

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Area Reviews of Post-16 Education](#),
HC 559

Wednesday 30 November 2016

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Neil Carmichael (Chair); Lucy Allan; Ian Austin; Marion Fellows; Suella Fernandes; Lucy Frazer; Lilian Greenwood; Ian Mearns; William Wragg.

Questions 65 - 84

Witnesses

I: **David Hughes**, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges, **James Kewin**, Deputy Chief Executive, Sixth Form Colleges' Association, and **Shakira Martin**, Vice-President Further Education, National Union of Students.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Association of Colleges ([ARE0032](#))
- Sixth Form Colleges Association ([ARE0011](#))
- National Union of Students ([ARE0023](#))

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: David Hughes, James Kewin, and Shakira Martin.

Q65 Chair: Good morning and welcome to this session. It is different from the last one in the sense it is a different topic. Multi-academy trusts was the issue before. Today, right now, it is the area review inquiry we are completing. Our purpose clearly is to explore the impact of that review on the FE sector. For the purposes of our many millions of viewers, could you say who you are and what you represent? We will start off with James.

James Kewin: I am James Kewin. I am the Deputy Chief Executive of the Sixth Form Colleges' Association.

David Hughes: David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges.

Shakira Martin: Shakira Martin, NUS Vice-President Further Education.

Chair: You have been here before, haven't you?

Shakira Martin: I have. I am getting used to this.

Chair: Yes, good.

Shakira Martin: I changed my hairstyle because I could not use the same hair.

Chair: Yes, but I still recognised you, so welcome.

Shakira Martin: Thank you.

Q66 Chair: What would you say, David, is the primary purpose of the area review process?

David Hughes: That is a great question, isn't it? I am not sure and I am not sure the Government really knew what the primary purpose was. I think the context in which they launched the area reviews was about financial health. They needed to do something. The NAO report that came out suggested that the colleges were facing a very difficult financial future, and I think they decided to do something about it.

It has morphed and evolved over the time of the area review. I think it has been partly about financial health and, as we have gone through, it has also been picking up a number of different issues, including devolution and how local relationships need to operate. I think it picked up issues of skills needs at higher level, particularly level 4 and 5 skills needs. It has picked up issues of leadership and governance. There is a whole host of things that are attached to it. Quite frankly, I am looking forward to when it is finished and we can get on with implementing the



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other big challenges that we have, which are about helping colleges deliver skills for the nation because that is really important.

Q67 **Chair:** Yes. James, do you take the same view as David in terms of the purpose?

James Kewin: Yes, up to a point. I think it started as a panic because of the parlous financial health of a small number of FE colleges. I think that was what was really behind this process. The frustration from a sixth form college perspective is that we feel rather that we have been brought into this process that was not designed for us. I do not think we are complacent about our financial health, but for us one thing I hear a lot from sixth form colleges is the opportunity cost of participation in this review. It has been huge. It has been a very long, protracted, bureaucratic process in many cases. In our view, it would have been better to target the intervention at those colleges that were in trouble or looked as though they were about to get into difficulties. That way, that would have been a better use of resources and it would have stopped a lot of the disruption that we see in the sector. It has been a challenging process from a sixth form college perspective, no doubt.

Q68 **Chair:** Okay. So far we have a lot of things added to the list as priorities. We got a lot from David. Opportunity costs are significant. Shakira, what do you think?

Shakira Martin: I think that the area review process is about the lack of money being invested into the FE sector and us trying to squeeze provision in on a limited budget, if I am completely honest. I know it is stated that we want more robust, larger institutions and I do think that our post-16 education needs to be reviewed. However, I do not think the area review process is doing what it was set up to do in the first place.

Q69 **Chair:** Because we have had so many different answers to the central question, the next one is going to be even harder still. What I want to know is: do you think that the area review process has been successful in achieving the purposes as outlined? David, you were talking about financial matters, then you moved on in haste to skills assessment and provision and so on. Do you think it has been successful in any of those things that you mentioned also in between?

David Hughes: As we say, if you do not know why you are doing it, measuring success is quite challenging. I think it has been successful in some areas and it has helped move things on, but there were a number of lessons from it.

