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Best Practice in Tackling NEETs

Interim Summary Report for
Colleges and e2e Partnerships

June 2008



Simon Bysse
and
Dorothy Berry-Lound

HOST Policy Research
PO Box 144, Horsham, West Sussex, RH12 1YS
Tel: 01403 211440 Fax: 01403 251866
Email: info@hostpolicyresearch.com
Website: <http://www.hostpolicyresearch.com>

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Best Practice in Tackling NEETs -
Interim summary report for colleges and
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Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In January 2008, HOST Policy Research (HOST) was commissioned by LSC West Yorkshire to undertake the second phase of the Young Persons' Study, which has been tasked with undertaking research to identify best practice in tackling NEETs.

This interim summary report has been written for colleges and e2e partnerships in West Yorkshire to provide:

- a) Further information about the research and about which organisations are acting as case studies.
- b) Feedback from the Stakeholder Workshop that was held at LSC West Yorkshire on 28 April 2008.

The report concerns recently funded *flexible starts provision* in colleges and the more established work in *e2e partnerships*. In regard to the former, following work undertaken by Bradford College in 2007/8 in trialling flexible starts provision, aimed particularly at those young people in the NEET group, the LSC commissioned further pilot projects in nine colleges in early 2008 to test out new delivery mechanisms and approaches aimed at the client group.

In terms of the latter, there are four *e2e partnerships* in West Yorkshire delivering individually tailored programmes to those young people who are not yet ready to access a level 2 course, post-16. The design of the programme has recently been revised into a three tier system, a structure which is understood to be unique to West Yorkshire. The three tiers are:

Tier 1: An intensive support programme for the most vulnerable young people facing a range of issues that are a barrier to them participating, and succeeding, in continued learning.

Tier 2: A structure programme consisting of: basic and key skills, vocational skills and development, and personal and social development skills.

Tier 3: Tailored support required to facilitate young people's progression from e2e onto appropriate Apprenticeship programmes.

1.2 Project purpose and aims

The *overall purpose* of the research project is to evaluate a number of good practice interventions or systems, and through *collaborative research* to identify the key mechanisms of success that can inform policies, priorities, action plans and the design of the 14-19 system to facilitate improved participation, retention and success of post-16 learners.

Aims

Within the overall project rationale, its *three key aims* are:

1. To assess on an individual project basis, where relevant: what happened; how it happened; why it happened.

2. To assess the impact of individual case study projects, including addressing: whether the project's aims were met or exceeded; the effects of each project intervention; evidence of effective innovative approaches and actions; what products, services and knowledge can be mainstreamed or shared, including how innovation can be enhanced and applied through similar projects, and consistency increased.
3. To report on findings, make recommendations, and assist with their dissemination through events and best practice guides.

Objectives

The specific objectives for the project are:

1. To identify with the practitioner community in West Yorkshire the appropriate interventions/providers to evaluate.
2. To review the background to identified interventions/providers, including their aims, learner engagement, scope, and stakeholders/third parties.
3. To review through desk research and fieldwork in co-operation with practitioners what activity has taken place, including its impact and wider contribution to the project's aims and objectives.
4. To identify and specify through desk research and fieldwork, in co-operation with practitioners, why certain activities have taken place, including their rationale, types of participation and partnership arrangements.
5. To review the impact and success of the interventions, including considering: a) learner progress and outcomes (including positive and unexpected outcomes); b) lessons learnt (including regarding delivery mechanisms and dissemination methods); c) innovation (including mainstreaming potential and how to ensure a more consistent approach based on best practice across West Yorkshire).
6. To produce two guides covering respectively best practice in e2e and delivering flexible starts to learning provision and facilitating agreed events.

Following this introductory section, the report contains two further sections covering respectively:

- **Section 2: Case Study Research.** This section sets out the research questions the case studies are addressing, the research methodology, and which organisations are involved.
- **Section 3: Stakeholder Workshop.** This section sets out the key discussion points raised at the workshop and highlights some questions arising from it.

