



LINCOLNSHIRE & RUTLAND

**EVALUATION OF THE  
LINCOLNSHIRE CONNEXIONS PILOT**

**REPORT 2: INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARENTS**

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## CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>4-8</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>9-12</b>
<b>Key Lessons</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>14</b>

## Appendices

<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>University of Lincolnshire and Humberside - 'Evaluating user based research methods in the development of local services'</b>
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>The Viewpoint Organisation – 'Develop and pilot Viewpoint Interactive, Young peoples needs, advice and guidance'</b>
<b>Appendix 3</b>	<b>Connexions 'shoebox'</b>
<b>Appendix 4</b>	<b>Report on Parental Focus Groups</b>
<b>Appendix 5</b>	<b>Members of 'Parent's' Action Team</b>
<b>Appendix 6</b>	<b>Parents/Carers Questionnaire and analysis</b>

## PREFACE

**The pilot project provided a very exciting opportunity to examine new approaches to involving young people and parents in the development of a local youth support service designed to meet their needs. We are extremely grateful to members of the Parents Action Team which included: Jan Gunter, Public Health Practitioner; Janet Flett, Lincolnshire Health Authority; Stephanie Bagnall, Lincolnshire Careers & Guidance Services Ltd; Julia Andrew, Paltform Skegness, Maria Tsouroufli, Lincolnshire and Humberside University and Chris Barrs, Lincolnshire Careers & Guidance Services Ltd for their continuous help and support throughout the pilot. We are greatly indebted to the many young people who participated in the pilot, including attendance at focus group sessions, for their willingness to openly share views and ideas on 'what works' and 'what does not work' for them. Staff from the University of Lincoln & Humberside and Viewpoint also played a key role in the project. Finally, we are very grateful to Carole Lang, Lincolnshire Connexions Pilot Manager for her continuous support and enthusiasm.**

Malcolm Ryan, Angela Bates & Shirley Wilce  
Project Team

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the findings from a two-pronged project that addressed the issues of how best to consult with young people and parents/carers in order to develop a more responsive and 'fit for purpose' service. The project explored different approaches to consultation with both groups and tested out a number of tools and mechanisms.

*Section 1* details the importance of involving primary clients in the development of the new Connexions service and outlines the aims and objectives of both segments of the project. Objectives included testing a number of approaches to consulting with young people and parents including the development of inter-active software to be used by large groups of young consultees.

*Section 2* outlines the various methods that were adopted and explains the role and significance of a multi-agency approach. It examines the number of organisations involved in delivering services to young people and explains its approach through events and use of questionnaires. One aspect was the role of young people from local youth parliaments in developing and delivering the consultation process. The work with parents/carers is also discussed and detail given of a questionnaire approach, supported by focus group sessions.

*Section 3* contains some of the key findings in respect of 'what works and what doesn't' when trying to involve young people and also details many of their views about the new Connexions service. The results from the consultations with parents revealed that the group who are likely to have children deemed 'at risk' are very difficult to involve in consultative activity. The responses to the parental questionnaire did give some useful indications as to the respondents views on the development of Connexions.

*Section 4* outline the need for a flexible approach to all consultation activity, the benefits of using a trained multi-disciplinary team and the continuing problems in engaging with a crucial group of parents - namely those likely to have young people in the 'at risk' category.

*Section 5* highlights a number of important recommendations for the future delivery of ConneXions and suggests areas that would benefit from further research. The need for effective training in appropriate consultation techniques is discussed.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Context

1.1 This pilot covered two key areas;

- to consult with both Young people and Parents regarding their views of the Connexions Service
- to identify and evaluate a range of methods which can be used when consulting with Young people and Parents.

### Rationale

1.2 From the outset, the pilot project team identified that the strength of the Connexions Service would be derived from its ability to engage with young people in consultation and hence enable them to influence the way in which the Service is designed and delivered.

