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HONEST BROKERS:
The Role of LEAs in Post-16 Education

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a number of developments in post-16 education, with the pace of change continuing to accelerate due to a number of factors. These include:

♦ the marked increase in the number of young people staying on in full time education post-16;

♦ the diversification of courses for post-16 students, including the new emphasis on vocational qualifications, especially GNVQ;

♦ changes in the financing and control of post-16 institutions, as a result of government legislation.

Through its Membership Programme of research, the NFER is investigating the impact of these changes on schools with sixth forms, and the ways in which schools and LEAs are responding to the new developments. This paper reports on one phase of the research.

1.1   The LEA survey

A telephone survey of LEAs was carried out between July and September, 1994. The aim was to establish:

♦ the role now played by LEAs in post-16 education;

♦ the views of LEAs on recent developments in post-16 education;

♦ the response of LEAs to new challenges resulting from these changes.

All 117 LEAs in England and Wales were approached, although some authorities now have little or no responsibility for post-16 education. Even LEAs with no 11-18 schools are likely to be involved in informing Year 11 students about post-16 options. Moreover, it

1

is quite possible that authorities which pursued a tertiary policy (and thus lost control of post-16 education) might now have 11-16 schools wishing to start sixth forms. Their views on current developments, therefore, are relevant. Response to the survey was extremely good, and 113 detailed interviews were completed, giving a comprehensive picture of current patterns of post-16 provision and highlighting the effect upon these of recent Government legislation.

1.2   The Interviewees

In the initial stages of the survey, the team of researchers approached the NFER Liaison Officer in each LEA and asked who would be the 'most appropriate' person to interview with regard to post-16 education. The nominated interviewees held a variety of posts. They included:

- 30 Inspectors/Senior Inspectors/Chief Inspectors;
- 29 Advisers/Senior Advisers/Chief Advisers;
- 18 TVEI directors/coordinators;
- 15 Education Officer/Senior Education Officers.

The different age groups for which interviewees were responsible illustrate the fact that post-16 education is at the interface of school and adult learning. Thirty-three interviewees (representing over a quarter of LEAs) dealt specifically with post-16 education. Another 25 were responsible for the 14-19 age range, or for the whole of secondary education. For a further ten, post-16 was linked with adult/community education.

Some interviewees had cross-phase responsibility. Post-16 education was linked most commonly with TVEI; a total of 39 interviewees specifically mentioned current (or very recent) TVEI involvement. Other areas mentioned were vocational education (12 interviewees), TEC/EBP liaison (nine interviewees) and CEG (five interviewees).

Although respondents were contacted as representatives of LEAs, some individual and personal views may have been reported.

2. THE LEA ROLE

Five years ago, LEAs were responsible for the post-16 education of all students except those in independent schools. With the incorporation of colleges, and with some schools becoming grant-maintained, the situation has changed dramatically. The proportion of post-16 students in LEA-maintained schools now varies widely from authority to authority (see Table 1).

Table 1:   LEA responsibility for post-16 education

Proportion of students in LEA-maintained schools (%)	No. of LEAs
0	7
1-25	27
26-50	31
51-75	16
76-100	6
Unable to estimate	26
Total LEAs surveyed	113

Seven English authorities have no involvement in post-16 education (except for special schools). Only a quarter of the LEAs responding to this question estimated that they were responsible for more than half the post-16 students in their area.

Traditionally, the role of the LEA has included three major aspects: support for individual schools, policy guidelines on curriculum and related issues, and overall strategy for providing post-16 places in the most appropriate and cost-effective way. The LEA survey aimed to discover how these areas of responsibility are developing in the 1990s, with specific reference to sixth forms.

2.1   Support for schools

LEAs continue to provide support services for schools, though in some cases these now have to be 'bought in', so the schools can choose whether to make use of them or not. In the survey, those interviewed were asked what assistance, advice or guidance their LEA offered school sixth forms (other than that provided directly through the Careers Service). They were not asked specific questions about their provision, so it should not be assumed that the LEAs mentioning a service are the only ones who provide it.

