

Connexions: Developing Options and Opportunities

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The Connexions experiment has reached a crucial stage whereby its future positioning within local partnership arrangements has yet to be determined. This paper offers stimulus material for policy-makers, local authorities, Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), managers, practitioners, trainers and researchers to give serious consideration to the Connexions service and its future. Three potential models are briefly outlined for consideration within the context of varying and complex youth partnership delivery arrangements throughout England. It is argued that, in the event of dividing responsibility for careers service provision to differing Children's Trusts, schools and colleges, there is a risk whereby government could find itself highly exposed to failing on its statutory obligation.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 In September 2003, the government produced its Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, which set out five child-centred outcomes that should underpin all children's and youth services in England¹. This was followed by a Five-Year Strategy for Children and Learners² which outlined an extensive and ambitious agenda designed to inform and support a major transformation in the design and delivery of national and local services for all young people and adults. Its basic philosophical principle is to protect, nurture and improve the quality of life for children and young people.

1.2 Connexions services were rolled out across England between April 2001 and April 2003³ to provide both universal *and* targeted services for young people between the age of 13 and 19, and to provide support for 20 – 24 year olds with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are yet to make the transition to adult services. There is synergy between the new government policies and the role and remit of Connexions, as stated at its inception:

'Connexions is aimed at helping young people make the right choices, giving them the opportunity to learn new skills they need to make a success of their adult lives'.⁴

1.3 In place of such synergy however, recent media coverage suggests that Connexions will not continue in its current form⁵ and there are suggestions that present policies may lead to it being integrated into the newly-formed Children's Trusts and/or into schools and colleges. Whilst rumour and speculation continue in relation to its future, Connexions has to continue to deliver its services in the knowledge that recruitment and retention of staff may be severely affected by this adverse publicity. In this context, Government is being asked to give further consideration to this complex issue. A review of 14-19 education, undertaken by the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee (2005), in the context of the national skills strategy, recently highlighted:

'Connexions is a young organisation and if it is to be changed the reasons need to be sound. The service providing information, advice and guidance to young people needs stability and high quality provision. Constant reconfiguring of the service will cause confusion, and confusion about the provision of advice could have a knock-on effect for the rest of the Government's plans'.⁶

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has delayed the publication of the Youth Green Paper (originally due in late 2004) which suggests that these issues are not yet resolved.

1.4 An important task now is accordingly to improve understanding about the existing provision and the possible reasons for changing Connexions as it currently stands. Account also needs to be taken of statutory legal requirements. The Secretary of State's statutory obligation for the provision of career services in England⁷ currently rests with Connexions Services, and through partnership arrangements these services also have responsibility for supporting the extended statutory duty on schools to provide planned programmes of careers education in the curriculum from Year 7 onwards⁸. Any changes in existing arrangements could have implications for these requirements. In the context of addressing Connexions' future, the critical question is:

In policy terms, what changes if any need to be made to Connexions services to provide high quality universal and targeted services for all young people?

1.5 This paper offers a reflection on the main themes that are currently emerging from government policies and outlines three possible policy options. These are offered for consideration by central and local policy-makers and other relevant bodies, including Connexions Partnerships, Local Authorities, schools, colleges, Learning & Skills Councils (LSCs) and professional associations.

1.6 A brief overview of some significant key developments in the life of the Connexions service illustrates how these developments have directly influenced and, to a large extent, determined the shape and nature of the service's work. Political imperatives are discussed, linked to operational considerations such as 'control and accountability' and 'capacity issues' in relation to the delivery of existing statutory requirements. The strengths, weaknesses and risks associated with 'system change' are explored, with emphasis placed on how best to avoid young people falling through 'hidden fractures' in the system and how best to support their progression.

1.7 Whilst partnership working is not a new experience for Connexions and other organisations involved in the planning and delivery of children's and young people's services, current plans to introduce new relationships between existing providers, local authorities, schools and colleges⁹, could drive up competition for service delivery. The paper argues that the statutory requirement for providing a careers service to young people in education, training and employment is a clear entitlement which, if not met, could lead to a serious challenge. Additionally, Local Learning & Skills Councils (LLSCs) and local Children's Trusts could be faced with highly fragmented delivery arrangements that could result in a major loss of knowledge of local and regional youth cohorts.

2.0 Background

2.1 There are various significant developments that have influenced the design and delivery model of Connexions (see Appendix 1). From this, the following *four* key policy imperatives emerge which will still need to be addressed, regardless of the final chosen model for Connexions and its future direction. These are likely to continue to gather further momentum and therefore will feature in any future scenario.

(i) *The legislative changes* as outlined in the new **Education Bill** (2004)¹⁰ set out the framework to support a 'new relationship with schools' and to promote greater autonomy and diversity in the education system. Simultaneously, the **Children Bill** (2004)¹¹ places a duty on local authorities to make arrangements to promote co-operation between agencies and other appropriate bodies (such as voluntary and community organisations), and a duty on agencies to co-operate in order to achieve the five key outcomes for well-being in childhood and later life. The duty to co-operate does not, at present, extend to schools and colleges.

(ii) *The funding changes* outlined in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*,¹² guarantee three-year **ring-fenced budgets** for every school from 2006 onwards, added to which there is the statutory requirement for **budgets to be pooled**, to support joint activities within the context of local authority Children's Trusts¹³.

(iii) *The refocusing changes* required to ensure cost effective and efficient delivery of **universal and targeted children's and young people's services**. The political agenda is likely to continue to focus on reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), regardless of the political party in power after the general election, whilst at the same time ensuring that the needs of those young people who are engaged in education, employment and/or training are not overlooked¹⁴.

