



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards
in Education

Inspection report
County Durham
14 to 19 Area Inspection

Dates of inspection: 6–10 June 2005

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Basic information about the area inspection

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| Name of area: | County Durham |
| Reporting inspector: | John G Evans HMI |
| Dates of inspection: | 6–10 June 2005 |

Introduction

The Learning and Skills Act 2000, as amended by the Education Act 2002, gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Schools the power, working with the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), to inspect the provision of 14 to 19 education and training in an area. The *Area Inspection Framework* sets out the principles that apply to the inspections of the provision of non-higher education and training made by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), local education authorities (LEAs) and their partners within an area. This inspection was carried out under section 65 of the Learning and Skills Act by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the ALI.

This inspection covered the area of County Durham. Inspectors analysed statistical and documentary evidence, considered the views of providers and of learners, and interviewed: officers of the local LSC, LEA, Connexions and local learning partnerships; senior staff in schools, colleges, and training providers; elected members of the council; governors, parents and young people. Several meetings were held in education and training venues around the county. Inspectors also took account of the evidence and findings of previous inspections of training providers, schools and colleges in the area to evaluate the quality of provision for learners aged 14 to 19.

Executive summary

The provision of education and training for young people aged 14 to 19 across County Durham is meeting the needs of learners, employers and the community satisfactorily. A clear strategic framework identifies the key priorities, goals, targets and includes a learner entitlement for young people aged 14 to 19. It is widely supported by providers and largely reflects the strategies and business plans for 14 to 19 education and training developed by the key partners. Structures are in place to take the 14 to 19 strategy forward and tailor strategies to meet local needs. There has been a significant change in attitudes and, led by the local LSC and LEA, an ethos of collaboration between providers is increasingly replacing highly competitive and sometimes antagonistic relationships. The 14 to 19 project team has made very good progress in supporting these developments and generating the commitment and momentum to address some previous weaknesses in provision for 14 to 19 year olds. Nevertheless, significant elements of the 14 to 19 strategy have yet to be developed in detail. The means of achieving several key targets are not set out. There is no clear and shared vision which will provide all young people with equal access to appropriate learning pathways at 16. Key partners have yet to provide a comprehensive development plan which ensures priorities and goals are addressed with sufficient urgency.

Support for learners is generally good. The Connexions partnership targets support on those most in need and has developed a good range of materials for informing young people and their parents about different learning pathways. However, too many young people in schools continue to receive insufficient impartial advice and guidance on progression. There is clear

evidence of improvement in 14 to 19 education and training. The LEA's strategies to raise attainment at Key Stage 4 are proving successful. The achievement level at general certificate of secondary education (GCSE), though still below the national average, is improving at twice the national rate. Collaboration between many schools and the colleges has been effective in broadening the vocational opportunities available for students aged 14 to 16, specifically through the increased flexibility programme (IFP) and other link programmes. Student success rates in the colleges are now above the national average at levels 1, 2 and 3. Achievement rates in work-based learning are low, but above the national average. However, strategies to increase post-16 participation are less well developed. Participation rates of young people aged 16 in education and training in County Durham are low. The configuration of 14 to 19 education and training does not meet the needs of all learners and provides insufficient opportunities for young people who have low levels of attainment to progress. Appropriate learning pathways are not available at 16 for many young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The number of young people not in education, training or employment, or whose destinations are not known, remains very high at 20%. Insufficient action has been taken to address these key weaknesses.

The following grades were allocated:

| Aspect | Grade |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. Strategy for 14 to 19 education and training | Satisfactory |
| 2. Achievement | Satisfactory |
| 3. Access to, and participation in, education and training | Unsatisfactory |
| 4. Quality of 14 to 19 education and training | Satisfactory |
| 5. Guidance and support | Satisfactory |
| 6. Leadership and management | Satisfactory |
| | Overall grade |
| How effective and efficient is the provision of education and training across the area in meeting the needs of learners, employers and the community? | Satisfactory |

The grades are allocated according to the criteria contained in the area inspection framework and using the descriptors in the common inspection framework. And using the scale: outstanding, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory and very weak.

Main findings

1. County Durham is a largely rural shire county in the North East of England with a population of just under half a million. It has high levels of deprivation, particularly in relation to health, much of it concentrated in the east of the county. The majority of residents live in the numerous small towns and villages spread across the county. The geography and limited transport links make access to learning and employment difficult in parts of the county, particularly in the south west. The employment rate is well below the national level and a high percentage of residents are economically inactive. There is continued reliance on traditional, declining employment sectors, slow growth in new, knowledge-based sectors and relatively few large employers. Although the days are long gone when employment in local industry was guaranteed on leaving school, the perception that learning and education are not of crucial importance remains common. Against this backdrop, there is a slowly rising trend in the staying-on rate at 16, but the percentage of young people aged 16 to 19 not in education, employment or training is extremely high.

2. Key partners have established a strategic framework for 14 to 19 education and training. Key priorities, goals, targets and a learner entitlement are set out in two concise leaflets, launched in March 2004. There is widespread recognition of, and support for, the framework. The local LSC and the LEA have strongly promoted and achieved a significant change in attitudes among providers, with previously competitive and sometimes antagonistic relationships increasingly replaced by an ethos of collaboration. The LEA's strategies for improvement at Key Stage 4 have broadened the curriculum and are proving successful in raising attainment. A county-wide strategy group has been established and an area advisory group has been set up in each of the four planning areas to tailor strategies to meet local needs. The 14 to 19 project team has made very good progress in supporting these developments and generating the commitment and momentum to move the strategy forward. Essential elements of the strategy, including the means by which several of the key targets will be achieved, are underdeveloped. There is not yet a clear and shared vision of the curriculum configuration which will provide all young people with equal access to appropriate learning pathways at 16. Key partners have yet to provide a comprehensive development plan which gives explicit direction to representative groups and providers and ensures priorities and goals are addressed with sufficient urgency.