Advisory service

Thirteen interviewees reported that their LEA funded a post-16 adviser or advisory teacher; eleven referred to a vocational adviser for the 14-19 age range.   Others said that their specialist subject advisers, and/or the advisory service in general, had a remit which included post-16 education.

INSET

Nine interviewees mentioned INSET specifically for sixth form staff, and eight general INSET for teachers which would include sixth form staff. Seven said that their LEA funded GNVQ training, which would be undertaken principally by those teaching sixth formers.

TVEI

No fewer than 28 of the interviewees (one quarter of the total) referred to the LEA's involvement with TVEI as a way of supporting sixth forms. It was noted that TVEI resources had:

- supported vocational advisers/inspectors (13 LEAs)
- created networks of post-16 providers (6 LEAs)
- provided funding for INSET (6 LEAs)

Several interviewees noted that TVEI had made a valuable impact on post-16 education, and expressed concern about what would happen now that TVEI had come, or was coming, to an end.

Other forms of support

Other forms of support mentioned by interviewees included coordinating post-16 forums (15 LEAs) and involvement in schools-business liaison via EBPs, TECs etc (11 LEAs).

2.2 Curriculum policy

More than half of the LEAs represented in the survey had formulated a post-16 curriculum policy, but in seven cases the policy was recognised as outdated and therefore no longer in force. In a further 16 LEAs, the policy was under review or being redrafted in response to the changes which had taken place in post-16 education.

Nearly a third of the LEAs who had a curriculum policy said that the key features were shared with their TVEI statement. The features mentioned most often were:

- entitlement (19 LEAs)
- a broad curriculum, offering choice (14 LEAs)
- progression and continuity (9 LEAs)
- access to Careers Education and Guidance (8 LEAs)

LEA representatives were asked whether they encouraged schools to undertake certain curriculum-related developments. The results are shown in Table 2.

In each case, few – if any – LEAs discouraged the initiative. The majority said either that they would positively encourage it, or that it was a matter for individual schools to decide. The proportions varied; on AS-levels and modular A-levels the groups were fairly evenly divided, but most LEAs were keen to promote vocational courses and work-related activities.

Table 2: LEAs encouraging curriculum-related developments

Development	LEAs encouraging	LEAs not encouraging	LEAs leaving to schools
One-year vocational and pre-vocational courses	84	0	19
GNVQs or equivalent	92	0	11
AS-level	51	3	50
Modular A-levels	54	7	41
Common core curriculum	74	3	25
Work experience / shadowing for sixth formers	94	0	9
School-business partnerships	96	1	6

Seventy-four LEAs reported a wide variety of other curriculum-related developments which they encouraged. Those most frequently mentioned were:

- TVEI   (16 LEAs)
- flexible learning   (9 LEAs)
- European work experience / links   (7 LEAs)
- core skills   (7 LEAs)
- post-16 National Records of Achievement   (7 LEAs)
- post-16 Action Plans   (6 LEAs)
- equal opportunities   (6 LEAs)

2.3   GNVQs

Interviewees were asked what impact they expected GNVQs to have on school sixth forms. Most responded positively, suggesting that GNVQs would:

- provide better choices and opportunities for a wider range of students (41 LEAs)
- increase the numbers staying on at school   (23 LEAs)
- lead to more collaborative arrangements between schools and colleges   (12 LEAs)
- facilitate progression   (11 LEAs)

GNVQs were said to be popular with students and/or teachers (12 interviewees) and LEAs would strongly encourage schools to introduce them (nine interviewees mentioned this here, but see also the response to the previous question about curriculum developments).

However, despite this enthusiasm, LEAs did have some serious concerns about GNVQs. Not all shared the views outlined above; for example, six interviewees thought that the introduction of GNVQs in sixth forms would increase antagonism, rather than cooperation, between schools and colleges. The need for different teaching styles, and the implications in terms of staffing and resources, were stressed. It was noted that small or medium sized institutions would find it difficult to offer a range of GNVQs, and might have problems with particular courses.