One is, and I agree completely with Shakira, that the investment in the sector is insufficient. If you look at the financial health of the HE sector where they have a 4% surplus forecast—and HEFCE thinks that is inadequate and very worrying given uncertainty—the FE surplus is all to do with the lack of investment. Eleven to 16 learning is 22% higher than 16 to 19 learning; 16 to 19 is half of HE learning in terms of investment. I think financial health is a really big issue.



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The competition issue with other 16 to 19 provision—school sixth forms, free schools and UTCs—was ignored by the area review. I think every area review report that came out yesterday pointed to the fact that there were small school sixth forms providing lack of quality, lack of breadth, lack of choice for young people. We have to do something about that because that is not fair on young people and it does undermine good provision and excellent provision in sixth form colleges and FE colleges.

There are some other worrying issues. I found out from a college this morning that they have been categorised as high risk by the Local Government Pension Scheme in light of the insolvency regime coming in. Despite being financially resilient and in very strong financial health in the area review, they have had a 50% increase in their contribution rate from 11.9% to 18.2%. That is £373,000 extra they will be paying out because of that changing categorisation, not because they have changed in nature. I think there are some really big financial issues that still will not be addressed.

The other issue that really worries me about the area reviews has been the seeming focus on merger as the solution, the silver bullet to every problem that is going. My experience over 20 years in the sector is that some mergers work really well and some do not, and mainly it is about good leadership and management and context. If you have competition from lots of small school sixth forms, it can undermine the financial health of your organisation. If you have good leadership and management, you can overcome a lot of that. Merger is not the solution. When we get to the end in March, we will have lots of mergers on the stocks and we have to work to implement them effectively. We have to invest in those colleges at the right rate to be able to allow them to deliver what is needed. I do not see that investment and the stability that is needed coming yet. We have quite a lot of optimism in the Secretary of State because she sang the right words, but I think Treasury needs to step up to the mark and invest properly in our skills as a country, particularly with Brexit.

Q70 Chair: Well, amen to that. James, do you have any additional points to make?

James Kewin: On funding, I could not agree more. Our funding impact survey was released a month or so ago and it showed the challenges of the 16 to 19 funding settlement. If you are a sixth form college and you have lost a third of your funding over the past five years and you are facing three funding cuts, and they have been very deep in some cases, on top of that you have, as David has alluded to, significant cost increases. We are paying more to the teacher pension scheme. We are paying more to employer National Insurance contributions. We have the looming triennial review of the Local Government Pension Scheme. We are being squeezed from both ends, cost increases and funding cuts. To then be told through the area reviews that we ought to be running a 3% to 5% surplus, I think the view from some of our colleges was, to put it



politely, "Stop cutting our funding. We will do our level best to continue to be as efficient as we can". The issue I think with the area reviews has been there has been no recognition, very little recognition—no recognition, really—that the actions of one part of Government might have had an impact on the other.

To answer the question, Neil, about the impact, it is too early to say, but I do think that because of the very narrow focus on financial viability and the rushed timescale we will see some short-term solutions. The aspiration at the beginning was will we see some long-term financially viable institutions. The model of the area reviews has been such that I think that is very unlikely. I think we will see some short-term quick fixes, if you like.

The other point I would raise, because I think this is key, is the timescale of these reviews has not been conducive to long-term, sensible decision making. If you ask volunteer governors in a four to five-month period to make potentially irreversible decisions about the future of their institutions, don't be surprised if the quality of the decisions that emerge from that are not what they should be.

The final point: the Government have not kept up their end of the bargain. On the one hand, they have been pushing and pushing colleges to make decisions through this process, yet we saw the publication of the reports that came out yesterday—coincidence perhaps—seven months after the first review had been concluded. In that context, I think it is unlikely to be the silver bullet that was envisaged at the beginning.

Chair: William, you have a question.

William Wragg: Good morning, everybody.

Shakira Martin: Can I answer the question that you posed to the two gentlemen, please, Mr Carmichael? I have some notes here that I would like to—

Chair: You can, but let William get his in because he has a supplementary.

Shakira Martin: Okay.

Chair: We are not going to leave you out, don't worry.

Shakira Martin: All right. Don't forget about me.