HOST would like to thank all those who have been involved in the research to date for their co-operation and support.

If you have any comments, or queries, about the research, please do not hesitate to contact Simon Bysse, Project Director: 01733-252799, e-mail: simon@sbassociates.org.uk.

Section 2: Case Study Research

2.1 Introduction

The research is being undertaken predominantly through considering best practice in tackling NEETs respectively in six case studies agreed with the e2e partnerships, and six with general further education (GFE) colleges that have secured funding to pilot flexible starts provision.

2.2 Research questions

The four key research questions to be investigated through the best practice case study research are:

1. *What is being done* (including by whom and when)?
2. *How does it work* (including the key processes and success factors)?
3. *What are the outcomes* (particularly regarding enabling young people to progress)?
4. *What needs to be done to support best practice* (by organisations/wider partnerships and policy-makers/funders)?

In the *context of e2e*, the overall question to be answered is: *How well is the Three-Tier e2e model working?* The key issues within this in regard to considering successful practice in e2e are:

1. **Engagement - including:** What does best practice in Tier One provision look like? How are young people being identified and engaged? What is attracting them to the provision?
2. **Core offer - including:** What does best practice in Tier Two provision look like? What programme offers have proved successful, with whom and why?
3. **Progression - including:** What does best practice in Tier Three provision look like? What transitions do young people make between tiers of provision? What have the outcomes been for young people (both during the programme and on exit)?
4. **Partners and processes - including:** What key roles are being played by different staff and partners? What support or other processes have proved necessary in delivering successful practice? What needs to be done to support best practice?

Similarly, in the *context of flexible starts*, the key issues to be explored in regard to flexible start provision are:

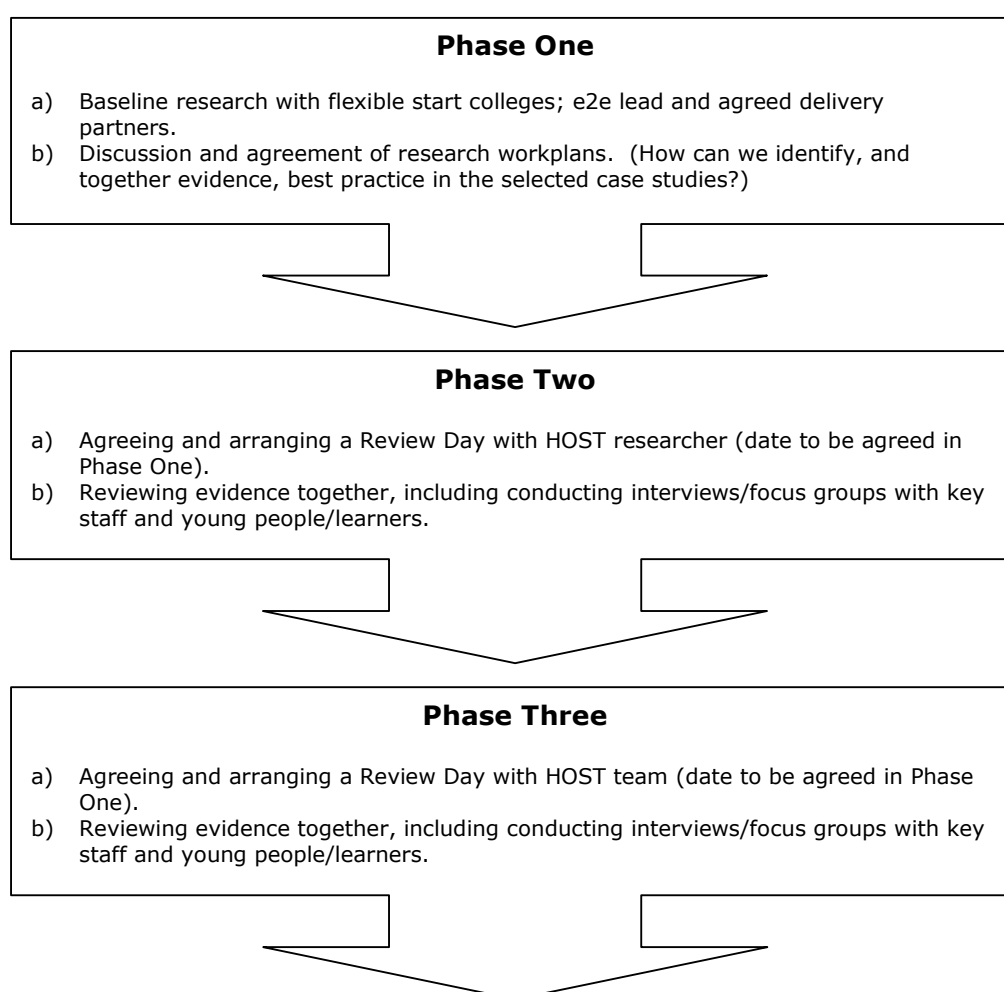
1. **Engagement - including:** How were young people identified and engaged? What attracted them to the provision?
2. **Curriculum offer - including:** What curriculum offers are proving successful, with whom and why?