The concerns most frequently expressed related to the quality, the content and above all the status of GNVQs. LEAs perceived a *'desperate need for national recognition ... it takes five years before the gatekeepers recognise a new qualification'*. Although *'some students have achieved considerable success on vocational courses where they would have failed at A-level'*, GNVQ *'will not work if seen as something for "lower achievers"; it needs parity of esteem ... [we must] keep making this statement'*.

In short, the LEA view was that GNVQs had considerable potential, but that issues relating to quality and status needed urgent resolution. They also recognised that the introduction of GNVQs could place heavy demands on schools, and careful planning and development was needed to ensure their success. Seventeen LEAs expressed the fear that some schools were going too fast and taking on more than they could realistically cope with. As was noted by one interviewee, *'some schools may be biting off more than they can chew... in terms of staff, facilities, viability, funds and being over ambitious. They are not prepared and yet offer it.'*

2.4 Strategy for post-16 provision

Until recently, LEAs could decide on the kind of post-16 provision which they felt was best for their area. Some LEAs opted for sixth form colleges in preference to individual school sixth forms; others implemented a comprehensive programme of tertiary re-organisation. The general trend was to have fewer post-16 institutions, so that each was large enough to offer a wide range of viable courses.

In the changed circumstances of the 1990s, it is difficult to see how an LEA - or any other single body - can develop a coherent strategy for post-16 provision. All colleges and some schools are now independent bodies, and even LEA-maintained schools can resist a threat to close or merge their sixth forms by *'playing the grant-maintained card'* (see below).

LEAs' power in this respect is therefore limited, to the evident frustration of some interviewees. Some spoke of tertiary plans carefully drawn up but necessarily abandoned. Another interviewee reported the existence within a comparatively small area of 19 secondary schools, each with its own small sixth form; it was acknowledged that this was not a rational method of provision, but the LEA could do little to change the situation.

The trend towards fewer post-16 institutions appears thus to have been halted. The number of sixth forms is unlikely to decrease in the coming years; on the contrary, it may well increase.

3. NEW SIXTH FORMS

In a speech in November, 1993, the Secretary of State for Education encouraged schools to consider starting new sixth forms. In order to assess the likely response to this encouragement, LEA officers were asked about new sixth forms. When asked whether any schools in their area had started sixth forms in the previous three years, 16 LEAs reported a total of 44 new sixth forms. They were then asked whether any schools were currently applying to start sixth forms, and 32 LEAs reported that 79 schools were doing so. In addition, 41 LEAs said at least a further 73 schools were considering the possibility of starting new sixth forms. These numbers suggest that the move to set up new sixth forms is gathering pace.

According to LEAs, schools gave a number of reasons for wanting to develop sixth forms. These included:

- filling gaps in local provision to meet demand   (17 LEAs)

- ensuring continuity for students wishing to stay at
  a familiar institution   (10 LEAs)

- achieving equal status with 11-18 schools   (8 LEAs)

- widening choice for students   (4 LEAs)

LEAs were asked whether they encouraged or discouraged schools which were moving in this direction. Some had no position on the subject, while 11 LEAs said they would consider each case on its individual merit. Special factors might influence the decision to support an application. For example, one LEA officer pointed out that *'Ethnic minority pressures may affect the situation'*.

Of the LEA representatives who indicated a general position, many more discouraged (42 LEAs) than encouraged (10 LEAs) the move towards an increased number of sixth forms. Those who supported new sixth forms felt that they increased choice and diversity for young people, provided pupils with an opportunity to stay on at a familiar institution, and allowed 11-16 schools in authorities with a mixed 11-16/11-18 provision to achieve equal status.

