Further innovation and analysis is needed

35. We identified the need to analyse *'models'* of effective partnership working for the main types of environment in which FE providers operate across the country and innovate to address the tricky issues described above. The contexts vary greatly in terms of single or multiple local authorities, different operational and accountability frameworks, as well as political profiles and histories, all of which have an impact on the strategies that are most effective.
36. Such analysis and innovation could develop models of governance and accountability, explore the potential application of subsidiarity, the impact of statutory responsibilities on partnership dynamics, effective use of rules of engagement, and effective approaches to creating headroom and discretions. It could provide colleges and providers with material to help them to review the effectiveness of their partnership working.¹⁰
37. Stronger engagement with local issues and priorities and increased partnership working, raises governance and accountability issues. College governors have a pivotal role to play - their endorsement of the college role within local strategies and partnership activities is essential to enable colleges to act collaboratively and with authority.
38. Leadership of collaborative partnerships requires particular skills, including the capacity to lead through influence and without power or authority; and to forge shared commitments and common cause. Professional development is needed in these skills for sector leaders and the increasingly wide range of staff who need to work effectively with partners outside their institutions.

¹⁰ Research has been commissioned by LSIS from LSN to examine existing patterns and develop potential models for sustainable self-organised networks. This work could contribute to this work described here.

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39. This might be a role for an '*Institute of Public Service*' – the notion of a focal point for professional development of staff across public services. Several possible areas of exploration were suggested. An institute could also examine the different governance structures and sources of legitimacy that colleges, councils and other public service delivery partners operate with, analysing the implications for partnership working. Joint professional and leadership development between local government partners, including FE was also proposed - a '*corporate university*' was mentioned in connection with this idea. An institute could also address common problems faced by different partners, such as succession planning, workforce diversity and talent management, which might be more effectively addressed at a partnership level.

Things that get in the way... Strategic commissioning, or the lack thereof

40. One topic that recurred often in the seminar discussion was '*strategic commissioning*', or more precisely, its absence. Many participants noted that Government agencies would often commission several, or even dozens, of providers, businesses and other concerns to pursue the same goal from different programmes or funds. For example, one delegate said there had been report that as many as 90 bodies in his home borough were receiving public funding to fight unemployment. This failure to co-ordinate commissioning and procurement leads to waste and a proliferation of offers that the target audiences are likely to tune out.
41. This is complicated by the fact that, in addition to national-level commissioning, regional and local agencies are contracting for services as well. These activities overlap.
42. Another problem delegates identified was the differing guidelines enforced by each commissioner. DWP has very strict rules on procurement, while Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) employ more flexible regulations¹¹.
43. There was a call for a body that could authoritatively manage a unified commissioning process. Others said there needed to be better coordination between Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Employment and Skills Boards (ESBs). Some thought the LSPs themselves could plan and co-ordinate commissioning. Another suggestion involved the use of 'planning matrices', which determine pathways and identify providers so as to simplify the process.

¹¹ For more on the difficulties of making government work in a joined-up manner, see: <http://www.guardianpublic.co.uk/public-managers-joined-up-government>

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Things that get in the way... Budgets, budgets everywhere

44. Related to the problem of commissioning was that of funding. The splitting of budgets between DCSF and DIUS means there is no fluidity to allow movement of funds between budgets and moreover, funding is parcelled out into several distinctive funding streams, the use of which is highly prescribed. These were described as '*salami-sliced budgets*' which consume enormous effort in administration and accountability. This level of disaggregation and lack of flexibility hampers a comprehensive and coherent response and poses a financial risk to colleges that are highly committed to partnership work. The desire to support local priorities can strain financial resources if there is no flexibility in mainstream funding.
45. The idea of '*integrated budgets*' at the local level was attractive but there was doubt about the willingness of all central government departments to move in that direction as this could be perceived as reducing their control over outcomes and jeopardising their ability to meet their own targets agreed with Treasury. However, there was a desire for some experimentation with shared or pooled budgets to address local priorities¹².
46. Sometimes closeness to local authorities can have an adverse impact on business. For example, as a partner shaping strategic plans, you can find yourself deemed to be ineligible to tender for the contracts that arise. This places colleges in an unreasonable position, faced with inappropriate choices and needs to be addressed.

An area that needs clarifying... Central vs local

47. Some participants felt that there wasn't enough clarity about the division of responsibilities between the central government and the local government and partnerships. Some delegates wanted to know what responsibilities should be set for colleges nationally, and funded nationally, and which should be set by the LSP and funded through the LAA. Which does the centre deem '*core*' activities, and which '*periphery*'? When is activity not '*learning*'?

¹² As part of the Budget an initiative called 'Total Place' was announced - <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1209992> - that will map flows of public spending in local areas and make links between services, to identify where public money can be spent more effectively. This forms part of the Operational Efficiency Programme looking at the scope for efficiency savings in the public sector. LSIS will endeavour to find out if there is potential for this to throw light on collaborative use of funds.

