

# Evaluation of the first year of devolved Adult Education Budget in London

Report for the Greater London Authority

September 2020



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## Headline findings at a glance

### Provider Satisfaction

**The findings from this research are largely very positive** – with the vast majority of providers surveyed stating that they were ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ satisfied across a range of measures.

Overall, providers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the GLA’s approach to managing the delegation of the AEB, with 39 of 44 surveyed stating that they were ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ satisfied. Most providers described the interaction with their provider manager as positive, with many really appreciating having a direct point of contact that they could go to with an queries or concerns.

We conclude that the delegation of the AEB has worked effectively in its first year, for the majority of providers who receive funding from it.

### Impact of delegation on provision

The evidence regarding impacts on provision is also positive, although less clear-cut, as may be expected given that delegation is only in its first year, and provision was impacted by the Coronavirus lockdown partway through the year. Many providers reported that they had increased their provision in priority areas, with the most common increases being:

- support for learners on low incomes
- courses relevant to the GLA’s priority sectors
- support for ESOL learners
- core skills learning opportunities

Where many providers reported an increase in provision prioritised by the GLA, they also felt that this had reinforced their existing plans rather than changing them.

### Response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Survey responses suggest there has been **a shift in mode of learning delivery in response to the Covid-19 pandemic**. Before March 2020, three-quarters of the providers surveyed were not delivering any provision wholly online. However, at the time of the survey, a similar proportion were delivering some form of online provision (either entirely online and/ or partially online courses). Most providers are planning to continue offering at least some online provision during the 2020/21 academic year - on average providers expect over two-thirds (69%) of their provision to contain some element of online delivery.

Nearly all of the providers felt that the GLA had communicated ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ effectively with them about the impacts of the Coronavirus on provision. More than two thirds of providers felt that the GLA had ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ effectively supported them with delivery flexibilities (32 out of 44) and online delivery (30 out of 44). A key area of support mentioned by many providers was Strand 2 of the

Covid Response Fund, which had assisted providers in moving their provision online by enabling them to purchase equipment or train staff.

### Areas for attention

Providers did offer some suggestions for improvements going forwards:

- More consistency in sharing information on developments in GLA policies and funding opportunities in meetings and communications.
- Better signposting to guidance and information on the website.
- Quicker response times to complex queries.
- Reduced bureaucracy – for example, pre-populating information that the GLA already holds within the Open Project system, such as funding amounts and responding to provider queries more swiftly.
- More sharing of good practice.
- More use and distribution of provider performance data and labour market information.
- Great flexibility in funding rules and more longer-term reassurances around funding.
- Making Innovation Fund or similar funding available more regularly.
- More clarity about plans for future funding/ bid opportunities.

Some stakeholders were vocal about the need for the GLA to be ‘bolder’ and more autonomous going forward, to maximise the impacts of the delegation of AEB funding on provision in London.

## Executive summary

### Introduction

Since August 2019, the Mayor of London has had responsibility for the capital's share of the Adult Education Budget (AEB), previously managed centrally by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The AEB covers skills provision for learners aged 19+ including Adult and Community Learning, but not apprenticeships or traineeships.

In April 2020, the Greater London Authority (GLA) commissioned IFF Research to conduct an assessment of the first year of the devolved AEB. The overarching aim of this research is to evaluate policy and management changes introduced in the 2019/20 academic year, by gathering insights from AEB-funded providers and sector stakeholders. As the research began after the start of the national 'lockdown', with the attendant impacts on learning delivery, the GLA broadened the research aims to include gathering views on the Covid-19 support measures it had put in place.

This report presents the findings of the research, which involved:

- an online survey of AEB-funded providers using a semi-structured questionnaire to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, which received 44 completed responses;
- 15 in-depth interviews with providers who agreed to be re-contacted, to explore their views in greater depth, and;
- five in-depth interviews with key sector stakeholders including the Association of Colleges (AoC), Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), and HOLEX (which represents adults and community learning providers, many of them local authorities).

### Impacts of delegation on AEB-funded provision

The most common increases in provision were support for learners on low incomes (30 out of 44), courses relevant to the GLA's priority sectors (23 out of 44), support for ESOL learners (22 out of 44) and core skills learning opportunities (20 out of 44). For many providers AEB delegation was identified as a reason for their increased provision. They mentioned their relationship with the GLA, the GLA's approach to contract management and the new funding model as assisting them to increase provision.

However, some providers did note that certain provision had increased due to the demand in the local area, rather than AEB delegation. This was typically in ESOL (22 out of 44 surveyed) and core skills (20 out of 44 surveyed). Although some providers did note that the GLA's priorities had offered them additional support in being able to meet this demand. Other providers also noted that this change in provision was part of a wider strategy within the area or local authority and therefore not directly correlated with AEB delegation.

In the survey, some providers did report decreases in provision as a result of devolution. Most common decreases were in careers advice support to learners (5 out of 44), vocational skills learning opportunities (5 out of 44) and childcare provision support to learners (4 out of 44). Some of the providers within the follow-up interviews suggested a range of factors that had impacted the decreases in their provision: the change in funding around low income learners, change of funding

around learners that live outside of London, Brexit and a loss of small training providers since devolution.

The majority (23 out of 44) of providers in the survey had not experienced any barriers when making changes to AEB funded provision. For those that had experienced barriers, limited funding (7 out of 44), bureaucracy/ administrative burden (5 out of 44) and flexibility of funding (4 out of 44) were the most common.

Many of the providers surveyed expected their provision to increase in most of the priority areas in the next 2 to 3 years. During the follow-up interviews providers reported that the economic impact of Coronavirus was the most common reason for the anticipated increases in provision.

AEB delegation had impacted upon the ways in which some providers were approaching their longer-term plans. In the survey 35 out of 44 respondents expected to increase provision in the GLA's priority areas. The qualitative follow-up suggested providers felt aligning themselves with the GLA's strategy could open the door to more support in the future.

### Impacts of the delegation on provider management and relationships

Providers in the survey commonly felt that they had the right amount of contact with the GLA (37 out of 44), only a small proportion felt they had too little or too much. (6 out of 44 too little contact and 1 out of 44 too much). The contact most frequently occurred less than once a month (16 out of 44) or at least once a month (13 out of 44).

The views of providers in the quarterly review meetings were overwhelmingly positive. The majority (38 out of 44) described them as 'very' or 'fairly' useful in the survey. The quarterly meetings were described as a safe space for open discussion by some providers during the follow-up interviews.

However, providers did feel that some improvements could be made to the discussions. In the survey, nearly all of the providers stated that they wanted the review meetings to include discussions of policy developments (41 out of 44) and financial and funding information (40 out of 44) at the quarterly meetings, suggesting these were areas in which meetings could offer most impact.

Providers also presented a very positive view on their relationship with their provider managers. In the survey most of the providers (39 out of 44) described the interaction with their provider manager as 'very' or 'fairly' positive. Providers really appreciated having a direct point of contact that they could go to with an queries or concerns. However, a few providers in the follow-up interviews did note that their provider manager had changed a number of times or that their provider manager took a long time to respond to queries.

Providers reported little difficulty using the Open Project System. The majority (35 out of 44) of providers surveyed described it as 'very' or 'fairly' easy to use. Providers were also very positive about the contract management system, with most (34 out of 44) stating they were 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with it.

Over half (25 out of 44) of the providers surveyed stated that the changes to the sub-contracting rules had no effect on their delivery model. For those where it had an impact, they commonly reported that they were now undertaking less sub-contracting (8 out of 44).

In the survey, providers most commonly felt that no improvements (24 out of 44) needed to be made to GLA communications. However, providers that could suggest some improvements noted that the

following would be helpful: sharing of best practice (4 out of 44), more consistency with guidance and advice (4 out of 44) and more discussions around long-term policy (3 out of 44).

The follow-up interviews also suggested some improvements to communications, mostly around ensuring emails flag updates on the GLA website clearly, so the detail can be found more easily on the website and that they could utilise more mediums for delivering changes such as webinars or a regular newsletter style update.

### Impacts of the Coronavirus and views on the GLA's response

Before March 2020, three-quarters of the providers surveyed (33 out of 44) were not delivering any provision wholly online. However, at the time of the survey, a similar proportion (31 out of 44) were delivering some form of online provision (either entirely online and/ or partially online courses). Most providers planned to continue offering at least some online provision during the 2020/21 academic year.

The majority of providers (35 out of 44) in the survey felt that the Coronavirus would increase the volumes of eligible learners due to higher unemployment and/or lower incomes. However, a small proportion (4 out of 44) were more cautious and felt unsure about the impact of the Coronavirus on the volumes or demand from eligible learners. Many providers believed that the Coronavirus would increase demand and interest in health and social care (30 out of 44) and digital skills provision (37 out of 44).

Most of the providers (35 out of 44) in the survey anticipated that the Coronavirus would have a negative impact on the financial health of their organisation. Only a small minority felt that it would have no impact (2 out of 44) or a 'fairly positive' impact (2 out of 44). During the qualitative interviews providers that relied more heavily on fee income, were very concerned, as they were predicting substantial losses in fees and those with little online provision prior to Coronavirus discussed the significant impact of shifting their provision online.

Nearly all of the providers in the survey (40 out of 44) felt that the GLA had communicated 'very' or 'fairly' effectively with them about the impacts of the Coronavirus on provision. Providers with a positive experience in the follow-up interviews felt the GLA had acted quickly and clarified the impacts on funding. However, some of the providers felt the GLA had not acted as quickly as they could have, and they felt other organisations had been more prompt with communications.

A similar proportion of providers felt that the GLA had 'very' or 'fairly' effectively supported them with delivery flexibilities (32 out of 44) and online delivery (30 out of 44). The key support that was mentioned was Strand 2 of the Covid Response Fund. Strand 2 had assisted providers in moving their provision online by enabling them to purchase equipment or train staff.

In the survey, providers mentioned a few key areas where the GLA could have provided more support; increased funding (12 out of 44), more flexibility in funding provision (10 out of 44), more provision for the longer-term impacts (7 out of 44), relaxed target performance measures (5 out of 44) and clearer guidance/ advice on flexibilities in provision. Respondents to the survey were keen to see more flexibility in funding provision in the following areas: more flexibility in the enrolment process e.g. using self-declarations for learners, relaxed target measures and support for a more qualitative approach on reporting outcomes, widening flexibilities in the delivery of qualifications up to level 5 and continuing with flexibilities into the 2020/2021 academic year.



Around one-quarter (9 out of 44) felt adequately supported and could not suggest any improvements. Some of the providers in the follow-up interviews also mentioned that they would have appreciated more shared learning with other providers, especially around changes in provision.

### Views on procured provision funding and support

Of the 15 procured providers surveyed, most (13 of 15) reported previous experience of ESF related funding agreement or a contract with the ESFA.

The majority of the procured providers (11 out of 15) felt that it was 'very' or 'fairly' easy to comply with the GLA funding rules for contracted providers, with just three rating it 'fairly' difficult. During the qualitative interviews procured providers explained that they had found this easy because they had experienced teams and knowledge of the ESFA and ESF funding rules.

Providers were slightly more likely to have issues with providing evidence complying with the ESF guidance: although most (10 out of 15) still rated this as 'very' or 'fairly' easy, four said it was fairly difficult and one said it was very difficult. Again, providers stated in the follow-up interviews that they did not experience any issues as they were used to providing the evidence. However, one did mention that it had become more challenging due to the need to social distance during the pandemic. They suggested more flexibility for learners to self-declare during this time would help.

In the survey, a third of the procured providers (6 of 15) felt there was nothing else the GLA could do to support efficient and effective delivery of AEB provision while still complying with ESF requirements. However, two providers did suggest that the GLA could re-think or reduce the requirements for supplementary evidence.

### Views on applying for the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund

The Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund is a £7.2million fund designed to support London's AEB grant-funded providers to deliver activity that meets the Mayor's priorities for education and skills in London.

Among those surveyed, 32 grant funded providers were eligible for the Innovation Fund. Nineteen of these providers applied for the Fund and 11 were successful in their application.<sup>1</sup> When discussing the experience of the application during the follow-up interviews, most providers stated that they generally found the application easy to follow and straightforward. However, two stakeholders felt the process did not run as smoothly as it could have and took longer than they expected.

In the survey, providers who did not apply for the Fund (but were eligible) were asked if they were aware of the Fund. All 13 of those that were eligible but did not apply were aware and eight had considered bidding. Providers in the follow-up interviews generally did not feel there was much more the GLA could have done to encourage more providers to apply for the Fund. Some of the stakeholders felt that the GLA could provide more clarity over the differences in the grants on offer, so providers could make more informed decisions about what to apply for.

