

**REPORT NO. 3**  
**EVALUATION OF THE COVENTRY AND WARWICKSHIRE CONNEXIONS**  
**SERVICE 2000 – 2001**

**A new Connexions Service for African Caribbean Young People**

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December 2000

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The government's Connexions Strategy aims to ensure that all young people achieve the most from the learning opportunities available to them and secure the best possible start to their working and adult lives (DfEE 2000a). The new Connexions Service is designed to help guide and support young people through their teenage years and in their transition to adulthood and working life. The new service will be delivered through a network of Personal Advisers with links to specialist support services. Personal Advisers will initially be drawn from a variety of existing public, private, voluntary and community organisations. Coventry and Warwickshire have been chosen as one of the first areas in England to pilot the new Connexions Strategy. The pilot is designed to trial new ways of working in local communities and to build on best practice. This report examines part of the community provision for African-Caribbean young people within the Coventry area. It draws on the findings from work being carried out in relation to the 'Young, Gifted and Educated' Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) initiative and provides an overview of key issues that are emerging from the recent implementation of the project. A series of recommendations are made to inform the future development of work in Coventry specifically designed to meet the needs of African-Caribbean young people.
- 1.2 The NSF is a major Government initiative developed in response to findings from the Bridging the Gap report (SEU, 1999). It is intended to re-engage disaffected young people back into education, training and employment. In England, from October 2000 onwards, £60 million will be spent over a three-year period. David Blunkett, Education and Employment Secretary, stated that "the money will be focused on those areas where too many young people have lost contact with education, training and work. The Neighbourhood Support Fund will provide the resources to help these young people succeed in learning or finding work.....It will use new ways of working outside the existing services to explore the best ways of reconnecting young people with the worlds of work and learning." (DfEE, 2000). Lessons learned from the evaluation of NSF projects should feed into the development of both the Learning Gateway and the design and implementation of the new Connexions Service.
- 1.3 "Young, Gifted and Educated" is a project aimed specifically at African-Caribbean young people in Coventry. The target group is primarily young people between the ages of thirteen and sixteen who are either excluded from, or at risk of being excluded from mainstream education, or those who are underachieving at school.

The project has a long-term objective to reduce the number of African-Caribbean pupils who are excluded or under-achieving over the three-year duration of the project. It aims to do this by enabling the young people to identify issues affecting their education, and to identify and develop actions and strategies that will help them overcome the barriers to their learning. Furthermore, it will provide the opportunity through residential experiences to identify peer support and reduce isolation. It will also serve as a research project to identify whether this new way of working with this client group will make a tangible difference.

- 1.4 This initiative builds on the findings from an OFSTED report 'Raising the Attainment of Minority Ethnic Pupils' (1999) which clearly states that "it is urgent that secondary schools establish what is happening to Black Caribbean pupils to cause a good start in primary schools to turn into such a marked decline and take action to reverse it."
- 1.5 The Coventry & Warwickshire Connexions Partnership commissioned this interim evaluation in order to identify how the Connexions strategy is being implemented in the community, specifically in relation to work with African-Caribbean young people, and to highlight emerging issues and examples of good practice. At the time of the research, the project was at a very early stage of development. This report examines the following key areas:
  - management and organisation
  - the delivery of the service
  - the involvement of young people
  - the effectiveness of partnerships.
- 1.6 The evaluation was carried out during October 2000. This provides invaluable baseline information which outlines how the project is developing and the key issues that need to be addressed in the future. In-depth discussions were held with the two Personal Advisers recruited to the project and one of the Project Managers. It should be noted that young people were not consulted as part of this process as this will take place at a later stage in February - March 2001.
- 1.7 The report is structured into seven sections. Sections two to five detail the findings in relation to aspects of management, delivery, involvement of young people and partnership workings. Section six highlights areas of good/interesting practice and added-value; and section seven outlines a set of key recommendations to inform the future development of this initiative within the context of the emerging new Connexions Service.

## **2 Management and organisation**

- 2.1 Two Personal Advisers linked to the project were appointed at the beginning of October 2000. They are currently based at Quality Careers Services Ltd. (QCS Ltd.), Coventry, and are managed on a joint basis by a senior manager from QCS Ltd. and a representative from the African-Caribbean Community Steering Group. The latter is also a member of the Steering Group for the project. From the discussions with Personal Advisers, they were uncertain about how this dual management system would operate in practice.

The project managers had a plan of action and a meeting had been arranged to finalise the practicalities of this new arrangement. It is clear that the exact responsibilities of each manager will need to be clarified and articulated in order to eliminate confusion for the Personal Advisers and other parties connected with the project. The effectiveness and efficiency of the dual management system will need to be closely monitored given this is a new way of working for all those involved.