(iv) *The market changes* associated with potential new 'buy in' arrangements could expand choice and increase competition between services. Whilst the TURER Act (1993)¹⁵ provides flexibility for the transfer of career service provision to alternative providers, it is possible that further **opening up of the market** will continue to be on the political agenda¹⁶.

The prognosis and imperatives for change within a post-14 education and skills reform agenda are clearly evident, whatever the final arrangements for their delivery. Bezanson (2004)¹⁷ highlights 'transformation models' which are highly relevant for policy-makers and other interested parties in considering ways forward to help implement these changes. These offer both a

structure and focus to begin a local and national dialogue on possible ways forward for developing robust universal and targeted services.

2.2 In addition to the policy imperatives, there are the following *operational considerations* that will need to apply irrespective of any future development of service delivery.

(i) *Control and accountability* – in view of the statutory requirements for the delivery of services to children and young people, the meeting of performance targets in the NEET group, the increasing complexity of delivering the universal service, and the need to address the actual skill and learning outcomes resulting from quality career services, these will all continue to be a prominent feature in delivery arrangements. This is particularly relevant given the concern for 'contestability'¹⁸ and the continued policy drive for greater choice and openness.

(ii) *Capacity* – in view of the continuing need for high quality provision, and irrespective of the number of providers involved, the shortfall in the number of available professional advisers across the children's and young people's sector remains an issue. In 2004, a children's workforce mapping exercise¹⁹ identified a wide range of workforce issues for different services and sectors, including gaps in service provision and the need to increase the recruitment and retention of staff. This issue is particularly relevant to the area in which Connexions operates, as evidenced by an initiative of the Regional Association of Careers Guidance Companies in Yorkshire and the Humber²⁰. This particular initiative will incorporate the findings of a research and consultation phase into a campaign to raise people's understanding and awareness of career guidance in the area, and to encourage more people to enter the profession.

3.0 Expectations and statutory requirements

3.1 Throughout its relatively short life, Connexions has been continuously scrutinised by external agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), the National Audit Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), research units within higher education institutions, market research agencies and independent consultants.

3.2 Research findings highlight variations in performance between partnerships. Positive results include: -

- '*Connexions is still relatively new but it is achieving positive impact, of different types, with different groups of young people, including those at risk*'.²¹

- ‘*Connexions are fulfilling their remit effectively. In particular, they are helping increasing numbers of young people from diverse backgrounds by developing programmes that are successfully responding to the needs of local groups, individuals and their particular circumstances*’.²²
- ‘*93% of young people were fairly or very satisfied with Connexions*’.²³

3.3 Connexions Service Planning Guidance (2001 - 2002)²⁴ indicated:

‘A key success measure is the extent to which it [the Connexions Service] reduces the number of young people aged 16-19 not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs)Increased participation levels will, in turn, help Connexions play an active role in delivering cross-Whitehall initiatives such as the national learning targets, the teenage pregnancy strategy and drugs strategy.’

Connexions Partnerships were set targets to reduce the proportion of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment and training between 2002 and 2004 by 10%.

In March 2004, the National Audit Office analysed the reasons behind variations in partnership’s performance and concluded that those who had secured the highest reductions to date were those who started with the highest proportions of young people in the NEET group. In early 2005, the Minister of State for Children praised the Connexions service for achieving a 14% reduction nationwide in the number of young people not in education, employment or training.²⁵

3.4 In contrast, other comments indicate a less favourable response, for example: -

- ‘*Colleges are using teaching budgets in order to supplement inadequate [Connexions] provision...giving the right advice is a large task and Connexions should be central to its delivery. We need to see it living up to its promise*’ (May 2004)²⁶.
- ‘*Every Head feels the Connexions service is poor and that money should go to schools and colleges*’ (February, 2005).²⁷

3.5 So far, Government policy-makers have viewed Connexions as a ‘key instrument’ to help raise young people’s aspirations and their active participation in education, employment and/or training. But individuals’ expectations of the outcomes from Connexions work vary considerably, as the following examples illustrate.

➤ **Young people** are likely to be most concerned with having *access to high quality services* designed to help support them with important life and work decisions that they may find difficult to make without some form of professional input, i.e. did Connexions provide a useful service?

➤ **Policy-makers** are likely to be most concerned with summative *evaluations* and *cost-benefit outcomes*, i.e. did the Connexions Service achieve the outcomes expected of it and what are the cost implications for current and future provision?

➤ **Local / sub-regional strategic planners** such as the Learning & Skills Councils and Children’s Trusts are likely to be most concerned with wanting *consistent universal and preventative coverage* i.e. did the Connexions service provide high quality and comprehensive information relating to the youth cohort?

➤ **Managers and practitioners** are likely to be most concerned with *formative issues*, i.e. which element(s) of the Connexions Service contributed most effectively to the outcomes achieved and how can these then be transferred elsewhere?

➤ **Headteachers, college principals and their staff** are likely to be most concerned with *retention strategies, qualifications and destination outcomes*, i.e. did Connexions inform and support the careers education and guidance curriculum within the school/college plan?

➤ **Parents** are likely to be most concerned with access to, and level of, *specialist impartial careers support, and access to information on learning and work related opportunities* that are made available to their child(ren) at key decision points, i.e. did Connexions offer something of value that was not available elsewhere?

➤ **Employers** are likely to be most concerned with *receiving appropriately referred young people into their companies*, i.e. did Connexions provide an effective service in terms of signposting or supplying the right sort of skilled people for the labour market?