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<sup>1</sup> This compares to 42 applicants and 27 successful providers for the full cohort of AEB providers



## Overall satisfaction with AEB delegation in its first year and perceived biggest impacts to date

There was a high level of satisfaction amongst providers on how the GLA had managed the delegation of the AEB in the first year. Thirty-nine out of forty-four providers said they were 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied and only one provider said they were 'fairly' dissatisfied. Providers were satisfied with the GLAs for several reasons: transparency/ ease of communications (13 out of 39), collaborative and responsive approach (11 out of 39) and no additional administrative burden (7 out of 44).

Stakeholders also reported high levels of satisfaction with the GLA among their members. However, one stakeholder noted that satisfaction would be much lower among independent training providers who were unsuccessful in bidding for procured funding, and therefore may have experienced difficulties because of this, which may have impacted on learners.

More than half (27 out of 44) of providers felt the GLA did not need to make any changes to the administration and management of the AEB. However, during the follow-up interviews providers suggested some improvements to GLA communications. They felt the following would be helpful: having a wider range of contacts than just the provider manager, having quicker response times for queries and better communication around financial planning and upcoming funding opportunities was also mentioned.

In terms of administration, a few providers in the qualitative interviews said it would have been helpful have clearer guidance on compliance documents from the start. Other suggestions were finding a way around the system of scanning documentation, increasing flexibility by making project change requests simpler and less bureaucratic.

Providers saw more scope for improvement in the design of the AEB. The most common improvement suggested were more flexibility of funding (14 out of 44), an increase in funding or funding rates (7 out of 44), and more funding for targeted or specific provision (4 out of 44). Several providers during the follow-up interviews also mentioned support for Level 3 provision.

In terms of overall approach, there was a view among some stakeholders in particular that the GLA should be more independent and 'bolder' in their decision-making, going forwards, to better shape provision specifically for London.

## Conclusions

The findings are largely very positive, with many providers stating that they were satisfied with the management of the AEB, the approach of the provider managers and the relationship they have built with the GLA in the first year of delegation. For the most part they were also satisfied with the way the GLA had communicated and responded to the Coronavirus pandemic. The impact on provision is also positive overall, although the picture is less clear cut on this due to the GLA's priority areas being aligned with plans that providers had in place prior to delegation in many cases, and the unprecedented and far reaching impact of Coronavirus.

Providers did offer some suggestions for improvements going forwards:

- More consistency in sharing information on developments in GLA policies and funding opportunities in meetings and communications.
- Better signposting to guidance and information on the website.

- Quicker response times to complex queries.
- Reduced bureaucracy – for example, pre-populating information that the GLA already holds within the Open Project system, such as funding amounts and responding to provider queries more swiftly.
- More sharing of good practice.
- More use and distribution of provider performance data and labour market information.
- Great flexibility in funding rules and more longer-term reassurances around funding.
- Making Innovation Fund or similar funding available more regularly.
- More clarity about plans for future funding/ bid opportunities.

# 1 Introduction

In April 2020, the Greater London Authority (GLA) commissioned IFF Research to conduct an assessment of the first year of the devolved Adult Education Budget (AEB). This report presents the findings of the research, which involved:

- an online survey of AEB-funded providers using a semi-structured questionnaire to gather both quantitative and qualitative data;
- 15 in-depth interviews providers who agreed to be re-contacted, to explore their views in greater depth, and;
- five in-depth interviews with key sector stakeholders including the Association of Colleges (AoC), Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), and HOLEX (which represents adults and community learning providers, many of them local authorities).

## Context

Since August 2019, the Mayor of London has had responsibility for the capital's share of the Adult Education Budget (AEB), previously managed centrally by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The AEB covers skills provision for learners aged 19+ including Adult and Community Learning, but not apprenticeships or traineeships. It is delivered by 127 providers, comprising 62 general FE colleges, 33 local authorities, 24 independent training providers, six Institutes of Adult Learning and two universities. The Mayor set out his priorities for skills and education in the Skills for Londoners Strategy and outlined how he plans to achieve his ambitions through the Skills for Londoners Framework.

The vast majority of the AEB (89%, approximately £262m) is allocated to approved providers as an annual grant where the provider has freedom in what education and training to deliver as they comply with the AEB Funding Rules. The remaining 11% of the AEB (approximately £32.5m) is awarded via a procurement exercise.

The GLA committed to maintaining stability for the sector during the transition to the devolved AEB, with further reforms likely to be introduced following consultation with the sector over a longer timeframe. However, some policy changes, and changes to the way in which the AEB is managed, were introduced for the 2019/20 academic year. These include:

- Widening the eligibility for full funding for up to Level 2 learning to those in work who earn less than the London Living Wage. The Mayor has extended the national low wage pilot – which provides full funding for Level 2 and below learning for those who are employed and earning less than £16,009.50 and cannot contribute towards the cost of co-funding fees – to cover all Londoners who are earning less than the London Living Wage, to take into account higher living costs in London.
- Introducing a full funding entitlement for British Sign Language (BSL) courses for Londoners where this is their first or preferred language, or for learners who cannot access spoken language because of their deafness and would benefit from BSL. Previously this would have been co-funded in the majority of cases.

- Changing subcontracting policy so that providers are required to outline any subcontracting they anticipate carrying out prior to the commencement of their grant/ contract, with a clear rationale for why the subcontracting is adding value. Changes to subcontracting arrangements throughout the year have to be agreed with the relevant GLA Provider Manager. The management fees that providers can charge to subcontractors were also capped to 20% unless an exceptional case could be made. The intention is to allow providers to use subcontracting for niche or specialist provision where small providers would not be eligible for a grant from the GLA and to reduce the risks associated with subcontracting.
- A new approach to provider management where each provider has a named GLA Provider Manager who acts as the first point of contact. The GLA Provider Manager is responsible for monitoring providers throughout the life of the funding agreement, including when performance is below the level as set out in the funding agreement, and visits the provider on a quarterly basis to discuss performance.
- More regular consultation with providers including through an annual framework consultation; regular liaison with provider representative bodies such as the AoC, AELP and HOLEX; and formal representation on the Skills for Londoners Board and other relevant bodies.
- Roll out of a new contract management system using the GLA's Open Project System (OPS) infrastructure. The system holds key information on grant agreements and generates payments to providers each month. The system is also used to record and request changes to subcontracting arrangements.
- Using procured AEB provision as match funding to unlock £71m of fund from London's unused European Social Fund (ESF) allocation. This has required the introduction of specific ESF-compliant Funding Rules for providers delivered procured AEB provision.
- Introducing the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund to support additional activity funded by the AEB that meets one or more of the Mayor's priorities for skills and training; demonstrates innovation in terms of the delivery methodology or how impact and outcomes will be measured; and delivers tangible employment, learning and/or social outcomes.

This research sits alongside a wider programme of research on the AEB and specific funding streams such as the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund.

### Research aims

The overarching aim of this research is to evaluate policy and management changes introduced in 2019/20, for the first year of the delegated AEB in London, by gathering insights from AEB-funded providers and sector stakeholders. As the research began after the start of the national 'lockdown', with the attendant impacts on learning delivery, the GLA broadened the research aims to include gathering views on the Covid-19 support measures it had put in place.

The key research questions are:

- To what extent have providers changed the education and training they deliver in response to the priorities and policies that have been set out by the Mayor? To what extent are providers planning to change their provision going forward? What are the barriers to

provider responsiveness? To what extent have providers welcomed the changes made by the GLA?

- How satisfied are providers and stakeholders with the GLA's approach to management of the AEB, including processes, systems and day-to-day contact? What could the GLA do to improve the management and administration of the AEB?
- What effect has the introduction of ESF-compliant funding rules had on providers delivering procured AEB provision? What could the GLA do to support the efficient and effective delivery of this provision, whilst maintaining compliance with ESF requirements?
- What was the experience of providers applying for the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund? Why did providers bid/not bid for the Fund? What should the GLA consider in the design of future funding streams for catalysing innovation in provision?
- How effectively has the GLA responded to the Covid-19 crisis in terms of its communications with and support for AEB-funded providers?

## Methodology

The evaluation adopted a mixed-methods approach in order to capture quantitative and qualitative data, involving an online survey of AEB-funded providers, 15 follow-up depth interviews with providers, and five depth interviews with sector stakeholders.

### The online survey

IFF Research designed and administered the online survey with support from the GLA. The questionnaire was designed to address the research aims and adopted a semi-structured approach, with a mixture of closed or scale questions to quantify the responses to key measures, accompanied by more open-ended text box questions where participants could write in additional details to explain their views, or provide examples. The mean time taken to complete the survey was 52 minutes and the median was 26 minutes.<sup>2</sup>

The GLA supplied the sample via secure transfer: this comprised of a census of all AEB-funded providers for the 2019/20 academic year. The sample contained individual email addresses for the main contact in each provider, who was generally a senior level representative such as the Principal, Chief Executive or Head of Service. IFF sent email invitations to all contacts, explaining the rationale for the research, providing reassurances about confidentiality, and containing a unique link to the survey for each provider. Fieldwork took place across a five-week period between early-June and mid-July, and included three email reminders each sent at least one week apart. In addition, the GLA publicised the research among providers and encouraged them to take part.

The online survey achieved complete responses from 44 out of 127 providers, an overall response rate of 35%. Looking at respondents by provider type, they included 14 local authorities, 13 colleges, 12 independent training providers and 5 Institutes for Adult Learning. This indicates that the response rate was higher among local authorities (42%), independent training providers (50%), and Institutes for Adult Learning (83%), and lower among colleges (21%). Weighting was not applied to the data

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<sup>2</sup> Responses where the survey was not completed in a single session (with start and finish times on different days) have been excluded from these averages

due to the small sample size, as introducing weighting would have introduced statistical design effects which would have reduced the effective sample size even further. Findings by provider type were also broadly similar, suggesting that weighting would not impact on the results.

Respondents included a mixture of providers who had been successful (11) and unsuccessful (8) in bidding for the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund: the remainder did not bid or were not eligible to bid. Just over half of respondents sub-contracted at least some of their provision (24 out of 44) and, similar to the overall population, the majority were grant-funded (29 out of 44) rather than procured provision (15 out of 44).

### **The qualitative interviews**

IFF conducted qualitative interviews with 15 providers who had taken part in the survey and agreed to be re-contacted for a more in-depth interview. The interviews covered a range of respondents by provider type and sub-region and included respondents who expressed some neutral or negative views in the survey, as well as positive ones. The provider interviews typically lasted 45 to 60 minutes.

In addition, IFF conducted qualitative interviews with five sector stakeholders, representing the vast majority of AEB-funded providers. The stakeholder organisations which took part in qualitative interviews were: the Association of Colleges (AoC); the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP); HOLEX, the membership organisation representing adult and community learning providers; and two London-specific organisations representing the London Councils and Institutes of Adult Learning. Stakeholder interviews typically lasted around 60 minutes.

All interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom or Teams, between 29<sup>th</sup> June and 22<sup>nd</sup> July.

### **About this report**

This report presents data from the survey and qualitative interviews thematically, and the text makes it clear if findings relate specifically to the survey or to the qualitative research. The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 examines providers' and stakeholders' views of the impact on provision, and the extent to which this has changed, and is planned to change in future, as a result of the delegation of the AEB in London.
- Chapter 3 explores their views of how the GLA has managed the AEB, changes in sub-contracting rules, and provider relationships with the GLA.
- Chapter 4 focuses on the impacts of the Covid-19 lockdown and subsequent restrictions on AEB provision and providers, and their views of how the GLA responded in terms of communications, support and funding.
- Chapter 5 assesses providers' views of the impacts on procured provision, in particular of having to follow ESF funding rules.
- Chapter 6 examines providers' responses to the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund, in particular why some providers may not have applied for this during 2019/20, and what providers think would encourage greater innovation in provision, going forward.

- Chapter 7 assesses overall impacts of AEB delegation in its first year, and what providers and stakeholders would like to see in 2020/21, to improve how the delegated AEB is managed and to maximise influence on provision.
- Chapter 8 draws on the key findings to identify conclusions from this research, focusing on how effectively the GLA has managed the delegation of the AEB in its first year, and providers' and stakeholders' priorities going forward.



