

LSIS Policy Update

24 March 2010 – 6 May 2010



Further education, skills and the economy

March 31st – New skills system formally comes into existence

From 1st April 2010, local authorities, the **Young People's Learning Agency** and the **Skills Funding Agency** became responsible for commissioning and quality assuring provision for learners over the age of 16.

The Skills Funding Agency will fund and regulate adult further education and skills in England with four direct routes into training for employers and learners – Train to Gain, the National Apprenticeship Service and the Adult Advancement and Careers Service, as well as further education colleges and training organisations.

The YPLA is a non-departmental public body which will work with Government and local authorities *'to help develop and deliver their vision and plans for young people's learning'* 16-19 provision. It is designed to support local authorities to commission high quality provision for all young people including young adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, whilst ensuring budgetary control. The YPLA will also have responsibility for the funding, support and challenge of open and running academies, which will transfer from the Department for Children, Schools and Families to the YPLA through an agency-type agreement with the Secretary of State.

DCSF and BIS publish details of post-16 quality assurance system

BIS and DCSF have published ***The Quality Assurance System for post-16 education and training provision***. The new quality assurance system has been designed to *'ensure that each provider will be held to account for the quality of its provision by a single sponsoring body'*. As such, the sponsoring bodies responsible for quality are as follows:

- School sixth forms will be the responsibility of the home LA;
- Sixth Form Colleges, will be the responsibility of the home LA which will supported by guidance issued by the YPLA;
- Academies will be the responsibility of the YPLA acting on behalf of the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families;
- FE colleges will be the responsibility of the Skills Funding Agency;
- Providers of Apprenticeships will be the responsibility of Skills Funding Agency, working on behalf of National Apprenticeship Service.

The role of the sponsoring body is *'to provide support, challenge and, where necessary, intervene to ensure that poor performance is addressed quickly and robustly'*.

Whilst discussions relating to quality and performance will inform future commissioning decisions, the sponsoring body will not always be the same as the lead commissioner. The lead commissioner will be the organisation which commissions and contracts with the provider. The main example of this is in FE Colleges. That is to say the sponsor agency for FE Colleges is the

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Skills Funding Agency. Local authorities, however, will commission significant amounts of provision for 14-19 year olds from FE Colleges and in many colleges the LA will be investing more money than its sponsor. As an investor/funder of provision the LA will wish to retain an interest in the quality of that provision as it contracts directly with the college.

Sponsoring bodies and lead commissioners will judge how well a provider is performing by evaluating a range of evidence, including that provided by the self-assessment, Framework for Excellence (FfE) and Ofsted inspections. The arrangements for School Sixth Forms will be slightly different until the FfE is fully implemented.

March 24th –Trials to prepare for raising the participation age

Five new Raising Participation Age (RPA) **trials** will begin in local authorities across the country to help prepare young people and the education sector for this change in the law. These trials are being piloted in addition to the extension of 11 existing trials¹. The funding for the additional trials is backed by approximately £1 million of investment in preparation for the raising of the participation age to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015 across England.

RPA will involve all young people staying in full-time education, work-based learning such as an Apprenticeship, or part-time education or training.

The trials focus on developing best practice in three different priorities:

- re-engaging 16- and 17-year-olds who have dropped out of learning, back into education or training;
- providing the right careers advice to young people drawing on the recent DCSF information, advice and guidance strategy; and
- developing area-wide strategies *that meet local needs and enable full participation of all young people in education or training.*

The five new trial areas are: Ealing, Blackpool, Plymouth, Worcestershire and a joint trial involving Coventry, Warwickshire and Solihull. These trials will run initially for one year when good practice and lessons learned will be collected and passed to all local authorities to help prepare for RPA.

Schools Minister, Iain Wright, said *'The days when young people could leave school at 16 without qualifications and find themselves a rewarding career are long gone - today, they need to continue learning to gain the skills and experience needed for the workplace and higher education'*.

