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Thank you for your email of 23 February, regarding your constituent's concerns about further education (FE) reforms and sixth form colleges.

I appreciate the concerns raised about area reviews and the potential impact this may have on the learners in your constituency. Your constituent asks a number of specific questions and I have responded to each in turn below.

Why are the reviews happening so quickly? The financial health of FE colleges is declining and as a result, the current structure of the post-16 education and training sector is unsustainable. Some colleges have not responded to the decline quickly enough and as a result could be financially inadequate by the end of this academic year. Quick and immediate action was therefore required to halt this decline.

Area reviews are the mechanism by which the provision of post-16 education and training in England is being reviewed and will ensure that all colleges in the sector are both financially sustainable while at the same time able to deliver the highest quality education and training in each local area. We anticipate that there will be around 40 area reviews in five waves. The first wave commenced last September and some of the reviews are now reaching conclusion. All reviews are due to be undertaken by March 2017.

Your constituents also ask what I will be doing to support access to any newly merged colleges, for example, if students will have to travel further to study certain courses, what will I do to make sure their transport is appropriately subsidised? The reviews are evidence based and take account of travel to learn patterns and travel requirements. The options and recommendations from reviews will take into account possible changes to travel to training patterns. In all reviews, there is recognition of the need to maintain access to local provision for learners, especially those studying at levels 1, 2 and 3.

In addition, where a review recommends structural change such as merger or closure, then the affected institution will be required to consult with the local community upon those changes in line with existing statutory requirements.

The views of learners are central to the reviews and following discussions with the National Union of Students (NUS), arrangements have been put in place to ensure learners can input. The NUS is also a member of the national advisory group, which is informing the reviews.

Your constituent asks how this process saves money for the FE sector when it is suggested that the same process failed to do so in Scotland. It provides a way of looking at how colleges can achieve greater efficiencies to create a financially sustainable and stable college sector for the long term, with a focus on what provision is needed in the area to meet the needs of learners and employers. As part of the process, we have established some benchmarks which are helping to shape options. The recently published updated area review guidance sets out details and can be accessed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-education-and-training-institutions-area-based-reviews>.

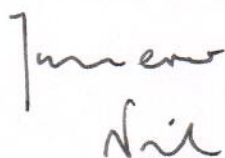
Your constituent also asks why the reviews only cover sixth-form and FE colleges, and don't include school sixth-forms or universities. The reviews are predominantly focused on general FE and sixth form colleges because of the urgent need to ensure there is a high quality and financially resilient set of colleges in each area of England. Provision in schools with sixth forms and relevant higher education institutions will be included in the initial analysis of the reviews. To include the 2,000+ school sixth forms and all of the relevant universities in this process would make the reviews excessively cumbersome and delay what is already urgently needed action. However, as the updated guidance makes clear, the regional schools commissioners and local authorities are both on the local steering groups and will take account of the analysis in their future considerations around schools.

Another question asks how we will ensure that basic adult education such as numeracy and literacy and English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) will be delivered effectively. The area reviews include analysis of learner and employer needs and how that is currently being met by providers, including the quality of provision at all levels, including numeracy, literacy and ESOL. One of the core principles of the reviews is a strong focus on quality improvement across the area.

In 2018/19 we will be devolving the Adult Education Budget to combined authorities who have signed devolution deals. As part of this we will be devolving duties relating to the current statutory entitlements so access to free English and Maths provision for those who do not have a level 2 qualification will be retained. Combined authorities will be responsible for commissioning provision, working with local partners to ensure that skills provision is tailored to the needs of the local population.

Your constituent's last question asks if equality impact assessments be carried out during the area review processes in each area. Government will produce an evaluation of the area review programme and its potential to impact on groups protected by the Equality Act 2010. Reviews themselves will also take account of the needs of protected groups. The decision on whether to take forward recommendations will rest with colleges themselves as independent corporations, so it will be for each college's governing body to assess the potential impact on groups protected by the Act.

I do hope that your constituent finds this information helpful.



**NICK BOLES MP**