3.6 Whilst differing perspectives present all-round challenges, there remains a *statutory duty* for the provision of careers services to be fulfilled and a duty on schools (2004) to provide planned programmes of

careers education in the curriculum from Year 7 onwards (see para 1.4). Inspection frameworks, such as OFSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), perform a key role in policing the quality of statutory provision and its effectiveness. Evidence from OFSTED and other inspection reports²⁸ show that schools and colleges have a serious need for more help in developing careers education and guidance provision. But extending this to include responsibility for careers service provision could greatly overstretch the boundaries of (i) available funding to resource this new service, (ii) teacher responsibilities, and (iii) schools' knowledge of labour market opportunities within and outside the locality. Of course, schools may choose to 'buy back' services from outside agencies. From this, a growing market in schools' careers work could emerge.

3.7 So the challenges remain of how best to achieve:

- high quality provision for all young people and
- stability in maintaining existing services within a turbulent sea of education and skills reform.

4.0 Refinement or change?

4.1 The State currently plays a vital role in the strategic overall management of public services such as careers service provision and careers education and guidance within schools and colleges. Sultana (2004) argues:

*'The more guidance is delivered through a variety of providers in a decentralized system, the more critical the co-ordinating role of the State becomes. Such co-ordination is necessary to ensure that all citizens have equitable access to services that are delivered in a timely and professional manner across their lifespan, in a way that supports their life goals.'*²⁹

4.2 A key feature in the State's response to developing services for young people is to apply a partnership solution. The Connexions strategy was originally based on a decentralised partnership model whereby a new youth support service – incorporating the Careers Services, parts of the youth service and a range of other specialist agencies – would be brought more closely together to provide a more coherent range of high quality services to young people. Watts (2001) highlighted two fundamental design flaws, firstly, the development of the service built around targeted provision with the universal service bolted-on, and secondly, the aim of merging youth, careers and educational welfare services was only part-implemented.

'The decision to commit the whole of the Careers Service budget to Connexions, alongside the failure to secure similar commitments from other budget-

*holders, immediately produced an imbalance in the structure of Connexions partnerships.'*³⁰

Thus it has taken time to establish Connexions in all areas and the process has been much more complex than the State originally envisaged. Where Connexions Partnerships have been established longest they have had time to engage local partners in joint development work compared to those set up in 2003/4. It is significant in this respect to distinguish between the Connexions strategy and Connexions service. The *strategy* was only implemented in part and assumptions on available resources could not be fulfilled. It was within this complex and confused strategic context that the *service* responded and sought to deliver government set targets and policy requirements.

4.3 The Connexions experiment has reached its most critical stage. The tension between providing both universal and targeted provision needs to be addressed. Hoggarth & Smith (2004) argue:

'Whatever the configuration of service to young people, there will be a need for both universal and targeted provision, even if they are contained within integrated services at the interface.' (p.16)³¹

An identical debate is taking place within the adult guidance sector where existing services are being challenged to provide both universal and targeted services. The issue of how best to maximize resources, in line with allocated budgets, whilst ensuring that all adults' guidance needs are met, is a major challenge for local Next Steps³² providers and Learning & Skills Councils (LSCs). Given the similarities, there is scope to widen current discussions on the feasibility of an all-age service that includes intensive support for vulnerable young people, as and when appropriate. A holistic service can help to ensure continuity of support, and promote trust between the individual and particular services. Connexions has demonstrated its ability to offer more holistic approaches in its work with young people in the NEET group.

Whether or not it is most desirable to opt for a refinement of existing services, or to find an alternative approach, requires more detailed scrutiny. The following brief analysis is designed to stimulate further discussion on the strengths, weaknesses and potential risks associated with possible options.

4.4 At this stage, for Connexions services there are at least *three* potential scenarios for its future direction.

(i) Connexions services managed and delivered through existing arrangements with further refinement built into their role and remit.

(ii) A segmentation of Connexions services with a clear split between ‘universal’ and ‘targeted’ services directly involving Children’s Trusts and Schools and Colleges.

(iii) An ‘all-age service’ designed to strengthen guidance provision, taking account of Connexions services’ best work and extending this to all young people and adults.

SCENARIO 1: Connexions services managed and delivered through existing arrangements with further refinement built into their role and remit

4.5 This *first scenario* recognises that significant financial investment (at least £450 million per annum during the last 4 years) has already been made by government and local services to establish a new Connexions ‘brand’, a cadre of around 8,000 Personal Advisers³³, a series of one-stop shops, and sub-regional partnerships that are, in many areas, coterminous with local Learning and Skills Councils.

4.6 Key *strengths* within the existing service include the potential for:

- expertise in working with ‘young people at risk’, particularly those within the NEET group, and the achievement of government performance targets set by government offices³⁴;
- engagement of young people in the development of local services;
- promotion of an established ‘brand’;
- well-developed tracking systems and expertise in associated data protection issues;
- support and development of 14 – 19 curriculum and guidance provision; and
- stronger working links with the labour market at local and regional levels.

4.7 Major *weaknesses* lie in the difficulties experienced in providing consistent interventions and support across the wider population of young people who have need for this, the over-emphasis on NEET targets, and a lack of performance measures specifically related to the delivery of the ‘universal’ service.

4.8 Whilst it is generally acknowledged that Connexions intensive work with young people contributes to the wider role and holistic remit of the service, its contribution is limited by (i) the resources available, and (ii) the number of young people it can engage. Proposals for system change could bring major opportunities to address these existing tensions;

however, any huge change in the current operational arrangements could place *at risk* the:

- major dividends of reducing the NEET population as well as potentially derailing partnership arrangements in areas where existing arrangements are working well;
- momentum associated with an established Connexions brand;
- financial viability of Connexions companies;
- sub-regional Connexions activities such as joint INSET in schools and colleges and in-house staff development;
- Personal Adviser training, with individuals feeling unable to commit given the political climate of uncertainty; and
- levels of confidence amongst young people using Connexions services.