¹ The 11 areas where trials are being extended are: Barnsley; Swindon; Wandsworth; Derby; Staffordshire; Cumbria; East Sussex; Hertfordshire; Lambeth; Newcastle and Greater Manchester. These trials began in October 2009.

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April 8th – Select committee publishes NEETs report

The cross-party Children, Schools and Families Committee² has published, ‘*Young people not in education, employment or training*’, a **report** on young people not in education, employment or training. The report examines who NEETs are, the actions already taken by government and assesses what more needs to be done. The report draws on the approach taken in the Netherlands where there are relatively generous levels of benefits and other support offered to young people in exchange for a greater compulsion to take up further education. The report makes a number of recommendations in addition to and in line with the Netherlands’ approach including:

- That government could enhance the benefits of the strategies outlined in *Investing in Potential*³ by extending the policies so that they apply more flexibly to a wider range of young people;
- A call for a joined-up approach to the provision of information advice and guidance (IAG), benefit advice, housing support and health matters in the form of a ‘one-stop shop’;
- That government considers the balance between relatively generous benefits and support for young people in exchange for a greater compulsion to take up education, training or work; and
- That government considers strengthening the rewards offered to local authorities who are successful in raising rates of participation.

March 25th – New rate for minimum wage and for apprentices announced

The Government has **confirmed** that it has accepted the recommendations from the Low Pay Commission (LPC) on the new rates for the National Minimum Wage. The new rates, which come into force on 1 October 2010, will be:

- £5.93 per hour for low paid workers aged 21 and over (a 2.2% increase on the current £5.80 rate);
- £4.92 per hour for 18-20 year olds (a 1.9% increase on the current £4.83 rate); and
- £3.64 per hour for 16-17 year olds (a 2% increase on the current £3.57 rate).

The Government also announced that it had accepted the LPC’s recommendation to introduce an apprentice minimum wage of £2.50 per hour. The new rate will apply to those apprentices who are under 19 or those over 19 but in the first year of their apprenticeship. See below for the IPPR report that recommended this.

² The Children, Schools and Families Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Children, Schools and Families and its associated public bodies.

³ The government strategy for increasing the proportion of 16-24 year olds in education, employment or training is available [here](#). We reported on this in Policy Update 30.

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Low Pay Commission Chairman, David Norgrove, said *'We are pleased that the Government has again accepted the Commission's recommendations. The introduction of an apprentice rate marks an important extension to minimum wage protection across the UK.'*

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) qualitative study of apprenticeship pay was **published** On April 1st. Commissioned by the LPC, the report examines young people's reasons for studying for and experiences of apprenticeships and sets out their views on a national minimum wage. Employers' and training providers' perspectives on apprenticeship pay are also explored. The report's key conclusion is that a national minimum wage for apprentices would provide greater clarity to employers, young people, and those advising and supporting young people, about the employment rights of apprentices.

April 6th – 157 Group publishes 14-16 pathways case studies

The 157 Group has **published** a compilation of eight case studies about young learners who started part-time or full-time college courses between the ages of 14 and 16. Entitled *Expanding choice: college pathways for 14 to 16-year-olds*, the publication highlights how a diverse group of young learners have benefited from learning in a further education college environment.

March 26th – 5,000 'green' work placements offered to young people

Ed Balls has **announced** five thousand green work placements available to young people aged 14 to 19 in a partnership with the Eden Project, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the RSPB, and the Institute for Education Business Excellence and businesses. It is anticipated that the £2m DCSF-funded *Green Talent* scheme will *'nurture and inspire the environmental leaders of tomorrow and will lead the Government's drive to connect them with job opportunities in the emerging green economy'*. The programme has been designed to introduce young people to the opportunities opening up in the new low carbon economy and to encourage them to become engaged in creating environmental solutions.