3. **Progression - including:** What have the outcomes been for young people (both during the programme and on exit)?
4. **Partners and processes - including:** What key roles are being played by different staff and partners? What support processes have proved necessary in delivering successful practice? Overall, what needs to be done to support best practice?

2.3 Case studies - research methodology

Research with the case studies is being undertaken in three phases, as follows:

Figure 2.1: Research with case studies



Source: HOST Policy Research, Best Practice in Tackling NEETs - research for LSC West Yorkshire, 2008

The first phase of the research was undertaken during April 2008. This consisted of meetings with managers responsible respectively for e2e, and/or flexible start delivery, and tutors and others involved in direct delivery.

Baseline reports were drawn up by the HOST research team and outline research workplans developed, both of which are subject to clearance by case studies. These are not included, but will be reported on at the end of the research.

2.4 Case studies

The finalised list of case studies is set out below:

Figure 2.2: Best practice case studies

Colleges (flexible starts)	e2e
Bradford College	A&R Training Services (Huddersfield), BTCV (Wakefield)
Dewsbury College	Bradford Distributive Training Services Ltd (Bradford)
Huddersfield Technical College	Bradford Foyer (Bradford)
Joseph Priestley College	igen Future Pathways (Leeds)
Leeds College of Building	MPC North (Wakefield)
Wakefield College	Project Challenge (Huddersfield)

Source: HOST Policy Research, Best Practice in Tackling NEETs - research for LSC West Yorkshire, 2008

Work to be explored through the case studies includes:

- In flexible starts:** The different approaches taken to delivery (eg the Xplorer programme at HTC and the Shuffle programme at Dewsbury College); the outcomes, effects and key success factors in the way that the colleges and Careers/Connexions staff have worked together (eg at Bradford College); the views of staff and learners on the effectiveness of flexible starts provision in specific vocational areas (in different Construction trades at Leeds College of Building, and in Construction and Health and Beauty at Joseph Priestley College).
- In e2e:** The work undertaken in different forms of Tier One provision (eg Project Challenge and A&R Training Services); effective ways of linking and delivering Tiers One and Two provision (eg Bradford Foyer, A&R Training Services); best practice in matching learners with work placements and in supporting employers (eg Bradford and District Distributive Trades); best practice in supporting learners (eg igen); effectiveness of specialist provision (eg MPC North and BTCV); developing training and approaches to meet the needs of specific employers (eg igen's developing work with Ventura).

As indicated, once completed, a research report will be produced for the project, alongside a summary report and separate best practice guides for e2e and flexible starts provision.

The latter will be made available in early 2009 and will, with other project outcomes, be disseminated through workshops for both managers and practitioners in February 2009.

