

RURAL LENS REVIEW



Skills for Jobs
Lifelong learning for
opportunity and
growth

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INTRODUCTION

The White Paper *Skills for Jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* was published on 21st January 2021.

'Rural' does not appear to be mentioned anywhere in the document. Nor are land-based colleges specifically discussed. Like many other Government statements and strategies, you are left wondering **how much of the funding/opportunities will really come into rural areas and benefit rural communities?** Will rural proofing **before** the setting of policy details and budget allocations actually take place?

The devil will be in the detail and at the RSN we will be closely monitoring these issues and making representations where necessary. This in line with our Revitalising Rural – Realising the Vision ambitions.

In our review of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Plan for Jobs (2020), which sought to sustain a recovery from the pandemic, we called for a more nuanced to the package of measures. Otherwise, the measures would fail properly to address the circumstances found in rural areas.

For now, we set out what we think, on first examination, are the key take outs from the White Paper and some brief RSN comments.

Generally, we do not repeat issues already referred to in our review of the Spending Review 2020, though do so where appropriate to the significance of the issues concerned. We only review specific proposals rather than the (often repeated throughout and across the document) generalised statements etc. From the Introduction we only include selected statements about the White Paper's rationale. Proposals where we see no specific rural elements have been left out for brevity – although all these points have relevance to the whole country. We start off by listing the main topics covered by the White Paper.

It is likely that further detail about specific measures and how they will be delivered will be set out in later documents.

Key areas in the SKILLS FOR JOBS WHITE PAPER and Rural Services Network comments

Skills for Jobs statements (using the Government's headings and words)		RSN initial comments
<p align="center">Key topics covered by the White Paper and its rationale</p>	<p>Chapter 1: Putting employers at the heart of post-16 skills Chapter 2: Providing the advanced technical and higher technical skills the nation needs Chapter 3: A Flexible Lifetime Skills Guarantee Chapter 4: Responsive providers, supported by more effective accountability and funding Chapter 5: Supporting outstanding teaching</p> <p>The introduction to the White Papers makes the overarching case for change in the following terms:</p> <p>Our skills system has been very efficient at producing graduates but has been less able to help people get the quality technical skills that employers want.</p> <p>There are currently significant skills gaps at higher technical levels. We do not have enough technicians, engineers or health and social care professionals to meet the many vital challenges we face, from building our green economy to meeting the health and care needs of our ageing population. Across a range of sectors, there is growing employer demand for the skills that higher technical education provides. Investing in these skills at both a local and a national level is critical to improving our productivity and international competitiveness.</p>	<p>The broad policy direction of the White Paper is helpful, but how it gets implemented will be key from a rural perspective. It is notable that issues concerning local access to skills training do not really feature within the proposed White Paper approach. Indeed, it could be said to overlook geographic variation. Whilst delivery organisations and partnerships will doubtless seek to manage variation in due course, policies still need to be designed at the national level in ways which suit rural needs and circumstances.</p> <p>Previous work has shown that issues with further education provision for many rural residents include: physical access to (or distance from) colleges; limited choice in terms of accessing colleges and courses; and the costs associated with travel to colleges.</p>

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<p>Key topics covered by the White Paper and its rationale.</p> <p>Continued.</p>	<p>Current funding rules encourage providers to put on cheaper and lower-value courses which can be filled easily. Ringfenced funding and excessive bureaucracy also stop colleges and providers from being as responsive and flexible as they would like.</p> <p>In addition to the problems that individual providers face, there is no mechanism to understand and address the gaps that local areas face in skills provision. Employers and providers do not always work together to agree what skills are needed to meet local labour market demands.</p> <p>It adds that: We are building on our successful apprenticeship reforms, where a focus on employer needs and standards transformed apprenticeships from a second-rate option to a prestigious choice.</p>	
<p>Chapter 1: Putting employers at the heart of post-16 skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give employers a central role working with further education colleges, other providers and local stakeholders to develop new Local Skills Improvement Plans which shape technical skills provision so that it meets local labour market skills needs. • Pilot Local Skills Improvement Plans in Trailblazer local areas, exploring an approach where they are led by accredited Chambers of Commerce and other business representative organisations in collaboration with local providers; and engage employer and provider groups to ensure we create the most effective models of employer representation before wider rollout. 	<p>This process should include rural-based employers, including SMEs, and must not be left solely to large, well-known urban-based employers. All those involved, though, will need a sufficiently broad perspective of labour market needs across different types of areas.</p> <p>It is important that some rural areas are included among the pilot Trailblazer local areas, so the approach can be tested and early lessons learnt in a rural environment. Not least, as the approach builds on the largely urban experience of Mayoral Combined Authorities and of LEPs (which have a mixed record on rural delivery).</p>