## 2 Impacts of delegation on AEB-funded provision

Overall, providers and stakeholders were positive about the impacts of delegation of the AEB on provision although some pointed out that, in the first year of budget delegation, this had reinforced existing priorities and plans, rather than directly changing them. Respondents expected to see more impacts on provision over the longer-term.

### Impacts to date

A strong majority of providers reported either increased or consistent provision as a result of delegation across all the Mayor's priority areas (Table 2.1). Only a small minority reported decreased provision in any of these areas.

**Table 2.1 Reported impacts of the delegation of the Adult Education Budget on provider provision**

Area of provision	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased	Not applicable / Don't know
Support for learners on low incomes	30	10	2	2
Course relevant to the GLA's priority sectors	23	18	2	1
Support for ESOL learners	22	13	1	8
Core skills learning opportunities	20	22	1	1
Vocational skills learning opportunities	19	20	5	0
Careers advice to support learners	18	19	5	2
Support for SEND learners	13	20	2	9
Support for learners with specific immigration statuses	12	20	1	11
Childcare provision to support learners	5	22	4	13

### Increases to provision

Providers most commonly reported increases in provision of support for learners on low incomes (30 out of 44), courses relevant to the GLA's priority sectors (23 out of 44), support for ESOL learners (22 out of 44) and core skills learning opportunities (20 out of 44). During the qualitative interviews, providers' reasons for having increased provision ranged across a mix of factors, relating to AEB budget delegation and beyond. It is worth noting that even where increases in provision were not a direct result of delegation, providers often felt this had been a positive support.

### AEB delegation to the GLA

For many providers delegation to the GLA was singled out as the primary reasons for their increased provision. Here the focus was on the relationship they had with the GLA, their approach to contract management and the new funding model. During the qualitative follow-up interviews, independent training providers particularly singled out AEB delegation as the primary reason for their increased provision. This increase was due to a variety of factors such as greater focus on the priority areas

outlined by the Mayor, expansion of their provision in London (which was limited previously) and receiving larger contracts since delegation. While some non-ITP providers felt delegation had assisted their moves to increase provision, it was typically as a secondary factor, supporting changes they were already planning to make.

The relationship the GLA had with providers, in particular the increase in direct contact, and ESF targets among procured provision, were seen to help focus provider strategy. Some providers felt this enabled them to target their provision and improve their strategic approach.

*"It's probably more of the closer relationship with the GLA and understanding what's required as part of the service; and because of the direct contract with them, wanting to also do more and impress them. We were doing things to a certain level but there was more emphasis placed on that. And we had to reshuffle pieces internally within the organisation that really led us more to extra focus and support in that area."*

**Independent Training Provider**

*"We've grown our English and maths provision, partially because of obviously securing the increased funding. But also, because having the ESF targets does focus the mind, and we have had to strategically plan, how are we going to achieve these targets around making sure that sufficient Londoners achieve English and maths."*

**Independent Training Provider**

For other providers, the GLA's approach to funding had allowed them to increase provision. In the survey, 30 out of 44 providers indicated they had increased support to learners on low incomes, a change that was pointed to during the qualitative interviews as having directly caused an increase in provision. For other providers provision had increased simply as a result of an increase in their overall budget.

*"With AEB, traditionally, we would do for unemployed learners because it was fully funded. Whereas employed learners you would only get 50%, but if you do English and Maths, or are on a low income, they are now fully funded."*

**Independent Training Provider**

*"We have now moved the whole College Group to a "nil charging model to the end user" for all adults up to L2. The low wage fee remission increases to London living Wage have allowed this to continue to be viable and increased take up in learning of the most disadvantaged learners in the community."*

**Further Education College**

## **Demand**

For some providers their increase in provision across certain areas was in response to local demand. This was typically in ESOL (22 out of 44 surveyed) and core skills (20 out of 44 surveyed). The qualitative follow-up interviews indicated a number of these providers were serving populations with high numbers of immigrants and thus experienced high demand in each of these areas.

*"We are now offering more ESOL and core skills because of demand. Our borough is full of inequality and there are a lot for whom English is not their first language or that have very little English so we have had to increase the number of ESOL courses, core skills courses, courses that support employability and we have had a number of requests for courses that support learners with disabilities."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

For some providers already looking to expand their provision to meet demand, the GLA's priorities offered support in doing so. This was particularly common for those looking to expand their ESOL provision. While this expansion might not have been directly because of the delegation of the AEB, it was assisted by the GLA's focus on this area.

*"Devolution has helped in one sense, but we would have done it anyway as that was the way we were moving the college... It's enabled a re-setting of priorities which I think has been important. We've always done a lot of very basic education, particularly around ESOL and things like that, and for a number of years under the ESFA there was a feeling that the government in power didn't particularly like ESOL and ESOL learners, whereas obviously having the GLA as an authority that recognises and values the importance of ESOL, that kind of helps."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

### **Change in strategy**

For several providers the change in provision was part of a wider strategy. For some local authorities, this was tied in to wider economic and skills strategies within the council, while other providers had identified the potential for expansion of provision in a specific area.

*"Based on the change that we made as part of our strategic plan. Last year we launched a plan focused on three areas, one of which was a careers focus. Instead of talking to learners about just doing a course we were talking to them about their longer-term plans and mapping out what that path might mean."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"We started providing to unemployed learners, so we started targeting unemployed learners and with that our provision naturally increased across a number of areas."*

**Independent Training Provider**

Again, some providers felt that the devolution of the AEB had played a role in facilitating this change in strategy. In the survey, just over half of providers (23 out of 44) had increased provision in line with the GLA's priority areas, and the qualitative follow-up interviews outlined that, for many non-ITP providers, the priorities of the GLA were in line with their own. Stakeholders also held this view, that the delegation of the AEB had gone relatively smoothly to date because of the high degree of alignment between GLA and provider priorities.

*"To a certain extent our ambitions and the ambitions of the GLA coincide, quite nicely. We feel comfortable trying to align the borough priorities and the GLA priorities."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"We were going to increase these provisions anyway but GLA has given us the push needed to reach the hard to reach learners in our areas and work towards the betterment of their future."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"It has not redirected priorities as yet, because provider priorities were well aligned with the strategic goals of the GLA. They've built strong relationships, trust and stability and there's been good mission alignment."*

**Stakeholder**

## Decreases to provision

A minority of providers did report decreases in provision as a result of AEB budget delegation, most notably in careers advice support to learners (5 out of 44), vocational skills learning opportunities (5 out of 44) and childcare provision support to learners (4 out of 44).

In the follow-up interviews, one provider with decreased provision stated the change in funding, compounded by Brexit, had impacted their provision. For ESOL provision, there was a suspicion that Brexit had reduced demand, while the change to some courses becoming fully funded had reduced their ability to charge for certain course materials.

*"The very nature of those courses they are very resource intensive... Floristry for example, flowers are expensive, we would have built in our fees structure the materials fee but when a learner is fully funded you can't charge them anything, so what this means is for this one learner we would have previously got 50% of the funding, we would have got our fee, the money for the materials and we would have got money for the exam fees. Suddenly we can't charge this learner anything, but we aren't getting additional funding to cover that cost."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

The change to support more learners on low incomes with full funding was felt to have unintentionally resulted in one provider having to reduce provision. For them, fully funding more learners had resulted in reduced income on these learners, meaning that they were not able to reach as many learners overall.

*"When they introduced the low income, which meant people below London Living wage had full funding, that had a real impact on us because we were one of the providers exceeding on our allocation, so introducing a new category where more learners were fully funded meant that our funding was actually not reaching as many people as it would have, as we were fully funding more people and we weren't getting the fees... it was an unintended consequence."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

One provider expressed concern that AEB delegation to the GLA had resulted in a loss of funded support for learners that live outside of London but work in the city, thereby contributing to its economy. However, another provider regarded this as a concern prior to delegation, which, for them, had not materialised.

*"Prior to devolution, as long as you lived in England you could be funded, so the biggest shift was that we had the focus on London as a region. This meant that we could no longer fund people who, for example were working but not living in London."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"We were very worried about student postcodes at one point - what do you mean by a Londoner? Pretty obvious for 99% of people but maybe there's a significant 1% that we were worried about; but that doesn't seem to have materialised, not aware of any issues. If there's anything it's just one or two students rather than e.g. 200 students."*

**Further Education College**

One stakeholder felt that the loss of some smaller independent training providers since delegation had reduced provision. These providers, which the stakeholder believed held a large amount of experience in delivering adult education budget provision, were unable to provide this in the new system, leaving gaps in provision that would take some time to fill.

*"There were some really good independent training providers that were really excellent at delivering AEB that ended up not being able to deliver it going forward. So all those relationships and processes and links locally on the ground that they've build up, I would say have got lost, because they haven't been awarded any contract and some of the primes don't need any additional partners."*

**Stakeholder**

### Making changes to AEB-funded provision

The majority (23 out of 44) of providers in the survey had not experienced any barriers when making changes to AEB funded provision. During the qualitative follow-up interviews, a number of providers reflected on the ease with which changes could be introduced.

*"In the main it's flexible enough to enable you to put together an offer to meet the needs of individual communities or businesses."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

For some providers the ease with which they felt they could make changes was due to the flexibility of the GLA:

*"We would commend the GLA on that because they were quite flexible. We are dictated by demand, whatever our students want to do, and the GLA has been flexible to that. When we communicated the desire to do new courses, they were flexible and said we could start delivering, which we did from January onwards, and we probably wouldn't have done that without the GLA."*

**Independent Training Provider**

Where providers had faced barriers, issues around funding were commonly cited. During the survey limited funding (7 out of 44) was the most common single barrier, the second was bureaucracy/administrative burden (5 out of 44) and the third was flexibility of funding (4 out of 44).

Where providers interviewed in the qualitative follow-up spoke about funding as a barrier, their frustration centred on the eligibility criteria, funding for ESOL and the overall levels of funding available to providers.

*"The fact that ESOL is not fully funded is a huge barrier, particularly in this borough. There is a huge demand for ESOL courses, and we don't always have the funding to provide them."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*“Funding rates for adults are too low in respect of the cost of delivery, especially for vocational areas with practical elements.”*

**Further Education College**

**Table 2.2 Barriers experienced when introducing changes to Adult Education Budget funded provision**

Barriers (coded)	Number of providers
Limited funding / low funding rates	7
Bureaucracy / administrative burden	5
Flexibility of funding	4
Unclear guidance / advice	3
Loss of fee income when the low-income entitlement was introduced	3
Inability to influence strategy	2
Other	8
Don't know	1
No barriers	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>44*</b>

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

**GLA support to overcome barriers to changing AEB funded provision**

The bureaucracy of the GLA, as a large public body, was seen by some providers as a barrier to flexibility. There was a desire among some providers for them to overcome this, to become quicker and more agile in their response to provider need.

*“Having the ability to be more responsive to need – I recognise that obviously it’s public funding that has to be accountable and audited, but sometimes it feels there’s this huge bureaucracy you’re trying to plough through, and there isn’t a speedy response. So, I think it’s about the GLA being able to feel more able to respond.”*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

There was also a recognition among providers that the funding is complex so greater support from the GLA to navigate the funding, possibly through more direct dialogue, would be a welcome way to overcome this.

*“One thing that did help... there was a provider event shortly before lockdown... And I think if those could be more regular events - maybe it's something they could do remotely - more providers can get together and there's an opportunity to actually exchange information with the GLA.”*

**Independent Training Provider**

For other providers it was simply about fully funding those areas where they are experiencing the greatest demand or may experience the greatest demand in the future. Providers wanted the GLA to be able to re-direct funding more easily when growth areas are apparent.

*"There has been a drive nationally to review the ESOL strategy and I hope that will inform the ESOL funding criteria. Either we make it all free, like functional skills, or at least up to entry 3 and then we make level 1 and 2 co-funded but then why do we fund functional skills and not ESOL?"*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"Consult colleges widely about the skills needed now and in the future. Be prepared to redirect funding to new/growing areas perhaps where there are not the traditional metrics for monitoring outputs."*

**Further Education College**

Other providers suggested in the survey that an increase in the flexibility of funding would be helpful in the following areas: simplifying the eligibility rules for funded learners, flexibility in funding Level 3 or higher level qualifications and some loosening of the restrictions linked to ESF targets.

*"Simplify the rules of eligibility in line with the GLA priorities for the best use of the AEB funding for London learners."*

**Further Education College**

**Table 2.3 Action the GLA could take to help providers tackle barriers to introducing changes to Adult Education Budget funded provision**

Action GLA could take	Number of providers
Increase flexibility in funding provision	7
Increase in funding / funding rates	7
Clearer guidance / advice	3
Increase flexibility in procuring subcontractors	2
More ongoing consultation/ dialogue	2
Other	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>20*</b>

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

### Future changes to provision

The majority of providers surveyed expected their provision to increase in most of the priority areas, as shown in Table 2.4.



