

# Connexions and Youth Policy: A Brighter Future?

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*A partnership between*



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In this CeGS Annual Lecture, the Chief Executive of the Connexions Service National Unit offers her vision of the brighter future offered by the Connexions Service. She outlines the policy context and the broad vision underlying the service. She pays particular attention to the role and value of guidance and of careers education. She also outlines the broader scope of the new service and the potentially important role of information technology within it. Finally, she identifies a number of questions to which responses are invited.

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The Centre for Guidance Studies was created in 1998 by the University of Derby and five careers service companies (the Careers Consortium (East Midlands) Ltd.). The centre aims to bridge the gap between guidance theory and practice. It supports and connects guidance practitioners, policy-makers and researchers through research activities and learning opportunities; and by providing access to resources related to guidance and lifelong learning.

CeGS aims to:

- conduct and encourage research in to guidance policies and practice;
- develop innovative strategies for guidance in support of lifelong learning;
- provide resources to support guidance practice across all education, community and employment sectors.

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## Introduction

My professional background to date working with and for the most disadvantaged young people, plus my experience of raising three children, has given me a very good insight into the challenges we face in terms of introducing a new Connexions Service. I know from personal experience, and the experiences of my children's peers, that even those who appear to have every advantage can face difficult career and life choices. I have always had a very strong interest in making sure that every young person gets the best possible start to their preparation for adult life and responsibilities. I now have the chance to be part of making it happen.

## The policy context

I believe these are the best of times for youth policy. We are working in a high profile area where the tide of opinion is flowing with the need to improve services for all our young people and their families.

The Connexions Service is just one part of a wider policy strategy aimed at raising achievement for young people. The vision behind this policy comes directly from the Prime Minister. He set out his vision in the *Bridging the Gap* report on young people, which said:

"We are now clear about the goal – higher standards of education for all, support for those who need it... and an end to a situation in which thousands of young people are not given the chance to make a better life for themselves and a bigger contribution to society....Getting it right offers the prospect of a double dividend. A better life for young people themselves and a better deal for society as a whole."

Out of this report, and the White Paper *Learning to Succeed*, came a number of coherent initiatives to tackle this very issue. We do not need to rehearse in detail the reasons why this is important – the facts are there in front of us every day:

- 21% of children live in households with no adult in work, compared to 7% in 1970.
- Half of all 16–19 year olds have tried drugs.
- 157,000 (1 in 11) 16–18 year olds are not in education, training or employment.
- 17% of 16–25 year olds have literacy problems; 22% have numeracy problems.

The world around us is changing. Today's youngsters face a different world to the one we remember, and different to even a generation ago. The Policy Action Team report on young people at

risk identified a range of sometimes conflicting changes that were and still are happening in society, that affected young people:

- The disappearance of traditional sources of employment, and the move away from a job for life, means that acquiring a diverse range of skills is more important.
- 1 in 4 children born in the 1970s experienced the breakdown of their parents' marriage by the time they were 16; 1 in 12 children currently live with step parents; and 1 in 5 children live in single-parent families – three times the number in 1971.
- Although traditional families and community links are less prevalent than previously, at the same time there is a longer dependence on parental support with young people leaving home, entering work and marrying (if they do) later.
- At the same time, though, media images and social attitudes to young people encourage pre-adolescents to be seen as older than they are – manifest in earlier and more intense exposure to experimentation in alcohol, smoking, drugs and sex.

So what is the solution?

Clearly, the Connexions Service plays a key role in tackling this issue on the ground – joining up services to provide coherence to young people's lives. At the policy level, so will the new Children and Young People's Unit – whose remit stretches from 0–19, but will provide the valuable link between Sure Start for 0–5 and the Connexions Service for 13–19s.

Other solutions include the wider Connexions Strategy, aimed at raising achievement through financial incentives such as Education Maintenance Allowances and the new youth card – the Connexions Card; improved post-16 provision through better inspection and the introduction of the Learning and Skills Council; and a new flexible curriculum which allows young people to develop their skills and learning in a way which not only raises achievement, but is responding to their particular needs.