Of the LEAs which discouraged new sixth forms, several expressed the view that post-16 provision was already sufficient and they were therefore reluctant to see the *status quo* altered. An interviewee from an LEA which had a tertiary system and (currently) no sixth forms commented *'...we are very happy with a college set up [and] a single coherent system...The worst thing that could happen is for schools to be encouraged to go GM and open sixth forms in this area...'*. Another felt that *'...asserting the break at 16+ is the best...we've done better by our students with our [tertiary] organisation. We are very annoyed the government...are allowing three GM schools to start sixth forms when local tertiary provision is the highest quality.'*

3.1 The Grant-Maintained issue

In a number of LEAs, the decision to encourage or discourage schools in their applications to start sixth forms was strongly influenced by the 'GM issue'. One LEA officer reported that, while the LEA had a general policy of not encouraging new sixth forms, it had supported an application from an LEA-maintained school because *'the only other local provider went GM and had aspirations about selectivity'*. Some LEAs, generally unenthusiastic about the development of new sixth forms, admitted that an application by a GM school would automatically be opposed: *'The GM situation is likely to encourage tactical rather than actual opposition'*.

On the other hand, several LEAs, who were opposed in principle to an increase in numbers of sixth forms, had reluctantly supported applications by LEA-maintained schools rather than see the schools become grant-maintained. One LEA representative commented: *'We want to work in close partnership with schools which want to stay LEA-maintained but could not if having a sixth form was an issue.'*

3.2 Viability

The LEAs' lack of enthusiasm for new sixth forms related strongly to the issue of viability. Many interviewees expressed concern that potential sixth forms might not be able to attract enough students to run viable courses. A number also questioned the viability of some existing sixth forms, and several LEA officers voiced the suspicion that schools diverted funds from lower down the school in order to support non-viable sixth form groups.

Only 19 LEAs reported that they had a policy on the size of a viable sixth form, and just six of those quoted a specific number. Six others said that they followed DfE guidelines (in the past, the DfE recommended a minimum of 150 students, but it does not now define viability in precise numerical terms).

No interviewees reported that they considered numbers below 120 to be viable. In practice, however, schools could and did ignore guidelines (and this had led to many LEAs *'abandoning'* the viability policies they had had in the past). For example, LEA-maintained schools could always *'threaten'* to go grant-maintained should the LEA attempt to impose guidelines by closing or merging an uneconomic sixth form.

LEA concerns were not restricted to economic viability. Many felt that quality of provision also might suffer if teaching groups were too small, for example, to allow a broad discussion of issues and an interchange of ideas on an A-level Politics course. Here, however, LEAs felt they were restricted to making clear their concerns about quality because they could only offer informal, non-coercive advice to schools.

4. COOPERATION BETWEEN POST-16 PROVIDERS

Collaborative relationships between schools, or between schools and colleges, can be one way in which viability problems are overcome, and these may take a variety of forms. LEAs were asked to indicate the prevalence of cooperative arrangements, and how they felt about them.

Joint sixth forms existed in one third of the LEAs questioned, and were encouraged by a quarter of them. These tended to be locally convenient, *ad hoc* arrangements, which, it was felt, broadened choices for young people within economies of scale. Schools could bring 'minority' subject students together and avoid duplication of provision.

Sixth form centres existed in 16 LEAs and varied in description. In some areas, this was simply an alternative title for an individual school's sixth form. In other areas, 'sixth form centre' was used to denote what was effectively a joint sixth form, although it might have its own site (rather than be attached to one of the 'parent' schools); one LEA noted that *'sixth form centres on a separate site give an illusion of college provision'*. Other authority representatives reported sixth form centres which were based at an 11-18 school into which a number of local 11-16 schools fed. At least one LEA was considering the establishment of a sixth form centre as a way of *'countering [potential] pressures'* from 11-16 schools to start individual, non-viable sixth forms.

Consortia of sixth forms existed in half of the LEAs questioned; many had evolved from TVEI networks. Again, several interviewees felt that these arrangements allowed a rationalisation of provision, giving *'good value for money'*, while offering students the security of staying in a familiar environment. In a few LEAs, a consortium had obviated the need to merge small sixth forms when the schools involved *'all felt they had something to offer'* or had provided *'a political solution for not going tertiary'*. Schools which were originally *'sensitive about their pupils moving around [are] changing and becoming more pragmatic'*.