### Aim

1.3 The aim of the project was to:

*'Develop more responsive and 'fit for purpose' services by exploring and implementing ways of engaging young people and their parents/carers in designing, developing and reviewing services.'* (Pilot Project Development Plan 2000)

Project milestones:

- Establish Multi-agency Project Teams
- Map existing Youth Groups
- Develop tools to gather views/engage young people and parents/carers
- Develop an Intervention Plan
- Develop and Pilot Viewpoint Interactive Software
- Train young people in facilitation techniques
- Plan and deliver a major Consultation Event for young people
- Identify existing best practice for engaging and involving young people and parents/carers
- Undertake testing of tools and systems as above
- Monitor and Evaluate.

## METHODOLOGY

### Establishment of multi-disciplinary teams

2.1 The pilot work comprised seven key elements:

- A *reference group* was established involving nineteen professionals from sixteen different organisations across Lincolnshire. The reference group agreed to act as the 'gatekeepers' for the project. Members of the reference group were informed of the key purpose of the pilot and the ways in which they could get involved or support the initiative. The main focus of this group was to advise on information and consultation issues. The reference group assisted in the identification of 'key people' who could have a contribution to make to the aims of the project.
- A *project focus group* was formed to operate as a strategic 'think tank', designed to help guide and shape the direction of the pilot so that its objectives were achieved. The Viewpoint Organisation and local evaluators from the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside [UL&H] were also invited to work with the Project Focus Group.
- *Key deliverers of services to young people* were identified from the focus group. These formed the Youth Action Team (YAT),
- A *multi-disciplinary team of 'young people workers'*. This group developed the key milestones of the pilot and delivered the key components as well as extending these through development activities.
- *Additional young people* were identified for involvement in a local major consultation event. A similar action team was formed to take forward specific objectives in relation to parents/carers.
- A '*software package*' developed by Viewpoint<sup>1</sup> that could be introduced as part of the consultations with focus group participants and YAT.
- A *mapping exercise* of existing youth agencies in Lincolnshire.

2.2 The role of the University of Lincoln & Humberside (UL&H) was to;

- evaluate the methods of delivery to young people in Lincolnshire;
- identify and evaluate relevant literature and data
- find evidence of 'what works' and 'what does not work' in order to inform the main findings from the pilot.

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<sup>1</sup> Viewpoint is an Interactive system designed to gather information from young people using a computer-based system. Appendix 2 provides a full account of the background and its application.

- 2.3 At an early stage, all aspects of the development work were piloted, with a sample group of young people and parents/carers, to ensure that the chosen approaches were sufficiently robust and sustainable. The methodology was designed to ensure the 'active involvement' of key stakeholders and participation of a wide range of relevant organisations. It was also essential to ensure access to a range of contrasting professional workers as well as, a network of contacts to help reach a wide cross-section of young people.

### **Mapping of existing youth groups**

- 2.4 Data provided by both the voluntary and statutory Youth Services was used to establish:

- 1) the range of different Youth Groups in Lincolnshire
- 2) the geographical breadth of provision.

The Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, on behalf of Lincolnshire Careers & Guidance Services Ltd., developed an electronic database for inputting information provided by both the voluntary and statutory Youth Services in Lincolnshire. Initial results showed that there were 855 individual 'youth support groups' operating within the County (including the uniformed sector – beavers, scouts & guides.) An analysis of the data enabled the pilot project team to ensure that a 'range' of different youth groups and young people had been involved in the consultation process. The database will be used in future to enable geographical and other relevant searches to be undertaken.

### **Development of Intervention Plan and Consultation Events for young people**

- 2.5 The Intervention Plan had two clearly defined phases:

- *Phase one*; this involved consulting targeted groups of young people about their general views on the Connexions Service through piloting the initial range of questions identified by the YAT
- *Phase two*; this involved planning and organising two major consultation events.