Q71 **William Wragg:** David mentioned the devolution aspect to some of this. I just wondered if in your experience of the whole process across the country there were any areas that had done it better than others or had got better outcomes from the review. I am particularly interested in your view on Greater Manchester.

David Hughes: I think it has varied and that is not surprising, is it? You work with 300 colleges across the whole of the country; it will be different. It is difficult to pick out particular areas, but where colleges



have come together and worked together and provided a useful set of information and data to the combined authority in particular I think it has worked better.

I have to say that in some areas the relationships are very strained. I think that is largely because there is a lack of definition of how devolution should operate. There is no framework for devolution. There is no understanding of what Whitehall will hang on to and what will be flexible and free at local level. There is no sense of how localities will work properly with their colleges. There is no clarity on how the funding will flow yet. All of that is creating an enormous strain and tension around relationships. I think the Government need to get their act together quite quickly on devolution and set out very clearly what they want to do, what they think the benefits will be of devolving particularly the adult education budget.

Q72 Chair: So, lack of uniformity there?

David Hughes: I think it is lack of clarity, Neil. Uniformity I think is one thing, but I just think a framework of what the deal is and how it will operate should allow that local flexibility to do things differently. There is just not a framework at the moment.

Q73 Chair: Okay, it is your moment to be in the spotlight.

Shakira Martin: I have my checklist. Going back to the purpose of the area reviews, there are a few points that I would want to make regarding how the process is going to ensure that quality is improved within post-16 education. I do not feel that there is a focus to ensure that quality is being improved in this process because learners' views are not at the heart of this. I know that we have been doing some excellent work at NUS with the Department for Education and BIS where we have conducted roundtables across the country for each wave. That has fed into the local steering groups, but because of late publishing and delays, we have not had any feedback to see how that has been considered within the reports and what has been taken out of that.

Also, when we go down to FE and finances, the area review process excludes sixth form colleges, university technical colleges and private training providers. When we are looking at the scope of further education and post-16, we need to ensure that all these institutions are being considered. We do not have the time, the money or the resources to do this process at the end and realise that we have missed out a whole chunk. I am almost finished.

Chair: Well, I am glad you said that because you have drifted on to Marion's territory, who is probably wondering what question she is going to ask next.

Shakira Martin: Sorry.

Marion Fellows: I have something sorted.



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Chair: Yes, she has something sorted, so Marion is going to be asking you a question in a minute.

Shakira Martin: Okay. Shall I finish?

Chair: No, you carry on until Marion is ready.

Shakira Martin: Okay. There are more than 2,000 sixth forms and growing numbers of other providers who have not been part of the process, as I said, compared to only 300 colleges who have been included. I have made sure that I have quoted the stats because I know Government like stats and facts.

In regard to the impact of the area reviews, I am hugely concerned as the Vice-President Further Education on the impact on quality, the impact on learner voice, the impact on access and the impact of outcomes for learners, which I can go into but I will wait for your question.

Chair: You could but, Marion, get in with a question before she starts again.

Q74 **Marion Fellows:** I think I will ask the gentlemen generally first. Do you think the area review process properly considered the interests of learners?

James Kewin: I don't. There are many flaws in the process and many flaws in the policy. For us as sixth form colleges, the fundamental flaw was the absence of school and academy sixth forms. We felt that perhaps more than the FE colleges because that is our world. Although we are called colleges, what a sixth form college does is largely what a school does. We deliver A-Levels. We deliver BTech and applied general qualifications, and we prepare young people for university. I am generalising, but on the whole that is what we do.

I think we should probably change the name of the review. I do not think you can call it a review of post-16 education and training institutions if you exclude over a third of those institutions, getting on for half a million young people. Frankly, I think Ministers ducked the opportunity to tackle the long tail of underperformance in school and academy sixth forms. They focused on sixth form colleges and FE colleges. The evidence is quite interesting and it is very clear that sixth form colleges are more efficient and effective than school sixth forms. There is no question about that. Eking out further efficiencies in the sector that is already the most effective post-16 did not seem to make a great deal of sense to us.