- 2.2 It is envisaged that the representative from the African-Caribbean Community Steering Group will be responsible for the overall development of the project and the supervision of the two Personal Advisers. Training and personal development issues will be addressed by QCS Ltd. Respondents agree that strong management and a clear strategy for how the initiative is communicated to and perceived by young people should help to ensure that local needs are addressed. Strategies for promoting and marketing the project need to be developed. Discussions have already taken place on the planning and preparation necessary to lay appropriate foundations for the project. To this end, the Personal Advisers have been tasked with drawing up an action plan to inform their work for the first three months taking into account the issues identified above.
- 2.3 The project aims to introduce new and innovative way of working with African-Caribbean young people in Coventry. Respondents felt that exact caseload targets for working with this client group are difficult to anticipate and therefore any set targets may need to be adjusted as the work unfolds. One of the Personal Advisers stated “we have no idea how it will all pan out at this stage.” Initially, it has been agreed that each Personal Adviser will have a minimum caseload of thirteen young people to work with intensively over the three-year duration of the project. It is envisaged that alongside a ‘core’ group of young people who will receive in-depth help and support, there will also be a further group who will receive regular support from the Personal Advisers. Those who are identified as being less vulnerable will have their progress monitored and reviewed periodically. Respondents agreed that supervision of this work is essential to ensure that the expertise and strengths of the Personal Advisers are being maximised and that the needs of the client group are being met.
- 2.4 All respondents report frustrations regarding administration difficulties and access to resources. Specifically, the Personal Advisers are ‘hot desking’ at present and have no filing cabinets or lockable drawers which means that they have nowhere to store books or confidential information. They have no computer therefore all their notes remain hand written and they are currently unable to produce information such as marketing leaflets. The Personal Advisers are uncertain about the administrative support they are entitled to. They indicated that there is money available but they are not sure how to access this. They feel the lack of facilities is inevitably slowing them down. There needs to be clarification regarding the finances available for resources and training.
- 2.5 It was noted that the project has a specific budget for the organisation of residential events, conferences and other relevant activities. This should enable the project team to provide opportunities for young people to develop and practice necessary life skills in a supportive learning environment.

### 3. Delivery of the Service

- 3.1 All respondents agreed that the calibre of the individuals who fulfil the role of Personal Advisers will be crucial in determining the success of the project. Respondents agreed that the two Personal Advisers who have been selected both have a number of clear attributes and experience:
- they are both African-Caribbean adults who have grown up and lived in the Coventry area;
  - they both have a professional as well as emotional understanding of the issues involved in engaging young people having had first-hand experience of this themselves;
  - they are both well educated (as one of the respondents said, “in spite of, not because of “ the local schooling they received);
  - they are relatively young;
  - they do not represent officialdom.
- 3.2 Respondents indicated that “ as far as we are aware there are no other Black people undertaking this kind of work in Coventry at present” therefore an added-value of this project is that the Personal Advisers will provide independent help and support to a targeted vulnerable group, as well as providing positive role models for others. It is hoped that these strengths will bring more credibility to the project. However, the work of this project is not compulsory and it does not necessarily form part of any school’s Connexions Service, nor are the two Personal Advisers linked specifically to particular schools. Although this independence has clear benefits as stated above, it may also prove to be a reason for some schools to ignore the project and the issues it seeks to redress. This will need careful monitoring. In addition, the fact that the project is only funded for a three-year period may serve as a disincentive for involvement by some schools. This highlights the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of the project so that it may be sustained beyond the Neighbourhood Support Fund (see section 2.2). It also emphasises the importance of establishing effective links with schools and other Personal Advisers in order to ensure that adequate referral systems are in place.
- 3.3 Both of the Personal Advisers indicated that they felt pressure to begin working with their clients almost immediately. They reported that they had attended an induction training event organised on a sub-regional basis for newly appointed Personal Advisers. This training provided an overview of the Connexions Service, the role of the Personal Adviser, and covered a range of relevant topics linked to working with young people and other organisations. However, some respondents reported dissatisfaction with certain elements of the course. Specifically, in the session on equal opportunities, they felt that there were assumptions made about levels of awareness and there was no shared understanding of the complex issues involved. Furthermore, they would have liked more information on a number of areas including child protection, disclosure of information, diagnostic assessment and evaluation. The project team would benefit from completion of a training needs analysis in order to build on their existing knowledge, skills and expertise. Project managers are currently in the process of planning relevant training, in association with other organisations, to provide specialist knowledge and expertise in areas of identified need for the Personal Advisers. This should provide the Personal Advisers with high quality training and offer the added benefits of networking possibilities and improved partnership working.