Section 3: Stakeholder Workshop

3.1 Introduction

The Stakeholder Workshop was held on 28 April 2008 at West Yorkshire LSC. It provided an opportunity for key stakeholders involved in the best practice research in tackling NEETs to come together to consider progress made to date and emerging good practice through the e2e and flexible start case studies.

A wide range of bodies accepted the invitation to attend. These included: colleges and e2e providers involved in the case studies; Careers Companies/Connexions; Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Local Authority (LA) representatives. Around 40 representatives attended for all, or part of, the day.

3.2 Workshop aims

The aims of the workshop were to:

1. Introduce the collaborative research programme and review work undertaken to date.
2. Enable colleges and e2e case studies to outline the work they are planning/undertaking, and to consider what we want to learn collectively through the projects, including ways of evidencing success.
3. Consider emerging good practice in respect to e2e and flexible starts delivery under a number of agreed themes.
4. Explore ways of maximising learning of '*What Works*', and how to implement this, in regard to helping young people at risk of being NEET into appropriate options.
5. Consider the next steps in respect to the research.

During the day, *three discussion groups* were held - two in the morning and one in the afternoon. The aim of the morning workshops was twofold:

1. To enable participants from case studies to provide *brief background* information about themselves and their work/provision.
2. To discuss the *key issues and challenges* facing all providers in: a) engaging young people who are NEET; b) developing suitable provision for them; c) helping them to progress into appropriate opportunities.

Following a review of the situation at lunchtime, the afternoon group discussions were re-arranged, with one focusing on identifying good practice in regard to recruitment, induction and assessment, and the other on good practice in regard to progression.

During the day, participants were invited to note down particular comments and points on a working document, '*What Works?*' (eg in the form of '*best practice tips*').

3.3 Workshop evaluation

Just under three quarters (74%) of participants who completed evaluation forms (20 responses)¹ indicated that they thought the workshop was very useful (11%) or useful (63%), with the balance (26%) assessing it as being fairly useful.

A majority indicated that the five specific aims of the workshop had been *fully met*, ranging from 89 per cent in the case of aim 1, to 53 per cent in the cases of aims 3 and 4, with the balance indicating they had been partly met.

In terms of specific comments, some thought the day could have been shortened (eg: *'May be an idea to have held over half a day - timings shortened in some sections to allow this'*) but others indicated it had been useful to have the opportunity to network (eg: *'Good to have chance to network with other providers and colleges, and share good practice'*).

3.4 Issues and challenges

As indicated, one of the aims of discussions were to highlight key issues and challenges in respect to developing best practice in tackling NEETs, under the key thematic headings of:

- **Engagement** (particularly regarding initially engaging young people).
- **Provision** (particularly regarding developing effective provision for young people).
- **Progression** (particularly enabling young people to progress).

In respect to each, key points made during the discussions included in turn:

Engagement

Early identification of those at risk: The need to: *'...catch young people'* at risk of becoming NEET at an early stage was highlighted by a number of participants. As one group put it: *'We need effective preventative work to help stop young people becoming NEET in the first place.'*

Inter-agency working and referrals: There appear to be concerns about the way that referral agencies (including Connexions) are working with providers (both in respect of colleges and e2e partners), with feedback from group discussions suggesting this is working better in some areas in West Yorkshire than in others.

Specific issues raised included the *level of information* available about young people on entry to programmes, and in some cases the lack of effective protocols for sharing *sensitive information* with providers.

The group that met in the afternoon considering recruitment induction and assessment highlighted the need to tackle issues such as developing inter-agency working and ensuring: *'...appropriate referrals'* by developing:

- *'A partnership between referral agencies and delivery providers supported by joint training'*, coupled with the need to develop: *'...clearing house arrangements'*.

- A formal communications strategy: *'Developing a better understanding of what is available and what Connexions can do.'*
- A *'joined-up'* marketing strategy for NEET recruitment.

Marketing: Alongside working with referral agencies, the importance of effective marketing to young people, including through the use of appropriate publicity materials, outreach, and *'word of mouth'*, were highlighted by many participants.