The new Ministerial Committee on Children and Young People, chaired by Gordon Brown and vice-chaired by David Blunkett, has a remit of overseeing the coherence of policy across this age range – getting Departments to work together for the good

of all young people. Youth policy is not just about education; it is not just about social services; it is not just about social inclusion, or culture, or sport, or tackling issues such as offending, drugs, homelessness. It is much bigger than all of that, and bigger than the sum of those parts, because it is about making sure that young people are given the life chances they deserve through working better at the national, local and individual levels – by Government, but also by schools, colleges, health services and employers and by the communities in which we all live.

### Connexions Service: the broad vision

Dave Shevill, head of Swinton Comprehensive School in South Yorkshire, sees the Connexions Service as "not a new initiative, but *the* initiative by which many others can be brought together". This is exactly what the Service must be.

The ultimate goal of the Connexions Service is to ensure a smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood and working life so that every young person has the best start in life. To achieve this, the Service must provide teenagers with the help and support they need to participate effectively in formal and informal learning so as to achieve to their maximum potential.

This is a big but essential challenge. How are we going to achieve it? By bringing together a wide range of existing agencies in the public, private and voluntary sectors to provide an integrated and modernised advice, support and personal development service for all 13–19-year-olds. For some young people, this will involve identifying and removing barriers to learning; for many others, advising on the most appropriate routes through education and training to achieve their desired career goals; and for others still, tackling under-achievement by raising aspirations and challenging stereotypes.

There is widespread support for our ambitions and the breadth of our vision. Some have doubts about our preferred route for getting where we need to be. Interestingly, these do not come from young people, who tend not to worry about professional boundaries and protocols and the employment conditions of those they turn to for advice and support. They need us to sort out the legal and structural issues. To do this we have to weigh up all the advice we receive, and make sure our judgement is not clouded by those who shout the loudest or who know best how

to get their views heard in Whitehall or Moorfoot. Not easy, when people believe passionately in the contribution they can make.

Young people want all of us to work with them to design a service that puts them and their needs first, middle and last. If young people turn away because Connexions does not give them what they need, we have failed them. Without them, we have no Connexions Service. Without a Connexions Service, they do not have the brighter future they deserve.

We need to accept that Connexions will mean a change in the way adults work to support young people. I am not suggesting that every single person working with young people will have to throw away everything they ever knew and start again. Connexions will build on what is working well. But we have always to be seeking to expand our horizons, to work in new ways to meet tomorrow's challenges as well as today's. We have to develop new ways of working across agency and professional boundaries, to explore new assessment and delivery methods and to provide a service in ways and in places that young people want – to become truly a *service*.

### Connexions: adding value to the processes

We have our goal, we have our objectives; how do we make sure we keep ourselves on track and how will we know that our young people have benefited from a smooth transition? Some of it is process and I really do not want to talk practical detail here. But we do have some big questions to resolve that I will come back to later. I am thinking about the value that Connexions will add to the lives of the young people and the lives of the nation, over and above the qualifications and the reductions in the social problems referred to earlier.

Connexions must epitomise a new public service which has a sharp focus on the needs of young people, who will have to learn, live and compete in an increasingly tough global market for the best jobs and to be flexible enough to cope with changing social and economic conditions. So a smooth transition will produce young adults who are responsible enough to make important decisions from a basis of sound advice and information, take responsibility for their own and their family's well being and prosperity, have a respect for, and hopefully a passion for, lifelong learning, and can contribute to, if not lead, their communities.

## The role and value of guidance

There is a clear need for young people to know about learning options, the ever-changing dynamics of the labour market and the growing range of learning opportunities in volunteering and community settings. That need is met currently through careers services alongside school and college provision.

There is a lot of good work done by careers guidance practitioners. Unfortunately, quality is patchy and young people confirm that in surveys. Our joint task is to improve the quality of what is done now and to deliver in new ways that young people will value.

We know that young people face a complex set of learning options during their teenage years. Individuals can easily waste time and suffer loss of confidence and, with student loans and fees, perhaps money because of decisions which prove to be inappropriate.