In a way, if we take this market model for a moment, you could argue that by excluding schools you could potentially be giving them a competitive advantage. If, for example, you decided to get into the business of curriculum rationalisation in a particular area, you could drop a subject or a group of subjects and the school, because they are out of scope, could suddenly start to offer them.



In answer to the question, I do not think the needs of all learners were taken into account through this process, and the absence of school and academies on the same terms was perhaps the most fundamental flaw in the process.

Just one final thing: I find it very odd as well that on the one hand the Government are saying they need to rationalise a number of colleges and sixth form provision in colleges, yet on the other hand it is actively encouraging the proliferation of more smaller providers as well. It feels very much like the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing on that point.

David Hughes: It is a really interesting question. I was trying to think what it would look like if it had taken into account learner interests adequately and properly. There are a few things that I would like to have seen done and perhaps can be done in the implementation phase.

I would want more focus on the transition from school and into post-16, which is very difficult for lots of young people. I would want much more focus on careers education and have comparable data and intelligence about what the options are at 16 because I think that is very uneven and unequal. I would want more sense of what the choices are for young people in terms of how they want to move on in their life and how they want to go into becoming adults, particularly comparable information about HE, apprenticeships, technical education, and so on. I would want much better understanding of what quality is like in a comparable way across all of the options at 16.

None of that exists and I think it makes it really difficult for adults, young people and their parents to make the right choices. If we were going to do a proper area review, we would take all of those things into account and we would definitely, as James said, look at all of the providers post-16 rather than just some of them.

Q75 **Marion Fellows:** Back to the whole idea of the learners' interests, you both talked quite a lot about institutions and how they have not been involved. I think I will move on to Shakira because, Shakira, that is your *raison d'être*, isn't it? I should declare an interest here because I was a former FE lecturer. The Scottish colleges absolutely had to take on board in anything we did the interests of the learners. Recently, in the massive review in Scotland in FE colleges when there were mergers, there was money put in to help student unions, to get them up and running, to make sure the learner voice was heard.

Shakira, you can now launch forth, if you please, on what the main concerns of learners are in this area review.

Shakira Martin: Can I just hark back to the title of the area review?

Chair: Can I just say we need shorter questions and answers, otherwise this inquiry is going to last longer than the area review process itself.



Shakira Martin: I will sum it up very quickly, that is fine. It is an important process. I am going to get all my points across. No disrespect, Mr Carmichael, but my learners have mandated me to be here, so they will hold me to account if I don't.

Chair: Let's hear your answer.

Shakira Martin: Statistically, in the area review process some things that are concerning are because of the lack of explaining what this means. It is meant to look at the local provisions. However, what we are finding is that there are some colleges that are having conversations with other providers across the country. For me, my learners are thinking this is looking at local provision, so we do not really understand the whole scope to be able to understand what is going on.

However, the problems that we have come across through doing the roundtable is about learner voice: how is learner voice going to be implemented? What does success look like after the area review process? Travel is something that is really consistent. I know in London we have good travel but it is fairly expensive. In Leeds, for example, the buses do not turn up. I cannot even imagine that happening, but there is a big issue around travel. There is also no safeguarding that colleges will privatise learner voice after the area review process or after any merger. There is an inconsistency in the development and profile of learner voice within FE and sixth form colleges. I feel him looking at me so I don't feel like I can go on a bit.

Chair: No, carry on, as long as you are not going to go on for too long.

Shakira Martin: Can I? Oh, cool. Some colleges invest resources and show commitment to student-led student support and student unions. Others favour feedback and non-connective, whereas I think Scotland is an excellent example of how they value learner voice, investing in learner voice, letting students take ownership of their education, provides excellent quality and outcomes for the student.

Chair: Thank you very much. Now we are going to go back to our original plan, which is to ask William to deal with the scope of the area reviews.

Q76 **William Wragg:** In our discussions, if you can call it that, we have covered areas of this already, but the former FE commissioner told us that conducting a review that included all 16 to 19 provision, "could not be done". In asking you if you agree or disagree with him, I wonder if you might say how it might be done as well.