#### *Phase One*

- 2.6 This primarily focused on consulting with a targeted group of young people to assess the appropriateness of a range of questions initially identified by the YAT. It was emphasised to all participants that the format and content of the questions were not written as 'tablets of stone'. The main objective was to actively involve and consult young people in order for them to influence the delivery of the major consultation events. The range of young people targeted for consultation during this phase were matched with members of the YAT who could assist with both access to these particular groups and delivery. Members of the UL&H team were actively involved in all events during Phase One. The targeted groups and YAT members included;

Young Offenders Team	Member of Youth Offending
Young Carers	Young Carers Support Worker
Young people at risk of School Exclusion	Careers Advisor
Young people suffering Rural Isolation Organisation)	Youth Worker (Church
Disengaged Young people	Youth Worker (Local Authority)
UK Youth Parliament Event	Youth Worker (Pilot Co-Manager)

2.7 A total of 87 young people were consulted, and the format, method of delivery and range of key areas for exploration were agreed. Consultation methods developed during this phase included:

- a paper questionnaire;
- focus groups;
- workshops;
- a scenario exercise,
- Viewpoint software;
- a Connexions 'Shoe Box' (Refer to Appendix 3).

The Lincoln Youth Council provided a suitable mechanism to help co-ordinate these activities and from this, three young people volunteered to assist in the delivery of Phase Two, one of whom was a Millennium Volunteer.

2.8 Findings from Phase One indicated that:

- the language used within the questionnaire required re-wording;
- the briefing given to young people on Connexions was in general, not fully understood. It was necessary to explain the concept of Connexions rather than attempting to describe an intangible, non-operational organisation;
- some questions were a) not clear and too difficult to answer without in-depth explanation; b) needed to be put into context before young people could fully understand their meaning; c) deemed by young people to be 'private' and therefore not conducive to being discussed in an open group.
- A few young people reported that they did not like some focus groups. Notably those where the facilitator failed to involve them fully in the process.

#### *Phase Two*

2.9 This involved holding two consultation events aimed at different target audiences:

- (i) *Consultation A* designed to target 'hard-to-reach' and 'disengaged' young people and this included young people from;
- the Learning Gateway
  - 'at risk' of School Exclusion
  - Education and Behavioural Support Service (School Exclusions)
  - Youth Offending Teams
  - Detached Youth Work Teams
- (ii) *Consultation B* designed to focus on mainstream young people who were already engaged with school and/or existing youth provision. This included young people from;

- Comprehensive Schools
- Special Educational Needs Schools
- Young Carers Youth Group
- Local Youth Clubs

In total, 67 young people took part in the consultation exercises and their views on the design, development and future consultation methods of the Connexions Service were canvassed.

### **Development of Viewpoint Interactive Software**

- 2.10 In addition to the two consultation days, Viewpoint, using the software developed during the Phase One stage, consulted young people on a range of questions. In total, Viewpoint consulted with over 700 young people from seven different secondary schools across the County. (Refer to Appendix 2)

### **Training for Young people**

- 2.11 Three members of Lincoln Youth Council attended two training events organised by the Youth Service. The content focused on delivery methods and styles for involving young people in discussion groups and consultation exercises.

### **Consulting with parents**

- 2.12 The project team was unable to find any research covering recommended methods of consulting with parents of young people aged 13-19 years of age. For this reason, the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside was commissioned to undertake research based around this issue. The 'Parents' Action Group identified a number of specific groups of parents which included:

- parents of young people involved with crime
- parents of young people acting as carers
- parents of young people with a disability (the term was used in its broadest context)
- parents of young people within the Connexions 'universal' group

As a result of the tight timescales within the project it was not possible to target all of the above-mentioned groups. It was agreed that for those parents who came into the 'universal' group, a series of questions would be used that elicited information on difficulties experienced by parents whilst dealing with teenagers.

- 2.13 Two contrasting approaches were used in accordance with perceived levels of parent/carer involvement:

- a) Low level involvement - *Self-administered questionnaires.*
- b) High involvement - *Focus groups.*

a) *Self-administered Questionnaires.*

These were delivered by one of two methods:

Postal questionnaires using Lincolnshire Careers and Guidance Services Ltd database. The database enabled a variety of schools and specific segments to be targeted, e.g.

- Urban schools
- Rural schools
- Secondary Modern schools
- Grammar and High schools
- Comprehensive schools
- Parents of young people unemployed
- Parents of young people in work based training
- Parents of young people registered with the Careers and Guidance Service

Direct approach at Parents Evenings and Parent Teacher Association meetings.

