

## POLICY WATCH

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### Guidance on Developing a 14 - 19 Prospectus of learning opportunities

Hard on the heels of the 14 - 19 Implementation Plan at the end of last year, comes this national guidance on developing 14 - 19 local Prospectuses. Work on these starts this year and the aim is to have them fully available in all areas by autumn 2007.

The idea of a local Prospectus of learning opportunities, in effect a website 'setting out the courses and programmes that each school, college and other provider wishes to offer 14 - 19 year olds in a local area,' is not new but it appears as a genuine runner this time. It's potentially significant for two reasons. Firstly because if it works as intended, it could progressively neutralise much of the damaging competition that exists in the system. Open house on what's on offer across the patch makes any arm twisting of young people as to where they should go at age 16 less effective. In that sense, these local Prospectuses complete much of what the Strategic Area Reviews set out to do in terms of mapping out the local offer, though it will be interesting to see how far everyone plays ball.

Secondly because finding your way round the new world of learning opportunities for 14 - 19 year olds can be a complicated business. Finding your way around the different providers can be hard enough. 430+ colleges nationally, some general, some specialist, some sixth form only, some tertiary, many linked with schools but often in different relationships. 3,385+ maintained secondary schools, some designated as community, some as foundation, some as voluntary aided or controlled, many now specialist, some extended, a few federated, let alone grammar and independent schools. And 800+ training providers of all shapes and sizes, many of whom lead the important apprenticeship and other work based programmes. In the middle sits the consumer, armed with increasing volumes of data and political promises of greater choice yet in many cases riddled with anxiety about how to exercise either. In such a world, a simple local Prospectus listing who offers what and where could be very useful.

Traditionally, decisions were made about where to go and often what to study on the basis of word of mouth, local reputation and institutional prospectuses. Over the last ten years or so Ofsted Reports and league tables have added to the intelligence available. More recently, the Schools White Paper introduced a new player - the choice adviser, someone to help those who find it hard to understand what's available while the Pre Budget Report in December introduced the idea of a much wider network of Parent Support Advisers. Next month detailed School Profiles get under way and now we have these local area 14 - 19 Prospectuses. The support infrastructure for those faced with what can often be bewildering choices is therefore getting much stronger.

So what will these local Prospectuses look like and how will they work?

In terms of how they will work, the Implementation Plan was very firm that joint responsibility lies with Local Authorities and local LSCs. "Local Authorities and the LSC will be under a duty to co operate with one another as they discharge their duties." This duty is likely to be enshrined in legislation this year.

Sure, many other players will need to be involved notably Connexions, Aimhigher, local providers and perhaps youngsters themselves who may have a view on how the information is packaged and presented. The thinking is that in each locality, a project manager will be appointed who in turn will work with a named contact in each school or college and most importantly of all with a website developer to help with the presentation of the information. The target audience includes the young people themselves, parents, staff and of course careers advisers.

Any accredited and locally available course for 14 - 19 year olds should be included along with information on course content, entry and assessment requirements, the awarding body responsible, any learner support, even course costs and any quality indicators. Most of this is considered essential. Desirable info might include informal learning opportunities, case studies, a help page explaining terms and levels, funding support that might be available, progression opportunities, even "information of local relevance such as links to local transport information."

Listed in this way, the volume of information looks daunting so how it's set out and how users are enabled to use search facilities is clearly going to be important. The Guidance suggests that it's important to work with experienced website designers and that a basic design is attempted first and put on to a test site for consultation. Colour, pictures, signposting are all encouraged as is branding, giving the site a recognisable name or logo, courses4u and all that. Paper based alternatives are also recommended.

The Guidance provides plenty of examples of existing websites that are worth looking at and of databases of courses that could be used. It also lists other useful websites that a local area might wish to signpost including BBC Learning, Connexions careers advice, Gapyear.com and After 16. The Implementation Plan highlights other examples of local Prospectuses already in use.

The downside of all of this appears to be the lack of funding available. The Guidance says it is for 'local partners to decide how to fund the development of the Prospectus.' It points to the LSC "Flexible Funding Pot" and to other possible funding sources but cap in hand doesn't seem a very good way to get the thing started. Other difficulties would seem to be keeping the database up to date as qualifications change and institutional offers vary, keeping information simple and accessible and most importantly, keeping everyone on board. The Guidance predicts some of these difficulties and has a 'solutions' page at the ready.

The hope of course is that colourful, zappy web based Prospectuses will start to personalise the rather turgid qualifications lists of old such as Section 96 and before that Section 400 and bring to life what is available. The problem is that 47 local Prospectuses, if that's what we end with, may simply add to the volume of info available. Choice inevitably comes at a price.

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