**Table 2.4 Provider plans to change their Adult Education Budget-funded provision in the next 2-3 years**

Area of provision	More provision	The same provision	Less provision	Not applicable / Don't know
Core skills learning opportunities	37	5	1	1
Support for learners on low incomes	35	7	1	1
Course relevant to the GLA's priority sectors	35	7	2	0
Vocational skills learning opportunities	31	11	2	0
Careers advice to support learners	28	12	2	2
Support for ESOL learners	22	13	2	7
Support for SEND learners	19	15	2	8
Childcare provision to support learners	13	13	3	15
Support for learners with specific immigration statuses	12	23	1	8

During the follow-up interviews, the economic impact of Covid-19 on the communities that providers served was the most common reason given for expecting provision to increase in the future. In the survey, providers commonly expected to expand their provision of careers advice support to learners (28 out of 44), while in the qualitative interviews there was a recognition that the coming months would bring a high number of unemployed learners in need of support back into employment. For many this was key to shaping their strategy in the medium term.

*"The country has a productivity issue, and we're likely to have a contracted economy due to Covid; adults are going to be sitting there looking for something to do - and they are a massive part of the productivity. If the country and London is going to go forwards, we need really good skilled adults... Too much of the focus is on under-19s all the time; they're important but so are all these people who have a massive amount to give."*

#### Further Education College

*"Post-Covid we are part of a strategy that is about getting people back into employment quickly, so it is not only about offering courses but also making sure that people can access any other support mechanism, or employment networks, so this is allowing the service to grow."*

#### Adult and Community Learning Provider

Many providers felt that the increase in provision would need to be focused on short courses designed to help people that already have a base of skills and experience back into work as quickly as possible.

*"For people who have been made redundant, really as a big surprise and very, very rapidly in their life, and who are used to working and have been a working a lot, a lot of them are going to want and need something very rapid, where they can very quickly upskill or reskill and hopefully get themselves back into the workforce."*

#### **Independent Training Provider**

Delegation of the AEB had impacted upon the ways in which some providers were approaching their longer-term plans. In the survey 35 out of 44 respondents expected to increase provision in the GLA's priority areas. The qualitative follow-up suggested providers felt aligning themselves with the GLA's strategy could open the door to more support in the future.

*"Seems the GLA are open if we can show there is demand that we may be able to expand that base. We never had that with the ESFA. With the GLA it feels there may be room for negotiation."*

#### **Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Some providers expected local demand and their own strategic aims to drive the growth of provision in certain areas going forward. These providers outlined an expectation that they would react to the demands of the local economy and expand their provision accordingly.

*"It's part of our own strategic approach. We are working with people who experience disadvantage and we aim to tackle inequalities. To that effect, we have traditionally had quite a big employability program, but we plan to expand that and deliver more provisions in the upcoming year to support the same."*

#### **Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"I'm trying to position ourselves for the next two years to say what is London going to need in terms of provision... for example, there's been this massive decrease in retail, because of the Covid and the Amazon factor. And therefore, the shift towards warehousing."*

#### **Independent Training Provider**

One college felt that there was sufficient local demand to expand their provision 'across the board', and that while they will look to do this, it will depend on the levels of funding available:

*"Several years ago they cut the Adult Education Budget by 30%... That means there is unfulfilled demand in adult skills, particularly for our sectors. A lot of the sectors are crying out for recruits coming into them, and actually they like adults coming into them, so there is always unfulfilled demand there. We would look to fill that demand if we had the flexibility over the adult budget."*

#### **Further Education College**

### 3 Impacts of AEB delegation on provider management and relationships

Overall, providers were highly positive about the approach to provider management and relationships since delegation to the GLA.

A large majority (37 out of 44) of providers surveyed felt they had the right amount of contact with the GLA (six felt they had too little contact and one too much). Most commonly this contact occurred less often than once a month (16 out of 44) or once a month (13 out of 44).

#### Quarterly review meetings

Provider views of the quarterly review meetings in the survey were overwhelmingly positive. Half of providers (22 out of 44) described the quarterly review meetings as 'very useful' and a further 16 (out of 44) described them as 'fairly useful'. Just two (out of 44) providers said they were 'not very useful' and a single provider said, 'not at all useful.'

During the follow-up qualitative discussions providers described the quarterly meetings as a safe space in which they could have an open discussion about their provision. For many this provided them a platform to ask questions and receive honest answers and feedback about their provision, gaining the perspective of the funder at regular intervals as they delivered.

*"Very useful. They provide an open forum for us to prepare a narrative around both strengths and challenges that the service is facing and try them out on a funder."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"It's been an extra layer of support that we didn't have previously, and it has been good to get an external review of what we've been doing. I find it quite useful and reassuring that we're taking the right steps."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

The communication at the quarterly review meetings was seen as a two-way avenue, in which providers could not only explore the views of the GLA, but also air their own perspectives on how things were working, and make sure the GLA were up to date about what they were doing as a provider.

*"It's quite useful for us to just talk about [the college], because we're not the biggest college and there's some big players out there in London - so to keep having the opportunity to say 'we're still here, and this is what we do' - in my view it's pretty important."*

**Further Education College**

Other providers saw the quarterly review meetings as a place in which they could discuss any changes to bureaucratic processes. This was seen as a helpful element of support in the changeover to the new devolved structures.

*“There was new paperwork we were dealing with and the GLA has criteria about how they want people to complete the paperwork. We found out in these meetings for example, that the learners need to sign privacy notices themselves. So, it gave us a platform to sit down and run through concerns or clarification we needed.”*

**Independent Training Provider**

One college mentioned that due to the limited change in processes in the first year, the current frequency of review meetings has been appropriate, although they did note that this may need to change in the future:

*“Because GLA guidance, in this transitional year, has often mirrored the ESFA National policies and announcements, there has been little difference between the two. This means that the frequency of review meetings has been about right. As GLA policy separates even further from ESFA criteria, this could change and more frequent and strategic meetings would be appropriate.”*

**Further Education College**

One stakeholder offered a succinct summary of the way in which the quarterly review meetings had been seen to change the relationship between the GLA and providers:

*“It's more a conduit to make things smoother, rather than being about holding to account.”*

**Stakeholder**

There was a more mixed picture regarding the role of the quarterly review meetings in sharing policy and funding updates from the GLA. In the survey, almost all providers said they wanted the review meetings to include discussions of policy developments (41 out of 44) and financial and funding information (40 out of 44) at the quarterly meetings, suggesting these were areas in which meetings could offer most impact.

During the qualitative follow-up interviews, some providers mentioned that through their quarterly review meetings they were kept up to date with developments at the GLA, which helped them with future planning.

*“Quite useful to bring us up to speed and let us know what's coming round the corner.”*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*“It's an opportunity to talk about our performance directly with our provider manager, but it's also an opportunity for our provider manager to tell us what's going on in the GLA and what's on the horizon.”*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

However, other providers suggested more updates on the GLA and any future AEB plans were a way in which the meetings could be improved. This suggests there may have been a degree of inconsistency between the review meetings, with some providers receiving sufficient updates from the GLA, while others felt they needed more.

*"When you're having a look ahead, if you're looking at skills ahead, you need a bit of lead time to get these things there, so if we're going to have a skills pipeline to the areas that we need it, we should be talking about that all the time. So, I think if the relationship manager is actually sort of either bringing us into the conversations in the GLA or bringing some of that conversation to us - that would be useful."*

**Further Education College**

Similarly, while some providers were given updates on upcoming funding opportunities at their quarterly review meetings, others identified this as a way in which the meetings could be improved.

*"It's a good opportunity for us to be updated on what the GLA is thinking and if there are any funding opportunities coming up."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"[The meetings could be improved by] Just letting us know about funding opportunities that they think we might be eligible for and support to apply for those opportunities that are coming up."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

### The provider manager relationship

Providers presented a highly positive assessment of the relationship with their provider managers. In the survey over three-fifths (28 out of 44) of providers described the interaction with their provider manager as 'very positive' and a further 11 described it as 'fairly positive'. Only one provider held a (fairly) negative view of the interaction.

Provider managers were seen as offering a direct point of contact in the GLA with a knowledge of the provider. As such, provider managers were a direct channel of communication through which providers could field queries. The consistency of this relationship ensured providers were able to have an ongoing discussion with someone who understood the particular context in which they were operating. In instances where provider managers did not have answers immediately available providers were confident, they would find the answers and get back to them.

*"Just having someone you don't have to start from the beginning every time you have a query or an issue. Because obviously you build a relationship and you know that person then has the time to learn about your organisation. And if you're dealing with perhaps a more complex or ongoing query, the trail of emails back and forth."*

**Independent Training Provider**

*"Where they don't know the answers, they find out and they are very responsive."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

For many providers, they had established a strong working relationship with their provider manager in a relatively short space of time. This left a sense that the interaction with the GLA was more human, in contrast to the more contractual approach of the ESFA.

*"We've established high trust relationships with the PM very quickly. They seem to have a good understanding of what the GLA is intending to do around AEB but also have a good grip on developments more broadly within the GLA and that's useful too."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"Our provider manager really supports us and always notifies us of any future developments or funds that may be relevant for us as a provider. Really appreciate the support provided."*

**Further Education College**

While providers mostly found provider managers responsive to their queries, there were some frustrations that responses were too slow and didn't always offer the answers needed. There was a feeling among some providers that additional bureaucracy at the GLA was slowing down responses to questions that, they felt, should be straightforward to answer.

*"I'm not sure if it's a convoluted process when you've got detailed information to ask your provider manager. I think there's a lot of protocols behind the scenes... we've got questions that can't be answered there and then. It's not like we could really say let's phone up one of the other people on the team and ask them directly. It's got to go through this 14-day turnaround time. I think maybe that's just a bit of a challenge. But overall, you know, you've got something compared to where it was, the evolution and having that support has definitely improved things."*

**Independent Training Provider**

However, there was an element of inconsistency in the provider manager relationships. For a few providers, managers did not always have the knowledge needed to field queries, took a long time to respond or, in one instance, were rarely in the office to be contacted.

*"We then moved to a system where we had two managers who seemed to 'out in the field' more than 'in the office' and who took a very long time to respond to queries and could very rarely give advice. When we got a response, it didn't usually answer the question. There was also significant upward referring by them for answers from senior managers."*

**Independent Training Provider**

## Open Project System and contract management

### Open Project System

Providers reported little difficulty using the Open Project System. This system holds key information on grant agreements and generates payments to providers each month, as well as being used to record and request changes to subcontracting arrangements. The majority of providers surveyed described it as easy to use, with 14 (out of 44) feeling it was 'very easy' to use and 21 (out of 44) 'fairly easy'. No providers in the survey described it as difficult to use.

During the qualitative follow-up interviews, providers described the Open Project System as a straightforward and logical system, although only once they had familiarised themselves with it.

Several providers pointed to the GLA's guidance as useful support. While it was seen as a helpful reference tool, often providing answers to questions that would otherwise need to be posed to someone at the GLA, there were some complaints that it was a little bit unwieldy and difficult to navigate.

*"It's very difficult to find your way through it. You've got this mass of written guidance... when you're trying to do something you're not going to read through a whole load of pages until you find the bit. It's just not very accessible in that sense. I'm sure it's all written down there but trying to find it when you're up against the clock..."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**



*"More training for the appropriate provider staff is required".*

**Further Education College**

For a few providers there was concern that the system had created an additional layer of bureaucracy. This was seen as creating some unnecessary extra work, as well as putting distance between providers and the GLA, in a way that seemed counter to their other communications approaches.

*"Colleagues have said that there are elements that are clunky, training and guidance was fine. They did make reference to the postcode validation which they thought was overly bureaucratic and could be streamlined and means that you're duplicating work when some of it could be automated."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"The main frustration of it probably does go back to communication. We can't see what happens on the other side. And so, where the GLA has massively improved by having this sort of personal contact, in a way the [GLA OPS] system does the opposite. It's a bit like a computer says no."*

**Independent Training Provider**

### **Contract management**

Providers were also highly positive about the GLA's contract management system. Just over a third (15 out of 44) of providers surveyed said they were 'very satisfied' with a further 19 (out of 44) 'fairly satisfied'. No providers surveyed were dissatisfied with the GLA's contract management system.