March 15th – DWP responds to ALP's critique of pre-employment provision for 16-17 year olds

In Policy Update 32 we referred to ALP's critique of pre-employment provision for unemployed 16-17 year olds which argued that there is a relative lack of support and provision for 16 and 17 year olds who are out of work. Jim Knight, MP has responded to the paper. He states that many of the issues raised fall outside the Department for Work and Pension's responsibilities, and he has therefore forwarded the paper on to colleagues in the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Jim Knight's response therefore responds specifically to ALP's proposal that eligibility for Jobseekers Allowance be extended to all 16-17 year olds. Jim Knight, MP states that this would represent a fundamental departure from the government's plan for 16-17 year olds to remain in education and training. The response and the original paper are available [here](#).

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March 29th – DWP publishes strategy for tackling long-term worklessness

'Building bridges to work: new approaches to tackling long-term worklessness', **published** on 29 March 2010, outlines the Government's next steps on welfare reform. The document sets out an approach for how government will help the long-term workless back into work and support disabled people and those with health conditions who are at risk of long-term unemployment and worklessness so that no one gets left behind in the recovery.

The key elements of this package include:

- improving the accuracy of the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), giving appropriate consideration of people's ability to adapt to their disability, as well as ensuring better recognition of mental health and fluctuating conditions
- assessing everyone on incapacity benefits over the next three years through the WCA, culminating in the abolition of incapacity benefits in April 2014
- providing extra support for people who are newly assessed as fit for work but may have spent a number of years on an incapacity benefit
- providing a personalised time-limited WCA reassessment and an individual programme of support with conditions for those who are currently unable to work but may be able to in the future
- guaranteeing employment or work placements for jobseekers who do not find work after two years
- guaranteeing a place on the specialist disability employment programme, Work Choice, for those on Employment and Support Allowance who want to work but do not find work after two years.

April 23rd – DWP publishes research findings on enabling and empowering older people as independent and active citizens

DWP has published a **report** which sets out the interim findings of LinkAge Plus (LAP) pilots. These pilots were designed to provide older people with access to *'a wide range of more integrated, joined-up services'* to enable and empower older people as active citizens. The third interim report from the study looks at how these pilots have built the capacity of individuals and organisations. The evidence provides examples of approaches that could be adopted and adapted elsewhere by local authority, third sector and private organisations which seek to *'unlock and empower the potential of working with and for older people as independent and active citizens'*.

The report analyses this evidence in relation to ten dimensions of capacity building including:

- Enhanced skill and knowledge resulting in better ways of working within existing services: direct and indirect training of key staff from statutory and third sector organisations; and
- Creation of employment, self-help and volunteering opportunities which develop new skills and social capital through the engagement and empowerment of older people.

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The final reports from the evaluation of LinkAge Plus will include an examination of the cost effectiveness of the approach

March 26th – Sector Skills Council relicensing decisions announced

Business Secretary Lord Mandelson has **announced** that three further Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have been relicensed. Sector Skills Councils are employer-led bodies, '*established to enable employers to exert influence on the UK's education and skills systems to ensure they meet their needs*'.

These are:

- GO Skills, the Sector Skills Council covering the passenger transport sector;
- Financial Services Skills Council, covering financial services, finance, and accounting; and
- Skills for Care and Development, covering social care, children, early years and young people's workforces in the UK.

22 of the 25 SSCs have now been relicensed. Skillfast-UK, the fashion and textiles sector SSC, was not relicensed, and their footprint has now been taken over by Skillset⁴. The government has announced that Government Skills, the body representing central government, is not seeking to be re-licensed as a Sector Skills Council after its license expires on 30 June 2010. Following consultation with central government employers it will become an internal skills body within government and will continue to work closely with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and other SSCs. It has also been announced that in relation to Lifelong Learning UK, there will be a fundamental review of the options available for coverage of the sector in future including, but not limited to, remaining as an SSC.

The relicensing process is overseen and managed by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills through a panel chaired by Charlie Mayfield, who is also chairman of the John Lewis Partnership.

March 11th – Cabinet Office publishes report on the role of third sector innovation: personalisation of education and learning services

The Cabinet Office Advisor on Third Sector Innovation has published a **report** which recognises the role of the third sector in delivering personalised learning opportunities, either in their own right, or in partnership with schools and colleges. It also emphasises the role the third sector plays in driving forward innovation in this sector, informing, supporting, shaping and stimulating service improvement and redesign.