David Hughes: I think I understand why he said that because the timescales that were put on this were very, very tight. I think he had envisaged rooms with 70, 80, 90 or 100 people, yet Brighton and Hove has done its own review of school sixth forms to supplement what is happening around the area review and other local authorities are considering it. It just seems absurd to me that we cannot do a review of



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provision in an area because there are a lot of organisations delivering it. I do not think that is a sufficient reason.

Of course, you might not want to get them all in a room five times to be able to do that, but you can look at what they are delivering, you can look at the quality, you can look at the choice, you can look at progression and outcomes for learners, and you can make some very simple assertions. I am pretty sure the Ofsted report coming out this week will show that small school sixth forms offer less good quality as well as less breadth of offer. There are some simple things that can be done just from data, but there are also some really useful partnerships that could be pulled together between sixth form colleges and FE colleges and schools to make that whole provision work more effectively. So, I do not agree with the ex-commissioner on that one.

James Kewin: I do not agree with him either. I think it could be done. I think, frankly, the political appetite was not there to do it. That is the honest truth. I think that in the timescale, as David says, it was probably not possible. The assumption that Dr Collins makes is that it would be done in the same way. It would not need to be done in the same way. As I said earlier on, if you focused it on those institutions you thought were in trouble or about to get into trouble, then you could target it. I think a targeted intervention would have been perfectly possible in the time that was there. Frankly, the appetite politically was not there to do it.

Shakira Martin: We were promised through the area review process a wholesale review of post-16 education. I do not believe that only engaging with 300 colleges and leaving 2,000 other providers has stated what it has on the tin. I am also extremely concerned about university technical colleges in particular that have proven that they are not cost-effective, yet the Government are being saved from scrutinising these provisions. But I have got what we want out of it because I am coming back with all the problems. We believe that the Government should ensure sufficient scrutiny of all providers and they should not shy away from recognising failings wherever they exist. Let's not try to make it easy but review the whole.

Q77 **William Wragg:** If I take what the three of you have said, that there is obviously in your opinion not the political appetite to do it, I put it to you perhaps that there is a conflict of interest within the sector. Maybe the provision that various providers offer is a conflict of interest. You mentioned often the separate sixth forms are in conflict with schools that have sixth form colleges, so do you think it is the conflict within the sector that has been the problem as to why there could not be a whole review?

David Hughes: No, I do not think so. James put his finger on it earlier, I think. We have had a system for 20-odd years of competition at post-16. The Government last year decided to intervene into the college bit of that sector because they thought there was some financial problems that needed to be dealt with. They did not decide to go into the free schools



and the UTC bit of the sector. I think they could have done and I think they should. It is a very simple thing to do. If you look at the 2014-15 figures, more than half of the sixth forms recruited less than 100 learners into year 12. That means by definition they are less than 200. The Government's own guidance for new school sixth forms is 200 minimum number of learners. They do that for a good reason, yet more than half have less than 200. But they are not doing anything about it and I think they should.

William Wragg: Is there anything anyone wants to add to that assertion I made, perhaps? Okay, thank you.

Q78 Lilian Greenwood: First of all, a really straightforward question to James. Last year, the Government announced that sixth form colleges in England would have the opportunity to become academies, and I know it is something that Sixth Form Colleges' Association welcomed. In five years' time, do you expect that most sixth form colleges will have chosen to academise?

James Kewin: It is a really good question. From our perspective, the academisation option was the silver lining to the area review process. It came partway through. It came after the reviews had started. It was something that we really campaigned hard for over a couple of years with support from colleagues here and MPs across the House. We think it is a really positive step.

The question I get asked the most is that one, which is how many will go. There are three answers to that question. To give you an indication, I have three numbers for you. The first is the number of expressions of interest that have been submitted already to become an academy, which at the last count was 58. The second is the analysis of the wave 1 and 2 recommendations that were published yesterday, and of those I think 74% had as one of their recommendations to pursue academy status. Thirdly—and least reliable—is my view about how many I think will go and I think we should expect around half in the short term.

The reason that I just do not know—there is a big unknown that I will come to—whether the whole sector will convert is because what the Government have told us is that you can only become an academy through the area review process. If you need funding to do that, it has to take place while its restructuring fund is available. I think there is a degree of brinksmanship in this. I am not sure that in four years' time if a really good sixth form college said they want to become an academy the Government would say no. They are saying at the minute they would. I think in the short term we can expect half to go, but I think potentially as many as another quarter could convert in the years that follow.