During the qualitative follow-up interviews, provider positivity tended to focus on the minimal changes from the ESFA approach, which was felt to have created a smooth transition, and the ability to track profile and funding as provision was delivered.

*"What has been really good is that we're able to run the same funding reports and the performance reports for the GLA that we are for ESFA, as running two different systems would have been very complicated."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"I think that is actually very good as well in terms of exactly where we are. we've never had it, It's a step above what we've ever had in terms of real time monthly knowing where we are in profile, seeing how the funding gets drawn down, and the whole system seems to be working well."*

**Independent Training Provider**

There was some frustration among providers that the value of the funding they had been awarded did not auto-populate in the contract management system. Providers felt this was an unnecessary burden on them to have to enter it manually, when the GLA has this information and it could be programmed to auto-populate in the system.

*"As the provider you have to put in the figures for what they have given you. I don't understand why they don't just pre-populate it."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**



## Sub-contracting

For providers surveyed, changes made to the sub-contracting rules had little impact on their delivery model. Over half (25 out of 44) of providers surveyed found it had had no effect.

**Table 3.1 Impact of changes to subcontracting rules**

Sub-contracting effect	Number of providers
Less sub-contracting overall	8
Sub-contracting became more strategic	8
Offer a wider range of provision	6
Work with more small or specialist providers	4
More sub-contracting overall	2
No effect	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

Where the changes to sub-contracting rules had had an effect, less sub-contracting (8 out of 44) was among the most common.

During the qualitative follow-up interviews, one provider that had experienced a decrease in sub-contracting due to the GLA changes explained that, for them, this was the result of increased due diligence causing delays to procurement.

*“You have to get approval and show you’ve done your due diligence before delivery. Sometimes the difference in that delay can be between that provision happening or not happening... if you don’t get approval in a timely fashion then that momentum can be lost.”*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Another provider explained as a result of the delegation of the AEB they had changed their focus:

*“[We have] removed all sub-contracting and focused on specialist niche provision.”*

**Further Education College**

For 8 out of 44 providers surveyed changes under the GLA had resulted in their model becoming more strategic.

One provider interviewed in the qualitative follow-up explained that having the weight of the GLA behind them allowed them to be more strategic in their approach to sub-contractors, offering a clear sense of why they were needed to work in a certain way.

*"I would say it's made us more strategic. It almost gave us the additional backing we needed when we were explaining to subcontractors, this is the way we work and this is why - the GLA sorts of guidance and rules fit in very well with the way we wanted it to go. And so, in that sense, being able to sort of almost call upon a higher power, it was useful in that sense, and for us it felt like we were kind of on the right track."*

**Independent Training Provider**

For six out of 44 providers surveyed, the GLA's impact on their sub-contracting had been to widen their provision.

During the qualitative follow-up interviews, it was explained that, for one provider, the GLA's network of connections throughout the capital allowed them to widen their supply chain and meet a wider range of employer needs in their provision.

*"If we were to deliver ourselves to East or Central Londoners, we wouldn't be able to deliver all of this ourselves, so having a supply chain that meets the needs of those employers is important. They have links with the communities and employers which we don't have. So, it just strengthens our performance. We are able to reach many more people. It makes a big difference to our offer."*

**Independent Training Provider**

However, one stakeholder expressed concern that the changes to sub-contracting rules have presented an issue for the providers they represent, as nationally they have a mandated remit to commission smaller providers in their area via sub-contracting; however this does not fit well with the new curtailments on sub-contracting, which were felt to make sub-contracting more difficult. They therefore feel there is a risk that some small, niche providers, such as specialist charities, might no longer be commissioned, leading to particular subgroups of learners no longer being served.

### Improvements to the GLA's communication with providers

Providers surveyed most commonly felt that no improvements could be made to the current communications with providers (24 out of 44).

*"We have had a very open and honest dialogue at the meeting which is welcomed. No changes are suggested."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Among the most common improvements in the survey was a desire for more sharing of best practice (4 out of 44). During the qualitative follow-up it was explained that this would give providers a check on their own quality and ensure that they were consistently pursuing best practice.

*"A bit of good practice sharing in there [would help] as well which will help us keep our eye on ensuring the quality is what it should be."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

During the survey providers also outlined a desire for more consistency with guidance and advice (4 out of 44) and more discussions around long-term policy (3 out of 44). During the qualitative follow-up, one provider explained that there was a sense that, while devolution was still in its infancy, some of the policy direction was still being worked out, and as such more updates on guidance and policy were needed.

*"The policy update is because you know the guidance but some of the policy direction they're still working out, so clearer guidance on their policies and procedures would be helpful."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Ways in which the GLA could improve future review meetings and other communications with providers are outlined in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2 Improvements for future review meetings**

Improvement	Number of providers
More sharing of best practice	4
More consistency with guidance and advice	4
More discussions around long-term policy	3
More opportunity to prepare for meetings	2
Other	10
No improvements needed	24
Total	44*

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

Improvements highlighted in the qualitative interviews often focused on a desire for the GLA to adapt the methods it used for delivering updates to providers.

The most common of these, mentioned in several follow-up interviews, was to ensure that emails flagging there was an update on the GLA website clearly stated where this update could be found, or had a link directly to the update. In the current system, providers felt they were spending a lot of time looking on the website for an update that could have been signposted more effectively.

*"When you get the email and go to the link, it's not clear what the update is. With the ESFA model, you got the email, you got the link and it took you straight to the update so that's something the GLA could improve on."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Another suggestion was for the GLA to utilise different methods and mediums for delivering updates. These included webinars and a more regular, newsletter style update.

*"Webinars. If there has been an online change have a session on it... It gets consumed more easily by the person on the webinar than by reading it because peoples learning style isn't always to read stuff. Some people looking at different ways to cascade information."*

**Independent Training Provider**

*"Something like what the ESFA do where they have a regular email update alert that comes out to us as an ESFA news... it's really, really helpful and I can't see anything like that for the GLA... they have a monthly one with any of the updates that might have come in or changes to the guidance which is really helpful to keep on top of what is changing."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

## 4 Impacts of the Coronavirus and the GLA's response

This section explores the impacts of the Coronavirus on the delivery of AEB-funded provision and providers, and their views on the GLA's response including communications and the support measures it put in place after March 2020.

### Impact on current and future delivery

#### Online provision

Before March 2020, the majority of providers (33 out of 44) were not delivering any AEB-funded provision exclusively online. In percentage terms, providers reported delivering an average of 5% of their provision wholly online, and 16% partially online, giving around a fifth (22%) of provision with at least some element of online delivery on average.

At the time of the survey in June-July 2020, the majority of providers (31 out of 44) were delivering some form of online AEB-funded provision (either entirely online courses and/or partially online courses). There was a big shift in the percentage of delivery carried out online, with providers delivering an average 70% of their provision wholly online and 17% partially online, meaning overall an average 86% of provision was being delivered at least partly online.

**Table 4.1 Average percentage of AEB provision delivered online wholly or partially**

Mean percentage of AEB provision...	...Delivered wholly online	...Delivered partially online	...With any online delivery element
Pre-March 2020	5%	16%	22%
At time of survey	70%	17%	86%
Planned for 2020/21 academic year	30%	41%	69%
<b>Base</b>	44	44	44

When looking ahead to online delivery in the 2020/21 academic year, these average proportions drop back slightly, although stay at a considerably higher level than pre-Covid, with a shift towards partial rather than wholly online delivery. Providers planned for an average 30% of their provision to be delivered wholly online, and 40% to be delivered partially online in the 2020/21 academic year; overall, on average providers expect over two-thirds (69%) of their provision to contain some element of online delivery.

Providers were asked in the survey about the effect of Coronavirus on their delivery of fully online provision or provision with online components and they strongly felt that it would increase delivery in these formats in the 2020/21 academic year (41 out of 44). Only three providers felt their online provision would stay the same and none thought it would decrease.

However, providers did have some concerns about the shift to online provision. They raised concerns around whether certain types of learners will want to undertake a partially or wholly online course and whether the lack of face-to-face classroom time would impact on their learner numbers. This concern

was raised in particular about learners that were long term unemployed, vulnerable (and therefore needed more face-to-face support) or those that lacked digital skills.

*"I think that the longer term unemployed that we've dealt with up until the end of January, they very much needed that classroom environment and we've been working closely with them. Now no-one can go into classrooms right now, so how is that model going to change and impact us?"*

**Independent Training Provider**

## **Demand for provision**

### **Demand for provision overall**

Many of the providers in the survey (34 out of 44) thought that Coronavirus would increase demand for provision overall in the 2020/21 academic year. However, a small proportion believed that it would decrease (5 out of 44) or stay the same (2 out of 44). A minority (3 out of 44) felt unsure about the impact on overall delivery in the 2020/2021 academic year.

During the follow-up interviews providers discussed this anticipated increase in demand. They suspected that this would predominantly come from a rise in unemployment due to the economic impacts of the Coronavirus and they felt that adult learning would play a huge role in the recovery of the economy and getting these individuals back to work. A few providers also mentioned that they may also experience increases in demand due to changes in their local area. For example, one provider mentioned an extension to the rail network and a large organisation moving into the area, which may increase demand for certain courses.

*"We know that by the end of the summer we will have at least 10,000 residents claiming benefits who weren't before lockdown so there's a huge Covid economic recovery plan and adult learning is a big part of that."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

### **Volumes of eligible learners**

In the survey, most providers felt that the Coronavirus would have an impact on the volumes of eligible learners due to higher unemployment and/or lower incomes. Most (35 out of 44) felt that the volumes of eligible learners would increase. A small proportion (5 out of 44) thought that the volumes would stay the same and a minority (4 out of 44) were unsure of what the impact would be on learner volumes.

As previously mentioned, providers that took part in the follow-up interviews also mentioned that the increase in unemployment and/or the loss of incomes is likely to increase demand for AEB provision in their area. Some are already preparing for a very busy 2020/2021 academic year.

*"Unemployment is shooting up already and we want to be there to support people, we want to be there to change lives. I think it's going to be busy we want to embrace the opportunity there. I think Covid is going to have a positive impact for our business because that's what we do - we work with unemployment."*

**Independent Training Provider**

However, a few providers were more cautious and felt unsure about what the impact of the Coronavirus would be on the volumes or demand from eligible learners. They felt it was difficult to comment, as there was still so much uncertainty around what would or would not be possible at the

start of the academic year. One provider gave the example of whether children will be able to return to school: if they are not able to return this may prevent parents from being able to take part in learning.

### Demand for health and social care provision

Providers commonly believed that the Coronavirus would increase the demand for and interest in health and social care provision (30 out of 44), although around a quarter (9 out of 44) felt that this demand would stay the same. A small proportion of providers felt that they could not comment on the demand for health and social care (4 stated 'not applicable' and 1 'don't know').

In the qualitative interviews, some providers believed that there would be an increase in the demand for health and social care and that this may provide opportunities for individuals to retrain. One provider noted that this could be a key area for hospitality staff to retrain in, as their sector has been significantly affected by the coronavirus.

*"There's no doubt that lots of hospitality staff can do a few months of really good high-quality training and move from hospitality to health and social care. There are lots of transferable skills in them."*

#### Independent Training Provider

Another provider also mentioned the need to retrain individuals into the health and social care and early years sectors. However, they felt the demand for both of these sectors was constant and therefore discussed it as more of a constant need rather than one that would increase.

*"We have a high proportion of economically inactive people in [the area] and there will be more inactive people economically in [the area] subsequent to the end of the Covid issue... We are looking at routes for people to get into employment. The areas that we can see obviously health and social care and early years are ones where the demand is constant."*

#### Adult and Community Learning Provider

### Demand for digital skills provision

Many providers (37 out of 44) in the survey felt that the Coronavirus would increase the demand for or interest in digital skills provision. Only a very small minority (2 out of 44) believed that Coronavirus would have no impact and provision would stay the same. Again, a small proportion felt that they could not comment on the impact on skills provision (3 stated 'not applicable' and 2 'don't know').

### Impact on financial health of organisations

In the survey providers were asked about the anticipated impact of the Coronavirus on the financial health of their organisation. Most of the providers (35 out of 44) anticipated that the Coronavirus would have a negative impact on the financial health of their organisation (11 a 'very negative' impact and 24 a 'fairly negative' impact). A small minority felt that it would have no impact (2 out of 44) or a 'fairly positive' impact (2 out of 44). There was also a small proportion that could not say or did not wish to say (3 'don't know' and 2 'don't wish to say'). Most of the Further Education Colleges (12 out of 13 providers overall) and adult and community learning providers (17 out of 21 providers overall) anticipated that Coronavirus would have a negative impact on the financial health of their organisation. None of them felt it would have a positive impact. In contrast, only half of the Independent Training Providers who took part in the survey anticipated a negative impact (6 out of 12). Two felt it would have a 'fairly' positive impact and four did not know or did not wish to say.