Recommendations focus on how the government can support third sector organisations to demonstrate the value of their work; how government initiatives could be brought together to make the most of what the third sector has to offer; and how innovation in the third sector can be supported and its full potential realised.

⁴ Skillset represents creative media industries

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March 30th – BIS select committee reports on further education funding

The Business, Innovation and Skills Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The committee considered the new structures which the Government has put in place to administer further education. The **report** finds that while the transition from the Learning and Skills Council to the Skills Funding Agency has been well managed, *‘the result has been the creation of an even more complex structure’*. The recommendations include a call for the relationships and lines of communication between delivery partners to be *‘closely managed and monitored’*. The report details key concerns about:

- *‘the logic or probable effectiveness’* of having two organisations funding further education;
- *‘unnecessary long-term bureaucracy’* as a result of policy, administration and shared services across the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People’s Learning Agency; and
- The ability of two agencies replacing one former agency to achieve long-term cost savings.

The report, however, welcomes:

- the single account system for colleges with dedicated account managers which has the potential to *‘simplify the administration of funding for colleges’*;
- the introduction of additional controls over the further education capital budget which BIS believes will *‘avoid any repeat mismanagement’* of that budget.

14-19 and Schools

April 8th – Children, Schools and Families Bill receives Royal Assent

Following agreement by both Houses on the text of the Bill, the Children, Schools and Families Bill received Royal Assent on 8 April. The Bill is now an Act of Parliament (law). The Bill as introduced aimed to provide guarantees for parents and pupils, setting out what they were entitled to expect from the school system. It also aimed to reform the curriculum and introduce a new licensing scheme for teachers.

Clauses on a number of key provisions were removed during the consideration of Lords Amendments, including:

- the Pupil and Parent Guarantee
- the licence to practise for teachers
- the extended remit for School Improvement Partners

The provisions that remain in the Bill include:

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- requirements for school inspections to take into account the needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities and provisions for an additional right of appeal for parents of children with special educational needs statements
- a requirement for local authorities to provide full-time education for children and young people who, for various reasons, are in alternative provision
- greater powers for school governing bodies on how they use their budgets, and the power to set up new schools and academies

Higher Education

March 25th – Lord Mandelson announces new postgraduate scholarships

Lord Mandelson has **announced** that the Government will invest £2.5 million in a scholarship scheme designed to *'target, recruit and retain the world's best research students'*. The Newton Scholarships will provide £25,000 support for the 100 best candidates wanting to study at postgraduate level in the UK. The scheme is intended to *'help provide the economy with the most talented and highly skilled graduates it needs to achieve growth in future industries'*. The funding for this comes from the £270million Modernisation Fund for universities and colleges announced in the budget.

Business Secretary Lord Mandelson said *'The Newton Scholars will be taking a leading role at an early stage in their careers, developing worldwide networks and fostering international cooperation, while working closely with industry, business and policy-makers in critical areas of the UK economy'*.

April 1st – David Lammy announces next steps towards a better deal for university students

Higher Education Minister David Lammy has **announced** that a working group co-chaired by the National Union of Students and Universities UK will produce guidance for developing university and higher education college charters.

The group will report later this year, *'making a significant contribution to the Government's moves to improve information available to students across the HE sector and to ensure the highest quality student experience'*.

The agreements would detail the mutual obligations of students and their institutions, covering such issues as expectations about personal support from tutors, formal contact time and feedback on course work, as well as the responsibilities of students such as private study time.

The Group will be jointly chaired by NUS president Wes Streeting, and Professor Janet Beer, Vice Chancellor of Oxford Brookes. Beginning with an examination of current practice across the

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sector, the Group's report will provide a toolkit for institutions and students' unions to use when developing institutional charters, including an agreed list of topics they should cover.