Q79 Lilian Greenwood: Then a question to all three members of the panel, and it is a sort of double bit. First of all, what are the benefits that academy status will bring to the sixth form college sector or, indeed, to the wider post-16 sector? Earlier, James, you spoke about the



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opportunity cost of the area reviews. I just wondered if in talking about the benefits you would also say whether there are any similar dangers around academisation because then the focus becomes on restructure or process rather than on the needs of learners.

James Kewin: Do you mind if I follow up that final point, if I may, just I suppose because it was our campaign and something we have done a lot of work on?

The main benefit is drawing sixth form colleges in from the margins of education policy to the mainstream. We inhabit this very strange no man's land between FE and schools and that has been a kind of existential problem and threat to the sector for many years. We are called colleges, yet we deliver a school curriculum and have that offer.

For us, it is about having a place in the system. There is a huge amount of untapped potential in the sixth form college sector that is not capitalised on at all. The big opportunity for us as sixth form colleges is to help drive up standards in mainstream 11 to 16 education by becoming academies. It will allow us to forge closer links with schools in a way that we cannot do at the moment.

There are two other things. One is that we can bring our expertise in 16 to 19 education into the mainstream. We can also bring our business management expertise into the mainstream as well. We are very good. We are very tight ships, very efficient operations.

There is a final thing. We talked earlier about the proliferation of sixth forms. If you have a sixth form college that is, in effect, the sixth form of a MAT, for example, there are economies of scale there, educational benefits as well. For us, there are huge opportunities. I think that in contrast to the area review process this was a bold and imaginative step that the Government have taken. Are there risks and downsides? Yes, absolutely, there are. Is there more bureaucracy? Yes, potentially there is. On balance, I think it is worth it and it is an option that is seriously worth considering.

David Hughes: I think it is just a shame we seem obsessed with institutions and structures and names and labels and things. What we want is the sixth form colleges that do a fantastic job both in terms of value added and quality to carry on doing that. Whether they are academies or not I think should be irrelevant to that. A lot of the sixth form colleges who are also AoC members are saying, of course, the benefit of not having to pay VAT is a really big benefit, but when we come out of the EU we have said let's just get rid of that because the Government have blamed the EU for that VAT for the last 20 years. That is a simple one to get out of the way.

Once you get rid of that issue, and it is not a fantastic reason to make a substantial change to the nature of an institution I would believe, there are some concerns that many sixth form colleges are talking to us about



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in terms of the lack of freedoms and the loss of freedoms. Lots of sixth form colleges also do vocational apprenticeship, higher education, and get involved in international work, and that looks more difficult as an academy.

The partnership angle, which I agree completely with, I don't think should require a change in status. If a college wants to work in partnership with schools, that should be supported and policy should make that happen. I go back to the earlier discussion about small school sixth forms. The Government can and should put in place an environment in which schools have to work with colleges, sixth form and general, in order to get the right options and choices and progression moves for young people irrespective of institutional label type obstruction.

Shakira Martin: To be honest, we have not done a lot of work in this area, so I will be happy to send you some of it in feedback in line with that. I just do not want to say something for the sake of it. However, I would draw the point of making sure that learners are at the heart of this process and that one way of reviewing this provision is to make sure that we are having quality, efficient, successful outcomes that are making these students employable for the labour market or to move on to higher education. For me, it is about having the correct options, a different range of options for different students to be able to do what fits them. As long as the students have that clear path, whichever route it is, that is my main concern, and learner voice is at the heart of that.

Q80 Lilian Greenwood: If academisation does allow sixth forms to work more closely with schools, and I accept your point, David, that that is not a necessary condition to make that happen, do you think that will lead to a reduction in schools wanting to develop sixth forms? I see schools do want to develop sixth forms because they think it helps them to drive standards for their younger pupils because they can see that route and maybe it drives aspiration. Do you think this might help that to not happen? I do have a concern about small sixth forms.