Some stressed the need to adapt approaches through: *'...target marketing to break barriers of access'*, meaning that approaches should be altered depending on which groups individual providers were particularly seeking to reach (eg young people in specific post code areas, from particular groups or communities, or with particular backgrounds – eg, early leavers).

Data capture and usage: A key challenge identified in a number of discussions was the need for *'co-ordination'*. For example, it was recognised, echoing an earlier point, that there was a need to: *'...share the right information (about young people who are NEET) in the right way'*, and to: *'...build a picture at a local authority level about who is involved in what and who the contacts are'*.

ICT systems: The importance of developing effective ICT systems was recognised here, and the role of the *'on-line prospectus'* in providing information, and the potential for feedback through common *'application procedures and processes'*, were explored.

Provision

Designing appropriate provision: An issue here (particularly regarding flexible starts provision) seems to be that the provision has had to address the needs of: *'...a wide range of learners'* (eg not just those at entry level, but also at Level 2 and beyond).

Challenging the: *'...perceptions of staff, schools/departments and senior managers'* was said to be an issue here, as some had anticipated the group might be of lower ability, and have less commitment to learning, than proved to be the case.

In regard to e2e, the key to effective provision was said to be using *the full resources of the partnership* and continually adjusting provision to meet young people's needs, with particular emphasis being given to effective *initial assessment*.

In regard to both e2e and flexible starts, the role that could be played by *'outside activities'* was emphasised. These included the use of *trips and activities* as a method of team building and confidence building, and also the use of *'outdoors education'*.

One challenge highlighted in respect to e2e Tier One provision related to the view expressed that the qualifications framework was too: *'...inflexible for projects targeting the hardest to reach'*.

Support: It was recognised that a number of the young people who had become NEET were *'challenging'* and *'difficult learners'* and so: *'...knowing the range of support available, and how to tap into it, is crucial'*.

A key source of *outside help* was said to be Personal Adviser (PA) support from Connexions. One group argued strongly that: *'...having an active PA working alongside a delivery partner works'*. Others highlighted the need for: *'...close working links between PAs, YOTs and providers'*.

Many commented on the '*resource intensive*' nature of support needs. In this context, a number of participants mentioned:

- The importance of '*reaching and engaging parents and carers*'.
- The role that could be played by peer mentoring.
- The use of '*sessional workers*' (to provide specific inputs).
- The role of volunteers.

Organised transition: One e2e provider indicated that they use: '*...placements as an organised transition*'. What they meant by this was that they use the placement to test out how ready the individual is to: '*...make the transition to the next stage*'.

They added, as preparation for going on placement, they will sometimes customise provision by, for example: '*...covering the underpinning knowledge they will need beforehand*'.

Progression

Building intermediate steps: One group discussed the importance of building intermediate steps to assist transition and progression. They talked about the idea of having a '*Level 1 and a half*' to describe the steps between, and provision needed, to encourage effective transition from Level 1 to Level 2.

Apprenticeships: An important issue (particularly in the context of the large number of micro-businesses in the area) was felt to be: '*Finding the right employers with the right breadth of experience to be able to offer apprenticeships.*' It was said by at least one group that: '*Progression to apprenticeships is easier where the provider also delivers e2e*', as the links with employers can be more secure.

It was felt that: '*...minimum levels of performance (for apprenticeship providers) can limit the willingness of providers to take a risk*', which emphasised the importance of Tier Three provision.

This, and other factors, can lead to a '*lack of progression opportunities*' for some groups, although the detail of this was not explored.

Supporting employers: One work-based training provider spoke of the work they undertake with employers and the importance of: '*...building up knowledge of employers' needs and requirements*'.

They indicated that it was crucial in '*building relationships*' with employers regarding engaging young people to: '*...be straight with employers*', and to: '*...indicate what behaviours they are likely to see*'. There was a need to overcome, the: '*...fear some had of getting stuck with a particular individual*', and of the need to provide: '*...support for employers*' (eg: '*...by having somebody at the end of a phone*').

