Rural Lens Review

Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper

RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

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Executive Summary

The White Paper outlines reforms to the post-16 education and skills system in England to:

- meet the needs of the economy
- close skills gaps
- support growth

It is aimed at:

- post-16 education and training providers
- local and strategic authorities
- employers
- individual learners

It also sets out reforms to higher education teaching and research.

And seeks to:

- Work with employers to drive growth and opportunity through education and training
- Provide a specialist and prestigious further education system that delivers high-quality education and training for all
- Strengthen the UK's world-leading higher education system

RSN View at a glance

There is no specific mention of rural areas throughout the White Paper. That said the White Paper has sensible ambitions to simplify the post-16 landscape and better link education to employer needs — which could help rural economies if implementation (including by Strategic Authorities) recognises the rural context and barriers to delivery/implementation.

Without explicit rural safeguards – there are none set out in the White Paper - (funding premiums, travel/placement support, digital infrastructure and phased transition of existing applied routes) the reforms risk reducing access and local relevance for many rural learners and employers.

The White Paper's ambition to link education with employer need is, of course, welcome. However, it must be recognised that rural learners and providers face distinct barriers. Embedding rural weightings, flexible placement rules, and digital/transport support will ensure the reforms deliver equity of opportunity and genuine local economic benefit.

The rural dimension of the workforce recruitment and retention issues must be fully reflected as the issues are addressed. The specific issues facing the workforce needs of rural small to medium sized businesses must be addressed in implementation plans.

The RSN acknowledges that the Government, through its Industrial Strategy should, in part, concentrate on places with the greatest potential for growth. However, the RSN strongly believes that Government should also prioritises other sectors such as traditional manufacturing, retail, farming, leisure, and hospitality which play a vital role to the UK's economy supporting local employment, our high streets, and rural towns and villages.

It is vital that other sectors must be supported as well as the eight highlighted in the Industrial Strategy. In that context, whilst not wishing in any way to diminish the continued importance of agriculture and food production, we would stress that rural areas are home to 549,000 registered businesses from across a broad economic base – 85% of them in non-land-based sectors. The challenge for policy makers is to improve the prospects and opportunities for rural businesses, to increase the wellbeing of rural communities and to enhance the contribution that rural areas make to the nation.

RSN View

Summary of key changes

- **New V-levels:** a streamlined vocational qualification to sit alongside A-levels and T-levels, intended to replace many existing applied/vocational courses (e.g. BTECs) and simplify the offer for 16–19-year-olds.
- **"Stepping-stone" lower-level qualifications:** new shorter L1/L2 routes and resit/support qualifications in English & maths to help students who are below expected attainment.
- **Reforms to T-levels & industry placements:** continuing emphasis on T-levels but with recognition of placement difficulties and moves to make some elements more flexible (and to support delivery). Previous evidence shows industry placements have been a sticking point.
- **Funding & system changes:** a 16–19 funding review, targeted investment in FE/apprenticeships and closer alignment of provision with regional economic needs (and employer engagement).

White Paper Strengths

- The White Paper's emphasis on aligning skills with local economies and more employer-led provision could help rural sectors (agri-tech, land-based industries, green energy) if implementation explicitly includes them.
- Smaller, modular "stepping-stone" qualifications may suit learners who cannot relocate or commit to long programmes because of work/family responsibilities common in rural areas.
- Local Economic Alignment: chance to embed agri-tech, land-based industries, renewable energy, and rural enterprise in regional skills planning.
- Short, Modular Pathways: stepping-stone qualifications can help dispersed learners balance work and study.
- Employer-Led Design: potential to strengthen ties between Further Education colleges and rural SMEs.

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RSN View

White Paper - Our Main Concerns

Industry placements & employer availability
Young people in rural areas can get tracked into qualification routes that have been developed according to national / regional need - but where, at a local level, there are limited employment opportunities. T-levels require sustained employer placements; rural learners and rural employers face transport, broadband and mobile phone connectivity and availability barriers. Evaluations repeatedly report that rural locations make placements harder to access (travel costs, lack of public transport, employers geographically dispersed).

Provider density and course choice
Rural areas have fewer colleges and specialist providers. Consolidation of vocational offerings into V-levels risks centralising provision in urban hubs, increasing travel/time costs for rural students and possibly reducing locally relevant course options (e.g. land-based, animal care, agri-engineering). Evidence on uneven T-level roll-out shows rural provision can be patchy.