Guidance can help individuals to tackle important decisions and transitions. And more importantly, careers work helps to develop the skills of applying information and self-awareness to a particular situation.

How will it be available? From a combination of sources – many of which are already in use but will benefit from development:

- information sources, including both ICT-based and paper-based types – whether in school or college libraries, on stand-alone or networked PCs, available via web-sites at all times of the week, in community centres, careers ‘buses’ or on the lap-top of an individual adviser;
- group or individual contact with advisers or other staff able to provide information or advice;
- interaction with guidance staff electronically, whether remotely by video conferencing, by e-mail exchange, or via web-sites or help-lines.

Who will provide it? Again, quite a range:

- within schools and colleges, careers co-ordinators or teachers or college guidance staff, information assistants and librarians, mainstream teachers, lecturers and support staff such as learning mentors or assistants – we want to improve on the capability of everyone and move towards more unified guidance processes;
- Connexions advisers based in schools or colleges, all of whom can offer basic advice, and

some of whom may have guidance expertise beyond that – we need to ensure that such expertise is maintained;

- those specialist advisers whose expertise is career guidance.

I want to reassure you about impartiality. Our position, which we have made clear to schools, colleges and Connexions Partnerships, is that the Connexions Service will discharge the statutory obligation to provide impartial careers information and guidance to 13–19-year-olds in full-time education. Our guidance gives responsibility to the Service for ensuring that effective arrangements are in place to enable all young people to access impartial help.

Business Plans will not be approved by the Connexions Service National Unit and Ministers unless they demonstrate how this will be delivered. Partnerships and schools and colleges therefore need to establish a basis for local arrangements at an early stage. Part of the Partnership Agreement between each school and local Connexions Service must cover how impartiality of information and guidance on Key Stage 4 and post-16 options will be guaranteed. Compliance will be monitored by the National Unit through its contract management function. The inspection framework for Connexions being developed by OFSTED will also play an important role, since inspection will focus on key standards, such as impartiality, being set for the Service.

Careers guidance rightly has an important place in Connexions. The trick is to make sure it is in the right proportions, of the right quality and proves its value in evaluation. I am sure none of that holds any terrors for you.

## Careers education

I want to say something too about careers education. Careers education is an essential underpinning of the guidance and skills development goals of Connexions. At the moment, it is inconsistent – strong in some places, weak in others. Practitioners are beginning to examine the synergy with other curriculum development such as Citizenship. It is important to make links with wider issues within education, such as the drive for school improvement and the growth of more differentiation in learning, especially in Key Stage 4.

We are considering a number of ways to strengthen delivery in schools and colleges and to encourage all institutions to give it the attention it deserves. We

have recently published a guidance document for governors and headteachers to give them some additional help.

Officials within the Department will be reviewing existing regulations covering the duties of schools towards careers work. We want to assess whether stronger direction is needed and how this might link to the partnership arrangements between the Connexions Service and schools.

We will make sure that careers staff in schools and colleges get a good level of training and support – working from the best that some careers services and LEAs already provide – and ensure the Connexions Partnerships build funding for this into their business plans, in two ways.

Nationally, we plan to establish a *careers education support programme for schools and colleges*. This might include advice for practitioners through a help-line or over the internet, as well as inputs to events and publications, and contributions to national web-sites such as the National Grid for Learning and the Teachers Centre.

Looking ahead to next year, as Connexions take shape, there is also the important, but complex, area of *standards for careers education and guidance*, taking account of existing work such as the standards developed by the Guidance Council. And of course, no public service can ignore the potential of technology to help improve delivery. Guidance is no exception.

### Connexions: the broader picture

Careers guidance, as I said earlier, is only one form of support that young people will need. The Service is bigger than careers. Young people will need to be able to access a wide range of advice and support. In order to produce the mature, active citizens of tomorrow, we need to encourage teenagers to take part in activities that will improve their basic skills, nurture talents that might not get free reign in schools, build their confidence and raise their esteem. We need leaders. Volunteering, peer-group mentoring, sports coaching, youth groups can all contribute to a holistic service for young people – helping them grow into the community and national leaders we need and to enhance academic achievement.