*b) Focus Groups.*

Two main approaches were used:

- A small number of specific groups involving parents were identified as the basis for testing out the use of focus groups. This involved:
  - Parents/carers whose children act as carers
  - Foster parents
  - Parents whose children are unemployed
  - Parents whose children are disabled
  - Parents whose children are involved in crime
- Parents and carers who completed the questionnaires were also asked to indicate whether they were prepared to take part in wider discussions.

Although attempts were made to arrange eight focus groups in different places in Lincolnshire by contacting a range of organisations and individuals [see Appendix 4], only two took place. Both focus group sessions took place in the evening and were school related.

- 2.14 Prior to undertaking the major consultation exercise, the questionnaire format was trialed by members of the group with a small number of parents. The University of Lincolnshire and Humberside also evaluated the appropriateness of the chosen methodology and process.

## FINDINGS

### Young people

- 3.1 There are two distinct elements to the findings from this pilot. Firstly the methods of delivery, and secondly, the views of young people regarding the design, development and future consultation by the Connexions Service. A more in-depth analysis of the methods can be found in the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside report.
- 3.2 There was no one specific delivery methods that worked best with all groups. Different groups and individuals responded in different ways to the range of methods delivered. There were however, indicators that could be identified that 'made a difference' to the way in which young people responded and participated in the consultation process. Key indicators included:
- Groups often needed 'some space' to talk through some of their issues and concerns. For example; they were keen to talk about their life experiences which did not necessarily link with the role of Connexions, but were more about openly and honestly sharing with the facilitators a flavour of what's going on in their lives.
  - It was important to constantly ask 'permission' to record a comment, and to check out with the group that they agreed with the interpretation of what had been said.
  - Open questions were important; some groups had difficulty expressing their thoughts – the checking out process helped with this.
  - Challenging comments and views, in a supportive non-judgmental way, was also important. This helped groups explore and focus more clearly on their reasons for the response.
  - The relaxed setting (lounge chairs in the bar area) was a plus. Groups were relaxed and seemed more at ease than in a tabled area.
  - Most groups coped well with the questions but when asked, they stated that they preferred that the facilitator read out the questions ("as they were thick" was stated by one of the groups).
  - It was essential that the aim of the session should be reinforced and clarified at the beginning of each discussion.
  - The Connexions Shoebox was used to ensure and check that young people had understood the concept.
  - Although most groups coped well with the questions, they struggled with understanding what was being asked of them. More lead in time and group building was required for some groups.
  - The length of the day, for some young people, was a challenge. By the afternoon session some groups were bored and could not concentrate.
  - Groups where young people knew each other worked best.
  - Groups of between six and eight young people worked best, with groups of larger than eight not working as well as smaller groups.
  - The interpersonal and group work skills of the facilitators made a significant difference in enabling young peoples' active involvement.
  - Facilitators who were able to 'read the group' and adjust the delivery format accordingly, gained best results.
  - Some young people did not cope well with a 'structured' environment.
  - The scenario exercise created more debate than the other sessions.
- 3.3 In general terms, the 'hard-to-reach' group of young people preferred Viewpoint and the scenario exercise. In contrast, the mainstream group preferred the workshops

and focus group sessions. Our findings showed that in this case, both groups were indifferent to the questionnaire.

3.4 The following key findings summarise the key points drawn from the consultation exercises with young people in relation to the role of the Personal Adviser:

- PA's should be 'with it' yet not appear patronising and understand what is going on in young peoples lives and what is important to them.
- PA's should establish relationships with young people *before* more personal in depth support is given (There is a need to do some fun things with a group of young people first).
- PA should meet young people somewhere private but with people around.
- PAs should do some social things with young people as well as one to one things that are more serious.
- Parents should not be contacted unless permission is given (except if the young person is 'at risk' i.e. drugs, prostitution, abuse).
- Young people should be able to 'tell someone else' if they want to change their PA. They agreed that changes can't happen all of the time, but in special circumstances, change should be possible.
- In terms of when they can access a PA, young people indicated that some 'core' drop-in times should be available (without appointment) as well as an appointment system for more important or scheduled matters.