Some good work was mentioned regarding the co-location of '*Learning Agreement Pilot (LAP)*' and e2e providers so that details of those who were entering employment could be passed on to the LAP team and employers contacted.

However, there was felt by some to be: '*...a lack of employer support for LAP*', and the need to undertake more work on raising employers' awareness of training, learning and help available was emphasised.

3.5 Key messages

The key messages from the group discussions were shared in the plenary sessions. In regard to comments on developing effective practice in flexible starts in colleges, in e2e provision, and in respect to other considerations, these were as follows:

Flexible starts

- The *nature and breadth* of the NEETs group attracted to flexible starts provision was greater than had been anticipated. It was felt to be crucial to offer provision that met the needs of individuals rather than simply offering what the college thought they might have wanted.
- *Describing flexible starts provision*: It was felt that '*how flexible starts provision was described*' was crucial. It was indicated that this could be quite difficult when the aim was to provide a very *flexible, individualised offer*, but it was very important that PAs knew what was on offer so they could effectively advise young people. It was also felt that if the marketing of flexible starts was effective, it could have *wider benefits* in terms of how the college was perceived by young people.
- *Planning*: Flexible start provision needs to be planned into the full college cycle to get away from the '*September start mindset*'. It was recognised that embedding a '*culture of flexible starts*' - for mainstream as well as NEET groups - would take time, but it was vital to make sure that *all* facilities/services were available to learners on a year-round basis.

It was indicated that a '*lack of time*' for colleges to plan flexible starts provision for an early start in 2008 was a barrier.

- *E2E and flexible starts interface*: Better links were required between e2e and flexible start programmes. These should be seen as '*complementary rather than competitive*'. The latter had a key role to play in meeting the needs of e2e learners who finished at different points throughout the academic year.
- *Quality links*: The quality of the link between providers, Careers Companies, Connexions, and other agencies promoting and supporting programmes was also thought to be critical, especially the interface with the PA network. It was clear from discussions that not all colleges enjoyed the same level of support as had been available to Bradford College in developing their provision over the past two years.

e2e

- *Links with activity agreements*: The links that could be made between activity agreement pilots and e2e were emphasised. It was felt to be important to '*build relationships*' and '*relay back good news*' to providers who had referred young people onto Tier One of E2E, as well as offering '*tasters*' to encourage initial engagement.
- *Access to provision*: Regular/frequent start-up times for e2e (eg through weekly inductions) were seen as important to capture young people when: '*...they were ready and available*'.

- *Partnership renewal*: One group in their plenary discussion made the point that the membership of e2e partnerships do, and need to, *change regularly*, particularly in response to learner demand and to delivery partners' performance.

It was felt that a key question for e2e partnerships was therefore: *'How do we keep it (ie the offer/provision) fresh?'*

Overall

In terms of overall points made, the following were particularly significant:

Young people's needs and circumstances: A number of groups commented on young people's varying lifestyles and circumstances in particular *'hard-to-reach'* groups.

Factors mentioned included: *'Nocturnal lifestyles', 'sofa surfing and homelessness', 'peer and family pressures',* and coping with the consequences of some young people's poor *'self-image and self-esteem'*. It was indicated that: *'...mental health, drug or other issues can mean that some young people are unable to cope on e2e'*.

Need for co-ordination: The importance of having *'NEET co-ordinators'* in different contexts was mentioned, as was having a *strategic group* (at local authority and provider levels) looking at how well existing provision was meeting needs.

EMA eligibility criteria: A range of issues were raised around eligibility for the EMA (eg, the fact that the minimum length of course that can be supported was said to be 12 weeks when some provision is shorter than that).

Forthcoming changes (to be introduced at the end of June), it was thought, could further affect progression options for e2e leavers. From then, it was indicated all e2e learners will receive the EMA *without* a means test.