Consultations

April 23rd – BIS launches consultation on low-carbon skills

BIS has launched a consultation *Meeting the low carbon skills challenge* which sets out the Government's key skills priorities, and the challenges which '*must be met*' to:

- enable British workers and businesses to take advantage of the opportunities in those sectors that are key to reducing our carbon emissions;
- embed the necessary skills across all sectors to move the UK to a low carbon and resource efficient economy.

The document identifies five key challenges for employers, the skills system and the government:

- Delivering significantly higher volumes of generic STEM skills at all levels;
- Developing and delivering rapidly the specialist skills solutions that will be needed for emerging sectors and technologies;
- Getting more young people and adults interested in low carbon careers, skills and qualifications;
- Stimulating employer demand for and investment in low carbon skills; and
- Replicating good practice rapidly in each of the above, within and between emerging sectors.

The consultation seeks views on potential action across the education and training system and how Government, business, individuals and training providers can work together to '*deliver the right skills to nurture sustainable growth and build Britain's low carbon future*'. Responses are sought by 23 June 2010.

April 23rd – Consultation on publishing Government financial data

The '*Putting the Frontline First*' White Paper published in December 2009 highlighted the key role technology can play in providing increased transparency on the effectiveness of Government. This new **consultation** seeks views on how centrally held financial data could be published in a user '*friendly and accessible way*' with a view to putting a live system in place by summer 2010.

The Treasury is seeking views on both the content and presentation of financial data, specifically:

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- To what extent would this dataset improve understanding of public spending, compared to data already available?
- Are there any examples of published public spending data that the Treasury might be able to learn from?
- How could the proposed new dataset best be presented to maximise accessibility and usability?
- How might the Treasury improve the presentation of existing public spending data to make it more user-friendly?

This is likely to be a theme that persists whatever the outcome of the election. The Conservative manifesto states they would create a 'powerful new right to government data, enabling the public to request – and receive – government datasets in an open and standardised format'.

The closing date for the consultation is 30 Jun 2010.

March 25th – HEFCE reviews methodology for funding teaching

HEFCE has published the first of two **consultations** that will explore the future methodology for funding teaching. The consultations will examine the options for change – from minimal change to an entirely new approach – and will inform the future of the method from 2012-13 onwards. The review is a response to the changing financial and political climate in the higher education sector and will, therefore, take into account factors such as the outcome of Lord Browne's Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, and the availability of new data.

The first consultation seeks views on underpinning principles and features. It invites comment on three key principles that the Council believes are key to the future of the method. These are:

- to give institutions the freedom to manage provision in a way that best responds to the needs of students, employers and society;
- to enable HEFCE to incentivise change that is in the public interest; and
- to be compatible with various modes of study, including flexible provision.

The second consultation will be published in spring 2011, and will explore operational and technical elements.

The closing date for the consultation is 12 July 2010.

March 23rd – Revised guidance on safeguarding children and safer recruitment in education

This **consultation** seeks views on updated guidance that sets out the statutory framework and underlying principles for safeguarding children and young people in educational establishments in England. It covers recruitment and vetting of staff and volunteers, the procedures for dealing with allegations against such staff, the new Vetting and Barring Scheme administered by the

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Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) and the circumstances in which a referral to the ISA might be required.

The closing date for the consultation is 15 June 2010

March 30th – DCLG seeks views on local spending reports

The Department for Communities and Local Government is consulting on the effectiveness of Local Spending Reports which aim to support local authorities, their partners and local people to promote the sustainability of local communities by providing more information about the funding that is spent in their area. The first local spending report was published in April 2009. This **consultation** seeks views on proposals for the second local spending report, its presentation and how these reports might develop over time. It places the development of local spending reports in the broader context of work to make public data public. In particular, it summarises ongoing work to ensure that public data becomes more accessible. This includes:

- The Local Public Data Panel
- The Local Data Exchange
- Total Place
- Civic Health
- Timely Information to Citizens
- Comprehensive Area Assessment

The closing date for the consultation is 16th July 2010.