3. The local LSC and the LEA have developed much more collaborative working arrangements, particularly at strategic level. There has been good involvement by the Connexions partnership and the Lifelong Learning partnership in the development of the 14 to 19 framework. The LEA provides very good performance data to schools, especially pre-16. Data are effectively shared between key partners, and data managers from the LEA, the local LSC and the Connexions partnership meet on a regular basis. Leadership and management in schools, colleges and work-based learning providers are at least satisfactory and, in many instances, good. The promotion of equal opportunities and social inclusion is satisfactory.

4. Schools have made effective arrangements to broaden the Key Stage 4 curriculum and collaboration between many schools and the colleges has been effective in providing an extensive range of vocational opportunities for students aged 14 to 16. Strategies to increase post-16 participation are less well developed. Participation rates of young people aged 16 in education and training in County Durham are low. The number of young people who are not in education, training or employment, or whose destinations are not known, is unacceptably high at 20% and has not improved significantly during the last year. The configuration of 14 to 19 education and training does not meet the needs of all learners and provides insufficient opportunities for young people who have low levels of attainment to progress. The comprehensive mapping of provision, fundamental to a thorough review of the curriculum configuration, has not yet been completed. The broad range of advanced level courses in the colleges and of work-based learning programmes is well matched to the local LSC's priority employment sectors, but most sixth forms are small and provide a limited curriculum. Progression to higher education (HE) is below the national average. There are insufficient programmes at pre-entry and entry levels. Post-16 provision for young people with special educational needs is particularly restricted and staying-on rates for this group of young people are low.

5. Support for learners, including those in vulnerable groups, is good overall. Connexions personal advisers effectively target support on those most in need. The Connexions partnership provides an arresting and informative range of material about the choices available to young people at 16. Despite this, too many school pupils receive insufficient impartial advice about their progression opportunities. Work-based learning is effectively promoted, but is too often perceived as more suitable for learners with few qualifications.

6. Although still below the national average, attainment at GCSE has improved at twice the national rate over the last two years. The educational value added between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 has improved in the majority of County Durham schools. In school sixth forms, GCE A-level points scores per student have also improved at twice the national rate over the last two years, but GCE A-level points scores and value added scores are significantly lower in those schools with small sixth forms. The overall success rates of students aged 16 to 19 in the four County Durham colleges have improved at levels 1, 2 and 3 and are now above the national averages for further education (FE) colleges. This reflects a very significant improvement at level 2 in 2003/04. Success rates on work-based learning programmes are low, but above the national average.

7. Teaching in schools has shown an overall improvement and is often good. In the colleges much teaching and learning is good or better. However, the proportion of teaching which is very good or excellent is below the national average in both schools and colleges. The training provided by work-based learning providers is generally satisfactory. Insufficient attention is given across the age range to improving young people's functional literacy and numeracy at all ability levels and there is too much variability in the effectiveness with which information and learning technology (ILT) is used to support learning. The quality of teaching staff is generally good and there is a strong commitment to their continued

professional development. Some school and college accommodation is of a high standard, but much of it is ageing, drab and in need of improvement.

8. This report identifies strengths that should be built upon and weaknesses that need to be addressed in order for progress to be made. To guide the local LSC, LEA and their partners, recommendations are included following each section of the report. The local LSC, LEA and partner organisations should consider these and incorporate suitable responses in the action plan for the further development of the 14 to 19 strategy for the area.

9. Strengths in the current provision, upon which improvement may be based, include:

- a clear strategic framework for 14 to 19 education and training with a learner entitlement at its core
- much improved collaborative arrangements between key partners at strategic level
- the effective challenge to the prevailing attitudes between providers to create more collaboration to achieve improvements in 14 to 19 provision
- good structures for the continued development and implementation of the 14 to 19 strategy, including the effective deployment of project teams
- a successful Key Stage 4 improvement strategy
- improving achievement rates in schools and colleges at all levels
- the broad curriculum offer at Key Stage 4 and at level 3, post-16
- improving standards of teaching and learning in schools and colleges
- good support for most learners, including those from vulnerable groups
- good use and sharing of data by key partners to plan improvements.

10. The local LSC, the LEA and their partners have some weaknesses to overcome. The most significant, requiring concerted and urgent action, are:

- key elements of the 14 to 19 strategy remain underdeveloped, particularly in relation to improving access and participation post-16
- the lack of a central 14 to 19 development plan to take forward the aspirations set out in the learner entitlement and strategy leaflets
- low progression rates into education and training at age 16 and into HE at age 18

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- slow progress in reducing the very high number of young people who are not in education, employment or training
 - insufficient curriculum mapping to ensure coherence and match of provision to need
 - inadequate range of entry and pre-entry qualifications, and consequently insufficient opportunities for young people with learning difficulties to progress
 - narrow curriculum provision and lower levels of performance in small school sixth forms
 - insufficient attention to improving functional literacy and numeracy across different levels of provision
 - insufficient impartial advice and guidance on the full range of progression opportunities available in each area
 - lack of processes for monitoring and evaluating progress against the 14 to 19 strategy, including an appropriate range of measurable targets
 - too little action to directly address the key weaknesses in 14 to 19 provision.

