



**To: All Chairs and Principals/CEOs of Corporations
and FE Institutions**

18 March 2016

Dear Colleague

The Area Review process is now well underway, with those colleges in waves 1 and 2 reaching their conclusions. To date, at least, it has been a remarkably smooth process with Corporations engaging fully in the new collaborative approach to provision, both to increase the quantity and quality of what is on offer as well as to create a greater sustainability for the organisations that they represent.

Arising out of the discussions have been new mergers and federations, the formation of joint companies to deliver apprenticeships more effectively and shared services proposals, as well as a degree of rationalisation of provision where competition has led to inefficiencies rather than quality improvement.

Lessons of course have been learned in a process which started before certain key building blocks were in place – the outcome of the autumn CSR, the criteria for the establishment of an Institute of Technology, the route to academisation for sixth form colleges and the existence of a restructuring fund to name but four – but that said the desire for change has been such that these obstacles have been overcome in a very positive atmosphere where steering groups have focussed on solutions rather than problems and produced a clear agenda for change.

Not everything of course has gone completely to plan. Wave 1 has taken longer in some cases to come to a conclusion than was hoped, complicated by the devolution agenda and the fact that some of the more difficult areas were included. Communications within colleges with staff, unions and students as to the process and the benefits for learners and employers has been variable and could clearly be improved and the long standing unsustainable debt positions of a few colleges have created delays while new solutions have been sought. What is emerging, however, is a greater unity of the college sector and a collaborative approach to promoting the benefits of a college education in terms of successful academic progression, employment opportunities and the development of skills at all levels.



Credit must go in particular to the governing bodies and chairs of the various institutions who have taken on board a significant amount of extra work and have been prepared to put the interests of learners and employers ahead of those colleges for which they are responsible. Without their hard work and commitment relatively little would have been achieved.

The LEPs and the local authorities have also played a major role, not only by articulating clearly the needs of their areas but in committing to a new relationship with the college sector in going forward. They will have an important role in ensuring that recommendations are implemented and future developments continue to be based on the needs of their area. In conjunction with the regional schools commissioners many have also instigated a review of sixth form provision in their area with a view to addressing examples of poor quality or financial viability as well as ensuring that over provision of post 16 places does not cause an inefficient and unnecessary waste of resources.

There are, of course, many area reviews that are still to be started but if waves 3 to 5 are entered into with the same enthusiasm and commitment as Waves 1 and 2, the future of the FE sector as a key driver in improving skills and productivity has probably never looked brighter.

Yours sincerely

Sir David Collins CBE
Further Education Commissioner