April 23rd – Proposal to establish a combined authority for Greater Manchester

The Association of Greater Manchester Authorities has **published** a proposal for the establishment of a combined authority for Greater Manchester. This consultation seeks views on the proposed structure, constitution and functions of the new authority.

The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 ('LDEDC Act') provides for the establishment of economic prosperity boards (EPB) and combined authorities. These are new sub-regional structures that are designed to support the effective delivery of sustainable economic development and regeneration and, in the case of combined authorities, transport. They are corporate bodies with their own legal identity which are able to take on functions and responsibilities for economic development, regeneration and (in the case of combined authorities) transport. They are controlled by their members, the majority of whom must be elected members of the constituent local authorities.

The proposal is that the combined authority be given local authority functions in relation to its area, including:

- the duty to prepare a sustainable community strategy under section 4(1) of the Local Government Act 2000
- duties and powers related to the provision of education and training and work experience for 16-19 year olds; 19-25 year olds who are subject to learning difficulty assessment and

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persons who are subject to youth detention. These are powers to be given to local education authorities through the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009

After the consultation the government will take into account the responses to this consultation in its decision on whether to make an order establishing a combined authority and in deciding the content of any such order.

The closing date for the consultation is 14th July 2010.

Devolved administrations

April 24th – Scottish minister points to importance of leadership

The leadership provided by Scotland's headteachers is key to the fully successful implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, Education Secretary Michael Russell has **said**. Mr Russell said *'We are entering a crucial period with further implementation of Curriculum for Excellence this August and effective headteachers, who lead by example, are essential to help drive forward the improvements to Scottish education that we all want to see'*.

Curriculum for Excellence is the Scottish Government's programme of reform for the education sector from nurseries through colleges and beyond. Curriculum for Excellence sets out the content of the curriculum and other aspects of Scotland's education system, including qualifications, assessment and learning and teaching approaches.

The Scottish Government is widening access routes for teachers to achieve the Standard for Headship, by rolling out a national Flexible Route to Headship, alongside the existing Scottish Qualification for Headship. All headteachers in Scotland are expected to be able to demonstrate that they meet the Standard for Headship. Education Secretary Michael Russell has also confirmed that, following management board advice, there will be no delay to the roll out of Curriculum for Excellence in Secondary schools this August.

April 21st – Welsh-medium education strategy announced

The final Welsh-medium Education **Strategy** delivers which sets out the strategy to deliver the commitment to create a strategy *'to develop effective Welsh-language provision from nursery through to further and higher education'* has been published. The final Strategy for the first time sets a national strategic direction of travel for Welsh-medium and Welsh-language education. It also contains an implementation programme with specific targets for achieving improvements over the medium to long term.

This strategy focuses on the way Welsh-medium education is delivered, including responding to parental demand for Welsh-medium school places. It has been designed to encourage local authorities to work closely in partnership to improve Welsh-medium planning and provision.

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The report contains a six strategic aims including:

- to improve the planning of Welsh-medium provision in the post-14 phases of education and training, to take account of linguistic progression and continued development of skills;
- to ensure that all learners develop their Welsh-language skills to their full potential and encourage sound linguistic progression from one phase of education and training to the next; and
- to improve the central support mechanisms for Welsh-medium education and training.

Heritage Minister Alun Ffred Jones said *'I am pleased that the Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning is delivering this Strategy. It is vital that learners of all ages have the best opportunities to develop their language skills in Welsh, enabling them to use the language in their personal lives, socially and in the workplace'*.

April 23rd – Public spending guidelines launched for Wales

The Welsh Minister for Business and Budget, Jane Hutt, has **launched** new guidance on *'getting maximum value for every pound spent of public money'*. The guidance includes counsel on, for example, embedding skills and apprenticeship needs early on in the procurement process in order to secure a more successful outcome.

The public sector in Wales spends approximately £4.3 billion annually on goods and services. The Welsh Assembly Government has developed the guidance to ensure that local communities benefit from procurement activity.

Jane Hutt said *'Public procurement can make an enormous difference to the social, economic and environmental well being of Wales and I would urge all those involved in spending public money to use this guide to ensure they get maximum value for every pound we spend'*.