3.5 Our findings from the consultations held with 'hard-to-reach' young people indicated that:

- Contact through the Web or email was not supported, as most did not have access to a computer. They also said that they preferred to be consulted by a real person of whom you could ask questions.
- More fun things should be organized as a reward for answering questions.
- The concept of a Youth Council was seen as being positive, however, none of this group had ever heard of a Youth Council and did not indicate any real desire to get involved.
- Most events previously attended where their views were sought, have been boring. A consultation and 'fun event' should be considered.
- There was not a great deal of interest in being involved in the interviews of PA's.
- They could be given a small budget to develop activities with the support of adults. These would be both educational (learning skills) and would give the PA a chance to get to know them.

3.6. Our findings from the consultations held with 'mainstream' young people indicated that:

- They were interested in helping Connexions by advising them where the money should be best spent.
- They should have a say in the type of information produced, including the way in which it is presented.
- They should be able to put their views to the 'big cheese' of Connexions to make sure they are listened to, or where complaints can be made.
- Young people should be given more chances to learn about how to have a say. This will make them more able to put their views across.
- Youth Councils should be used as a means of consulting young people. However, it was suggested that Youth Councils can't represent everyone and

that questionnaires and 'user' focus groups should supplement any formal consultation with Youth Councils.

- They should be asked for 'feedback' on a termly basis about how their PA is doing and whether or not the service could be improved.
- They expressed an interest in getting involved at all levels of decision-making (some stated that it was good practice for later in life!).
- They would like to test out leaflets and information so that they can be sure that they are suitable.

## Parents/Carers

### *Views of Parents/Carers*

3.7 A questionnaire survey was distributed throughout Lincolnshire, and achieved a response rate of 25%. The majority of parents who completed the questionnaires were parents who were already involved with and committed to their children's future. However, the findings do not reflect the views of parents whose children are not at school or 'disengaged' from the formal learning process. Nonetheless, the results provided useful information about several issues regarding the views of parents and the design of the new Connexions service.

3.8 A full analysis of the survey results are contained in Appendix 6. The following summarises the main findings:

a) *Information received by parents from school*

- 92.5% found school reports very helpful or quite helpful
- 85 % found parents evenings very helpful or quite helpful
- 50 % found career action plans very helpful or quite helpful (but 26.1% of parents reported that they did not see them).

b) *Information and support required by young people to make informed decisions about their future life include, in priority order*

- Career Options 88.1%
- FE Options 79.9%
- Coping with money 61.2%
- Lifestyle 43.3%
- Health 41.0%
- Leisure 21.6%

c) *Content for information about your child to be shared with other organisations*

- Yes 80.6% (93.3% wished to be informed in advance)

d) *Involvement with child's hopes and ambitions for the future*

- 82.1% often talked to their child on these topics.
- 42.5% felt that their child always took their advice into account

e) *Future service to support young people's future education and career decisions*

- 90.3% felt that it should be located in an educational establishment
- 57.5% felt it should be open on early evenings during weekdays
- 74.6% felt that the service should be by personal interview

3.9 The most successful focus group was held at a school where seven female parents attended. Prior to the focus group, parents had been sent a letter explaining the purpose and at the beginning of the two-hour session the Connexions concept was outlined. All the parents participated equally and they were very involved in the discussion. Although the parents in this group said they had found the questionnaire clear, concise and coherent, they stated that they preferred focus group sessions facilitated by a professional that felt they could trust and they could relate to. Lack of previous contact was not a problem or a disadvantage either for the facilitator or the participants. In the event, it proved to be an advantage, as parents revealed that sharing views and experiences with a stranger was often easier than discussing sensitive issues with someone that they knew. For example, a member of staff in their child's school. The group felt that the following were important qualities in a facilitator:

- Reliable and trustworthy
- Honest
- Good listener
- Empathetic
- Reflective
- Caring
- Experienced
- Understanding

This group also suggested a 'drop-in' centre where they could go after 5pm in order to get help and support about their children's learning, careers and lives.

3.10 The second focus group session was not successful. It was arranged to take place in the Careers and Guidance Service Offices in Sleaford. Although four people had agreed to attend, only two turned up and both were associated with one school. Both participants had found the questionnaire interesting and useful but were extremely concerned about the difficulties in involving parents and were unhappy at what they perceived to be the level of school involvement required. Outreach activity and contacting the parents through their children was one option suggested.