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48. This highlighted the lack of a clear narrative about the purpose, role and parameters of FE and skills providers and of colleges in particular – what is core to their role and what is optional or beyond the norm? Given that colleges contribute to the objectives of a range of government departments, a full story about their role is unlikely to come from government. The sector itself should develop such a narrative setting out its contribution to local communities, society and the economy.
49. There was some dispute as to whether central government policies about localism and collaboration were driving partnership work. Some said statutory requirements played little or no role in decisions to form partnerships, while others thought they were a major influence. FE colleges will now be required to *'co-operate'* under a new statutory duty that is being introduced, though at least one delegate was unsure how effective this provision would be.
50. Some called for the national government to take on a more strategic role, and allow local partnerships the flexibility to devise plans and meet targets in the local area without undue interference. Some called for colleges to *'own the targets'* that are now the responsibility of the LSC. However, another attendee pointed out that the ministers and MPs can't compete electorally on 'localism' – they have to be able to promise action on matters like schools and employment.
51. Some said that the centre itself was unclear about what it wanted. Many departments and agencies are involved in implementing policies locally, without necessarily creating an overall view of what the Government wants locally. The perception according to some was that DCSF and DIUS are working together less and less. Neither DIUS nor CLG has *'a narrative about localism'* that includes colleges. Government policies create a *'miasma of different things without rigour or order'*, and colleges have no idea which is deemed most important or appropriate to them. A clearer narrative from the centre is needed.
52. The discussion also highlighted again the need for colleges and providers themselves to write the script that asserts their role and contribution directly to the relevant constituencies and departments, including health, communities and local government, police and the community and voluntary sector.

What the future holds... The creation of the Skills Funding Agency (SFA)

53. There was considerable discussion about how the end of the LSC, and its replacement by a new post-19 agency, the SFA, would affect local partnership working. On the one hand, some suggested that the end of the LSC, and its many regional offices, would create a *'void'* in the leadership of the FE system at the local and regional level. Others suggested that FE colleges and other providers are well-placed to fill this role and do not need large numbers of intermediaries.

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54. On the other hand, some expressed concern that the SFA was also planning to have a regional-level infrastructure. Furthermore, the number of public service personnel in the system will remain the same it was suggested – even though the SFA will be smaller than the equivalent divisions of the LSC, the total workforce will remain constant, because some personnel will be transferred to the local authorities. However it was also suggested that the Government can no longer afford *'too much more bureaucracy'* so there will be greater pressure for efficiency than hitherto.
55. However there were fears expressed that the SFA will want to continue to perform the prescriptive planning and regulatory role of LSC. Some delegates noted that the ex-LSC personnel, now with the SFA, would envision themselves in the same management role that they once performed as employees of the LSC. Others pointed out that the SFA will inevitably have a regulatory role because they will control funding.
56. At the same time, it isn't even entirely clear that the SFA itself will exist in its proposed form for very long. It has already been modified considerably from the model proposed in the 2008 machinery of government paper, and may be reformed further, or even abolished, in future, especially if there is a change of Government.
57. Discussion pointed clearly to the critical priority for the sector to shape the SFA prior to its launch, to address some of these concerns. Recent discussions about sector regulation¹³ also highlighted the importance of effective sector engagement in the formative thinking about SFA.
58. We also considered the potential relationship between Communities and Local Government (CLG) and the SFA, and whether they would have a shared agenda and approach. A topic that ran through the discussions on regulation referred to above was how to cohere local and national policy imperatives and accountability arrangements at the local level. Will the potential strains between local and national be resolved at national level in the design process, or will it be left to colleges and providers to resolve these strains at an institutional level or through local partnerships?

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¹³ See the final report of the LSIS seminar series *Self-regulation – shifting the paradigm* here http://www.lsis.org.uk/Libraries/Policy/LSIS_StP_SelfRegulation_FinalReport.sflb

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Seminar participants

Participant	Job title	Organisation
Kris Ambler	Head of Economic Development	CFE
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Jon Bennett		Communities and Local Government
Nick Brown OBE <i>Speaker</i>	Principal	Oldham Sixth Form College
Richard Chambers <i>Speaker</i>	Principal	Lambeth College
Gary Clarke	Head of Faculty, Arts and Technology	West Suffolk College
Judith Cutts	Sales and Marketing Executive	LSIS
Martin Doel	Chief Executive	Association of Colleges
Kat Fletcher	Director of Policy and Development	157 Group
Ruth Griffiths	Director of 14-19 Curriculum	Lewisham College
Sarah Hakeney	Joint Managing Director	CFE
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Caroline Mager <i>Seminar chair</i>	Executive Director, Policy and Strategic Intelligence	LSIS
Ben Margulies	Policy Research Officer	LSIS
Roger McClure	Chief Executive Officer	LSIS
Joy Mercer	Quality Manager	Association of Colleges
Chris Minter	Interim Service Director, Safer and Stronger Communities	Leicester City Council
Phil de Montmorency	Director of Work and Learning Services	St. Mungo's

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Graham Morley	Principal	South Staffordshire College
Richard Pilkington	Director of Curriculum and Quality	Stoke College
Mark Ravenhall	Director of Operations	NIACE
Soo Redshaw	ACL Programme Manager	LSIS
Nick Rousseau <i>Speaker</i>	Team Leader, Learners and Communities Unit	DIUS
Ranjan Sen	Information Specialist	Department of Health
Dame Ruth Silver DBE	Principal	Lewisham College
Andrew Slade	Director of Adult Responsiveness Curriculum	Lewisham College
Richard Steer	Policy Researcher	City College Norwich
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