Features of the area and its context

11. County Durham covers an area of some 1,400 square miles in the North East of England. It is largely rural, particularly in the west. In the most recent Index of Deprivation, County Durham ranked as the most deprived county in England by a considerable margin, particularly in relation to health, with levels of deprivation similar to northern industrial cities. One-third of residents live in one of the 10% most deprived wards in the country, which are largely concentrated in the east of the county. At the last census, the population was 492,300; it is declining as more skilled residents leave the area for improved opportunities. There are 12 main towns, but most residents live in 230 small towns and villages. Many of these are former colliery villages. Residents with minority ethnic backgrounds represent only 1% of the population with 1,500 travellers forming the largest minority group. Due to the geography and transportation issues, many residents experience difficulties in accessing employment and learning opportunities.

12. The employment rate in County Durham is significantly lower than that for England as a whole. In 2003, it was 65% compared to 75% nationally, although at 7% the unemployment rate was only slightly higher than the 5% national level. The difference is explained by the high percentage of those in the 16 to 74 age group who are economically inactive, 30% in 2003 compared to 21% nationally. There is over reliance on traditional employment sectors, such as manufacturing, which are continuing to decline while growth in

knowledge-based sectors is low. Earnings are 15% below the national level. In 2004, 18.7% of school pupils were entitled to free school meals compared to 15.6% nationally, 17.1% of pupils had special educational needs compared to 15.8% nationally, and there were 2.9% of pupils with statements compared to 2.4% nationally. Some 36% of County Durham residents have no qualifications compared to 29% nationally. The perception that learning and education has little influence on future life chances is still commonly held.

13. County Durham has a single county council and LEA, seven district councils, one local LSC and one Connexions partnership. There are 36 secondary schools, 17 of which have sixth forms. There are 12 special schools. The sole pupil referral unit currently provides for pupils aged 11 to 14. There are four FE colleges: Bishop Auckland College in the south west of the county; Derwentside College in the north west; New College, Durham in mid-Durham; and East Durham and Houghall College in the east of the county. The local LSC currently funds 23 private training companies and the 4 colleges to provide work-based learning programmes. In 2004, there were 11,922 pupils aged 14 to 16 in Years 10 and 11 in the schools and 3,160 students aged 16 to 19 in school sixth forms. Data for 2003 show that 4,585 full-time students aged 16 to 19 and 3,656 part-time students aged 16 to 19 attended the FE colleges. Some 25% of students aged 16 to 18 choose to follow courses outside the county, while 21% of students aged 16 to 19 studying in County Durham travel from other counties.

14. There has been a slowly improving trend in the proportion of Year 11 pupils progressing to education, employment or training. In 2003, 67% of the cohort progressed into full-time education, 8% into government supported training, and 11% into employment, of which 6% were in employment with training. The proportion of young people not engaged in employment, education or training or whose destinations are not known is 20%, one of the highest levels in the country.

The strategy for 14 to 19 education and training

15. Key partners have established a clear strategic framework for 14 to 19 education and training. Key priorities, goals, targets and a learner entitlement are set out in two concise leaflets, launched in March 2004. Much of the groundwork for the framework was undertaken by an external consultancy and involved consultation with partners and providers. The key priorities are to provide a coherent, high-quality curriculum accessible to all; to raise attainment at all stages to encourage progression; to increase participation in structured learning post-16; and to show that more effective learning can make a significant contribution to economic and community regeneration in County Durham. The framework contains some headline targets, most of which are appropriately challenging. The framework is centred on learners' needs and on achieving the stated outcomes through collaborative partnerships. The leaflets are widely recognised as the primary source of the 14 to 19 strategy, although they have not yet been shared with young people or their parents. The key strategies and business plans of the key partners, including the outcomes from the local LSC's strategic area review (StAR), are congruent with the framework and work is ongoing to align the wider range of

related strategies. The local LSC has liaised closely with work-based learning providers and the colleges to ensure their development plans support the area-wide strategy. The contribution that 14 to 19 strategies will make is clearly identified within Durham County Council's community strategy.

16. The local LSC and LEA have successfully challenged prevailing attitudes among 14 to 19 providers. The highly competitive, sometimes antagonistic, relationships between schools and colleges which characterised the area until very recently, have increasingly been replaced by an ethos of collaboration. The development of new collaborative arrangements between providers during the last 12 months represents real progress, but much more extensive collaboration is needed to provide learning pathways which meet the needs of all young people in different parts of the county.

17. The LEA's strategy for raising achievement at Key Stage 4 is proving successful. Very effective interventions and support by the 'Beyond Expectations Transformation Team' have helped to improve teaching and learning, curriculum development and the use of data in raising standards. The achievement level at GCSE, though still below the national average, is improving at twice the national rate. Collaboration between many schools and the colleges has been effective in broadening the vocational opportunities available for students aged 14 to 16, specifically through the IFP and other link programmes.