During the follow-up interviews some of the providers discussed in more detail the current and anticipated impacts of the coronavirus on their organisation. Those with more reliance on fee income, were very concerned, as they were predicting substantial losses in fees.

*"The biggest impact is our loss of fees I'm forecasting that we will lose over 50% of the fees this financial year. I have lost all my fees this term and I think I will lose 50% next term."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Another provider mentioned that they would also usually obtain income from various commercial ventures that they run, which had been stopped due to the lockdown:

*"If you shut the door to all your commercial businesses you lose your income, so although we've furloughed people, we've immediately written off the income, so that will be with us for some time."*

**Further Education College**

In addition, those with limited online provision or platforms prior to Coronavirus discussed the difficulties in moving their provision online, which for some entailed changing their entire business model. Providers discussed how the move online had an impact on equipment costs, staff time and planning costs. A few also mentioned that they had waived fees for some learners due to the new offer being quite different to the one the learners had originally signed up to.

*"It has resulted in more spending as we have had to purchase more equipment, offer more overtime, to ensure needs are met."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Stakeholders were also concerned about the current and future impacts of Coronavirus on providers. Concerns were raised about providers who heavily rely on fee income, or who were already in precarious financial situations before Coronavirus.

*"I think they've been stabilised in the short term, but in the longer term I think it will be difficult. And some providers, particularly colleges, were in pretty dire financial straits to start out with. So, it's a concern."*

**Stakeholder**

However, a few who had already recruited the majority of their learners or were able to move their provision online more easily were more positive and did not feel Coronavirus had impacted the financial health of their organisation.

*"Not at all affected by coronavirus. We had already recruited the majority of learners on the funding streams and all the classes were running during Covid."*

**Independent Training Provider**

One of the providers that felt the impact would be 'fairly positive' felt that in the short term (next 3-6 months) the impact would be very negative, as they change their entire way of working. However, in the longer term (next few years) they felt that they are going to be very busy as they specialise in learning for the unemployed and they expect the number of unemployed individuals to rise considerably.



## GLA response to the Coronavirus

Overall, providers were positive about the response from the GLA, however, they did suggest some improvements around the swiftness of communications and the support on offer.

### Communications

The majority of the providers in the survey (40 out of 44) felt that the GLA had communicated 'very' or 'fairly' effectively with them about the impacts of the Coronavirus on the AEB, of whom 18 said it was very effective, and 22 fairly effective. Only a minority (3 out of 44) felt that the communications were 'neither effective nor ineffective' and only one provider felt the communications were 'not very effective'.

In the follow-up interviews, some of the providers were very positive about the communications they had received from the GLA. They felt that the GLA had been quick to make decisions on current funding arrangements and any additional funding. It was also noted that the GLA had offered some flexibility in the current funding arrangements which had provided some certainty for providers.

*"Very well. They have been very proactive. I think they have been good at communicating it and the opportunities that were available through the funding."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"They've offered some flexibilities where they can, and certainly when they very quickly said protection of the funding and things, that was very useful, because it gave certainty very early on."*

**Further Education College**

Most of the stakeholders also supported this, as they noted that what they had generally heard from providers was positive, they noted the GLA's responsiveness and that they had tried to be as clear as possible with providers about the impact on funding arrangements.

*"I can only feedback what I've heard from providers, but I think it's been pretty positive, I think they acted pretty quickly, and tried to be as clear with providers as they can be. My understanding is that broadly providers are quite happy with how the GLA has done that and has communicated with them, that's been positive."*

**Stakeholder**

However, others felt that the GLA could have improved their communications. Some of these providers disagreed with the swiftness mentioned by the very positive providers. They felt the GLA had not been responsive enough and that other organisations such as the ESFA and other devolved areas had been much quicker in providing the clarity they needed. One of the stakeholders also felt the GLA communications had been a bit slow at the start.

*"There were other devolved areas that had come up before the GLA on what they were doing... at that point of time, at the end of March, it was a little bit frustrating. There were emails back and forth saying, 'what am I doing? Am I allowed to furlough staff?'... there was just the wait for the announcements to come out."*

**Independent Training Provider**

### **Support with payments, evidence, and eligibility**

Most of the providers in the survey (34 out of 44) felt that the GLA had supported them 'very' or 'fairly' effectively with payments, evidence, and eligibility, with 23 saying very effectively and 11 fairly effectively. However, there was a small proportion (8 out of 44) who felt that the GLA had been 'neither effective nor ineffective' in supporting them with these elements. Only two providers felt that the GLA had 'not very' or 'not at all' effectively supported them with payments, evidence, and eligibility.

Generally, the providers in the follow-up interviews were positive about the approach to payments and the support that had been provided around payments. They did not feel they had experienced any issues with this process.

*"Very, very supportive. It's been fantastic. Basically they just... took a view on December, January, February and they said this is the average we will pay you, and offset anything you feel you shouldn't be claiming... and they paid us and it's really helped from a cash flow perspective. We don't have the trauma that I know a lot of other businesses are having."*

**Independent Training Provider**

### **Support with delivery**

In the survey, many of the providers (32 out of 44) stated that the GLA had 'very' or 'fairly' effectively supported their organisation with delivery flexibilities, with 13 saying very effectively and 19 saying fairly effectively. However, around a quarter of the providers (11 out of 44) felt neutral about the support and stated that the GLA had been 'neither effective nor ineffective' in providing support with delivery flexibilities. Again, only one provider felt that they had been 'not very' effectively supported.

Providers who were positive about the support the GLA had provided around delivery flexibilities and they discussed how the GLA had been clear early on that being able to deliver was the key priority and other measures around attendance levels and quality were being relaxed to ensure providers could keep delivering. This flexibility took some of the pressure off providers and allowed them to focus on shifting their delivery online.

*"I think the flexibility has always been there so as long as we carry on delivering. You have to weigh up the quality as well in terms of Ofsted, so I think as soon as we knew the pressure was off the onus was really on keeping the learners learning. I think that took away a lot of the pressure, especially in terms of the tutors. They could focus on getting the resources ready, rather than focusing on just attendance... I think we got a lot of flexibility which we are grateful."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Some of the stakeholders also agreed that the GLA has been clear on the delivery flexibilities and this had allowed providers to focus on delivering whatever provision they could.

*"I think the most important thing the GLA did was to give that guarantee [around funding] and then it just allowed the providers the security of funding to then engage in whatever way they could..."*

**Stakeholder**

However, others who felt more neutral about the support provided felt that they had not really been supported by the GLA, but they equally had not asked the GLA for support. They felt they were able

to deliver what they needed to do on their own, so they did not have a strong opinion on the support provided.

*"Mainly our support came from the awarding organisations we work with. We didn't really ask for or receive anything from GLA. We were assured that as long as we were still delivering the support would be there."*

**Independent Training Provider**

*"We've just cracked on and done what we needed to do."*

**Further Education College**

Many of the providers in the survey (30 out of 44) also stated that the GLA had 'very' or 'fairly' effectively supported them in being able to change or expand their online delivery, with 11 saying very effectively and 19 saying fairly effectively. Around a quarter (10 out of 44) felt the support was 'neither effective nor ineffective'. However, a small minority (4 out of 44) stated that the GLA had 'not very' or 'not at all' effectively supported them in changing or expanding online delivery.

Providers who felt effectively supported discussed this in more detail within the follow-up interviews. The main element of support that they noted was the Covid Response Fund. Strand 2 in particular was noted as helping them to move their delivery online, either by providing equipment or enabling them to provide some professional development to staff, to help ensure that they would feel confident and comfortable delivering online. A few also felt that the GLA had provided clear guidance and encouragement on how to use different methods to keep the learners engaged in this new environment.

*"I think in all of this the GLA has been really supportive. I mean we've obviously had the COVID response funds that we've been able to apply for, and we've used it to set up some more professional development for staff and support them."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

*"They've offered a fund for laptops and there's a £50k fund as well... that impacts delivery as that will go straight to students. Quite a few students have got a laptop but need to share it between family members - so getting a laptop will be massively helpful to them."*

**Further Education College**

Some of the providers that were more neutral had already started to move some of their provision online or they already had systems in place to do this and therefore they did not really need any support from the GLA.

*"It's not that they didn't support us, we didn't need to go to them... We were already well on our way to developing our digital expertise, Covid just accelerated it"*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

However, others did not feel supported by the GLA. They did not feel the GLA had provided any support or guidance with moving their provision online. The only support they felt the GLA had provided was the Covid Response Fund.

*"I don't think they have supported us with the online delivery, apart from saying that your funding is secure as long you can demonstrate that you can do it."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

### **Additional advice and support for learners in potentially vulnerable groups**

In the survey, around half of the providers (20 out of 44) felt that the GLA had 'very' or 'fairly' effectively signposted them to sources of additional advice/ support for learners in potentially vulnerable groups, with six saying very effectively and 14 saying fairly effectively. However, just over a quarter of the providers (14 out of 44) felt the GLA had been 'neither effective nor ineffective' in signposting them to sources of additional advice/ support for learners in potentially vulnerable groups. A small minority felt (6 out of 44) that the GLA had 'not very' or 'not at all' effectively signposted them to advice/ support for potentially vulnerable learners.

Most of the providers that took part in the follow-up interviews could not recall the GLA signposting them to additional support or advice for learners in potentially vulnerable groups. However, a few did mention that they had been continuing with their standard safeguarding approaches during Coronavirus.

*"No, we haven't been signposted to anything, but we have maintained our safeguarding process. Our safeguarding team has followed learners up."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

### **What other support could the GLA have provided**

In survey, providers felt that the GLA could have provided more support in a few key areas. They felt the GLA could have increased funding (12 out of 44), provided even more flexibility in funding provision (10 out of 44), made more provision for the longer-term impacts (7 out of 44), relaxed target performance measures (5 out of 44) and provide clearer guidance / advice on flexibilities in provision.

In the survey, providers discussed the following ways that the GLA could provide more flexibility in funding provision in the future: more flexibility in the enrolment process e.g. using self-declarations for learners that would struggle to provide scanned documentation, relaxed target measures and support for a more qualitative approach on reporting outcomes, widening flexibilities in the delivery of qualifications up to Level 5 and continuing with flexibilities into the 2020/2021 academic year.

*"Continue with flexibilities for 2020-21 delivery given that delivery plans are uncertain, including commitment not to claw back funding if overall targets cannot be achieved."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

However, it is important to note that just under a quarter (9 out of 44) felt adequately supported and that they could not suggest any improvements. It is also worth noting that the same proportion (9 out of 44) could not think of any improvements or did not wish to state them.

**Table 4.2 What more could the GLA have done to support providers to be able to deal with the impacts of the Coronavirus on delivery?**

Additional support GLA could have provided (coded)	Number of providers
Increase in funding/ funding rates	12
Flexibility in funding provision	10
Recognise/ Make provision for the possible longer-term impacts	7
Relax target performance measures	5
Clear guidance/ advice on flexibilities of provision during Coronavirus	4
Other	15
Nothing / Feel adequately supported by GLA	9
Don't know/ Don't wish to say	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>44*</b>

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

Providers in the follow-up interviews also mentioned that more longer-term information or reassurances around funding would be very helpful as it would help to shape their plans for the next 2 to 3 years.

*"The only thing that would be helpful going forward is if there could be some assurances around funding in the medium term."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

During the follow-up interviews providers also discussed that the GLA could have provided communications which shared best practice and encouraged more collaboration between providers during the pandemic. Providers felt that more shared learning during this time would have helped them in making decisions around changes in provision. They recommended this as an area for the GLA to investigate in the future.

*"There hasn't been a lot of communication in terms of encouraging collaboration and discussions between providers in the wider sector, bearing in mind we're all facing the same situation... It could be an area they look at in the future."*

**Independent Training Provider**

## 5 Views on procured provision funding and support

### Experience with European Social Fund funding

Of the 15 procured providers surveyed, six had only been involved with the management of European Social Fund (ESF) funding for less than a year, while four had been involved for 10 years or more. Most (13 of 15) reporting having had a previous ESF-related funding agreement or contract with the ESFA, while six had previous agreements with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).

