Evaluation of the Phase 2 Raising the Participation Age Trials – Final Report

Isos Partnership

Background

The Education and Skills Act 2008 legislated to increase the age of compulsory participation in education or training to age 18 by 2015 and to the end of the academic year in which young people turn 17 in 2013. Young people will be able to participate in a way that suits them: for instance in full-time education at school or college, on an Apprenticeship, or part-time if they are also working or volunteering full-time. The Government made clear its commitment to raising the participation age (RPA) in the Spending Review announcement in October 2010 and the White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' published in November 2010.

Achieving full participation of young people in education or training until age 18 will require all parts of the education system to play a role. Ultimately, however, it will be local authorities (LAs) that will be responsible for ensuring that young people in their areas participate, and for providing the support young people need to overcome any barriers to learning. Many LAs, with their providers and other local partners, are already planning how they will achieve full participation by 2013/2015. The Phase 2 RPA trials have sought to build on the work undertaken in Phase 1 of the trial, to enhance knowledge and good practice in the implementation of RPA.

Phase 1 of the RPA trials ran between September 2009 and March 2010 with ten LAs and one sub-region involved. Phase 2 of the RPA trials began in April 2010 and ran until March 2011. Four new LAs, Blackpool, Worcestershire, Ealing, Plymouth, and another sub-region, Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire, were chosen to join the 11 Phase 1 areas, who all continued into Phase 2. As in Phase 1 the trial areas in Phase 2 were asked to focus on one of three specific themes during the trial period:

a. How LAs can work most effectively in securing a **full** Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) offer for young people to support the increase in the participation age;
b. How LAs can plan and deliver a system, building on the September Guarantee, which effectively picks up those 16 and 17 year olds who disengage with learning through the year and re-engages them in education or training;
c. The development of an area-wide strategy to enable full participation of all young people in education or training. This model will assess the overall challenges and barriers, and implement solutions at a local level.

Key Findings

The key findings of the evaluation report are:

Overall progress based on the evaluators judgements

- Most of the trial areas have maintained a strong focus and commitment to delivery throughout the trial despite the uncertainty in policy and financial challenges faced.
- Progress was affected by the policy uncertainty between May and October 2010, with slow progress in many areas during this period, and much activity only really starting in October.
- Some areas maintained momentum throughout this period and even where areas were slow to start, significant progress was made by many once the policy was confirmed.
- A summary of the evaluation team's judgement of areas' progress during the trial shows that ten areas made excellent or good progress and six made mixed or limited progress.
- All of the trial areas recognise they need to give more thought to how they measure the impact of different interventions, and use this to prioritise activity within their RPA plan.

Good Practice identified by the evaluators

The 16 trial areas were able to choose from 3 themes to base their work on: IAG, Re-engagement and Local Solutions. The good practice coming out of these themes identified by the evaluators are:

- IAG strand – There has been a strong focus on supporting young people's transitions throughout the trials. This has included a greater focus on activity in Key Stage 3 as well as focusing on supporting transition post-16. Some areas have developed local protocols for their providers to share information in a way that supports young people effectively as they move.
- Re-engagement strand – The trial areas in this strand developed a more systematic approach to supporting young people at risk of disengagement or who have already disengaged and continued their work developing early identification systems (to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET post-16 and use this information to target activities more effectively pre-16), the role of the participation advisor in supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET and support panels, which bring together all the relevant professionals to put together an appropriate package of support for a young person.
- Local Solutions strand – Areas following this model developed their own approaches in response to their local priorities. Examples of their innovative practices includes using partners, including VCS organisations and private companies, outside the local authority to engage employers and secondly through the development of an alternative provision catalogue and helping to establish new provision such as apprenticeships linked to a special school.

Objectives

Isos Partnership were commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) in September 2010 to undertake an evaluation of the Phase 2 trials. The trials were designed to look at how effectively local areas were developing and implementing their approaches to RPA and to capture emerging practice, which could be shared amongst the trials as well as with other LAs. The trials and evaluation process spanned the period preceding the election, the subsequent general election and formation of the coalition Government, and the Spending Review. Whilst it is an inevitable part of the political system in the UK, the short period of stasis followed by policy and funding uncertainty has had an impact on the operation of the trials in this phase.

Methodology

The evaluation team carried out the evaluation by: reviewing the trial areas plans and holding short telephone conversations with the leads for the trial in each of the 16 areas to understand their aims and objectives for the trials; visiting each of the trial areas at least once (eight areas were visited once and eight areas were visited twice) during the trial period to interview trial leads, other LA staff, stakeholders and providers. In all, 24 visits were undertaken using an agreed question framework. The evaluation team produced an interim report in early January 2011 which was shared with the DfE and a final report in April 2011. We also held a workshop in March 2011 with trial areas to allow them to feed into the report's findings. This final report presents the evidence from the trial areas and views of the evaluation team on the progress made and lessons learnt.