18. Although the strategic framework for improving 14 to 19 education and training has been slow to emerge, there is widespread support for the broad priorities, goals and targets now established and the approach adopted by the key partners. Coherent structures have been established to support strategic development and the implementation of 14 to 19 strategies. The 14 to 19 project team has proved a very effective agent of change. This team has made good progress in supporting structural developments, generating the commitment and momentum to move the area forward, promoting partnership working and disseminating good practice. A county-wide strategic group, with representation from all key partners and sectors, has oversight of strategy and responsibility for monitoring its impact. An officers' group of the relevant managers from the local LSC, the LEA and key partner organisations has the responsibility for taking decisions forward. An area advisory group, representing the range of providers, Aimhigher, Connexions, local strategic partnerships and the business community, has been set up in each of the four 'areas' into which the county is currently subdivided for 14 to 19 planning purposes. Their role is to contribute to the achievement of 14 to 19 targets by adapting and implementing strategies to best meet the needs of young people in their own area. Area advisory groups have developed action plans aligned with the 14 to 19 framework. The broad roles and responsibilities of the different groups are understood, although operational aspects are not yet fully developed. However, it is too early to judge their capacity to achieve the improvements needed in 14 to 19 provision.

19. Contributory strategies have not been mapped against the framework to provide a more holistic 14 to 19 strategy and essential elements of the strategy have yet to be developed in any detail. There is no clear and shared vision and structure for a curriculum, either county-wide or specific to each of the four areas, which meets the needs and aspirations of all

young people. Nor is there any strategy for students with special educational needs in the post-16 phase. Key partners have not produced a comprehensive development plan which gives explicit direction to the strategic and operational groups, schools, colleges and work-based learning providers. The current implementation plan is only concerned with establishing the structures and processes which have been put into place. There are insufficient measures or targets in place to support the monitoring and evaluation of 14 to 19 strategies.

20. Although the action plans of the area advisory groups are seen as the key vehicle for making progress, it is not clear within the present arrangements how the local LSC and LEA will ensure that key weaknesses are addressed with sufficient urgency by each advisory group. Their current action plans, for example, do not address the performance of smaller sixth forms or the inadequate range of post-16 pathways for young people with special educational needs. While the emphasis on the learner entitlement and collaboration has provided sufficient strategic steer to ensure that local partnership initiatives are coherent and benefit learners, the 14 to 19 framework does not, at this stage, provide sufficiently clear or comprehensive direction to providers. The single education plan clearly indicates what the LEA will do to improve the experience of young people in Key Stage 4 and raise achievement levels at 16. However, most 14 to 19 targets relate to improvements at 16 onwards and there is little indication, for example, of how participation in structured learning beyond 16 or the percentage of 19 year olds who achieve a level 2 qualification will be raised to their respective targets of 85%. The local LSC has recently published a summary of recommendations and actions culminating from the StAR process. This does provide some clear action points for improving post-16 education and learning and could provide the basis for a 14 to 19 development plan.

Recommendations

The LEA, local LSC and their partners should:

- a. establish a clear and shared vision and structure for a curriculum which meets the needs and aspirations of all young people in each of the 14 to 19 planning areas
- b. produce a comprehensive 14 to 19 development plan which provides more explicit direction to schools, colleges and work-based learning providers and ensures priorities and goals are addressed with sufficient urgency by the strategic and area advisory groups
- c. develop a wider range of measurable outcomes and targets to enable closer and more rigorous monitoring of the impact of 14 to 19 strategies.

Leadership and management

21. Leadership and management of the development of 14 to 19 education and training are satisfactory overall. There is a strong commitment to the 14 to 19 framework from the county council and local LSC board. At Key Stage 4, the LEA provides good leadership and

support. The single education plan addresses the priorities for this age range through a number of appropriate initiatives and sets challenging targets for improvement. The scrutiny sub-committee for 'Developing Lifelong Learning' receives regular reports on the implementation of strategies related to 14 to 19 education. The Ofsted inspection of the LEA in 2003 found leadership by members and officers to be good and very capable of tackling the weaknesses then identified at Key Stage 4 and in support for 14 to 19 education. The local LSC has adopted national LSC objectives and is responding to these appropriately in its local context. During the last 18 months, there has been a complete change in personnel at directorate level within the local LSC; this has resulted in a step change in the rate of progress being made and much greater emphasis on collaboration. The 14 to 19 project team includes two area development managers who support the work of area advisory groups and three 'champions' with specific responsibility for schools, colleges and work-based learning, respectively. They have a county-wide brief to encourage and support providers in their sector to implement 14 to 19 strategies. This approach has produced many new initiatives; for example the development of common approaches to teaching key skills and staff training between work-based learning providers, and significantly increased the dissemination of good practice. The 2004 Ofsted inspection of Connexions County Durham found leadership and management to be satisfactory, but highlighted the need to improve quality assurance and performance management of personal advisers.

22. During the last 18 months, the local LSC and LEA have developed a much more collaborative approach towards 14 to 19 developments, particularly at strategic management level. The two key partners jointly fund the 14 to 19 Project Team and collaborate in external funding bids. They have recently established a protocol on capital expenditure intended to ensure that spending on school buildings and colleges is co-ordinated. Relationships with the other statutory partners are equally constructive. The Connexions partnership is strongly represented across 14 to 19 structures and the lifelong learning partnership has played a role in moving strategy forward. The key partners have, with some success, begun to encourage and facilitate collaborative arrangements between providers. Links have been established between schools and work-based learning providers. More constructive arrangements have been developed between colleges and schools previously competing against each other. For example, Derwentside College and neighbouring St Bede's Roman Catholic Comprehensive School have taken steps to provide a joint prospectus for post-16 provision and the animosity between East Durham and Houghall Community College and the schools in East Durham is being resolved.