3.11 Working with other agencies proved problematic, as a number had originally been supportive, but in the event were unable to commit, due to time constraints and a lack of understanding about Connexions.

#### **4. KEY LESSONS**

- 4.1 The strength of this pilot, particularly with respect to young people, was clearly the experience and insight of the Multi-disciplinary Team. With some further group work training, coupled with an allocation of time to plan a range of consultation events, there would be value in such a team working across services, on consultative issues with Young people and co-ordinated by Connexions.
- 4.2 There are also some useful learning points to consider within the University of Lincoln & Humberside and Viewpoint evaluation reports which will further assist in any future consultation events. However, both reports point to the crucial importance of consultation teams having good interpersonal skills and group work experience.
- 4.3 Parents or carers of 'at risk' young people, that could benefit from participation in the development of Connexions, remain the most difficult to contact. Further work is needed in identifying and developing appropriate methods of involving these disparate groups. Postal questionnaire approaches are not successful with this group.

## **5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 Multi-disciplinary Teams from key agencies should be established to deliver consultation events for the Connexions Service with Young people and parents/carers. Teams delivering focus groups should receive relevant and good quality training prior to professional delivery.

The successful 'parental' focus group identified the qualities needed in a facilitator. Use of a planned format for delivery of focus groups would ensure that all facilitators are working to common standards and have a structure to follow.

- 5.2 The Connexions Service should work in partnership with the Youth Service and other key partners to develop and expand the current network of Youth Councils.
- 5.3 The Connexions Service should work with others in developing and implementing the Young Person's Charter.
- 5.4 The Connexions Board should consider the co-option of the existing four UK Youth Parliament Members of Parliament from Lincolnshire and Rutland onto the board as full voting members.
- 5.5 Personal Advisors should develop Group work skills and consider ways in which opportunities to build relationships with their client base can be developed.
- 5.6 Viewpoint should be located in at least six schools across the County and developed to continue the consultation process. A further three 'portable' units should be dedicated to consultation with 'hard to reach' Young people.
- 5.7 The Connexions Service, in partnership with the Youth Councils network, should host an annual Youth Conference which focuses on 'Youth Council identified issues' as well as the Connexions agenda. The Multi-disciplinary Team should support this event.
- 5.8 Regular consultation events with 'hard to reach' Young people should be developed by the Multi-disciplinary Team which combine 'fun' activities with consultation.
- 5.9 Building on the successful pilot work to encourage liaison between agencies, future developments should ensure that all levels from senior manager to practitioner are involved. This will encourage strategic development, sharing of information and foster effective joint working.



## CONNEXIONS IN A SHOEBOX

**Q. What does a jigsaw, an alarm clock, a mobile phone and a condom have in common with the Connexions Service?**

**Got the answer yet?**

**A. They are just four of the objects contained in our Connexions in a 'shoebbox' a concept which has been developed to help young people understand what the new Connexions Service is about.**

### INTERESTED TO FIND OUT MORE? - WELL READ ON

The shoebbox idea is a visual and fun way of communicating the concept of Connexions to either small or large groups of young people. It has already been hailed a success following a series of consultation events recently held in Lincolnshire.

*"It is difficult to explain the aims and objectives of the new service in a way that is interesting to young people, especially to get over the message in a user friendly way. For a lot of young people the concept is just simply over their heads. The shoebbox idea developed in partnership with the Youth Service has gone down really well with young people. The items in the shoebbox are all designed to give them a flavour of what some of the key features of Connexions will be. Connexions is an evolving service, a developing service that young people can help to shape, and so things can continually be added to the box or taken away as Connexions evolve." Said Carole Lang - Connexions Pilot Manager*

### BOX CLEVER!

How does it work? In the box there are various items including a compass, an alarm clock, an application form, a jigsaw, a mobile phone, a teenage magazine, a condom and a questionnaire. The list is growing all the time as professionals and most importantly young people add items. At a recent event one young person suggested that we add a small pair of boxing gloves which would represent the fact that Personal Advisers were on young peoples side, working on their behalf, putting them first - the list is endless.