4.9 Options for **refinement of existing Connexions services**, to build on perceived strengths and address key weaknesses, include a closer examination of current *policy drivers* and *operational considerations* as indicated below.

- *Demand and supply arrangements* - The current Secretary of State has the power to make arrangements for ‘local education authorities, persons of any other description, or through joint arrangements to provide, or arrange for the provision of careers services, in accordance with statutory requirements’.³⁵ Designated responsibility for careers service provision in England currently rests with Connexions services.

Connexions performs a key role in informing and supporting schools and colleges in the design, planning and delivery of careers education programmes from Year 7 onwards; delivering training and development for schools and college staff; and promoting kite-marked quality standards. The service also seeks to help young people make better sense of the opportunities and options available to them. One such example is the introduction of the ‘Common Application Procedure’ (CAP), developed by Connexions Coventry & Warwickshire³⁶, designed to improve the delivery of high quality guidance and support services to young people. This specific Connexions approach offers direct benefits to young people so that they can declare their potential aspirations at an early stage and then explore linkages to potential employment and training opportunities. There may be scope to

refine existing arrangements to focus more on the linkages between education and labour market opportunities.

- *Commissioning and accountability arrangements* - Steps need to be taken to ensure that delivery is underpinned by performance measures and quality standards that relate to the universal as well as the targeted service provision. In the absence of these, individuals' entitlements to statutory services may not meet minimum standards, and failure to provide the service, or to provide it adequately, could increase the risk of potential legal action.
- *Training arrangements for Personal Advisers (PAs)* - Connexions services have made significant investment in the training of 'generic' PAs. The majority are working towards, or have achieved, a level 4 guidance qualification. This enables Connexions Personal Advisers to respond flexibly to varying needs within differing contexts and settings. However, with the possible option available to schools and colleges to 'buy in' services, it is likely that they may require an even higher level of specialist expertise to inform and influence the development of career education and guidance policies and implementation plans. Connexions services, in partnership with higher education institutions, could be encouraged and resourced to develop more 'specialist' career advisers training. This would enable the service to provide better for the social and economic well-being of the individual, as well as supporting the policy aims of Government's education and skills agenda. It would also help clarify the Connexions services' unique selling point within multi-agency partnerships.
- *Co-location arrangements* - Strategies will be necessary to prevent young people falling through any gaps in services when they reach age 19. The development of even closer working links between Connexions and Job Centre Plus is one way forward to help address this issue.

4.10 Hitherto, resources have been fully stretched, therefore, in order to achieve possible refinements, government would have to make additional resources available. Without the appropriate resources, universal and targeted services for all young people cannot realistically be delivered.

Currently, Connexions straddles both local and sub-regional partnerships; there are considerable variations across England in terms of how the arrangements operate. But, in all areas Learning Partnerships exist across sectors (schools, colleges, work-based learning providers and adult and community learning), led by LSCs, to promote and drive forward provider

collaboration. As Children's Trusts begin to fully unfold they are charged with addressing the economic well-being of young people alongside their other key priorities. Connexions (and other organisations) will have to reconcile their role and responsibilities within these two differing partnerships. In a refined arrangement, Connexions could play a more central role in focusing on labour market requirements, education and training opportunities for all young people.

SCENARIO 2: A segmentation of Connexions services with a clear split between 'universal' and 'targeted' services directly involving Children's Trusts and Schools and Colleges

4.11 This *second scenario* of dividing the existing Connexions' resource, is logically appealing, but this is a 'high risk' strategy in relation to delivering the statutory duty for careers service provision in England. There are policy attractions in devolving budgets which can potentially stimulate new forms of provision. The central issue is the extent to which devolved responsibilities lead either to a more coherent set of local and regional arrangements, or to a more piecemeal service for end-users.

4.12 *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* (2004) highlights the commissioning of services within the context of pooled resources and joint partnership-working at local authority level. Although not a statutory requirement, it is anticipated that Children's Trusts will act as a conduit for commissioning arrangements. Whilst it is too early at this stage to say what funding and delivery arrangements will finally emerge, it has been widely speculated that there will be a division of resources with 60% allocated through Children's Trusts and the remaining 40% allocated directly to schools and colleges. If this division of resources were generally to apply, this would not exclude the possibility of a variation of delivery arrangements evolving in different parts of the country, i.e. new sub-models are likely to be developed. However, irrespective of the detail of the final arrangements that might emerge through this scenario, some common strengths and weaknesses can be identified.

4.13 *Key strengths* of delivery through Children's Trusts include the potential for: -

- greater clarity of mission, with allocated resources focused upon 'targeted' provision;
- improved co-ordination of services for children and young people;
- synergy and added-value to be gained from sharing of resources;
- enhanced tracking and monitoring systems; and
- closer alignment of local education authorities' strategic and operational plans to other local direct delivery services.

Key *strengths* of delivery through schools and colleges include the potential for: -

- greater clarity of mission, with allocated resources focused upon ‘universal’ provision;
- increased direct control and accountability at the point of use;
- greater potential for a more flexible and cost effective use of resources;
- enhanced student access to services;
- increased opportunity for curriculum integration; and
- in-house development of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) for students.

4.14 Main *weaknesses* of delivery through Children’s Trusts are associated with the complexity and bureaucracy of partnership working. This could result in: (i) unnecessary delays in decision-making; (ii) conflicting and competing agendas (which could create temporary system inertia); (iii) lack of focus on core delivery whilst new infra-structures are established; (iv) monies being spent or dissipated through other financial pressures; (v) loss of young people’s and parents’ recognition of established branded services; and (vi) a danger that the service becomes stigmatised as the service for young people with problems.