However, while a large number of consortia were said to have been very successful, a significant minority of interviewees reported that existing consortia were breaking down, or had now broken down, mainly through competitive pressures (see below). As a result, a number of LEAs were less likely to encourage consortia in the future, given what they felt was their limited success.

Franchise agreements between schools and colleges were reported by 72 LEAs, and another nine said they were under consideration. These arrangements often related to GNVQ and BTEC provision, allowing schools to offer vocational courses to students on their *'home territory'*. Schools could utilise college expertise and facilities, sometimes as a *'launch pad'* or *'springboard'* before going their own way in particular course provision. However, interviewees noted that provision by schools of the widest range of vocational courses would rely on franchise agreements being maintained since some courses - construction, manufacturing and engineering, for example - required facilities not normally found in schools.

Progression arrangements between schools and colleges existed in two-thirds of the LEAs interviewed and were encouraged by nearly three-quarters. A number of interviewees reported that these were informal agreements, based on pre-incorporation relationships, where colleges had undertaken to find appropriate post-16 courses for all students from local 11-16 schools. However, a greater number of LEAs reported that more formal arrangements were in place, with structured, common progression between institutions. A number of these had developed from TVEI networks.

A variety of other **linking arrangements** was reported by interviewees. These included:

♦ joint courses run between schools to allow provision of one or two minority subjects;

♦ the organisation of GNVQ courses across a group of schools with agreement about which each would teach and with transfer arrangements for students in place;

♦ a *'halfway house'* joint course run between one school and an FE college to provide vocational courses for pupils *'to find their feet if they're reluctant to leave school and the local community, [who] would otherwise be lost to post-16 education'*;

♦ the joint provision of two courses by seven 11-18 schools and two colleges in a *'well established cooperative'*;

♦ collaborative time-tabling between two schools and a college to widen access.

Further cooperation was also being encouraged in a number of ways, including:

♦ network and cluster groups of post-16 providers, including a post-16 *'unifying project'*;

♦ a post-16 consultation exercise attempting planned, not piecemeal development;

♦ a 14-19 strategy group representing all the schools and colleges in an authority, together with the TEC and ED;

♦ a working party investigating ways of improving cross-authority progression;

♦ the development of common entry/recruitment procedures for post-16 courses;

♦ post-16 school/college liaison officers in each school.

Within LEAs, there was wide appreciation of *'any creative, cooperative development which [avoids] expensive duplication of provision'*, and many interviewees expressed the wish to see more cooperation between post-16 institutions in the future. But while examples of cooperative arrangements were reported by most LEAs, and encouraged by many, they were not necessarily widespread. In some rural LEAs, for example, the distances separating schools might prevent the development of a successful consortium arrangement because travel between sites would not be feasible. But even in more densely populated areas, where inter-school or school/college cooperation was geographically feasible, other factors appeared to be militating against the development of good working relationships.

5. COMPETITION

LEA representatives were not directly questioned about competition between post-16 institutions, and yet this frequently emerged as a dominant theme in the interviews. Competition has been stimulated by two key factors:

- ◆ the independence given to colleges and GM schools;

- ◆ the increased overlap in courses on offer, with schools now encouraged to run the advanced vocational courses which previously were the preserve of FE colleges.

Schools with sixth forms have always been keen to persuade their Year 11 students to stay on, and aim to provide courses which will enable as many as possible to do so. However, some schools, together with the colleges, have become increasingly pro-active in marketing their post-16 courses to increase recruitment from outside. The result is a competitive market in which cooperation is difficult to sustain.

