
Raising the participation age (RPA) trials: Phase 1 evaluation

Background

1. The Education and Skills Act 2008 legislated to raise the age of compulsory participation in education or training until at least 18 by 2015 and until the end of year in which young people turn 17 in 2013. Achieving full participation of young people in education or training until 18 will require all parts of the education system to play their part. Ultimately however, it will be Local Authorities (LAs) that will be responsible for ensuring that young people in their area participate and for providing the support young people need to overcome barriers to learning.
2. Many Local Authorities, with their 14-19 Partnerships, are already planning how they will achieve full participation by 2013/2015. To support preparations for the delivery of Raising the Participation Age (RPA) the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (now known as the Department for Education, DfE) decided that it wanted to work with a small group of areas on how best to trial elements of RPA during 2009/10. Ten Local Authorities and one sub region were identified to take part in the first phase of the Trials from September 2009 to April 2010. A second phase will run from April 2010.
3. This evaluation covered activity undertaken by Trial areas between September 2009 and April 2010 in relation to one of three themes: Information Advice and Guidance; Re-engagement of 16 and 17 year olds; or the development of area wide local solutions.

Summary of key findings

Overall progress

- Overall progress during the Phase 1 Trial has been good and many important lessons have been learnt about what works and the challenges which still need to be overcome
- Progress at an individual level has been more varied with some areas using the Trial as an opportunity to galvanise their local areas behind RPA whilst others have struggled to make as much progress particularly in engaging local providers and other partners

The importance of local context, understanding the cohort and keeping a tight focus

- Trial areas started the Trial in very different places – both in terms of their current rates of participation and their current mix of provision. Understanding this local context has been critical for many areas in determining what the priorities for their Trial should be
- A key first step for many of the Trial areas has been better understanding of the data to understand the cohort they are dealing with. All areas need to undertake this analysis

Governance Models and Engagement of Partners

- A number of different models of governance have been adopted by Trial areas. Some have developed dedicated RPA sub-groups, or RPA has become one of the central themes being monitored by the 14-19 Partnerships. Others have chosen to use existing sub-groups to manage the Trial – most commonly the Inclusion, IAG or NEET sub-group
- Whilst governance remains a local decision many of the Phase 1 Trial areas felt that making RPA a key part of their 14-19 governance structures had significant advantages
- There is a spectrum of engagement with providers to date. Some areas have used the Trial to push the RPA message with all providers, but in many it has been more limited

Theme Specific Findings

Information Advice and Guidance

- There has been a wide range of activity undertaken and planned through the Trials aimed at different cohorts of young people from Years 7-9, Years 10 and 11 and post 16
- The key lesson from work with Years 7-9 is the need to better join up and co-ordinate RPA activity with other IAG activity that is taking place with this cohort e.g. Aim Higher
- Trial areas wanted greater clarity about the DCSF's intentions for national materials and communications on RPA in order to plan their own activities and materials
- Many of the Trial areas are developing new approaches to judging the quality of IAG and progress being made by providers - building on the national IAG standards

Re-engagement

- All of the Trial areas focused on this theme, and a number of others, had placed a significant emphasis on developing their tracking systems. An interesting development in a number of areas was to focus on the join between pre and post 16 tracking systems
- At least two Trial areas have developed a pre 16 'at risk' of NEET indicator and 'early leaver protocols'. One Trial area was exploring with their post 16 providers the possibility of a Managed Moves Protocol. All have potential for use in other areas
- Publication of progression data for schools has been a powerful lever used by some but Trial areas wanted a national progression indicator to give added impetus to this push
- Development of more flexible provision was also seen as key. Some areas diversified their Foundation Learning (FL) provision, one was piloting delivery of FL with sixth forms
- Other areas focused on the wide range and mix of existing provision and had published Alternative Provision catalogues showing the fit with Foundation Learning

Local Solutions

- A number of these areas are large LAs or sub-regions and developed interesting models for managing the delivery of RPA across Local Authorities or Travel to Learn areas
- A number of these areas have already started to develop RPA plans and trajectories
- Two areas had developed new approaches to engaging employers, and were exploring approaches to the Jobs Without Training (JWT) cohort to further develop in Phase 2