23. At provider level, leadership and management are satisfactory overall and, in many cases, good or better. Recent inspection reports for the four colleges indicate that leadership and management are good at New College, Durham and Bishop Auckland College and satisfactory at Derwentside College and East Durham and Houghall College. Of the 18 secondary schools most recently inspected, leadership and management were judged to be very good in 4, good in 10 and satisfactory in 4. Leadership and management grades are generally higher in the 11–16 schools and special schools than in the 11–18 schools. Inspections of work-based learning providers by the ALI have judged leadership and management to be satisfactory or good in the majority of providers. In the case of seven

providers, leadership and management were initially found to be unsatisfactory, but had improved to a satisfactory standard by their re-inspection. One provider remains to be re-inspected.

24. Key partners collect an appropriate range of data and use this effectively to monitor quality and outcomes and target improvements. The LEA supports schools with excellent performance data, especially at pre-16. The data enables schools to benchmark their performance with other local schools. The local LSC closely monitors the success rates of work-based learning providers and appropriately challenges underperformance. Reliable data is provided by individual colleges, but their use of value added measures has not been adequately developed. The Connexions partnership has improved its tracking of young people after leaving school, particularly those not in education, employment or training, and provides a thorough analysis of destinations, including those for young people with learning difficulties. Data managers from the local LSC, the LEA, and the Connexions partnership meet on a regular basis and data is shared well between the partners.

25. The promotion of equal opportunities and social inclusion is satisfactory. The LEA has comprehensive policies for inclusion which are effective in ensuring that the needs of young people at risk of disengagement from education are being met during the period of compulsory schooling. There is good support for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools, a high proportion of children from the traveller community attend regularly, and outcomes for children in public care are improving. Beyond age 16, the local LSC supports a range of initiatives to improve equal access, such as encouraging the participation of women in engineering. However, the post-16 curriculum does not provide appropriate pathways for all young people, particularly those with lower levels of attainment. Provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, for example, those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, does not meet the range of educational support needs. The number of disengaged young people aged 16 to 19 has remained exceptionally large. Insufficient action has been taken to directly address these key weaknesses.

26. The LEA has effective mechanisms in place for setting targets with schools and regularly monitoring their progress and performance, and provides regular reports to members on the performance of schools and the progress of local initiatives. The local LSC closely monitors the performance of the colleges and work-based learning providers against agreed targets. However, there is insufficient monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of 14 to 19 strategies and the impact they are having. Formal monitoring and reporting procedures, including the monitoring role of the strategic group, have yet to be fully developed.

27. A variety of factors, including the relatively limited collaboration between post-16 providers, the inequalities in access and participation, and the cost-effectiveness of smaller school sixth forms, give rise to concerns about value for money post-16. However, the clear trends of improvement in the quality of provision, participation rates and levels of attainment across the 14 to 19 age range indicate that resources are being targeted effectively. LEA services to support schools are well managed and lead to improvement. The key partners

make good use of external funding to support the priorities of the area. Overall, value for money is satisfactory.

Recommendations

The LEA, local LSC and their partners should:

- d. ensure that urgent action is taken to reduce the number of young people aged 16 to 19 who become disengaged from education, employment or training
- e. increase the range of collaborative arrangements between providers to improve young people's access to a wider range of learning opportunities which meet their individual needs
- f. support providers in developing the more extensive use of post-16 value added measures
- g. develop more robust procedures for the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of progress against the 14 to 19 strategy and ensure that partners are kept fully informed of the progress made.

The curriculum and access to, and participation in, education and training

28. The configuration of education and training for young people aged 14 to 19 does not meet the needs of all learners and provides insufficient opportunities for young people who have low levels of attainment to progress. Participation rates of young people aged 16 in education and training in County Durham are low. The number of young people who are not in education, training or employment, or whose destinations are unknown is unacceptably high at 20% and has not improved significantly during the last year. Although the number of 16-year olds progressing to full-time education, employment or training has improved slightly in each of the last two years, the percentage of learners entering employment without training is well above the national average at 5%. The local LSC and LEA are aware that the lack of a comprehensive and reliable audit of provision has impeded curriculum planning at a strategic level and the identification and analysis of curriculum pathways is incomplete.

29. The four colleges offer a comprehensive range of programmes. They each provide well-planned and coherent provision which gives young people choice of academic and vocational programmes. In nearly all curriculum areas, they offer qualifications at a number of levels which provide clear progression routes for learners. Their curriculum provides a good match with the needs of local employers. At county level, there is a broad range of courses at advanced level, including a good choice of GCE AS/A-level subjects. However, the range of vocational options in many school sixth forms is very small. The majority of sixth forms, mostly those located in rural areas, contain fewer than 150 students and in many of these, particularly in the southwest of the county, the choice of subjects is restricted, class sizes are small and progression from Year 12 to Year 13 is low. Although there have been

some attempts to protect minority subjects, schools and colleges have not yet collaborated sufficiently to ensure that students in different parts of the county enjoy satisfactory access to advanced level provision. Progression into HE, currently at 19%, is well below the national average. Improving this to 33% by 2007 is one of the most challenging 14-19 strategic framework targets. The local LSC and LEA have taken action to increase young people's aspirations through the Aimhigher initiative and programmes to improve the participation in HE of young people who have followed vocational and work-based education and training. Activities include master classes for Year 10 pupils, subject specific links with universities, self-motivational days, intensive revision classes and visits to universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. Progression into work-based learning is promoted through initiatives such as challenge events to stimulate interest in advanced apprenticeships.