Some young people have barriers to participation that have to be dealt with before we can talk about achievement. Social issues, health, housing, drugs, family breakdown, truancy, exclusion, petty crime:

the list can be endless and each of them of burning importance to the young person concerned. Connexions has to be able to recognise the needs and bring all the sources of support together, to avoid duplication, to plug the gaps and to help the young person and their family through the processes.

How do we get the balance right, between inclusive guidance and targeted guidance? To some extent, by looking at what pilots and Partnerships tell us about the priorities for their young people. By looking at what is needed, plotting that against the full picture of provision – not forgetting what is done by volunteers and part-time workers in community-based organisations, the private sector, church and youth groups and charitable organisations as well as the larger-scale and statutory agencies.

And not just by replicating what has always been done. We need to bring in new players, new partners, new resources. We must not guard jealously old ways unless they are also good ways. Young people must get a service they are comfortable with and which meets the Government's priority for modernising public services. They are increasingly familiar with technology and will expect to see it in all the important areas of their lives.

### Ahead with technology

The fast pace of change in the world of information technology is requiring all of us to work and transact business in new ways. But it also provides us with the opportunity to be proactive in promoting new and radical ways of delivering services to young people. We need to meet the challenge of the government's e-business strategy to innovate in our service delivery and to develop the necessary infrastructure from the centre to support these goals.

I see information technology underpinning the Connexions Service on three levels:

- in the delivery of services to young people;
- in supporting practitioners;
- in providing some of the infrastructure for the service itself.

As such, it encompasses a range of technologies and delivery methods, from software and telecom systems through to CD Roms and the internet, accessed through phones, information kiosks, computers and digital television.

But why is the government so convinced of the potential to transform service delivery through ICT

– and why do we in the Connexions Service share this conviction?

Looking at the first area I outlined above – the delivery of services to young people – I see vast potential for young people to access information, advice, guidance and support conveniently, independently and with enthusiasm.

We know that young people are already among the biggest user groups for the internet and mobile phones. In the UK, 98% of 12–16-year-olds use a computer at home or school, and around 60% are on-line, compared with 44% in 1999. 95% of homes in the UK have a fixed phone line, and an ever-increasing proportion of teenagers have mobile phones. If we want an indication of how things might develop, we might look to America, where the number of under-17-year-olds who are on-line has tripled to 25 million since 1997.

Convenience is a key factor. Through ICT we can offer services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. More and more young people have access to the internet in schools and colleges – and often at home. E-mails can already be sent via mobile phone, and the new ‘third generation’ mobile phones will make digital transfer of video images a reality. The Radiocommunications Agency is estimating that such services will be available from 2002, a date which will mark a step change in providing high-resolution video and multimedia services on the move.

We need to look at how we utilise this emerging technology to meet the demands of young people growing up in an information age. There is a huge amount of synergy between the aim of the Connexions Service to provide interconnected support services to young people, and the capability of ICT to quickly link a user with information, advice and guidance.

It is not unrealistic to expect that in a few years, a young person could have a face-to-face conversation with their Personal Adviser using the screen on their mobile phone. This is, in many ways, an extension of the developmental work that has gone on in the careers guidance field to provide guidance by video-conferencing. But it is exciting in that it empowers a young person to make the call themselves, and potentially to use the service at a time and in a place that suits them. It also has advantages for practitioners in that it provides a more personal service than simply a phone call, but allows for flexibility in working patterns and travel arrangements.

The issue of independence is also important. Connexions is about equipping young people to make the transition to adult and working life. This involves developing the confidence, motivation and access routes so that they can investigate and seek out information and advice for themselves. If this is done independently, it is a sign that the young person has taken ‘ownership’ of their transition. This of course also places a responsibility on us as providers so that they come back for more, rather than abandoning the exercise as a waste of time.