5.1 Circulation of information

LEAs placed considerable value on young people's access to comprehensive and unbiased information about post-16 opportunities. LEAs reported that this access had been encouraged by them in a number of ways, including:

- promotion of the circulation of information in all secondary schools (96 LEAs)

- publication of a post-16 booklet detailing options in every institution (31 LEAs)

- use of TVEI projects to promote or provide unbiased options advice (28 LEAs)

However, several LEAs voiced their concern that *'schools are not as honourable as they might be'* regarding the dissemination of options information. In a competitive post-16 market, *'protectionism'* was a motivating factor, or an *'unwritten assumption'*, when schools promoted their sixth forms at the expense of other providers by failing to circulate information about them. Schools had a *'vested interest'* in retaining pupils and a *'captive audience'* to be able to do so. As was noted by one LEA, there was a wealth of difference between *'[sticking] the information on a shelf [and] actively [encouraging] students to look at it'*. LMS and GM status had made this an area difficult for LEAs to *'police'*. One authority had published a 'parents' guide' to post-16 courses, *'but the competitive element may mean that it doesn't get to the parents'*.

In addition, LEAs reported that college access to Year 11 pupils was being restricted by some schools. These had withdrawn invitations to local FE college representatives to speak to Year 11 pupils, had blocked the attendance of colleges at careers conventions, or had not sent pupils to college open days. However, as was noted by one interviewee, *'the extent to which colleges are welcomed into schools varies enormously'*. Schools without sixth forms tended to be open, but *'11-18 schools... are guarded'*.

5.2   Schools versus colleges?

The competition described by LEAs was not one-sided. One LEA reported that sixth form and FE colleges had *'ganged up on the schools this year'* and excluded them from a college-produced options booklet. The excluded schools, as a result, had been left *'paddling their own canoe'*. In another LEA, an FE college had *'aggressively advertised'* itself on hoardings and had sponsored a pop music programme on the local radio station. Through this, *'everything the schools traditionally do [was] made to present a stuffy, fussy image to students'*.

There was a general consensus among LEAs that the critical development in post-16 education had been *'the emergence and dominance of a market place and its effect on relationships between established institutions which are now competitors'*. LEAs gave a number of examples demonstrating difficulties in school/college relationships:

♦   an agreement between colleges about which would offer 'minority' subjects had broken down into a *'free for all'*;

♦   an 11-18 school had *'cut off its nose to spite its face'* and entered into a franchise agreement with a college from a different LEA, rather than work alongside a local, *'rival'* college;

♦   in a dispute between a school and college, an LEA suggestion that the two enter into a franchise agreement had been rejected by the college because this would allow the school to start a new sixth form and they perceived this as a *'threat'*;

♦   a common application procedure scheme, to which to all post-16 providers in an authority had adhered, was now under threat because a quarter of them had opted out;

♦   a *'sensible provision transfer'* arrangement between schools and a college had collapsed because the schools did not want to risk intake levels by limiting their A-level options.

In the opinion of many interviewees, these problems were compounded by the absence of *'one body to give direction or compel cooperation'*. Since incorporation, and with GM status as an available option, LEAs were no longer able - formally - to devise and implement strategic plans for coherent post-16 provision.

5.3   The LEA response

When asked, very few LEAs reported that they had a policy on encouraging young people to choose a particular type of post-16 institution. Of the eight who did advocate a system, one preferred school sixth forms to colleges, and three felt that different institutions were better for different courses. The remaining four LEAs had always favoured colleges as post-16 providers, a situation which had not changed with incorporation. A small number of LEAs felt it was inappropriate for them to promote GM and voluntary aided schools.

On the whole, however, the concern of most LEAs was that young people should have objective advice circulated to them on the broadest possible choice of options (see above). Here, a number of LEAs reported that they were having to take an increasingly pro-active role in ensuring young people had access to relevant information. Strategies they had adopted for doing this included:

- posting options booklets direct to students' homes;

- developing a 'code of conduct' for all post-16 providers;

- allocating a schools' PR officer to support them in 'positive promotion';

- coordinating open days/evenings to avoid clashes of date;

- advertising all open days/evenings on the same day and via the same local media.

LEAs were aware that the first of these - posting options booklets direct to students' homes – was not always a popular move: *'schools don't like this'* was the comment made by one LEA. In another, production of an options booklet had ceased completely because *'it would be difficult to do now without upsetting lots of people'*. In a third, schools had denied the LEA access to databases of student addresses, thereby preventing a direct 'mailshot'.