30. Schools have made effective arrangements to broaden the Key Stage 4 curriculum. All mainstream secondary schools offer at least one vocational qualification for students at Key Stage 4 and approximately 2,800 young people in Years 10 and 11 are studying vocational courses through one of the four IFP partnerships. Some 250 students in each year of Key Stage 4 follow a course in 21st century science and 17 schools make effective use of the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) to provide work-related qualifications. Collaboration between schools and colleges is well established for students aged 14 to 16. Five secondary schools, a special school, one college, a group of seven employers and a national training organisation have collaborated effectively to develop a Pathfinder project, 'Fit for employment', to address local skills shortages in the construction industry. The attendance of the pupils at school has improved and in most cases their attainment at Key Stage 4 has increased. The LEA has effectively promoted a balanced range of specialist schools across the county. At the time of the inspection, there were 28 specialist schools, including one special school, with the remaining secondary schools actively seeking specialist status.

31. Some 19% of young people aged 16 to 19 in education, employment and training are following work-based learning programmes with one of 27 providers. The work-based training programme available in the county is well matched to the needs of the local labour market and results in a majority of learners going into employment upon completion of their training. More than 60% of provision is in construction, engineering and business administration. Although the majority of work-based learners are following apprenticeships, there are insufficient large employers to provide apprenticeship training at advanced level.

32. There is a clear commitment to inclusion. Overall, however, there remains a significant gap between that commitment and effective provision. Many of the initiatives established to improve the outcomes for vulnerable young people have been successful. The entry to employment (E2E) programme is increasingly successful in providing foundation skills for learners otherwise unable to study at higher levels. The 'Impact' programme has been effective in supporting young people who are at risk of disengagement at Key Stage 4. The percentage of traveller children participating at Key Stage 4 is very high at 87%. There is effective provision for anxious children and for young parents. Schools and colleges provide additional studies and enrichment activities to enhance students' learning. There are

appropriate opportunities for students to develop wider social, personal and practical skills. The Youth Forum project, designed to promote the well being of young people residing in Easington, is an outstanding example of the empowerment of students in the context of social education.

33. Other aspects of the provision are less satisfactory. There are no work-based learning programmes as yet at pre-entry level and insufficient programmes at entry level, including significant gaps in the provision in hairdressing, engineering and retail occupations. The provision for young people with special educational needs is particularly restricted and staying-on rates for this group of young people are low. The percentage of young people with statements of special educational needs who became unemployed in 2004 was high at 13%. Many students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities become disengaged from post-16 provision, sometimes as a consequence of poor communication of their individual needs. The local LSC and LEA have identified the need to reduce low levels of literacy and numeracy within the county by addressing students' achievements in basic and key skills, but have yet to implement a co-ordinated strategy. Recent Ofsted inspection reports indicate that colleges do not make a sufficient contribution to improving the levels of functional literacy and numeracy of young people aged 16 to 19. The number of permanent exclusions has increased in each of the last two years and has significantly exceeded the LEA's target. There is currently no post-14 provision in the pupil referral unit. Although the mentoring and academic support arrangements for looked after children have proved effective, the service has yet to develop a range of accredited programmes appropriate to this group. In 2003, only 7% of looked after children achieved five grades A* to C at GCSE and 48% failed to achieve any GCSEs. Only 40% of former care leavers are known to be engaged in education, training and employment.

Recommendations

The LEA, local LSC and their partners should:

- h. develop the curriculum mapping exercise at county and area level to enable a thorough review of the configuration of provision, including access, progression, and alternative provision for post-16 students at all levels
- i. use this analysis to provide a more secure basis for planning by the LEA, the local LSC and providers and to extend collaborative arrangements
- j. increase the availability of pre-entry and entry level qualifications post-16
- k. improve the outcomes and staying-on rates of young people with special educational needs
- l. develop and promote a strategy for improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young people
- m. review the curriculum offered in schools with small sixth forms and make

appropriate interventions where the range, quality or outcomes are unsatisfactory

n. develop further strategies to overcome barriers to learning presented by travel difficulties

o. continue to improve the progression rate of young people into education and training at age 16 and into HE at age 18.

Guidance and support

34. Guidance and support for learners in County Durham are satisfactory. The inspection of the Connexions County Durham partnership in December 2004 found it to be a satisfactory partnership overall. A key priority of the partnership is to reduce the number of young people who leave school without going into education, training or employment. Improved target setting and monitoring has resulted in a modest improvement in each of the last two years, with more 16-year olds moving into FE. However, little progress has been made in reducing the proportion of disengaged young people in the 16 to 19 age group as a whole, which fell by only 0.1% over the last year.

35. Support for young people in learning is good. Pastoral support arrangements in most secondary schools help pupils to make progress and pay good attention to pupils' welfare. School-based provision for young people with special educational needs is good. Academic and pastoral support for learners in the colleges is mostly good, but arrangements to assess and meet learners' additional support needs are unsatisfactory in some cases. Support for learners who attend college part time is less well developed than for full-time students. The majority of work-based learning providers have good arrangements for supporting learners and the others provide satisfactory support. Connexions personal advisors and teachers work together increasingly closely to target learners most in need of support. Personal advisers are very responsive; they address learners' needs quickly once they have been identified and link effectively with education welfare officers, care authorities and external agencies to improve the likelihood of those needs being met.