Findings

Overall progress

- Most of the trial areas have maintained a strong focus and commitment to delivery throughout the trial despite the uncertainty in policy and financial challenges faced.
- Progress was affected by the policy uncertainty between May and October 2010, with slow progress in many areas during this period, and much activity only really starting in October.
- Some areas maintained momentum throughout this period and even where areas were slow to start, significant progress was made by many once policy and funding was confirmed.
- A summary of the evaluation team's judgement of areas' progress during the trial shows that 10 areas made excellent or very good progress and six made mixed or limited progress.
- The evaluation team's judgements show mainly positive assessments of progress for areas new to Phase 2, with four out of five judged to be making very good or excellent progress.
- For areas that continued from Phase 1 into Phase 2, most have made a similar level of progress as they did during Phase 1. There are some exceptions with two of the areas who struggled to make progress during Phase 1 managing to regain momentum in Phase 2 by greater delegation of responsibilities and wider engagement of a range of partners.
- Measuring the specific impact of activity has proved as difficult for the trial areas as it did in Phase 1, given the short timescales involved, the overlapping nature of much of the activity and the fact that many of the young people targeted for support and intervention did not successfully complete or progress from their courses until after the end of the trial.
- Some areas found it helpful to think about measuring impact by asking themselves what percentage of the overall non-participating cohort are being targeted by their trial activity.
- All of the trial areas recognise they need to give more thought to how they measure the impact of different interventions, and use this to prioritise activity within their RPA plan.

Planning for RPA delivery

- Most of the trial areas do not yet have a fully complete plan for delivering RPA by 2013/15. However, a number of trial areas outline plans and the key building blocks are now in place.
- The importance of data and analysing the cohort has been reinforced during Phase 2. Nearly all of the Phase 2 areas have undertaken some form of detailed data analysis to better understand their cohorts, although not all areas have a fully comprehensive picture yet.
- Currently trajectories, where they exist, simply set a straight line between the current level of participation and full participation. More work is needed to estimate the year by year impact of interventions on participation rates.

- Governance has been given less prominence in Phase 2. Some areas made a deliberate change to give greater focus to RPA in governance structures. There is concern in some areas that recent changes to LA structures have made RPA less of a strategic priority.
- One issue that has emerged in areas where the trial has been led by Connexions is difficulty in securing the engagement and commitment from the LA. These areas need to look again at their partnership structure to ensure they have the right working relationships.
- There has been a much greater emphasis on the issue of sustainability during Phase 2. In five of the original Phase 1 areas there has been a change of approach to the leadership and management of the trial in Phase 2, with an overarching trial lead delegating day to day operational responsibility for trial activities to members of their teams.
- The engagement with providers has proved a more difficult issue for many areas in Phase 2. Many areas held back from engaging with providers until the uncertainty over the policy was resolved. Most of the successful examples of engaging providers have come from their involvement in the 14-19 partnership governance arrangements or directly in trial activity.
- The evaluation found that in some areas, activity was limited to a small number of providers and there was no convincing plan for how the lessons of the trial would be rolled out to other providers or how they might be engaged beyond the trial.
- Many of the trial areas believe the engagement of schools will be made more difficult by recent policy changes, for example increased schools autonomy and the introduction of the English Baccalaureate, although areas are encouraged by the post-16 progression measure.
- There has been stronger engagement with special schools during Phase 2 than Phase 1, but areas have found the engagement with Further Education (FE) colleges more challenging. Often this is a result of difficulty in identifying the right person to engage with, but in a quarter of areas they believe it is due to a lack of commitment from some colleges to RPA.

Findings from the three themes:

IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance)

- Derby, Ealing, Plymouth and Staffordshire were the trial areas focused on this theme.
- There has been a strong focus on supporting transitions throughout the trials. This includes a greater focus on activity in Key Stage 3 as well as focusing on supporting transition post-16.
- A number of the trial areas have started to map their planned RPA interventions and activity against the key transition points in young people's lives. They have used this as a tool for engaging in conversations with schools as well as a strategic mapping tool for the local area.
- All four of the areas under this theme have developed local strategies for improving IAG. They have often used provider audits, quality marks or best practice guides/workshops to do so, but there are concerns about providers' willingness to engage with these tools in future, given their increased autonomy and reduced local authority resources to support this work.
- Areas have significant concerns about managing the transition from Connexions including: a potential gap in services before the National Careers Service is fully established; maintenance of the Connexions Client Information Systems (CCIS) database; and targeted support for the most vulnerable.
- Areas found engaging parents/carers difficult, though a targeted approach has had some success in one trial area. Parent/carer ambassador schemes have also had some success.
- Although over half the trial areas have undertaken analysis of post-16 progression rates for schools, most have been unwilling to challenge schools without a clear national measure.
- Trial areas have been better in Phase 2 at identifying the cohorts who have specific barriers to participation. Teenage parents and learners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD) are

the two most prominent. The trials identified that more work is needed to align support for the first, and that stronger mentoring can support transition for the second.

