

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education
Via email: sec-of-state.ps@education.gov.uk

17 February 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

The role of colleges in Local Skills Improvement Plans

We are writing to you as the college leaders participating in the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) trailblazers. We are wholly supportive of the ambitions of the skills reform agenda and the vital role that colleges play as anchor institutions.

LSIPs can become an important mechanism for agreeing the long-term priorities of a locality, defining how employers will work with colleges and empowering colleges and other providers to work together in pursuit of these priorities. That is why we were so keen to participate in the LSIP trailblazer programme. Our experience so far through the LSIP trailblazers is that this new approach can really work – at its best, it is strengthening and building upon existing relationships while also bringing new partners to the conversation, and it is helping to ensure that our collective focus is on the long-term skills needs of a locality.

However, we are keen to share three areas where the approach can and should be developed further.

Firstly, the new model has to act to involve a genuine strategic partnership between employers, FE providers and other key stakeholders such as elected Mayors and local government, focused on:

- long-term priorities, not just the more immediate skills needs they face
- what each partner, including employers, brings to the relationship
- supporting businesses to be successful, to grow, to innovate, to recruit, to develop people and to have the skills, investment, and advice they need to succeed
- recruitment and retention, emerging sector priorities and the new skills these require, and priorities for innovation and business change.

Secondly, whilst it is right and important that FE providers and employers are focussed on local strategic priorities, it is important that every LSIP operates within a framework of national priorities too.

Thirdly, we note that LSIPs are one side of the Skills Accelerator programme, sitting alongside the Strategic Development Fund (SDF). The SDF is of vital importance, in providing capacity for FE providers to work together to develop their offer to employers in the locality, including on innovation and advice to employers, alongside skills provision.

These issues have been a matter of considerable informed and lively debate throughout the progress of the Post 16 Education and Skills Bill through parliament. We have three areas where we believe the Bill can be strengthened:

1. The role of colleges be strengthened on the face of the legislation, holding us jointly responsible for the development of local strategies – reflecting the important amendment you brought forward strengthening the role of elected mayors.
2. The development of a national post 16 education and skills strategy, that is developed and held across government – and to which LSIPs would make reference, applying these priorities to their local context.
3. Retaining the Skills Development Fund alongside LSIPs into one overarching model – strengthening the strategic capacity and responsibility of FE providers to work as partners with employers and other key stakeholders.

We – and our colleagues across the sector - are absolutely committed to our role as sector leaders in ensuring the skills reform programme is a success. And we recognise that it is only through taking a shared responsibility – alongside government – that the full potential of the reforms can be realised. It is in this context that we are sharing these three areas, which would best enable us to deliver on these shared ambitions.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Paul Phillips CBE - Principal and Chief Executive, Weston College

Yiannis Koursis - Principal and Chief Executive, Barnsley College

Chris Nattress - Principal, Lakes College

Simon Cook – Principal, MidKent College

Phil Cook - Education Training Collective, Chief Executive and Group Principal

Alison Robinson - Chief Executive and Principal, Myerscough College

Andrew Green - Chief Executive Officer, Chichester College Group

Jo Maher – Chief Executive and Principal, Loughborough College

Darren Hankey - Principal and Chief Executive, Hartlepool College

Zoe Lewis - Principal and Chief Executive, Middlesbrough College

Martin Raby - Principal & Chief Executive, The Northern School of Art

Kate Roe - Principal and Chief Executive, Darlington College