4.15 Main *weaknesses* of delivery through Schools and Colleges are associated with the potential for (i) institutions not volunteering to follow-up and provide ongoing support to young people after their initial schooling (individuals who temporarily drop-out of education may not know who is best placed to serve their interests); (ii) conflict between student and institutional interests; (iii) a loss of impartial guidance; (iv) a major weakening of the link between careers education and guidance (CEG) and the labour market (especially in relation to school-based delivery); (v) inconsistency in the quality and level of provision (especially given the poor track record of schools in delivering their current statutory duty for CEG)³⁷; (vii) loss of strategic overview of the whole youth cohort. This could result in greater opportunities for young people to fall through the net than existed before. It may also put at risk the Public Service Agreement target for further reduction in NEET by 2010.

4.16 It is generally recognised that within this ‘devolved’ scenario, schools and colleges might choose to buy in services from external suppliers. Experience from the Netherlands suggests, however, that many will choose not to do so, and that where they do, this may restrict the impartiality of the services with which they contract.³⁸ Where services are bought in, Connexions could continue to act as the main supplier, if commissioned to do so. Current proposals are silent on the extent to which a preferred supplier model would

apply. However, this does not mean that this possibility has been ruled out by policy-makers. This *potential* development creates both opportunities and risks for existing Connexions services. Where partnership relationships are less well developed, the risks for Connexions services are at their greatest, particularly in relation to alternative providers entering the market.

4.17 Schools, colleges and Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) have the lead responsibility for pre- and post-14 schooling and work-related learning. It should not be overlooked that major fractures could occur in relation to those young people who move in and out of the ‘at risk’ category. Hoggarth & Smith make explicit the fluidity of young people’s transitions over time, and how ‘leakage’ in the system can occur.³⁹ Tensions in funding responsibilities, and variations in perceived ‘duty of care’ to young people, are likely to result in a number of young people being lost to the system. Also, the Secretary of State’s statutory duty for the fulfillment of the provision of careers services could be at risk if the universal service was split off and placed in the hands of institutions. This type of devolved arrangement creates a certain degree of vulnerability for government; therefore, it would be necessary to ensure that accountability arrangements are transparent and explicit from the outset. In essence, these devolved arrangements must be sufficiently robust to withstand legal challenge.

SCENARIO 3: An ‘all-age service’ designed to strengthen guidance provision, taking account of the Connexions services’ best work, and extending this to all young people and adults.

In the *third* scenario of an ‘all-age service’, the current role of Connexions would be extended to offer provision to *all* young people and adults. Ford (2000)⁴⁰ previously highlighted that ‘much concern has been expressed that the focus on ‘horizontal’ integration of services for young people aged 13-19 within Connexions contains the risk of undermining the ‘vertical’ integration of all-age guidance’. He identified eight key principles of guidance delivery underpinning the Connexions strategy that apply to adults as well as young people. A review of the Connexions strategy could provide a unique opportunity to build guidance provision at local level that meets the expressed requirements of all age groups, and indeed, could drive up standards due to the synergising of two complementary areas of provision. There are key lessons to be learned from all-age guidance services that exist in Scotland and Wales and the differing contractual models used.

4.18 A move for Connexions towards an ‘all-age service’ recognises the logic of not moving away from local and sub-regional arrangements, coterminous with local Learning and Skills Councils, given their statutory

remit for funding post-16 education and training (excluding higher education). It also acknowledges the existing infra-structure arrangements in place to support local adult guidance partnerships, i.e. Next Steps providers, many of which (though not all) are off-shoots of Connexions Partnerships. If Connexions were to dissipate, this would inevitably impact on existing adult guidance structures, such as premises used for delivery and ancillary support including specialist library expertise. Ford (2000) recommends further exploration of the concept of establishing local 'Guidance Action Zones' as one possible way forward.

The '14-19 Education and Skills' White Paper (2005)⁴¹, and the 'Skills: Getting on in business, getting on in work' White Paper (2005)⁴², highlight the need for better joined-up services, employer participation in education and training, closer working links with the labour market, and opportunities for individuals to help themselves with high quality support where necessary. Many issues relating to gender, ethnicity, age, disability and learning difficulty are common to young people and adults, and may therefore lend themselves to unified action. Indeed, in the context of this third, 'all-age' scenario, it is worth emphasising that, although primarily focused upon supporting young people aged 13 – 19, Connexions has significant experience in working with young adults through its current responsibility to help 20 – 24 year olds with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are yet to make the transition to adult services.

4.20 Key *strengths* of delivery through all-age service arrangements include the potential for:

- local economies of scale that can help to avoid duplications and improve efficiency;
- greater clarity of mission, with allocated resources focused sensitively on balancing the universal service and targeted services;
- increased direct control and accountability in the relationship between providers and LSC;
- common approaches and activities, and the exchange of information and expertise;
- joint strategies for quality assurance and development; and
- enhanced access to labour market opportunities.

4.21 Main *weaknesses* of this scenario might include the possible reduction of close, joint partnership work through local authorities; the logistics of alignment of overlapping agendas; and the perception that segregated provision is preferable for different client age groups.

4.22 Within the context of adult provision, there is a notable step change in government policy whereby 'a combination of free and charged services' will be marketed as the 'best source of impartial guidance linking independent guidance services with those provided by colleges, universities and training providers'.⁴³ The general principle of creating a 'market in career' to take pressure off the public purse is now a serious proposition in response to the government's new skills policy framework.

4.23 Further moves to 'open up' a new market in careers work for young people and adults, are likely to result in new suppliers seeking entry, including sole traders and larger companies. The state has a role in regulating the market and assuring the quality of services, both to protect the public interest and to build consumer confidence.