**Table 5.1 Organisations with which had previous ESF-related funding agreement or contract**

Organisation	Number of providers
Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)	13
Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)	6
Big Lottery Fund	3
A London Borough	3
National Offender Management Service (NOMS)	1
Other teams within the GLA (not part of the AEB)	1
Other	1
Don't know	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>15*</b>

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

### Ease of compliance with funding rules and providing evidence

Most procured providers (11 out of 15) reported finding it either 'very' or 'fairly' easy to comply with the GLA funding rules for contracted providers, with just three rating it difficult (and none saying 'very' difficult). Providers were slightly more likely to have issues with providing evidence complying with the ESF guidance: although most (10) still rated this as 'very' or 'fairly' easy, four said it was fairly difficult and one said it was very difficult.

**Table 5.2 Ease or difficulty of complying with GLA funding rules and providing evidence complying with ESF guidance**

	How easy or difficult is it for your organisation to...	
	Comply with the GLA funding rules for contracted providers?	Provide evidence complying with the European Social Fund guidance?
Very easy	5	4
Fairly easy	6	6
Neither easy nor difficult	1	0
Fairly difficult	3	4
Very difficult	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>

In the qualitative follow-up interviews, procured providers generally stated that they found it easy to comply with GLA funding rules; this was due to having experienced teams, and familiarity with ESF funding rules.

When it came to the ease or difficulty of providing evidence to comply with the ESF guidance, again, most stated they did not have any issues with this, and that it was something they were used to doing. However, one did flag that it had become more challenging due to the social distancing required as a result of Covid-19:

*"For example, where you are running classroom based delivery and you've asked someone to bring their benefit evidence or a passport etc., OK, you know they're physically coming in and can meet the requirements of the GLA in terms of identification or proof of benefits. Now that it's all virtual they've got to upload or put things into a secure place and knowing how to do that is tough."*

#### Independent Training Provider

This provider felt there should be more flexibility in allowing learners to self-declare, due to the situation.

Similarly, another provider mentioned that the requirement for taking copies was the most difficult to manage due to the administration time required, and that it would be good to have more flexibility in this area; they understood that the GLA needs evidence in case of future audits, however, finding another way to reach that goal would be a key change that would reduce provider burden.

One stakeholder mentioned that as the GLA is only applying ESF rules to procured provision, this has had a beneficial effect in reducing burden on grant providers:

*"For the ESFA all of your AEB provision is in scope for an ESF audit, whereas the way the GLA has worked it is your grant contract isn't subject to ESF audit, it's only the procured AEB. So, it's basically taking an audit burden off."*

#### Stakeholder

However, in the survey comments, one procured provider noted that procured providers need to obtain more evidence than grant providers and felt that this disparity was unfair.

### Views on GLA guidance

In the survey, procured providers gave mixed feedback regarding the guidance that the GLA had provided on ESF compliance, with four saying the guidance was helpful and comprehensive, and two saying the guidance was unclear and contradictory.

Two others fed back that the guidance was useful, but that carrying it out involved substantial bureaucracy and was a significant burden for providers.

All procured providers followed up with in the qualitative interviews recalled receiving guidance and said it had been helpful. The guidance was described as clear and easy to digest, and one provider particularly noted that the decision trees and eligibility criteria trees really helped; however, another provider fed back that:



*“They do have some provision maps that are extremely confusing. It kind of is a reflection of the complexity of ESF, and it seems to have been put together by people who love maps and charting... they're probably not the most useful guidance for general staff because it's tough to understand them.”*

**Independent Training Provider**

### What more the GLA could do to support delivery of provision while still complying with ESF requirements

In the survey, several procured providers (6 of 15) said that there was nothing the GLA could do further to support efficient and effective delivery of AEB provision while still complying with ESF requirements; a further four said they did not know or did not wish to say. Two providers suggested that the GLA could re-think or reduce the requirements for supplementary evidence. Other suggestions made in the survey, each by a single provider, were for the GLA to provide more help with interpreting the guidance, and to reduce the bureaucratic and administrative burden on providers.

Providers in the follow-up interviews generally felt there was not much more the GLA could have done; although one reiterated the point about the requirement to scan documentation being particularly burdensome. Another suggested that holding regular webinars would be useful to remind people of data requirements and things to look out for to ensure compliance.

## 6 Views on applying for the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund

The Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund is a £7.3million fund designed to support London's AEB grant-funded provider base to deliver activity that meets the Mayor's priorities for education and skills in London, demonstrates innovation and delivers key outcomes.

### Experience of grant funded providers with the Skills for Londoners Innovation fund application process

Among those surveyed, 32 grant funded providers were eligible for the Innovation Fund, 19 had applied for the fund and 11 were successful in their application.<sup>3</sup> When asked about the experience of the application process in the qualitative follow-up interviews, most providers stated that they found the application generally easy to follow and straightforward, with an overall manageable timeline. However, one stakeholder flagged that the process of applying and awaiting a response was quite long and burdensome for them.

*"I appreciate they are doing a lot of things for the first time, so it is difficult to estimate how long processes may take but we reach a point in the year where everything kept taking a bit longer than estimated... It felt like there were a lot of hoops to jump through to get the money."*

**Stakeholder**

Grant funded providers followed up with in the qualitative interviews gave mixed feedback on the innovation element of the fund. Some providers that were successful in their application noted that the innovation fund was unique in challenging them to develop a new and improved curriculum and tangible delivery outcomes. One of these providers also fed back that the fund could be better utilised by education and training providers if made more accessible:

*"I think just giving providers the opportunity, for example if they knew it was always going to be available every two years that would be good because we could start taking some more risks in terms of innovative programmes. Sometimes we are too careful in terms of what we can offer in case it doesn't work."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

On the other hand, providers that were unsuccessful in securing the funding, and some stakeholders, felt that the innovation fund steered focus from developing efficient and sustainable provisions that previously worked well for adult learners, towards developing a more experimental bid that they may or may not have the means to deliver as effectively.

*"Open tendering is not always the best way to achieve intent - good bid writers will secure the funds, but those providers aren't always the ones who are capable of delivery."*

**Stakeholder**

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<sup>3</sup> This compares to 42 applicants and 27 successful providers for the full cohort of AEB providers

## Views of grant funded providers that did not apply for the Innovation Fund

The survey asked providers who did not apply for the Innovation Fund if they were aware of the fund and, if so, whether they had considered bidding for it. Of the 13 eligible providers that did not apply for the fund, all 13 were aware of it and 8 of those had considered bidding. Across the survey and follow-up interviews, reasons given by eligible providers for not applying included the timing not being right due to other priorities, being mostly based outside of London, and the fund not being applicable to the sectors that providers operated in.

## How can the GLA encourage more grant funded providers to apply for the Skills for London Innovation Fund in the future

Providers in the follow-up interviews generally did not feel there was much more the GLA could have done to encourage more providers to apply to the Innovation Fund, since most of them had positive responses on how the fund was publicised and the communication surrounding it. They felt that the information was adequate in assisting and encouraging them to put in their best bids.

*“I think everybody was encouraged. From my experience, we had enough information about it from both a centralized GLA communication point of view, from our provider manager and all of our networks, so that support in building up our own projects within that perspective was really good.”*

### **Adult and Community Learning Provider**

However, one stakeholder expressed some concerns over bids being selected at face-value and suggested that some flexibility in the bid-selection stage from GLA would encourage more education and training providers to apply for the fund. Some grant funded providers suggested that a clearer distinction between the different grants and their applications would simplify the process and ensure providers stay abreast with all the funding provisions offered by GLA. In addition, one provider also added that a calendar or roadmap of upcoming funding applications could help differentiate between them and assist them to keep track and plan ahead.

One of the stakeholders believed that some providers may think that the capacity limitation of the capital fund could deter their applications from being successful.

## 7 Overall satisfaction with AEB delegation in its first year and perceived biggest impacts to date

This section discusses providers' overall satisfaction with how the delegated AEB has operated in its first year, and further improvements identified by providers and stakeholders which could improve the management of the AEB and its impacts on provision.

### Overall Satisfaction

Overall, providers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the GLA's approach to managing the delegation of the AEB, with 39 out of 44 saying they were either 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied. Only one provider said they were 'fairly' dissatisfied, and none were 'very' dissatisfied.

**Table 7.1 Satisfaction with the GLA's approach to managing the delegation of the AEB in its first year**

Satisfaction score	Number of providers
Very satisfied	25
Fairly satisfied	14
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	4
Fairly dissatisfied	1
Very dissatisfied	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

The one provider who was dissatisfied gave a number of reasons for this: that the new systems weren't really needed; that a larger funding pot has come at the expense of the effectiveness of AEB on the ground; and that it is unclear what value devolution is adding. That provider also felt that the GLA had not always awarded contracts to the most deserving providers:

*"GLA contracted with some very dubious providers and missed out in contracting with established Grade 2 OFSTED providers. This is due to some people having better tender writers, but they don't deliver the provision and the restrictions around procurement (mainly ESF) meant that the supply chain ended up being quite weak in my view."*

#### Independent Training Provider

The four providers who stated they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' gave a mix of reasons for this: one felt that devolution had placed an additional administrative burden on providers, while another said they did not feel devolution had made a difference so far, whereas they had been hopeful it would lead to a whole new approach. One expressed concern about the GLA only funding providers with a base in London and believed this could lead to an underspend and loss of specialisms. Despite having given a neutral rating, the fourth provider stated that parts of the GLA had been very helpful, particularly around setting up and using the systems.

Those who expressed satisfaction overall commonly cited reasons such as the transparency with which the GLA have operated and the ease of communicating with them (13 out of 39), the

collaborative and responsive approach taken (11 out of 39) and the fact that the devolution has not posed an additional administrative burden (7 out of 44), in contrast to the opinion expressed by one provider above. However, one provider did say they felt that *“further consultation with existing providers is required in order for the GLA to fairly judge and decide on the best providers to deliver training.”*

**Table 7.2 Reasons for satisfaction score among providers ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ satisfied**

Reason for positive satisfaction score (coded)	Number of providers
Transparency / ease of communication	13
Collaborative / responsive approach	11
Does not pose an additional administrative burden	7
Useful advice and guidance	4
No improvements necessary	2
Better consideration / decision making needed on best providers to deliver training	1
Other	7
Don't know	3
Prefer not to say	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>39*</b>

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

High satisfaction was also evident in the qualitative follow-up interviews:

*“We are very pleased about how this contract has gone. We are looking forward to next year... We are very excited about the future... We are really pleased with how this has been commissioned and managed.”*

**Independent Training Provider**

Many providers expanded further on the themes of communication and collaboration, with one mentioning they were surprised at how much support they’d received from the GLA over the first year, and several stating that the GLA had taken more of a partnership approach than the ESFA.

*“They haven’t just consulted for the sake of ticking a box, they have really listened... they listened, they consulted, and they have involved providers.”*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

One small provider also explained that they felt more included now the AEB was being administered at a London rather than national level, as they ‘got buried’ in the national picture; another provider singled out the guidance documentation provided by the GLA and account management as particularly positive:

*“Having a strategic document to help provide guidance and clarity around provisions and funding and the responsiveness of account management has been really supportive.”*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

Several providers mentioned that the transition had been smoother than they had expected. One noted that the continuity of approach with the ESFA was welcome, as different funders taking different approaches could lead to confusion:

*"What we don't need is a devolution of approach; by that I mean they've devolved the money, but what we don't particularly want is the GLA then dealing with it in one way and the ESFA dealing with it in another way. So, at the moment they've kind of preserved the rules and the approach at the same time, so that's quite helpful."*

#### Further Education College

One provider did express concern over the amount of money taken to manage the devolved AEB, although also acknowledged that spending on management and administration is necessary:

*"It does cause me some anxiety that the infrastructure is so expensive to run the funding, but I also appreciate if you are managing funding it does cost money. At the moment none of the interventions seem unreasonable."*

#### Adult and Community Learning Provider

One stakeholder raised a similar point, saying that the GLA are already quite a big bureaucracy, so they will need to take care that as they continue to grow, the money goes to learners rather than being put towards increased overheads.

Stakeholders generally reported high levels of satisfaction with the GLA among their members, although one cautioned that satisfaction would be much lower among independent training providers who were unsuccessful in bidding for procured funding, and therefore may have experienced detrimental consequences with a potential knock-on effect for learners. These providers were not in-scope of this research.