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<p>Chapter 1: Putting employers at the heart of post-16 skills</p> <p>Continued.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Strategic Development Funding available in 2021/22 in a number of pilot areas to support colleges to reshape their provision to address local priorities that have been agreed with local employers. • Align the substantial majority of post-16 technical and higher technical education and training to employer-led standards set by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, so skills provision meets skills need. • Continue to improve and grow apprenticeships, so more employers and individuals can benefit from them as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. Improve the quality of traineeships, to better support young people to transition to apprenticeships and other occupations. • Invite proposals through the Strategic Development Fund to establish College Business Centres within further education colleges to work with employers in a designated sector on business development and innovation. 	<p>As above. This funding must reach some rural areas and support provision that has been shaped by rural (as well as urban) employers.</p> <p>The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education must be alive to the skill needs of particular rural-based businesses, including SMEs, the self-employed and those in the land-based sector.</p> <p>It is welcome that plans are afoot to try and improve the transfer of funding raised through the Apprenticeship Levy so it benefits SMEs. Rural economies are dominated by SMEs (with many being micro-businesses).</p> <p>Specific effort should be made to encourage a good number of rural-based FE institutions to establish College Business Centres, not least because many rural students only have (at best) reasonable travel options to one college.</p>
<p>Chapter 2: Providing the advanced technical and higher technical skills the nation needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the new £2.5 billion National Skills Fund to enhance the funding to support adults to upskill and reskill. This will include an offer, backed by £95 million in 2021-22, for all adults to achieve their first full advanced (level 3) qualification as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. 	<p>This would be a welcome move, though more information will be needed how the funding is to be allocated or drawn down to ensure that there is a fair geographic distribution.</p>

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<p>Chapter 2: Providing the advanced technical and higher technical skills the nation needs.</p> <p>Continued.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to roll out T Levels, to prepare students for entry into skilled employment or higher levels of technical study, including apprenticeships. • Create clear progression routes for students towards the higher-level technical qualifications that employers need. 	<p>Again, this would be a welcome move. The wider roll out should be used to ensure T levels become widely available to rural students.</p> <p>Whilst welcome in principle, the rural dimension will need careful development. Creating progression routes is likely to prove more challenging in areas where the choice of colleges and training institutions is limited.</p>
<p>Chapter 3: A Flexible Lifetime Skills Guarantee</p>	<p>Note: The Lifetime Skills Guarantee for those aged 18 or over was announced earlier in September 2020 by Government. The White Paper focusses on measures for its implementation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the flexible Lifelong Loan Entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education from 2025. • As a pathway towards the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, we will stimulate the provision of high-quality higher technical education (levels 4 and 5), as we work towards making it as easy to get a student finance loan for an approved Higher Technical Qualification as it is for a full-length degree. • Introduce pilots to stimulate higher technical education and incentivise more flexible and modular provision. • Improve how teaching is delivered so that it is more accessible, with the use of digital and blended learning. 	<p>This is welcome. The key rural issue will be how easy it is to use, given issues for some of access to and choice of post-18 education.</p> <p>As the Lifelong Loan Entitlement is introduced Government should measure and monitor how far it is stimulating a range of higher technical education opportunities that are accessible to residents from rural areas across the country.</p> <p>These pilots should include some rural areas so the approach can be tested in them and early lessons learnt.</p> <p>Continuing issues with digital connectivity in rural areas need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. One in six rural premises cannot yet access a superfast broadband connection.</p>

Skills for Jobs statements (using the Government's headings and words)		RSN initial comments
<p>Chapter 4: Responsive providers, supported by more effective accountability and funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will consult on the following proposals to reform our funding and accountability system: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simplification and streamlining of funding for further education to support high-value provision relevant to the labour market, with elements of simplified and streamlined funding to be tested ahead of consultation. - Give more certainty to providers over their funding, including considering how we could move to a multi-year funding regime. - Reform our accountability approach, relaxing ringfences and reporting; instead focusing on outcomes. - Introduce new accountability structures to underpin the delivery of Local Skills Improvement Plans. • We will continue to invest in the college estate, to transform facilities and enable high-quality provision. 	<p>No details of the proposals are yet available. However, the intention to simplify the current funding system is welcome. Any new funding system must ensure fair geographic allocation so students and trainees benefit from similar opportunities wherever they live. Development funding may need targeting at some rural areas to enhance provision and its accessibility. This should take account of extra costs providers face in sparsely populated areas e.g., lost economies of scale / smaller classes.</p> <p>Investment in college estates should seek to benefit all types of colleges – larger and smaller – and hence their students. It should avoid the trap of focussing on larger colleges just to hit target numbers.</p>
<p>Chapter 5: Supporting outstanding teaching</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch a national recruitment campaign for teachers in further education settings. • Improve the provision of high-quality professional development and support progression for teachers. • Support apprenticeship teachers and lecturers with a tailored professional development offer. 	<p>See below on workforce data collection.</p> <p>Professional development opportunities must be delivered in ways which are accessible for rural-based teachers, including apprenticeship teachers. This could include outreach provision (e.g., at rural town facilities) and making more content available online.</p>

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<p>Chapter 5: Supporting outstanding teaching.</p> <p>Continued</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce comprehensive workforce data collection. 	<p>Workforce data collection is welcome. That data should be geographically tagged and disaggregated, so localised shortages can be identified and addressed. It would also help if national statistics reported using the ONS/Defra rural-urban definition, to test whether any workforce issues are different in rural areas.</p>
<p>Not covered by the White Paper</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>Students aged 17 and 18 should be entitled to statutory free travel to schools and colleges, matching the current entitlement up to age 16 and those aged 17+ in London. This should be fully funded by Government.</p> <p>More effort should go into making training course content accessible to rural residents e.g., using online or outreach provision.</p> <p>Careers advice has been improving and is vital to boost the aspirations, not least of young people in rural areas, and to help them navigate career pathways. More needs doing to ensure that careers advisers understand opportunities in the land-based sector.</p> <p>The Government needs to ensure that its skills proposals are joined up with other recent policy announcements. There are many skills needs in and opportunities for rural areas relating to the net zero agenda (as indicated by the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution).</p>