4.24 The main risk associated with this scenario links directly to the issue of who should regulate the market in order to safeguard the interests of potential consumers. Without more integrated forms of 'professional formation' between 'specialist' and 'generic' workers, to help define common ethical standards and develop an integrated competence framework, there is a strong likelihood that variations in the quality and standards of service delivery will remain.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Whichever direction the current service follows, the achievement of 'organisational' alignment should not alone be the end goal. Instead, the ultimate objective is to ensure that services adequately meet the needs of young people (and adults), so that they can flourish in managing successfully their life and work experiences over time. Delivering both universal and targeted services for young people is a major challenge, and recent experience shows that this places a significant strain on the public purse. The intention to reconfigure the Connexions service to address the problems associated with delivering universal provision is highly laudable. This should help identify the necessary steps that need to be taken to ensure that statutory obligations can be fulfilled.

5.2 The strengths, weaknesses and risks associated with the three outlined models illustrate the complexity of any policy decision designed to reposition the existing service. The research that charts the life of Connexions is of critical importance, because this provides us with a reminder of the shortcomings in the original Connexions strategy, and it also raises awareness of how the Connexions partnerships responded positively to their set targets. Connexions had to deliver within a complex and confused strategic context. Learning from this recent past should enable

policy makers to concentrate their minds on the new strategy required to achieve a universal service, with targeted provision for those young people who require more intensive support.

5.3 The statutory requirement for providing a careers service to assist and support young people as they move in and out of education, training and employment is a clear entitlement which, if not met, could be seriously challenged. Therefore exploring the three outlined scenarios will offer the reader both context and options for consideration. In the event of dividing responsibility for careers service provision to differing Children's Trusts, schools and colleges, a situation may occur whereby Government finds itself highly exposed to failing on its statutory obligation.

5.4 The challenge for policy-makers is to review the education and skills landscape and to give careful consideration to finding a strategy and implementation plan that will reduce hidden fractures in the system, rather than create new ones. There is a strong need to focus more on improving youth support services that involve a much closer relationship with the labour market. The success of both universal and targeted services for young people is inextricable to the supply-side of opportunities. From this, and other related debates, a more robust strategy should emerge to inform and support youth policy, and guidance provision, throughout England.

APPENDIX 1

A brief overview of key developments influencing the life of Connexions Services in England

(i) From 1998 onwards, growing concerns in government about a new burgeoning ‘under-class’ of young people not in education, employment or training (unofficially known as the **NEET group**)¹ required action. Government took the first step in implementing a new Connexions service to help address this issue by targeting the newly **privatised careers companies**² to deliver an improved joined up ‘universal’ and ‘targeted’ service for all young people, in particular those ‘most at risk’. By 2003, the majority of these companies were fully enveloped within the new Connexions service, although some opted for sub-contract arrangements whilst still operating privatised career services.

(ii) **Central funds, channelled through regional Government Offices, were used to establish new Connexions Partnerships**; however, other youth-related services such as the Youth Service, Youth Offending Teams, Health Education and Social Services, whose funds were located within local authorities, were not compelled to participate fully. This caused some initial problems in terms of ownership of responsibility and ‘buy in’ from professionals across the various youth-related services.

(iii) The roll out of 47 Connexions services between April 2001 and April 2003 resulted in **three main types of contractual arrangements**, as described in the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee Report (October, 2004).

- **Direct delivery model** whereby companies limited by guarantee have responsibility for service delivery (and in some cases, sub-contract services to other providers⁴⁴). The majority of Connexions Partnerships operate through the direct delivery model.
- **Sub-contracting model** whereby the Connexions Partnership delivers through one or more sub-contractors. 22 of the Connexions Partnerships continued to sub-contract careers services for young people to career service companies.
- **Local authority lead body model** whereby responsibility for delivery lies with a local authority, with other partners as advisers. In October 2004, DfES reported to the House of Commons that at least two Connexions Services “are known to be moving towards having more than one local authority as bodies entering into contracts. They are West London and North London.” (DfES response to question 114)³.

As a result, **Connexions Partnerships vary considerably** throughout England. However, the National Audit Office reported that:

‘partnership building at a local level has been very successful... Where partnerships have encountered problems, these have been due to specific local tensions rather than due to fundamental, intractable differences between Connexions and its partners’ (p. 41).

Other research findings⁴ portray slightly more complex partnership arrangements, with the formation of Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnerships and Children’s Trusts working alongside existing Connexions Partnerships.

(v) The formation of a new profession of **‘Personal Advisers’**⁵ underpinned policy intentions for new **trusting working relationships** between professionals and young people. **Inter-agency networks** established through **sub-regional partnerships** were set within a coterminous arrangement with local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs).

(vi) In July 2003, Margaret Hodge (Minister of State for Children) announced the arrival of 35 pathfinder **Children’s Trusts**⁶ in response to the findings from the Victoria Climbié inquiry. The trusts were to be based on ‘best practice of local authorities and from initiatives such as Sure Start, Connexions, Children’s Fund, and Youth Offending Teams’. This was followed by the Children Act (2004) which placed a duty on Local Authorities to make arrangements to promote co-operation between agencies and other appropriate bodies (such as voluntary and community organisations) and a duty on agencies to co-operate in order to achieve five key outcomes to well-being in childhood and later life. Some of the **key functions of the existing Connexions services**, such as the development of inter-agency databases, safe-guarding and promoting the social and economic interests of young people and championing their views, particularly those most ‘at risk’, were now firmly **embodied within local authority responsibilities**. The established coterminous sub-regional arrangements began to sit uncomfortably alongside the confines of local authority boundary areas.