- 3.4 It is not possible to ascertain how realistic the initial caseload targets for work with individuals are, given that the level of demand for the service is as yet untested (see 2.3). Broad criteria for inclusion onto their caseload have been identified, notably African-Caribbean or mixed race young people, aged 13-16 years who have been or who are at risk of being excluded or underachieving at school. However, respondents are aware of the need to agree a system for prioritising referrals in case the numbers exceed their initial expectations.
- 3.5 Personal Advisers intend to assess the needs of each individual, focusing particularly on issues that have contributed to underachievement and/or exclusion. Discussions are underway to help determine how the needs of young people will be assessed. Respondents are aware of a number of potential instruments and tools that could be used and are also contemplating designing their own customised approach. It will be necessary to agree appropriate strategies for assessing young people's needs. Working links could potentially be established with Lincolnshire Connexions Pilot, given they are developing a pilot project which focuses on diagnostic screening and assessment issues. The project team will also need to be kept informed of assessment developments emerging from the National Connexions Unit.
- 3.6 Discussions have taken place regarding potential ways of evaluating the project and the practice of the Personal Advisers but no definite decisions have been made. Some obvious 'hard targets' have been identified, for example, improved attendance at school but they are aware that they will need to forge strong working links with schools-based Personal Advisers to help them measure the success of their work. All respondents acknowledge the need to develop a clear evaluation strategy and for this to be made a priority in order to ensure that there are clear baselines from which progress can be measured.
- 3.7 Part of the success of the pilot of the Connexions Service rests on their ability to deliver a high quality service to African-Caribbean young people. Respondents are aware that it will take time to develop and they are very committed to making this work.

#### **4 Involving Young People**

- 4.1 From the discussions held with the respondents, they indicated that young people were not consulted at the initial planning stages of this project. Those responsible for writing the initial bid for funding through the Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) indicated that there was insufficient time in which to incorporate any meaningful consultation. The time frame was such that there was less than three months between submitting the bid and the start of the project. Respondents are therefore aware that the views of young people have not been sought regarding the project and that this will need to be rectified at the earliest opportunity. A strategy for consulting young people regarding any future planning and development of the project needs to be developed.
- 4.2 African-Caribbean young people formed part of the group who were interviewed in the research conducted by Marketry (2000), which was commissioned by the Connexions Steering Group. The project team will need to decide what action, if any will be taken as a result of the findings from this survey.

- 4.3 Respondents indicated that there was an African-Caribbean young person present as an observer at the interviews for the Personal Advisers for this project. Respondents viewed this as extremely positive in theory; however, they expressed some concerns about the young person not being viewed as representative “given he is an achiever and as such is in the minority.” All respondents expressed concern about the issue of confidentiality during selection procedures.

All respondents agreed that it is good practice to involve young people in the selection of staff; however, clear procedures must be followed at all times including adequate preparation of the young people involved in this process. The lessons learned from this experience should be used to inform future good practice. The project could also potentially make a very positive contribution by identifying a range of potential African-Caribbean young people who could be involved in future selection processes.

- 4.4 It is envisaged that young people will contribute directly to decisions relating to the work of the project including residential events and annual conferences. This will provide them with the opportunity to develop skills in a number of important areas including communication, assertiveness, organisational and social interaction. The means of recording the level of involvement, contributions and achievements that young people gain needs to be clarified.
- 4.5 As stated in the original outline of the project, there are no significant numbers of African-Caribbean people in any one area of the city of Coventry. This is seen to contribute to the isolation and lack of ‘mutual support’ for African-Caribbean young people. This project will attempt to address this issue by developing individual and group work activities, peer support and mentoring in order for these young people to gain support from others who have experienced, or who are experiencing similar problems. Peer support and mentoring is potentially one of the main strengths of the project. A potential added-value of the project is that it will create a pool of young people who may be able and willing to offer peer and mentoring support to others.
- 4.6 The project team is keen to involve young people in evaluating good and interesting practices. Respondents are well aware that they will need to ensure that they are developing a service that directly meets the needs of this particular client group. There is a need to identify how the success of the project can be evaluated and how young people’s views can be fully taken into account.