Key recommendations from the evaluation

Overall Focus and Clarity

- Trial areas need to be absolutely clear about the value added and uniqueness of their Trial activities as opposed to ongoing day to day 14-19 activity
- Keeping a clear and tight focus on the specific Trial deliverables is key to successfully being able to use the Trial to determine what has and hasn't worked during the Trial and to use these lessons to be clear what it will take to achieve full participation levels
- Using the data at the start of the Trial to really understand the cohort has been a critical part of enabling Trial areas to determine where their focus should be – all areas need to undertake this analysis at the start of their Trials to determine their focus and priorities

Engaging the 14-19 Partnership/providing senior leadership for the Trial

- Trial areas should think carefully about the governance of the Trial and how they will ensure that the 14-19 Partnership really starts to focus on the implications of RPA
- Trial areas that had embedded the Trial within existing sub-groups such as Inclusion or IAG groups were concerned about the focus and priority being given to RPA currently
- Areas that had established a clear focus and remit for the Trial to report direct to the 14-19 Partnership felt they had been more successful in focusing on the implications of RPA
- Having a senior lead for the Trial – either within the Local Authority or across the sub-region - and a close working relationship with Connexions have been key success factors

Understanding the cohort and developing leading indicators

- Using the data that Local Authorities and Connexions already have at their disposal is critical to properly understanding the current picture and challenges faced
- Getting beneath this headline picture is also important – Trial areas who have undertaken in-depth research with specific cohorts have a much deeper understanding of the specific challenges and issues faced by different groups of young people
- Developing early warning indicators of becoming NEET and joining up tracking systems pre and post 16 has been a key success in some areas that ought to be replicated by all

Providing local drive and impetus to create momentum and engage all providers

- Some Trial areas have been particularly successful in using the Trials to generate a sense of local momentum and getting people talking about RPA and what it means
- In other areas the focus has been on more detailed engagement with a more limited number of providers – in these cases there will be a need to roll out messages to others
- In all cases Trial areas need to think in Phase 2 how they can use the Trial as an opportunity to galvanise their local systems and effort behind the push to RPA

Top ten tips from Trial areas for Phase 2 and other Local Authorities

All areas should.....

1. Carry out detailed cohort analysis using data from Connexions and the Local Authority to better understand at risk young people and those who have dropped out
2. On the basis of this analysis develop a clear set of priorities for action and focus on delivering these - determining how they fit within wider 14-19 plans
3. Consider how best to embed RPA governance within existing 14-19 arrangements to ensure the 14-19 partnership is focused on what it will take to deliver RPA
4. Nominate a senior lead for RPA as well as an RPA Trial manager to implement activity and think about the sustainability of this resource beyond the Trial period
5. 'Galvanise the system' locally and get local stakeholders and providers talking about RPA – this means engaging all providers in RPA activity in some way
6. Consider appointing local young people, parents and employer champions to spread the message
7. Develop RPA plans and trajectories and consider the implications of these for wider 14-19 plans including commissioning priorities
8. Make sure Connexions and other key partners locally both within and outside the LA are engaged fully in delivering RPA – use RPA as an opportunity to strengthen relationships
9. Engage more regularly and informally with other local areas to learn from each other and be willing to share and engage in debate with other local areas
10. Consider your own plans for evaluation especially if RPA activity is starting now but won't impact until 2013/15 – setting a baseline now will be important to determining success

Trial Areas Recommendations for National Policy

Whilst the Phase 1 Trials have predominantly focused on local action needed to deliver RPA, Trial areas have identified some areas of national policy where they think further effort is required from the DCSF or where greater clarification of policy and policy intent is needed. These messages from Trial areas from the final evaluation workshop are captured directly below, although the Isos evaluation team believes this should be a more explicit focus and question asked by both Trial areas and DCSF during Phase 2.

DCSF should:

- Emphasise the priority that needs to be given to RPA in all of its communications to Local Authorities, Directors of Children's Services and elected Members
- Lead a national communications campaign to young people, parents and employers
- Do more to incentivise schools to focus on post 16 progression by developing a national post 16 progression indicator
- Continue nationally to join up policy and messages between 14-19 and Integrated Youth Support Services (IYSS)
- Clarify future policy on financial support for young people/fit with the benefits system
- Continue to help local areas understand the opportunities presented by Foundation Learning to create a flexible offer that works for young people
- Help lead work with employers to understand how best to engage the Jobs without Training cohort
- Better align post 16 funding to promote provision for Learners With Learning Difficulties or Disabilities (LLDD).

Additional Information

This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.