David Hughes: Yes, I think there are some great examples of colleges working very closely with a group of schools in their locality. I think structure is irrelevant to that. Clearly, if you are in a multi-academy trust between a sixth form college and a bunch of schools in an area, then that might help. Again, I do not think you need to do it like that in order to get the same outcome.

James Kewin: This is probably one where I would take a slightly different view. I think there are benefits because you do not necessarily need to change your structure to work with schools to drive up standards, absolutely, but to really get that close relationship that you have in a multi-academy trust—we have a very odd situation at the moment where sixth form colleges can establish a multi-academy trust but they cannot be part of one. It is very strange. That very, very close working under the same roof, effectively, that is what we are talking about. It is a deeper type of collaboration that is allowed through the academy route. What we



want is for colleges to have the option. They will lose some freedoms, there is no question—those that deliver HE, for example, or international students—but what we have always said is let's make the option available to colleges and then given their local context they make the choice.

Shakira Martin: Could I add something in line with working in partnerships with schools? What I think is really important, which is something that we raised at the last evidence session last week, is about IAG, information, advice and guidance. All the structure changes are happening around the individual but they are not understanding what the difference is between a stand-alone sixth form, a school sixth form or a general FE college. Without having information, advice and guidance from Key Stage 4, we are not allowing these young people to potentially make the right choices. So, IAG, and I would strongly recommend the skills show. I will throw that in there.

Q81 **Chair:** Thank you very much. You are embellishing our report on careers advice as well by that observation, which is quite right. One question for you, James. Presumably, you would be thinking that vertical MATs would suit your purpose. Would that be right?

James Kewin: Both, I think. It is interesting. One of the concerns of some colleges when this option was first made available was what do we know about pre-16 education; we are sixth form specialists. We have been working with the sector to, in a sense, point out and remind them of their qualities. If you run a successful institution, I do not think it matters what age range that you cater for. A successful looking business model is a successful looking business model again. At the moment on the table are all sorts of interesting models. We have sixth form colleges looking at secondary and even primary schools. We have sixth form colleges looking at getting together with other sixth form colleges and multi-academy trusts. It is exciting, it is interesting and it is new, but I think all options are on the table at the moment, even working with universities potentially in a multi-academy trust as well.

Q82 **Suella Fernandes:** I think, David, you have already answered, but I am interested to hear the views of the others on the panel as well and just to confirm with David. In terms of next steps, do you think that these current reviews can be followed by a similar process looking at school sixth forms, free schools and UTCs?

David Hughes: Yes. It has to happen. As James said earlier, it does not have to happen in the same way for the same timetable because there are 2,000-odd sixth forms. It is a big number, but we have to do it because young people are not getting the deal they need. The figures show that. There are lots of young people entering school sixth forms and leaving after the first year. That is not in their interests and it is an expense to the Treasury as well, which we could reduce. We could save money and we could get a better option for young people that would help them better. We have to do it. How it is done, national framework, locally



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driven, but very rigorous in the same way the area review process has been.

James Kewin: There is a lot of focus on market entry. I think we need to do more on market exit. We talk about market entry and there has not been a new sixth form college approved, for example, since 2010. Despite the fact that we are the best performing sector, a superior product has been displaced by a brand that is more favourable to policymakers. We have seen academies, free schools and latterly grammar schools even as well. There is an issue about market entry, but what are we doing about market exit? A lot of these very inefficient, poorly performing sixth forms are limping along leaving their students poorly served as well, and we are not addressing that in the same way that we absolutely would if those providers were in the college sector.

I saw an interesting figure recently about the number of new sixth forms, which sometimes looks quite significant but I think there has only been a net increase in terms of the number of school or academy sixth forms that are funded by the EFA of about half a dozen, yet we know that in the past five years 160 or so have been set up. In a sense, these providers are closing at the same rate as they are opening, and that cannot be good for anyone in terms of capital, disruption and impact on students as well. I think market entry and exit are really important.

Shakira Martin: Could you just repeat the question, please?

Suella Fernandes: Yes, the area-based reviews have focused on FE. Do you think that that should be replicated for school sixth forms, free schools and UTCs?