36. The Connexions partnership has developed attractive and detailed materials to support transition at age 16. Every pupil in Year 10 receives the Key Stage 4 planner 'Get Real' which details all post-16 programmes across the county. Young people can also draw information from a range of CDs and easy-to-read guides. Personal advisers provide impartial advice and guidance on progression opportunities, but the requirement for them to prioritise young people needing most support means that insufficient learners gain the benefit. Too many school pupils and their parents receive insufficient impartial advice on post-16 learning opportunities and are unaware of the range of vocational and work-based learning programmes available. Schools with sixth forms concentrate too much on what is available within the school rather than ensuring each young person can make a fully informed choice about progression. Too many young people select the most convenient post-16 establishment, often their own school sixth form, and reduce their curriculum options; in some cases settling for their second choice subjects at AS level. Few learners take post-16

courses in more than one institution. Some young people do not have sufficient opportunities to engage in work-based learning when selecting options. Option arrangements in Year 9 guide too many learners towards academic options at Key Stage 4. Guidance is related too closely to previous levels of attainment, with work-based learning often promoted as an option for lower attaining pupils. Colleges provide good pre-entry advice and guidance; all the colleges have achieved the recognised kite mark for their advice and guidance provision.

37. Data to monitor guidance, support and learner progress are good and well used. Detailed records provide a complete history from Year 8 onwards including each destination, contact, type of support provided, summary of discussions and links to social workers or care authorities. Young people not in education, training or employment are contacted every 12 weeks by personal advisers, those in training every 6 months and those in education or employment every 12 months. Reports are used to monitor current performance and prompt future actions and are regularly shared with the local LSC. However, systems to track learners who do not complete their post-16 programme or who leave school or college after one year are less well developed. Despite efforts to improve transition planning, the transfer of critical information about young people with special educational needs at the age of 16 is too protracted. This delays the availability of appropriate support and results in some vulnerable young people failing to progress into structured learning or dropping out of it early.

Recommendations

The LEA, local LSC, Connexions service and their partners should:

- p. ensure that schools improve the impartiality of their advice and guidance arrangements for young people and their parents so that they are able to make informed post-16 choices during Key Stage 4
- q. make arrangements to ensure more efficient communication of young people's support needs at key transition points
- r. develop more robust systems to identify, track and support learners who do not complete their post-16 programmes and to monitor the progress of young people at age 17 more effectively.

The quality of 14 to 19 education and training

Achievement

38. Achievement across the 14 to 19 age range is satisfactory. At Key Stage 4 the achievement level remains below the national average but there have been significant improvements in GCSE performance, particularly in the last two years. The proportion of pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE improved from 41.8% in 2001 to 47.5% in 2004. The rate of improvement has been twice the national rate in each of the last

two years. This reflects the contribution of improved participation and attainment in vocational subjects. There have been clear improvements in most of the schools with the lowest levels of achievement. In 2004, there were 4 schools where fewer than 30% of pupils achieved five A* to C grades compared to 12 schools in 2001. Achievement levels vary between areas of the county, with the average for schools in East Durham lower than other areas. Specialist schools perform better on average than non-specialist schools, but this reflects the national picture.

39. The percentage of pupils gaining five A* to C grades including English and mathematics, but not including general national vocational qualifications (GNVQ) passes, has risen from 32.1% in 2002 to 34.5% in 2004. This is in line with the national rate of improvement. The percentage of pupils gaining five A* to G grades has risen by 0.6% over three years compared to a fall nationally of 0.1%

40. The gap in attainment between boys and girls at GCSE is narrower than the national level for higher attaining pupils but wider than the national level for lower attaining pupils. The attainment of pupils in Year 11 in public care has shown steady improvement between 2001 and 2004, but falls short of the targets set by the LEA. Attendance in schools at Key Stage 4 has improved from 91.2% in 2002 to 91.9% in 2004, which is in line with the rate of improvement nationally.

41. Value-added scores from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 have improved. Data which compare schools of a similar type show a significant improvement over the last four years in the value added in most schools in the county. In 2004, only 2 schools performed below expectations compared with 15 in 2001. Some 12 schools performed above expectations compared to one in 2001, and 31 out of 36 schools improved their ranking during this period. Value-added is better for boys than for girls and is stronger for higher achieving pupils. The value-added from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 does not demonstrate the same gains.

42. At GCE A level, the overall achievement level remains below the national average but, again, there has been a faster rate of improvement. In school sixth forms the A-level points score per student has improved from 246.6 in 2002 to 260.9 in 2004, compared with an improvement nationally from 264.1 and 270.2. The gap between male and female performance is narrower than that nationally. There is considerable variation in GCE A-level performance between schools: of the 17 schools with sixth forms, 5 have points per student scores of 200 or less. Each of these schools has fewer than 150 students in the sixth form and four of the five are located in the south west of the county. The relatively lower points scores in smaller sixth forms are also reflected in lower value added scores.

43. In the colleges the overall success rates on courses at levels 1, 2 and 3 have improved over the last three years and are now above the national averages. Overall retention rates are broadly in line with national averages. Poor performance at level 2 has been a significant issue in recent years. However, in 2003/04, the retention rate at level 2 improved by 9%, the pass rate improved by 17% and the overall success rate at level 2 improved to 60%, which is 8% above the national average. GCE A-level performance in the colleges

ranges from 136 points per student to 177 points per student, which represents an overall improvement over the last two years, but indicates the degree of variation between colleges.