(vii) From 31st March 2004, the withdrawal of VAT dispensation reduced the 22 sub-contracted arrangements to 15. Around this time, DfES commissioned an **‘end to end’ review of careers education and guidance**. The results from this have yet to be formally published, to the dismay of Connexions services and other interested parties such as schools, colleges and professional bodies.

(viii) In October 2004, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts examined **Connexions spending** and concluded that **‘though on course to meet its main objective, there are risks that the wider population of young people may not always get the advice they need’**.⁷ The Committee recommended that Connexions work with schools to help them deliver a good standard of careers education, noting the variable quality highlighted by the National Audit Office⁸ and that closer working links with local Learning and Skills Councils should be established for improved alignment of shared employment and training targets (pp.6). The Committee specified that ‘Connexions should encourage all partnerships to adopt effective data-sharing practices.....Where partnerships continue to have problems relating to interpretation of the Data Protection Act, Connexions should take the lead in resolving them, in consultation with the Data Protection Registrar’(pp.6). The Committee also highlighted **concerns about the apparent variations in the attention that local Connexions Partnerships pay to different groups of young people across England** (Q27-EV4).

(ix) In December 2004, the government’s new **Education Bill** set out the legislative framework to support a **new relationship with schools** and promote greater autonomy and diversity in the education system. This links directly to the Department’s ‘Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners’ and guarantees three-year ring-fenced budgets for every school from 2006 onwards. The significance of this for Connexions is the possible option of the Secretary of State **transferring the statutory duty for careers service provision to schools**. This sits uncomfortably with international research findings as highlighted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on the effects of this approach in relation to **ensuring impartiality** in guidance.

(x) However, in early January 2005, **media speculation** cited senior government sources as suggesting the Connexions service was failing and there were plans to dismantle it. This included a suggestion that Ministers were intent on giving **40% of the current Connexions grant to schools/colleges** so that they could provide the ‘universal careers services’ either directly or through ‘supply arrangements’, and **60% of Connexions grant to the new emerging Children’s Trusts**. The seeds of uncertainty were sown and from this various off-shoots directly linked to the above-mentioned two options have emerged. For example, The Department for Education & Skills (DfES) is currently supporting the development of new Connexions pilot models with 12 ‘migration test areas’ currently underway. Here, Connexions Partnerships are testing out new models for service delivery such as: -

- *a consortium arrangement model* whereby DfES is exploring the option of paying a grant to a consortium of organisations rather than a single company, though one lead body must take responsibility for delivery, including ensuring accountability by signing a financial memorandum. In this context, Connexions funds could be managed by groups of institutions (schools/collegiate) and/or Children’s Trusts or through some other organisation.

The findings from this and other piloting arrangements will need to be monitored closely to help address key concerns linked to funding and coherent service delivery for *all* young people. The probability for system failure is much higher within devolved local arrangements shared between two separate, yet inter-related, bodies.

(xi) In March 2005, the Chancellor announced in his budget: **an extra £140 million from 2006-7** to raise 16-19 year olds participation in training, particularly those most at risk of dropping out; an expansion in the range of work-based learning for 14-16 year olds; and new financial incentives for young people to continue in education. The new **‘14-19 Education and Skills’** (White Paper, March 2005) highlighted the need for: -

- improved sources of advice available from institutions and more professional development for teachers to work effectively with their students regarding information about choices (para. 5.28);
- objectivity and impartiality in the advice young people receive (para.5.28); and
- a better joined-up service from youth to adulthood (para. 5.30).⁹

However, it made little reference to Connexions services beyond recognising its achievements in reducing the NEET population.

(xii) The Skills White Paper (2005)⁵² made explicit that:

‘Better information and guidance to overcome barriers is one of the cross cutting themes of our reforms for young people and adults. As set out in our 14-19 White Paper, we need to reform guidance for young people, with stronger involvement of employers to help young people understand the career choices open to them and the realities of the world of work’ (Part 1, para. 72).

In order to move forward, Connexions would appear to require a strong focus on independent brokerage activities and much closer working relationship with the labour market.