International

April 7th – Changes in regulations for ESOL and Citizenship

On 7 April, the Home Office made changes to the regulations for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners who are applying for UK citizenship or Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) through the ESOL Entry level qualifications. All ESOL providers now have to be publicly funded colleges or private colleges accredited through one of four agencies, and this includes community organisations receiving funding via colleges or other bodies supported by the Skills Funding Agency (formerly the LSC) and which are therefore subject to inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Updated **guidance** and a **pro-forma letter** are now available on the Home Office website.

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Local Government and Public Sector

April 23rd – Birmingham and Manchester universities examine learning and improvement in public services

Recent **research** from the universities of Birmingham and Manchester examines the learning and improvement capacities in twelve health and local authority organisations in England and in five organisations in other parts of the public sector.

The report finds that the capacity of an organisation to acquire, assimilate and apply knowledge (absorptive capacity) is shaped by a number of external factors such as:

- The wider environmental conditions, such as the pace of change, level of competition, extent of control and overall scale of challenge in the local community.
- The characteristics of knowledge – the ease with which the organisation can access both explicit and tacit knowledge about performance, how that knowledge is shared, and how it is transferred.
- The learning relationships – how the organisation works with other stakeholders (like inspectorates, peers, advisors, commissioners and so on) and whether those relationships exhibit collaboration, trust, mutual respect and parity, and how close or distant and formal they are.

The report concludes that the absorptive capacity or ‘learning capacity’ of organisations which are poorly performing is not much discussed or analysed, by organisations themselves or by those who work with them (like inspectorates, improvement teams, consultancies and so on). The report argues that a greater awareness of absorptive capacity, and more attention to, for example, trying to assess it or to measure some of the internal and external factors outlined above, could provide a more rigorous and effective basis for diagnosing, treating and even predicting organisational decline.

April 22nd – IPPR critiques funding formula for the devolved nations

A new ippr **study** suggests that the current funding disparities between England and the devolved nations might widen as spending is cut across the UK.

With the prospect of significant cuts in public expenditure after the General Election, the study argues that because of the way the Barnett formula works the budgets of the devolved administrations will be better protected than those in England for spending on comparable services. The report suggests that although spending across the UK will fall overall, the spending disparities that currently exist between the devolved nations and England may actually widen during a period of spending retrenchment. Certainly the spending gap will not narrow in coming years.

The study argues that the UK as a whole would benefit from more discussion on how the budgets for its constituent nations are set – *‘this could lead to better decision making and improved*

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economic performance.

March 30th – Employers urged to champion flexible working

The government has called on employers to do more to promote flexible working, as it **published** its response to the Family Friendly Taskforce report.

Taking forward the taskforce's recommendations, Ministers will promote flexible working across the public sector and new Cabinet Office guidance will mean that there will be a presumption that all jobs should be advertised as available for flexible or part-time working unless there is a good business case why this isn't possible. Yvette Cooper, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, also announced that Government will appoint a taskforce of business leaders and business organisations to champion the case for flexible working in the private sector.

To help encourage more businesses to offer flexible jobs next year, Jobcentre Plus will implement computer changes which will mean every time a new vacancy comes into a Jobcentre – the employer will be automatically asked if it can be part time, job share or flexible.

Ministers believe that increasing the availability of quality, flexible and part-time jobs will be crucial for the recovery as it will stimulate more jobs, help parents off benefits and will give them the opportunity to work, continue their careers and balance the needs of their family too.

This is a theme that will persist whatever the outcome of the election as all three parties include proposals for improving flexible working in their manifestos. The Conservatives would initially extend the right to request flexible working to every parent with a child under the age of eighteen and would extend the right to request flexible working to all those in the public sector, though they state that this may need to be done in stages. The Liberal Democrats would extend flexible working to all employees.

April 3rd – Steps to 'strengthen' voluntary and community groups announced

Communities Secretary John Denham has **announced** four new steps to strengthen voluntary, charity and community groups.

