

Ensuring appropriate and accessible post 16 education and training provision in rural Shropshire is a real challenge. A free market approach would potentially fail to meet such a challenge and could destabilise the existing provider base. This paper aims to outline the issues for post 16 provision in Shropshire.

## **Context**

- There are eight 11-18 schools of which six are Academies
- There are five colleges in Shropshire one of which specialises in provision for young people with severe disabilities
- There is a significant decline in pupil numbers in Shropshire (8.2% in secondary school year 11 students over the next 5 years) which bucks the national trend of growth. However, this decline is not evenly spread and varies by local area.

## **1. Demographics**

Key issues raised by providers:-

The decline in student numbers will:-

- Create a reduction in curriculum diversity; more subject areas will become marginalised through lower recruitment and funding changes.
- Intensify competition between providers i.e. smaller critical mass of students against a potential back drop of an increase in the number of post 16 providers.
- Contribute to further financial pressures, over and above substantial cuts in funding for 16-18 education, because funding is driven by student numbers.

Potential impact/ consequence for young people

- Courses being withdrawn due to insufficient numbers and courses not being financially viable
- Young people will have restricted curriculum choice at some institutions and, therefore, base post 16 decisions on course availability, which may involve increased travel to learn distances. This could deter some young people from continuing their education/ training post 16, increasing the risk of becoming NEET.

## **2. Funding**

Key issues raised by providers:-

- Imposed national changes to post 16 funding has meant a reducing budget for all providers. The costs of delivery could soon be greater than student funding levels.
- Increases to employers' contributions to staff pensions and NI contributions will impact on schools and colleges in 2016. This will add in additional costs creating a further burden on the reducing levels of national 16-19 funding.
- As a result of demographic changes school sixth form funding may have to be 'topped up' with 11-16 funds if recruitment reduces year on year.

Potential impact/ consequence for young people

- Courses designed to facilitate financial efficiency may not fully meet young person's needs and could result in a narrower choice with the possibility of some subjects disappearing.
- The spread and range of provision across Shropshire could be dictated by reducing budgets. This could mean the loss of provision in smaller market towns and young people will then have to travel further to access provision of choice.

### 3. Provision/ Curriculum

Key issues raised by providers:-

- It is crucial that a mix of high quality learning provision is accessible to maintain high levels of participation. This is particularly important given the cost and provision of public transport.
- Whilst the current national policy of competition within the education sector has the potential to raise standards the 'free market' approach could also destabilise existing provision. If further additions to the current provider base continues this will lead to potentially unviable institutions across Shropshire.
- The quality of the information, advice and guidance (IAG) young people receive pre 16 will influence their choice as they move forward with education/ training aged 16. The notion of impartial and robust IAG is crucial and should be focussed on young people's needs.

Potential impact/ consequence for young people

- Course availability will become more restricted; students requiring a particular mix of subjects/ qualifications will have limited choice. Access to the choice of course is already a challenge for some young people in our more rural areas, due to limited public transport.
- In areas where new provision becomes available, whilst offering choice for young people, this could lead to over provision rather than being responsive to young people's needs.
- Cost of transport could prohibit and be a limiting factor to participation in further education or training. In addition some external providers are providing free/ heavily subsidised transport. Young people could make decisions based on financial commitment as opposed to choice of course, students access inappropriate courses, choose external providers or not participate at all.

### SLN member's response/actions

The Shropshire Learning Network (SLN) provides a forum to explore solutions. SLN membership represents all who contribute to, or support, education and training for learners 14-19/ 25 (aged 14 -19 and up to age 25 for high needs learners) in Shropshire. The role of the 14-19/ 25 network is to develop plans aligned with LA statutory responsibility and national direction.

The SLN membership agrees the following guiding principles be considered for future planning:-

- New provision is not the solution.
- Any solutions need to be scoped and considered to ensure they benefit young people. There are a range of possible solutions (i.e. soft or hard federation, agreements between providers on curriculum offer, merger, consolidation, etc.).
- Key institutional decisions are the responsibility of governing bodies of schools, colleges and training providers.
- The Local Authority has a responsibility to ensure sufficient, suitable, accessible and high quality provision.
- All stakeholders must be fully involved in any solution(s).
- Collaboration is possible, but requires real commitment, trust and honesty.
- An effective and affordable transport system is essential.

In response to issues raised within the paper SLN is proposing:-

- To research potential models for collaborative working/possible solutions for sustainability which ultimately benefit young people in Shropshire.
- To develop a financial modelling tool to support school sixth forms with budget forecasting. This will complement the pre 16 financial modelling work from schools forum.
- To initiate further communication with post 16 providers, governing bodies and local members. Councillor Nick Bardsley, deputy cabinet member for children's services, has a post 16 brief and provides a valuable link between schools forum, SLN and Shropshire councillors and officers, therefore, ensuring an informed dialogue between SLN members and the Shropshire Council's ruling administration.