References

- 1 The five child-centred outcomes are as follows: (i) being healthy; (ii) being safe; (iii) enjoying and achieving; (iv) making a positive contribution to society; and (v) experiencing economic well-being. Department for Education and Skills (2003). *Every Child Matters*, p.6. London: DfES.
- 2 Department for Education and Skills (2004). *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*. London: DfES.
- 3 Connexions services operate throughout England. They were rolled out between 2001 and 2003, on a phased basis, in 47 local Connexions Partnership areas coterminous with local Learning & Skills Council (LSCs) areas.
- 4 Department for Education and Skills (2000). *Connexions: the Best Start in Life for Every Young Person*. London: DfES.
- 5 'Warning as advice service faces axe', *Times Educational Supplement*, 28/1/05; 'Signs point to bad Connexions', *The Times* (London), 1/2/05; 'Analysis: Green Paper – a radical programme of reform', *Young People Now*, 16/3/05.
- 6 House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee, (2005). *National Skills Strategy 14 – 19* (2005). para. 104. London: Parliament.
- 7 Employment and Training Act 1973, amended in the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993. The Secretary of State is under a duty to secure the provision of career services for (i) assisting persons undergoing relevant education to decide what are suitable employments for them when they finish education, and what training or education is or will be required and available in order to fit them for those employments; and (ii) assisting persons finishing relevant education to obtain such employments, training and education.
- 8 Department for Education and Skills (2004). *Extension of the Statutory Duty on Schools to Provide Planned Programmes of Careers Education in the Curriculum to Include Years 7 and 8: Guidance for Middle Schools*. Sheffield: DfES.
- 9 Department for Education and Skills (2003). *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* p.7. London: DfES.
- 10 The Education Bill (2004) and explanatory notes can be found on the Parliament website <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pabills.htm>
- 11 The Children Bill and explanatory notes can be found on the Parliament website <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pabills.htm>
- 12 Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Every Child Matters: Next Steps – The Response: The Children Bill* para. 2.23.
- 13 <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/childrenstrusts/overview/faq.shtml>
- 14 Phil Willis statement: ICG Conference February 2005 <http://www.icg.co.uk>
- 15 The legislative and administration structure of the privatised career services operate under The Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act (TURER,1993), through arrangement specified in Chapter 19, Parts III, Sections 45 and 46.
- 16 Watts, A.G., Hughes, D. & Woods, M. (2005) *A Market in Career?: Evidence and Issues*. (in press)
- 17 Bezanson, L. (2004). *Career Development: A Time for Transformation*. Centre for Guidance Studies Annual Lecture: Occasional Paper Series. University of Derby, December 2004. (The four models are described as (i) Moving from fragmented services to a holistic service framework; (ii) Moving from a simplistic to simple accountability – from one dimensional to “true dimensional”; (iii) Shifting from a service-supply focus to service-demand focus; and (iv) Changing a weakly professionalised field to one with clear professional standards for practice).
- 18 The term ‘contestable’ is used to describe the extent to which there is pressure upon a provider to improve services and/or reduce costs, either through the presence of competitors or , in the case of a single provider, where there is the threat of a potential competitor entering the market. A highly contestable market is one in which there are few or no barriers preventing the entry and exit of alternative competing providers.
- 19 Department for Education & Skills (2004) *Children’s Workforce Mapping Report* London: DfES.
- 20 CeGS Newsletter, No. 12 April 2005, p. 10.
- 21 Hoggarth, L. & Smith, D. (2004) *Understanding the Impact of Connexions on Young People at Risk*. DfES Research Report RR607 p. 7.
- 22 <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/annualreport0304/1.1022.htm>

- 23 Brunwin, T. et al. (2005) *Improve Your Connexions: Connexions Service Customer Satisfaction Survey - Reulst from the Second Wave Survey in Phase 1 Partnerships*. Nottingham: DfES p.4.
- 24 Connexions Service National Unit (2001) *Connexions Planning Guidelines 2001 -2002*: Moorfoot, Sheffield. p. 26 para.1
- 25 National Association of Connexions Partnerships Ltd. Media Release. 31/1/05
- 26 http://www.aoc.co.uk/members/admin/connexions_careers_advice/view
- 27 Dunford, J. (2005) *The Times* (London) *Signs point to bad Connexions*. 1/2/05
- 28 National Audit Office (2004) *Connexions Service Advice and guidance for all young people*. Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for presentation to the House of Commons. HC 484 Session 2003-2004: 31 March 2004. pp. 35 para.3.20
- 29 Sultana, R.G. (2004). *Guidance Policies in the Knowledge Society: Trends, challenges and responses across Europe – A CEDEFOP synthesis report*. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Thessaloniki, Greece p. 91. 10.1
- 30 Watts, A.G. (2001) *Social Exclusion: a cautionary tale*. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*. Vol. 29, No.2, 2001
- 31 Hoggarth, L. & Smith, D. (2004) *Understanding the Impact of Connexions on Young People at Risk*. DfES. Research report RR607 p.16
- 32 Next Steps is the brand name, introduced in England by the National Learning & Skills Council to help identify information, advice and guidance (IAG) services for adults.
- 33 At the end of September 2003, when NAO completed their report, there were over 7,700 Personal Advisers in post. This compared with a cadre of 8,100 estimated at the start of the year, a shortfall of 5%. *EV 16 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts: Evidence – supplementary memorandum submitted by DfES*.
- 34 <http://www.connexions.gov.uk/partnerships/index>. The majority of Connexions Partnerships were set targets to reduce the proportion of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment and training between 2002 and 2004 by 10%. Three partnerships which did not start until after November 2002 were set targets to reduce NEET by 5%. Both targets were achieved, and in many cases exceeded. Areas which had a very high level of NEET in November 2002 achieved greater reductions than those where NEET has, historically, been low.
- 35 Halsbury's Laws of England (4th ed 2000 reissue) Vol.15 (2) para 956, and Vol. 16 para.605.
- 36 Together with the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and other partners, Connexions Coventry and Warwickshire is piloting a Common Application Procedure (CAP) designed as a 'Clearing House' for Year 11 students to enable them to make applications for learning and work electronically.
- 37 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*. Paris: OECD.
- 38 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2002). *OECD Career Guidance Policy Review: Country Note – Netherlands*. Paris: OECD.
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- 40 Ford, G. (2000). *The Connexions Strategy and All-Age Guidance*. Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies Occasional Paper Series. University of Derby
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- 42 DfES (2005) *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on in work* London. March 2005 –Parts 1, 2, & 3.
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- 1 A Department for Education and Skills (DfES) study '*Estimating the Cost Of Being Not in Education, Employment Or Training at Age 16 -18*' written by Hutton et al (2002) estimated that the financial costs of young people not in education, employment or training is in the region of £16 billion. RR346.
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- 7 House of Commons (2004) Committee of Public Accounts: *Connexions Service – Forty-eight Report of Session 2003-2004*. London
- 8 National Audit Office (2004) *Connexions Service Advice and guidance for all young people*. p.5 Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for presentation to the House of Commons. HC 484 Session 2003-2004: 31 March 2004
- 9 DfES (2005) *14-19 Education and Skills White Paper*: London. March 2005
- 10 Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Getting on in business, getting on in work*. White Paper, March 2005, Part 1. p. 21