Re-engagement

- Barnsley, Blackpool, Coventry, Warwickshire and Solihull sub-region, Swindon, Wandsworth and Worcestershire were the trial areas focused on this theme.
- Three of the trials under this theme have developed a more systematic approach to supporting young people at risk of disengagement or who have already disengaged.
- Although there are many similarities in the approach of the trial areas, there have been important differences in their early identification systems, the participation advisor role and use of support panels. This suggests other areas will need to decide their own approach.
- Risk of NEET indicators (RONIs) remain an important mechanism for trial areas. 10 of the trial areas already have a RONI or are developing one. Six areas do not yet have a RONI and are unsure about plans to develop one. More focus is needed to ensure schools use RONIs.
- During the trial over half of the areas have focused on the relationship between Connexions and providers with a focus on improving the pastoral care provided. In one area a weakness identified in providers with poor pastoral care has been systems for monitoring attendance.
- Although local areas often believe they have robust systems in place for the notification of a young person dropping out, evidence from one of the trial areas suggests all areas might benefit from a regular check on whether the systems are actually being used as intended.
- Different approaches have been taken to the development of the 'participation advisor' role, with some seeing it as similar in some aspects to the Connexions personal advisor role and others seeing it alongside that role providing mentoring support to the most vulnerable.
- Trial areas have also used 'support panels' in different ways with some using them to follow up on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and others as an alternative to a CAF.
- Significant progress has been made in defining when young people might be said to have a 'reasonable excuse' for non-participation. More thought needs to be given to support young people during these times and to identifying when they might be ready to participate again.

Local solutions

- Cumbria, East Sussex, Greater Manchester, Hertfordshire, Lambeth and Newcastle were the trial areas focused on this theme.
- The focus of this theme varied, according to local priorities. Two issues did emerge which were unique and which relate to the issue of how to fill any gaps in provision which an area's provision mapping, data analysis and/or feedback from learners might tell them exist.
- The first involved two trial areas who have developed particularly effective approaches to engaging with employers by utilising the services of partners outside the LA.
- The second was the number of examples of innovative new provision seen in areas and the progress which continues to be made in developing catalogues of alternative provision.

Top tips from the Phase 2 trials for other local areas to consider

Local areas should think about how they can...

- Develop a comprehensive plan for delivery of RPA.

- Develop their understanding of their cohorts and identify a set of priorities for delivering RPA with expected impact demonstrated through trajectories to 2013 and 2015.

- Measure the impact of planned interventions by looking at the different segments of the cohort activity and targeting and quantifying the potential impact of each.

- Review own governance and leadership of RPA to ensure they are getting full engagement from the wider LA and other partners, and have maximised opportunities to streamline governance and leadership drawing together youth, IAG, post-16 and schools' arrangements to minimise bureaucracy and increase coherence, sustainability and efficiencies.

- Establish stronger links with wider LA governance and employers through local economic partnerships or LA regeneration teams.

- Engage with young people and parents/carers to ensure young people's voices are reflected in plans for delivering RPA and that the hardest to engage are aware of RPA.

- Engage with the full range of providers, using the data to agree which providers have issues with post-16 progression and what support they might need/benefit from.

- Thought about how to strengthen their engagement with schools and colleges in particular, identifying the right strategic lead for RPA to work with at each institution.

- Learn from the successful work of some Phase 2 areas in engaging employers during Phase 2 and think about who has the credibility to lead this work in their locality.

- Focus on the transitions throughout secondary education and into post-16 education, identify and map all of the universal and targeted support available and identify gaps, overlaps and efficiencies through conversations with providers.

- Identify particular groups within their own cohorts that will be critical to RPA and map the interventions, support and provision in place for each 'at risk' cohort including all of the LA services and other delivery partners working with them.

- Approach their work with those at risk of disengagement or who have already disengaged more systematically, including considering what the role of the participation advisor and support panels should be, and how they will define when young people have a reasonable excuse, and how to support those with one.

- Discuss and debate the need for a RONI, think through the key measures to include in one for their own local area and ensure schools are using it.

- Identify provision gaps through mapping, data analysis and/or feedback from learners and decide how best to fill them, learning from the trials experience of engaging with employers for young people in Jobs without Training (JWT) and developing new provision.

- Develop future delivery models in the context of the changing financial climate and decisions already taken, such as the development of the National Careers Service.

- Identify other areas facing similar challenges where lessons are likely to be transferable and ensure they are visiting and talking to them to avoid reinventing the wheel.

Tools

A series of tools and thematic good practice guides have been produced, which capture some of the specific examples of good practice seen in the trial areas in more detail, and which link to the case studies and materials which the trial areas themselves have produced. The tools and good practice guides are introduced in the full evaluation report, but published separately as standalone documents and can be found on the Department for Education website.