## **5. Partnerships**

- 5.1 Some respondents indicated that “this project demonstrates the true spirit of partnership in that it is firmly placed within the Connexions strategy but, in essence, is run by a voluntary organisation”. The composition of the Steering Group allows for effective partnership working with a number of key organisations including the local Voluntary Sector, Youth and Community Education, the City Council and QCS Ltd.
- 5.2 The dual management of the Personal Advisers is further evidence of clear partnership working. Respondents indicated that working from QCS Ltd. careers office provides an excellent opportunity to network and share learning experiences.

They will also be able to advise careers service staff on any issues concerning African-Caribbean young people and to aid the dissemination of good practice working with this client group. However, respondents indicated that they would be “better positioned at the City Centre One-Stop Shop where partnership working is in progress to identify and respond to the needs of all young people in Coventry.” The Project Team will need to identify which location would be best for their client group, taking into account young people’s views as indicated in the Marketry report (2000).

5.3 Respondents are very much aware that this project and the work of the Personal Advisers can not work in isolation. Effective networking is crucial. To this end, the Personal Advisers have been tasked by the Project Manager to devise a comprehensive checklist of relevant services and organisations within the Coventry area. They are also aware of the need to work in partnership with schools in order to support and facilitate the aims and goals that they are working towards with individual young people and to ensure consistency of approach.

## 6. **Good/Interesting Practice and Added-Value**

- Personal Advisers are negotiating an action plan to inform the development of their work (*paragraph 2.2*)
- The project has a budget that allows for the organisation of residential events and conferences for young people, by young people (*paragraph 2.5*)
- Personal Advisers should provide positive role models for African-Caribbean young people (*paragraph 3.2*)
- Personal Advisers aim to provide impartial and independent help and support to a targeted group of young people (*paragraph 3.2*)
- Managers are negotiating relevant training with other organisations for quality training and networking opportunities (*paragraph 3.3*)
- Involving an African-Caribbean young person in the selection of staff for the project (*paragraph 4.3*)
- Consultation and involvement of young people in the planning and development of the work will be integral to the project (*paragraph 4.4*)
- The project provides opportunities for young people to develop and practice necessary life skills in a supportive and learning environment (*paragraph 4.4*)
- The project plans to develop a system of peer support and mentoring (*paragraph 4.5*)
- Bringing together groups of African-Caribbean young people with an aim to reduce the isolation and lack of mutual support experienced by many of this client group (*paragraph 4.5*)

- The project is a demonstration of the true spirit of partnership working between agencies (*paragraph 5.1*)
- Personal Advisers will develop a comprehensive checklist of relevant local services and organisations (*paragraph 5.3*)

## **7. Recommendations for Action**

- Clarify and record the exact responsibilities of the project managers within Quality Careers Services Ltd. and the West Indian Community Association (*paragraph 2.1*)
- Monitor the effectiveness of the dual management system (*paragraph 2.1*)
- Identify a clear strategy for evaluating the effectiveness of the project in order to gather evidence of sustainability and effectiveness (*paragraph 2.2*)
- Develop strategies for promoting and marketing the project (*paragraph 2.2*)
- Monitoring, training and supervision of Personal Advisers work is crucial in order to gather clear evidence of good and interesting policies and practices (*paragraph 2.3*)
- Personal Advisers should have access to proper office facilities in order to assist them in undertaking their project development work (*paragraph 2.4*)
- Plan how effective links with schools and school-based Personal Advisers can best be developed (*paragraph 3.2*)
- Complete a training needs analysis of the Personal Advisers and Project Managers (*paragraph 3.3*)
- Develop a system for prioritising referrals (*paragraph 3.4*)
- Establish a range of methods for assessing individual young people's needs. Closer working links need to be forged with Lincolnshire Connexions Pilot and the National Connexions Unit (*paragraph 3.5*)
- Develop a strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of the project with the support from the Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby (*paragraphs 3.6 and 4.6*)
- Establish a strategy for consulting young people regarding any future planning and development of the project (*paragraph 4.1*)

- Agree what action, if any, will be taken as a result of the Marketry survey (*paragraph 4.2*)
- Clarify a system for recording the contributions and achievements of young people participating in the project (*paragraph 4.4*)
- Consult with relevant parties to determine the most appropriate location for the Personal Advisers (*paragraph 5.2*)

## References

Department for Education and Employment (1999) *New Start: Paving the Way for Learning: An Interim Evaluation of the Second Round Projects*. DfEE Research Report Series. Sheffield:DfEE

Department for Education and Employment (2000a) *Connexions: The best start in life for every young person*. Sheffield: DfEE

Department for Education and Employment (2000b) *Connexions Planning Guidance*. Sheffield:DfEE.

DfEE circular: 424/99 Neighbourhood Renewal Fund - 29/9/99.