However, it was thought that if they wanted to progress onto a programme-led apprenticeship, or to go onto a college course, they would *only* be eligible for this on a means-tested basis.

Similarly, the rules about the number of hours that they had to do on certain types of provision for the same level of allowance also varied, and caused perceived injustices. For example, it was said those on an apprenticeship had to do 30 hours to qualify, whereas the minimum in a college setting could be 12 to 13 hours a week in a college (up to a qualifying 450 hours).

Funding: A range of issues were raised which related to funding:

- *Output funding*: The view was expressed that funding appears *'qualification-driven'*. One group hoped that this situation would improve once it became possible to claim for units and not just whole qualifications. Another group noted that: *'...if young people reach age 19 before they are ready to access Level 2, there are funding issues'*.
- *Key workers*: The crucial importance of having effective staff, who in the words of one workshop: *'...who want to work with, and have the skills to work with, this client group'* was stressed in a number of discussions. However, it was argued that there was a lack of *mainstream funding* to support *'key workers'* who *'were successful in engaging and retaining young people'* which meant that colleges were unlikely to be able to sustain the required level of support.

- *Funding rigidities:* The view was expressed that: *'...LSC's funding mechanisms need to keep up with the development of flexible provision'* (eg summer school provision).

It was said that learners who started after May, which was the last census point: *'...were not counted'*, and some courses suitable for offering in summer schools were not fundable.

Similarly, it was indicated that funding and policy: *'...make it difficult to offer young people taster sessions or opportunities to sample different provision'*, primarily because of requirements that learners are registered within a specific number of weeks.

Overall, concerns about funding raised the key issue of how to: *'...secure senior managers' recognition and understanding of the benefits versus the costs of providing suitable provision for NEETs'*. It was felt the *'financial penalties'* for getting things wrong could be severe and that an understandable *'safety first'* course was try to recruit *'low'* rather than *'higher'* risk students.

Machinery of government: There was some acknowledgment that changes to the machinery of government meant that there was a risk that *'new bodies'* may not be fully aware of *'current good work'* and that they may be tempted to commission new delivery arrangements (eg through sole providers) rather than fully considering (or understanding) the benefits of *'partnership-style delivery'* which had been adopted in West Yorkshire, but which was far from being universally used across the country.

It was felt by one group that it would be important to: *'...convey these messages to Local Authorities'* as they took up new responsibilities.

3.6 Emerging questions

Our review of the issues raised during the day in turn prompts a range of questions for the LSC, Local Authorities and providers, as follows:

- How, from a provider's point of view, can *'risk taking'* with more challenging learners be encouraged and incentivised when the funding system appears to reward *'success and outcomes'*?
- What encouragement and active support can be given to colleges to provide flexible provision? How can we ensure effective progression routes?
- How can e2e partnerships be encouraged, and supported, to keep their provision in line with young people's needs and requirements? How can the benefits of a *'partnership delivery model'* best be proven?
- What effects or consequences are changes to EMA, and other forms of learner support, having on young people's progression options? Are the routes being selected by young people *'the right ones'* for them?
- What allowance should be made to fund the support needs (through *'key workers'*) for students who had previously been NEET?
- What range of employability/personal development qualifications, or units from qualifications, have providers and learners found to be particularly effective?
- How can links with employers, and apprenticeship providers, best be developed?

- How can links with activity agreement, and learning agreement, pilots best be secured?
- What are the key competences required by staff to work with the NEET group? In the context of wider workforce development reforms, how can these be encouraged and developed?
- What can be done at a Local Authority level to better co-ordinate arrangements for young people who are NEET, and to encourage more consistent support across West Yorkshire from Careers Companies/Connexions?

Some, although by no means all, of these questions will be explored through the best practice case study research, and the wider review of the e2e *'Three-Tier system'*. However, others (particularly regarding funding and strategic support issues) will need to be addressed in wider discussions at a local, regional, and indeed national, level.