44. Achievement in work-based learning has improved, but remains low. There is a clearly improving trend in framework achievement rates on apprenticeship programmes, currently at 38% compared with the national average of 34%. Positive progression outcomes on the E2E programme are 46% compared with the national average of 43%. The most recent college inspections have judged the performance of their work-based learning programmes to be satisfactory.

Quality of education and training

45. Teaching and training satisfactorily meet the needs of most young people across the area. There are no longer any schools in special measures or colleges judged inadequate and only one work-based learning provider is due to be re-inspected because of significant weaknesses. Recent Ofsted inspections have found teaching and learning at Key Stage 4 in those secondary schools inspected to be at least satisfactory and mostly good, enabling pupils to make good progress. Data shows the quality of teaching and learning to be broadly in line with the national average, although the proportion of teaching and learning which is very good or excellent is below average. In special schools, the quality of teaching and learning is consistently good. The very effective Beyond Expectations Transformation Team initiative is sharply focused on raising attainment through improving the quality of teaching and learning. The team is highly responsive to the needs within individual schools and has provided good support for teachers introducing new vocational courses. In some instances, this has taken the form of network groups for specific vocational interests. The initiative has helped to increase teachers' confidence to teach new courses and encouraged more collaboration between schools. There is very good practice in the use of ILT in some schools, notably those which are part of the information and communication technology (ICT) test bed, but its use in others is poorly developed.

46. In colleges, teaching and learning are satisfactory overall, with clear evidence of improvement in curriculum areas previously found to be unsatisfactory. Recent Ofsted inspections found the proportion of good teaching to be broadly in line with the national average in three of the colleges and significantly above the national average in New College, Durham. Again, the proportion of very good and excellent lessons is below the national level. At New College, Durham good teaching and learning are cited as a key strength of the college. At Derwentside College there is good teaching on level 3 courses for students aged 16 to 18. In Bishop Auckland College, inspectors found some very effective differentiated teaching in lessons which took account of the varying needs and abilities of students, but also some dull and uninspiring teaching. In East Durham and Houghall Community College there is little unsatisfactory teaching, but the proportion of good or better teaching for students aged 16 to 18 is below average. In two of the colleges, the use of ILT in teaching and learning is an area for improvement.

47. The quality of teaching and learning in work-based learning is satisfactory overall.

Where this was not previously the case, recent re-inspection of provision found that training had improved to a satisfactory standard. Where provision under the IFP has been surveyed by Ofsted, teaching and learning have been good and the learners involved have been exceptionally well motivated and enthusiastic and have demonstrated very positive attitudes to learning.

48. Inspection reports clearly identify weaknesses in the development of literacy and numeracy in some schools and colleges. In the schools, strategies to support learners with weak literacy skills are not always consistently applied and not all departments within each school have developed programmes to improve literacy and numeracy standards. Although the quality of existing literacy and numeracy support in colleges is often good, it is neither sufficient nor diverse enough to meet the range of needs. There are weaknesses in key skills provision in several colleges. In a county with an exceptionally high proportion of adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills, it is critical that these weaknesses in 14 to 19 provision are resolved.

Resources

49. Funding levels are adequate to meet the education and training needs of most young people. Partners make good use of opportunities to access regional, national and international funding initiatives, particularly those targeted at areas of social deprivation. A broad range of funding sources, including the Leadership Incentive Grant, the Specialist Schools initiative, and the European Social Fund, support existing programmes. However, the short-term nature and inflexibility of some funding streams inhibits the sustainable development of initiatives. The inability to plan for the longer term is a major constraint and hugely frustrating for the staff involved, particularly where such initiatives have clearly demonstrated their value in improving the quality of learning and outcomes for young people.

50. The quality of accommodation and resources to support learning is satisfactory overall, though varies considerably. Some schools, such as the Byron College sixth form centre in Peterlee, enjoy attractive accommodation and good resources. Although enterprising use is often made of the accommodation available, much school accommodation is ageing and drab. County Durham has been accepted into the third wave of the Building Schools for the Future programme, but it will be several years before the benefits start to be realised. In the colleges, recent inspections have recognised the high standard and facilities of new buildings, but have also highlighted deficiencies in accommodation as an area for improvement. The standard of resources in specialist vocational areas within the colleges and some training providers is often very high, particularly where centres of vocational excellence have been established.

51. The quality of staff, particularly teachers, across the range of providers is good. Some schools have encountered difficulties in recruiting teachers in certain subjects, but overall recruitment and retention of teachers have not been major issues. The LEA's work in assuring the supply and quality of teachers was recognised as good in its last inspection. There is a strong commitment to the continuing professional development of staff. Recently

this has provided a strong focus on supporting and improving the teaching of vocational subjects, including applied GCSEs. Careers co-ordinators in schools have good access to training made available through the Connexions partnership and other providers. Thirty schools are currently collaborating on a school-based initial teacher training project designed to train mature entrants with vocational experience. The initiative has the potential to significantly strengthen and extend the existing vocational provision in schools.

Recommendations

- r. Schools and colleges should ensure that improvements in achievement rates at Key Stage 4 and level 2 post-16 are sustained.
- s. The LEA should address the deficiencies in school accommodation.
- t. The LEA and local LSC should increase opportunities for best practice to be shared within and between providers and across sectors, to promote high standards of teaching and training, and the effective use of ILT to support learning.
- u. The LEA, local LSC and their partners should develop joint strategies to secure the sustainability of 14 to 19 initiatives which only have short term funding.

Notes