Digital/transport infrastructure gap
The proposals rely in part on remote/digital learning and employer engagement. Rural broadband/mobile phone and transport limitations make remote placements and hybrid delivery less reliable for some communities.

Risk to existing vocational routes that work locally
Rapid replacement of BTECs/AGQs with V-levels could remove locally valued applied courses that are cheaper to run and better suited to smaller cohorts; NAO and sector reports have warned about low uptake and high costs for T-style reforms, which is relevant here.

Staffing & CPD pressures for rural providers
Smaller rural colleges already find it hard to recruit and retain specialist staff and offer CPD; qualification redesign and more employer-facing delivery will increase pressures unless funded and supported.

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RSN View

White Paper - Our Recommendations for Rural Areas

The RSN suggests the following are implementable tweaks that the White Paper could adopt to avoid large rural harm:

- **Rural weighting in funding** — add an explicit rural/dispersion premium so small cohort providers can sustain niche local courses (land-based, forestry, agri-tech). This prevents forced centralisation.

- **Funded travel bursaries & placement transport hubs** — reimburse travel and create shared vehicle/placement hubs or local placement coordinators to organise clusters of placements and reduce travel duplication. (Pilots already found travel was a major cost and time barrier.)

- **Hybrid placement rules that work for rural contexts** — allow higher proportions of high-quality simulated/remote activity for placements where physical work is inaccessible but preserve in-person requirements where licensing/professional standards demand it. (The government has already moved toward some hybrid flexibility for T-levels — expand that with rural safeguards.)

- **Mobile & satellite delivery units** — fund mobile training labs (e.g., agri-tech vans, mobile engineering rigs) and pop-up course weeks so rural learners access practical training locally.

- **Employer incentives targeted at rural SMEs** — travel-offset payments and micro-grants for small rural employers to host placements; local employer hubs to aggregate rural micro-placements across a number of local employers to create credible placement experiences.

- **Protect locally-valued applied qualifications during transition** — phase out BTECs only where robust local coverage of V-levels exists and ensure bridge financing for providers to redesign curricula. (NAO and sector bodies recommended keeping applied routes until new options are proven.)

- **Investment in digital infrastructure & wraparound support** — prioritise rural broadband and mobile phone upgrades and provide device/space subsidies so remote learning and virtual placements are reliable.

- **Rural workforce & CPD package for Further Education staff** — extra CPD funding, rural recruitment incentives, and shared specialist staff (visiting lecturers across colleges) to maintain expertise in niche rural subjects

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Key excerpts from the White Paper

“As part of this we will stop long-term unemployment for young people by subsidising paid work placements so they can build skills, gain experience, and improve their employability. For those on Universal Credit who remain unemployed for over 18 months, we will offer a guaranteed job”

“Across the post-16 education and skills system, we will support providers to identify their specialism and foster collaboration with local market actors. This will ensure all areas of the country have the right volume and mix of priority courses and research capabilities, both at a local and national level. We will be clear on what we expect from providers and will ensure providers are held to account to deliver this”.

“We will join up the skills and employment systems, strengthening our offer to support people back into work with a new Pathways to Work Guarantee, closer integration of the Adult Skills Fund and Jobcentres, and a significant expansion of access to Sector Based Work Academy Programmes in England and Scotland, providing training, work experience and a guaranteed job interview.”

“We will ensure everyone can upskill throughout their working life with access to short, modular courses or longer periods of training. These will be funded through a new loan entitlement, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, or will be via short courses funded by employers through the Growth and Skills Levy. “

“Strategic Authorities will have a stronger role in this system, joining up skills, work, health, and transport interventions to tailor progression pathways to jobs that drive growth locally and bolster pride in places, and delivering change regionally through the devolved adult skills budget.”

“We will act to tackle the rise in the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training. We will support young people with access to specialist support to stay in learning, access training or get into work, underpinned by better data to track attendance and reforms to accountability. “

“Further education teachers and leaders will have access to high-quality, national training and professional development that will raise standards in all parts of the country. Through our Industry Exchange programme, we will bring workplace skills into the classroom, creating a flow of information that benefits all”

“These changes will be underpinned by clear funding principles. The government funds the universal education offer up to the age of 18 and provides support to individuals who are furthest from the labour market, to help them re-enter the world of work. We will also work with businesses to co-invest in the priority sectors identified in the Industrial Strategy and in our Plan for Change. We will ask Strategic Authorities to be responsible for adult skills provision, including delivering the adult skills entitlements”