The four measures are:

- New support to transfer publicly owned buildings to the ownership or control of local voluntary groups;
- A series of new grants which will let local organisations become self-sufficient;
- New guidance to local councils, telling them to make sure that third sector organisations must be given a fair chance to bid for local council contracts; and
- New measures outlined in the Budget, to enable community groups to raise new finance and to play a bigger role in delivering cost-effective services which prevent, rather than treat, social problems.

All three parties emphasise an important role for the voluntary and community sector in their manifestos. The Conservatives plan to support social enterprises by creating a '*Big Society Bank*' funded from unclaimed bank assets to provide new finance for neighbourhood groups,

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charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies. The Liberal Democrats too are committed to encouraging voluntary activity.

Equality and Diversity

March 25th – Child Poverty Act receives Royal Assent

The Child Poverty Act, which commits this and future governments to eradicating child poverty by 2020 has received Royal Assent meaning that it is now enshrined in legislation.

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Yvette Cooper **said** *'We know this goal is extremely challenging, but we won't back down. This Bill is about the world we want to live and raise our children in, to make sure no children are left behind. We've lifted 500,000 children out of poverty already, but there is much more to be done'*.

Financial Secretary to the Treasury Stephen Timms said *'This is a landmark moment in our fight to eradicate child poverty by 2020'*.

New guidance has been published for **consultation**. It has been designed to help local authorities understand the new duties outlined in the Child Poverty Act. Local authorities must work to reduce the effects of child poverty in their local areas – including producing local child poverty strategies. The closing date for the consultation is 18 June 2009. The final version of the statutory guidance is due for publication in the summer.

April 8th – Equalities Act receives Royal Assent

The **Equalities Bill** has received Royal Assent, and is therefore, now an Act of Parliament. The Bill will harmonise and in some cases extend existing discrimination law covering the 'protected characteristics' of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. Amongst its provisions it creates a unified public-sector duty, intended to promote equality in public policy and decision-making, and proposes a new public sector duty related to socio-economic inequalities.

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New Faces and Awards

May 5th – Chris Moorcroft elected president of AoC

Association of Colleges' members have **elected** their new President – Chris Moorcroft, Principal of Worcester College of Technology. Chris has been Principal of Worcester College of Technology since 1 November 2002 and is a member of the Principals' Professional Council (former Chair), a national board member of the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Chair of the AoC HE in FE Group.

Chris will succeed Pat Bacon, Principal of St Helens College, on 1 August. Chris Moorcroft said '*I am thrilled to have been elected and look forward to building on the excellent work of Pat Bacon and David Collins... It is an exciting challenge and an honour to be able to represent this dynamic and diverse sector through the office of President.*'

March 23rd – Learning and skills representatives appointed to YPLA Board

Three college principals have been **appointed** to the board of the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA):

- Peter Birkett, principal of Barnfield College (Further education representative);
- Helen Sexton, principal of National Star College (LLDD/Independent Specialist College representative); and
- Michele Sutton, principal of Bradford College (Further education representative).

In addition the YPLA has invited a small number of observers who will bring their experience to the new Board for a period of up to one year and support the Board's work in developing strong relationships across the young people's sector. These are:

- Ian Ferguson (representing independent learning providers);
- John Freeman (representing the Raising Expectations Action Programme (React));
- David Igoe (representing sixth form colleges/the Sixth Form Colleges Forum); and
- Malcolm Trobe (representing the Association of School and College Leaders).

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Contact the LSIS policy team

This policy update has been prepared by Angela Nartey, policy research officer, LSIS. Your comments are welcome – please contact Angela by email on angela.nartey@LSIS.org.uk.

Caroline Mager, Executive Director, Policy, Research and Strategic Intelligence

Caroline.Mager@LSIS.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7929 8733

Jenny Williams, Head of Policy

Jenny.Williams@LSIS.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7929 8713

Angela Nartey, Policy Research Officer

Angela.Nartey@LSIS.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7929 8734

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