*"There's a whole infrastructure that was knocked out. They had to scramble around for subcontracts, they had to close, reduce size and all of that. So, if that was the intention of the GLA then that's been successful; if it wasn't, you know they have affected delivery that did exist and was good quality. And that's not a good thing."*

#### Stakeholder

### Improvements the GLA could make to the administration and management of the AEB

More than half (27 out of 44) of providers felt the GLA did not need to make any changes to the administration and management of the AEB. However, some did suggest better reporting alignment with the Skills for Londoners strategy. For example, closer reporting links with the aims and outcomes of the strategy and that it may be worthwhile to review whether the current reporting approach clearly demonstrates impact and value for money. They also suggested an increase in funding or funding rates, which was also requested by one provider in the qualitative interviews:

*"We need more money please. The funding has been frozen for the last five years which really equates to a cut as all our delivery costs have gone up... They need to be realistic about what it costs to deliver these programmes in London and give us what it costs to deliver. We are at capacity and staff are at breaking point."*

#### Adult and Community Learning Provider

Despite high levels of satisfaction with communication with the GLA generally, in the qualitative interviews several providers suggested improvements that could be made to communications, such as giving providers a wider range of contacts than just the provider manager, and having quicker response times for queries, something also mentioned by some stakeholders. Better communication around financial planning and upcoming funding opportunities was also mentioned.

Another theme emerged around general engagement and consultation, with one suggestion for the GLA to look at how to engage with employers and the community better, and to support providers in promoting the provision in London. A stakeholder also requested that the GLA continue consulting with providers in London to try and ensure a more joined-up approach between supply and demand.

One provider also specifically mentioned they would like to see closer working with Local Authorities:

*"There's a tendency to go to higher colleges and FE providers to work out what's possible and Local Authorities become a kind of sub-sector. Particularly in the climate post-covid there's a much more immediate need to understand what Local Authorities are doing in that space."*

#### **Adult and Community Learning Provider**

With regards to administration, a couple of providers in the qualitative interviews said it would have helped to have clearer guidance on compliance documents from the outset:

*"In the start we didn't receive enough guidance on what information they needed, and documents need to be filled until the first performance meeting. So, it would help to have some earlier guidance, so we don't have to go back to learners to ask for different information"*

#### **Independent Training Provider**

Other suggested improvements to administration included finding a way around the system of scanning documentation and increasing flexibility by making project change requests quicker and less bureaucratic. Another provider also requested that the GLA not change the ILR data being collected, in order to keep things consistent; similarly, one stakeholder felt that the GLA should continue to use the systems which are used by the ESFA in order to minimise the administrative burden for providers.

One provider mentioned that although performance data is important, the GLA should ensure collecting this does not become too burdensome for providers; for example monitoring the destinations and salaries of students two or three years down the line would be quite difficult for colleges to do.

At the same time, several suggestions were made around greater use of data to improve the service, including the GLA acting as a link between employers and providers by sharing labour market data with providers to help them plan curriculums and meet employer needs, as well as sharing data on provision:

*"What would be useful would be to get a regional and sub-regional view on services and delivery... I want to map who is doing what in my borough and I think the GLA could help with this."*

#### **Adult and Community Learning Provider**

A stakeholder also stated that performance data should be made regularly available to ensure that the funding can be redeployed if necessary, a point reiterated by another stakeholder who suggested redistributing funding from under-performing providers mid-year.



*"We should be able to see performance on a quarterly basis at least. Potentially there could be providers that could perform even better if there was more money and there could be areas where there's providers not performing. Actually, it's about redeploying that money really quickly."*

**Stakeholder**

Another stakeholder also wanted the GLA to make more data available on the impact that the devolution of the AEB has had, in order to inform future thinking and decisions around the AEB:

*"Having an understanding of what is the impact of rule changes, what is the impact once we start measuring outcomes? What is the AEB being spent on and how has it changed as a result of devolution?... I think it's trying to get a bit of that common understanding so that you can then at least advise with a bit more knowledge of what the impact might be based on the previous impacts. I know that's probably quite difficult for them to do but I think it is quite crucial."*

**Stakeholder**

### Improvements the GLA could make to the design of the AEB to maximise the impacts on provision

Providers saw more scope for improvement in the design of the AEB, with less than a third (13 out of 44) saying that no improvements were needed. The most common improvement suggested was for there to be more flexibility of funding (14 out of 44), followed by an increase in funding or funding rates (7 out of 44), and more funding for targeted or specific provision (4 out of 44).

**Table 7.3 Improvements the GLA could make to the design of the AEB**

Suggested improvements (coded)	Number of providers
Flexibility of funding	14
Increase in funding / funding rates	7
More funding for targeted / specific provision	4
Reduce bureaucracy / admin	2
Other	11
No improvements	13
Don't know	2
Prefer not to say	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>44*</b>

\*Responses do not equal total as respondents could give more than one answer

In the qualitative interviews, providers reiterated the need for flexibility around AEB design and delivery, and one also noted this flexibility should extend to an understanding of the current circumstances, as being monitored on jobs and outcomes might not be appropriate in the post-Covid period. Stakeholders also emphasised that the GLA need to make sure there are flexibilities around what providers can deliver through AEB, and how that links to other programs, in light of Covid and the local needs of different groups. Finally, one provider requested that the GLA speed up the process of deciding any changes to funding, so that providers will have longer to plan their provision.

Providers in the follow-up stage also felt there should be a review of the funding rules and restrictions. One provider felt there should be funding available for initial advice and guidance even if the potential students do not enrol in a course, as this can take up considerable amounts of staff time.

Several providers also mentioned Level 3 provision specifically, although there were some differing viewpoints. One provider felt that Level 3 provision should be funded by the GLA, although they were not certain if this was something the GLA could control:

*"I think it's a huge missed opportunity in London for people not to have access to funded Level 3 qualifications. The reason I feel it's outside the GLA's remit, is that the rules in regard to Level 3 provision is set at a national level. However, London does really have particular circumstances that are different from the rest of the country. The majority of jobs, or at least a significant minority of jobs, do require people to be qualified at advanced level or higher. I think that will only increase as a result of Covid, the way that working life is going to go... And the GLA should try to lobby the government in regards to that on the basis of the needs of the capital."*

**Independent Training Provider**

Another provider mentioned the detrimental impact that Adult Learning Loans have had on Level 3 provision, and felt it would be better if the loans were replaced by funding, to allow more learners to progress to this level:

*"It's decimated provision particularly at level 3, it's decimated provision in areas like childcare, health and social care – all the areas where we are crying out for staff; but because they're areas that are traditionally not particularly highly paid, why would you take out a loan to get a qualification?"*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

However, referring to the new Level 3 flexibility to support the London recovery in respect of the Covid-19 pandemic, another provider expressed concern over Level 3 provision being funded under AEB, and how providers will be able to fit this within their budget. A stakeholder also expressed concern around the introduction of free Level 3 provision with no increase in funding; they felt that although this might not be a problem for colleges, Adult and Community Learning providers have 'no spare headroom' to accommodate this.

Finally, in terms of overall approach, several stakeholders and providers felt that the GLA should be 'bolder', 'braver' and more independent in their decisions going forwards. One stakeholder acknowledged that the GLA does not want to destabilise providers but felt they could be more proactive in terms of thinking about if the AEB is really giving them what they need.

*"I think politically you could ask, what difference has devolution made? And if you can't really answer that, apart from a series of complex rule changes, rather than 'well it had this impact and we shifted towards this or we did this,' then I think that becomes all a little bit problematic: both politically, but also in terms of arguing for further devolution."*

**Stakeholder**

*"I think it's about them having more confidence that they know what they're doing. I think it's about them being perhaps a bit more forceful in the sense that this is what they're wanting, and they're not always waiting for permission from the ESFA or whoever else."*

**Adult and Community Learning Provider**

## 8 Conclusions

This report has provided insights into provider and stakeholder views on the first year of the delegated AEB in London.

**The findings are largely very positive.** The vast majority were very or fairly satisfied with a range of measures, including: how the GLA has managed the delegated AEB in its first year; the provider manager role and its impact on relationships with the GLA; and the GLA's response to the Coronavirus crisis. Based on this, we can conclude that the delegation of the AEB has worked effectively in its first year, for the vast majority of providers who receive funding from it.

**The evidence regarding impacts on provision is also positive, although less clear-cut,** as may be expected given that delegation is only in its first year, and provision was impacted by the Coronavirus lockdown partway through the year. Where many providers reported an increase in provision prioritised by the GLA, they also felt that this had reinforced their existing plans rather than changing them. In future years it will be important for the GLA to monitor changes in the type and level of provision that is delivered under the AEB (and in learner outcomes) as part of a full impact evaluation.

There are two caveats to these findings: one being that providers who no longer receive funding from the AEB were outside the scope of this research and therefore may have different views about the impacts of delegation. Some stakeholders highlighted a concern about the impacts of the changes on some of these providers, who they reported were typically smaller and involved in more niche, specialist provision. Secondly, there was a general view among both providers and stakeholders alike that the changes introduced for 2019/20 preserved an element of continuity with ESFA rules and processes. While this served to allay some initial (misplaced) concerns among providers about potential upheaval, and while providers and stakeholders appreciated the smooth transition, some were vocal about the need for the GLA to be 'bolder' and more autonomous going forward, to maximise the impacts of the delegation of AEB funding on provision in London.

Notwithstanding the positive feedback overall, the report identifies certain refinements which the GLA might consider making to the administration/ management of the AEB, and its design, to capitalise on the solid foundations set in the first year. Informed by feedback from the providers and stakeholders who participated in this research, these are detailed below.

### Administration and management of the AEB

While feedback on the provider manager role and the quarterly review meetings was very positive, there were some recommendations for how these may be enhanced further. There was an element of inconsistency in the extent to which the meetings were used to convey broader information to providers about developments in **GLA policies and funding opportunities**. Providers would welcome greater consistency of approach to this, both via the regular meetings but also using communications such as **webinars and regular newsletters** to convey this type of information. More use of webinars was also raised in relation to providing information and support on ESF funding rules.

**Better signposting** was also mentioned, in terms of helping providers to navigate through what could be complex guidance, and in terms of providing direct links to updated information on the GLA website, rather than an alert which was not accompanied by a specific link. Providers would also welcome **speedier response times** to more complex queries.

**Reducing bureaucracy** was identified as an issue going forward. Specific examples of processes which providers felt could be made more efficient included automated postcode validation and pre-populating funding amounts in the contract management system. While the level of bureaucracy and paperwork required for meeting ESF funding rules was highlighted by providers delivering procured provision, they acknowledged that this was not necessarily within the GLA's remit to change.

Providers also highlighted scope for the GLA to take on a greater role in **facilitating more widespread sharing of good practice** between AEB-funded providers. In particular, providers identified this as a gap when it came to adapting their provision in response to the Coronavirus. They would welcome more support from the GLA to share good practice and the facility for a more collaborative approach between providers on issues such as moving to online learning.

### Design of the AEB to achieve greater impacts on provision

Providers and stakeholder alike raised a number of potential improvements around better use of performance data. They felt there was a role for the GLA to make **provider performance data and labour market information (LMI) more easily available** to providers, employers and learners. For providers, this would assist them to plan their future curricula and help to shape the degree of fit between supply of and demand for provision.

Linked to this, some providers would like more information on the impacts of the delegated AEB on provision and on learner outcomes, with **performance reporting aligned to the priorities in the Skills for Londoners Strategy**.

Mentioned less frequently by providers, but a key point raised by stakeholders, was the recommendation for GLA to make **more strategic use of provider performance data**, including, potentially, to redeploy funding between providers if warranted, due to under-performance.

Some providers called for **increased funding rates** which were more closely aligned with delivery costs, after several years of under-investment. Some also identified a need for **greater flexibility in the funding rules**, in particular about more funding for higher level courses at Level 3 and above, in certain priority sectors such as health and social care and early years. Linked with these points about funding, a specific improvement associated with the impacts of the Coronavirus was for providers to have **more long-term reassurance around funding**, for example over the next 2-3 years, as they planned their response to the economic fallout of the pandemic.

### Increasing innovation in provision

Views around how best to stimulate innovation in provision were more mixed, with some providers and stakeholders questioning the need for specific innovation funds and considering that more funding should be directed at 'tried and tested' provision instead. However, specific improvements to the current approach included:

- **Making the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund or similar stimulus packages available more regularly**, so that there was less 'risk' involved for providers of developing new approaches which may only receive short-term funding.
- **More clarity for providers about future funding opportunities, such as a funding 'roadmap'**, to enable better forward planning and responsiveness to bids in future.

“

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