Shakira Martin: I think that we do need to look at the education system as a whole because it is a domino effect, but again learners need to be involved in this. This is why we need to create learner voice structures and invest in student unions and learner voice because who knows best what they want out of education than the student who is going into that institution? We also do not want to just create spaces where people learn just for learning or qualification, that rote-type of learning. We want our students to have qualifications for life where they can transition and use transferable skills in doing that. So I do think so, but I do think timescale and timing and learners being part of that process is really important.

I would also say in what happens next, in the work that we have done around the roundtable, my students would like to know how that has been considered or if it has not been considered what were the outcomes. I would also strongly recommend that we have students on the implementation boards for each of the waves to see how that is going to be implemented. If we do review TUCs and free schools, again learners need to know what this means. Parents need to know what this means. I do think that parents are being left out of the loop. They do not know what this means and what this means for their children. Safeguarding,



gang culture, there are loads of different things that are being left, and I think parents should be involved in this process as well.

Suella Fernandes: Although I hope we are not proposing a review into the TUC.

Shakira Martin: Well, they do not work.

Suella Fernandes: You said TUC; I think you meant UTC.

Shakira Martin: Oh, my gosh.

Q83 **Suella Fernandes:** Do you think other work needs to be done to assess whether colleges are meeting the needs of learners in addition to what has been carried out already, other criteria, other kinds of inquiry?

James Kewin: The point was made earlier: less scrutiny, more support, please; this point about the relentless funding cuts, no appreciation of the relentless cost increases, yet this kind of constant scrutiny. A bit more support, a bit more partnership working, I think would be appreciated. We have all made the point but I will make it again because I think it is the number one, which is that all of this energy, this huge amount of energy, this army of people that has been involved in these reviews, a more useful way would have been by scrutinising, making a link: what does a rounded education for young people look like, and then let's cost it. At the moment, there is a complete disconnect between the amount of funding available and the type of education young people need. That I think is the number one priority.

David Hughes: Broadly, may I just add one thing, which is about data? I do not think there is sufficient measurement of progress of every young person through Key Stage 4 all the way through to post-19. I think we need to get some better measures because what is happening is the vast majority of young people who do not achieve at least a C in English and maths GCSE are going into FE colleges. They are causing enormous difficulties in terms of just the logistics and the resourcing to deliver the English and maths. The schools are passing that burden on and we have to get a much more collective understanding that is in the interests of every single young person all the way through school and post-16 and beyond. I do not think we have that.

That does not need a review. I think it needs DfE to start thinking about the success measures and the outcome measures a bit and work with the sector. That would allow locally the planning to be done and to say, "Where are the problems? Where are the issues? Where do we need to improve?" Some of that will be in schools, some of it will be in colleges, some of it will be apprenticeships, because not everything is perfect. But we do not have that single view of every outcome and we value some things much more highly than others. We value the access to HE above other outcomes. I do not think that is right. I do not think that is fair on young people.



Q84 **Chair:** That answer, of course, implies that you are interested in destinations and the question is how you collect that kind of data, measure it and compare it.

David Hughes: The good news is that the matching of school data and college data and university data with tax data gives you some measures. It is only pay and income but that is a really important part of it. I do not think we should only look at that because I think there are lots of issues. If we want people to go into the care sector, for instance, then income will not be fantastic, but we need that as a really important resource for our country.

That matching I think DfE have. If they could start disaggregating that down to local areas and work with the whole family of education providers, you can start to identify the cold spots and the issues and hot spots and do something about it at that level. I think the data is there and coming. At the moment, it is national and the lag is really enormous, of course, but that gives you something to base that on. Then you can start to look at some of the closer indicators of just what does happen to the children who leave school at 16 without English and maths. Where do they go and what are their options? Are they really getting the investment they need to catch back up again because the system has failed them?

Chair: Right. Well, I do not think we have learnt a huge amount more about the purpose of the area reviews or whether or not they have met that purpose because we have not been able to define it clearly enough. But we have learnt a lot about sixth forms, about the process of the area reviews and, last but not least, the views of the students who attend the FE colleges, so I thank you very much for that. We will be dealing with our report shortly because we are nearing the end of this inquiry, but thank you all very much indeed for coming along today and sharing your thoughts, often in a surprisingly entertaining way. Thank you.