This leads into the area of ‘enthusiasm’. We have to make all our services – not just those that are IT-based – high-quality or we will fail in our goal of making Connexions a universal service. This means providing a service which meets the needs of users, offers something that is of obvious benefit or interest to them and something which helps them to move forward. Because the world of ICT is so vast, I see a number of avenues for us to explore in this field:

- I think that one of the really exciting areas for Connexions is the ability to link young people up with each other, so that they can provide peer mentoring and guidance. As well as being done face to face, this can also be done by e-mail or videophone so that, for example, a student at Nottingham University can tell a sixth former in Plymouth what it’s really like and answer some questions that perhaps a Personal Adviser could not.
- The Connexions Card is an integrated development that will provide a portal to education and careers information, as well as links to health and lifestyle guides, and provide rewards for staying in learning after 16 – one of the main aims of Connexions.
- We have introduced *The Real Game* and will be evaluating its impact, but what about the development of video games and other interactive material which engage young people in learning in a format that they are familiar with and equate with enjoyment? This is, as far as I am aware, a largely untapped area, and one that has potential both for Connexions and in a broader educational context.

But this is not just about games – and we would want to make sure that products do not become gimmicky. We need to ensure that all the material we provide engages young people in an appropriate, non-patronising way. The content of a web-site is more important than flash graphics, the information must be accessible quickly, and the advice on a

phone line must be appropriate to the nature of the query. Of course, this raises the issue of quality standards and this is something that we are considering as we take forward the development of an ICT strategy for Connexions. We are aware that there are a number of useful standards already in existence and, like all things in Connexions, we will seek to build on best practice where appropriate. At the heart of this issue, however, is the engagement of young people themselves. Whatever we develop, whether at a local or national level, we need to bear in mind our key principle of involving young people. I am pleased to say that this is happening across all aspects of the service, and will be equally true in the ongoing development of ICT-based services.

As such, ICT has a central role at the heart of the universal service. It will supplement and complement the face-to-face services that are provided right across Connexions, as well as related activity such as the PSHE curriculum in schools and colleges. There are a number of developments under way through the National Grid for Learning, exploring issues such as providing all those in school with their own e-mail address. It will be important for Connexions Services to link with developments such as this.

ICT will not replace the need for face-to-face advice, and there is of course the possibility that it may increase demand for such services. We will be monitoring this carefully. I see it providing an additional 'tier' of support, which must be closely linked in to other services. And of course I am aware of the large number of issues that we, and all services hoping to increase their use of technology, face: protecting young people from the unsavoury aspects of the internet; making sure that we address the equal-opportunities issues of access, physical, economical and geographical.

## Questions

I began by saying that we are at an exciting time in youth policy. I have ended with the excitement of the potential of new technology. I have had to be selective in what I can talk to you about here, but Connexions is brimming with ideas and possibilities and I want you to let me have your views on some important questions. I do not mind if you let me have them individually, but I would prefer a mediated, considered response on behalf of the guidance community. We will be setting up a new channel of communication on this very shortly.

So I leave you with these questions:

- How do we best respect and value existing professional expertise whilst at the same time recognising that young people do not compartmentalise their lives into neat administrative boxes?
- How can the personal development agenda be better integrated with guidance so that we promote personal development as beneficial for every young person; and what role should the volunteering, citizenship and active community policies have here?
- How do we raise the profile of work experience as a valuable experience for all young people and how can it be better linked to PSHE?
- Are we being radical enough in our thinking about modernising service delivery and the use of ICT – especially in using ICT to deliver a universal service?
- Raising aspirations and expectations for young people across the board is a key principle for Connexions, but how can we make a step change for the 'silent majority' who always just get by but could do better?
- How can Connexions work best to bring synergy and coherence to the huge impetus in schools and colleges to improve the quality of the learning experience, promote progression and raise achievement levels?
- How can we make sure that Connexions becomes a leader in promoting equal opportunities and challenging stereotyping and discrimination?
- We have Beacon Schools and Beacon Councils: what would a Beacon Connexions Partnership look like – and how would careers education and guidance be delivered there?