While realising they could not impose cooperative relationships, LEAs reported they were at least attempting *'to oil the wheels and keep relationships together'* or to provide *'an umbrella under which competition occurs'*. In some areas, they were being called upon to mediate in disputes between competing post-16 providers. For example, in an LEA where a college had complained about a severe reduction in the numbers of pupils sent by a particular school to their open day, the LEA had called a meeting between the head teacher and principal concerned; remedial action had been agreed and assurances obtained that the situation would not occur again.

In circumstances such as these, LEAs perceived their role as that of *'honest broker'* or *'ombudsman'*. A number reported that they now oversaw what might best be described as post-16 'forums' in order to facilitate liaison among providers. In some LEAs, these forums had been created at the instigation of the providers themselves who had then invited LEA representatives to chair them; in others, the LEAs had *'intervened'* in a deteriorating situation.

6. CONCLUSION
– THE NEW ROLE OF LEAs

Recent developments, such as the incorporation of colleges, LMS and grant-maintained status, have had a major impact on the role of LEAs in post-16 provision. A variety of local responses to these changes were described by interviewees, but some common themes emerged from the survey.

Some LEAs had evidently maintained close relationships with 'their' colleges. Funding now came by a different route, but otherwise it was very much 'business as usual'. And indeed, at one level the role of the LEAs seems little changed. They can and do still offer support to individual schools; they can provide advice and direction in the form of policy guidelines; they can be involved in coordinating post-16 provision.

The difference is that under LMS, schools can decide whether to make use of LEA expertise, or find alternative providers; they can also choose, in many cases, whether to follow or ignore LEA policy guidelines. During the interviews, *'we don't have a policy ... we leave it to the schools'* was a frequent response. In some cases, this appeared to reflect the conviction that it was most appropriate for individual schools to make their own decisions. But in some other cases, there was a feeling that the LEA, recognising its lack of power to enforce rules, had abandoned the attempt to provide guidelines.

Since LEAs no longer control all state-funded post-16 education, it is difficult for them to impose new policies relating to overall provision. For some LEAs, this may not be a great problem, but many interviewees felt frustrated by their loss of power to act, or to prevent others from doing so. There were those who could see problems with their current pattern of provision, but were unable to make changes, such as closing sixth forms perceived to be non-viable. There were also those who were enthusiastic about the college provision which they had developed prior to incorporation, but believed that it was under threat from GM schools about to start sixth forms.

Many interviewees expressed concern about the competition developing between newly-independent colleges and schools. They feared that this could damage post-16 education; as one said, *'competition ... is having a serious effect on any attempt to make the best possible provision for young people'*.

Is it possible, within the present framework, to minimise the negative effects of competition and create a coherent pattern of post-16 provision? While recognising that their power has been curtailed by recent legislation, some interviewees provided evidence to suggest that LEAs still have a valuable contribution to make.

As noted above, there were reports of LEAs being called upon, increasingly, to intervene in disputes between competing post-16 providers. In such cases, LEAs acted as 'brokers' or conciliators; they appeared to perceive themselves, and to be perceived by others, as the obvious – perhaps the only – candidate for this role.

In other areas, LEAs were taking a more proactive role by encouraging and facilitating cooperation and the rationalisation of provision. It was recognised that this was not an easy task, but some LEAs at least were finding that *'cooperation can still be achieved, given a positive approach, but it has to be constantly promoted and worked for'*.

This new strategic role which some LEAs are adopting, or attempting to create, may be limited in scope, but it is an important role, and one that only they can play.

The schools' view

The next stage of the research project is a questionnaire survey of a representative sample of schools with sixth forms in England and Wales. This will be followed by in-depth case-study research in selected schools. The report (to be published in 1995) will provide a comprehensive picture of sixth forms in the 1990s, and map the ways in which both schools and LEAs are responding to new developments in post-16 education.