The presenter opens the box and pulls out individual items one by one. At the same time showing the group and giving the following explanations. The following is a very brief summary about what each item represents:

- **Jigsaw** Different pieces of a jigsaw represent different organisations, ask the group to list the people and organisations that they have had help from. Join the pieces together to make up a whole picture - our jigsaw makes a picture of Bob the Builder and what does he do - fixes things. Connexions will operate in the same way

- Mobile Phone You will be able to get in touch easily with someone who will listen to you
- Alarm Clock Connexions will meet you at a time and place that is best for you
- Teenage magazine Connexions understands youth issues, knows where young people are at
- Information Options the Works - a magazine about education and training opportunities, health and lifestyle magazines, information on leisure and cultural issues all demonstrate the range of information held by Connexions Services
- A Compass and Map Helping young people make realistic, informed decisions about choices/direction they want their lives to take
- Application form Connexions can help young people get into training or employment
- Condom Connexions will be a reliable service - not always 100%. It's important that it's used properly or it won't work.
- Questionnaire Connexions will not only consult with you, but take action to make things better

The idea of Connexions in a show box was devised by one of our pilot managers and has proved a popular activity when talking to young people, to act not only as an 'ice breaker' but to sum up in a clear and simple way what the new service means to them.

Have you any ideas about what we can put in to the box, perhaps describing a Personal Adviser then let us know.

Further details contact Carole Lang at Connexions Lincolnshire and Rutland on 01522 875000.

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## REPORT ON PARENTAL FOCUS GROUPS

### 1. AIMS:

- 1.1 The development of effective tools and methods of delivery, which are best, suited to consulting and involving parents in decision-making.
- 1.2 The identification of effective tools and methods of delivery, which are best, suited to developing and implementing the Connexions Service.

### 2. OBJECTIVES:

- 2.1 To identify existing best practice, within County and elsewhere, of tools and methods of delivery for engaging and involving parents.
  - 2.2 To identify an appropriate and prioritised set of tools and systems of delivery to be used by the Action Team to test out robustness. These will need to take into account the different needs of parents.
  - 2.3 To develop a set of questions which will be used to test out the identified tools and methods of delivery. The questions to fit within the Connexions framework of:
    - Advice and Guidance
    - Information
    - Personal support
    - Referral
  - 2.4 To identify practitioners who will form the Action Team - see Appendix 5.
  - 2.5 To work with parents in the testing of the agreed tools and systems.
  - 2.6 To work with the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside on the development, testing and evaluation of tools and methods of delivery.
  - 2.7 To evaluate and prepare a report on the outcome of the testing of tools and methods of delivery. This will include recommendations for systems to be used by the Connexions Service.
- ### 3. METHODOLOGY:
- 3.1 No research about parents of young people aged 13-19 years of age has been published. For this reason the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside was commissioned to undertake research based around the work of this specific project.

3.2 Working alongside the Young Peoples Focus Group, a number of specific groups of parents were identified:

- (a) Universal (the committed?)
- (b) Parents of young people involved with crime
- (c) Parents of young people acting as carers
- (d) Parents of young people with a disability (in its widest context)

3.3 In view of the tight timescales within the project, it was not thought possible to target all the groups. Rather, it was agreed that for those parents who came into the "universal" groups; that a series of questions would be used that elicited the information.

3.4 Statistical evidence and confidence from data provided by Ian Popham from The Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby shows that even allowing for at 10% +/- variance that a relatively small sample size, 270, is all that is necessary.

3.5 Two methods for testing identified questions were determined. The levels of involvement that parents/carers would have in relation to each method are also described:

- Self-administered questionnaires. Low involvement
- Focus groups. High involvement.

3.6 **Self-administered Questionnaires.** These were delivered by one of two methods:

- Postal questionnaires using Lincolnshire Careers and Guidance Services Ltd database. The database will enable a variety of schools and specific segments to be targets, e.g.
  - Urban schools
  - Rural schools
  - Secondary Modern schools
  - Grammar and High schools
  - Comprehensive schools
  - Parents of young people unemployed
  - Parents of young people in work based training
  - Parents of young people involved with the Careers and Guidance Service
- Direct approach at Parents Evenings and Parent Teacher Association meetings.

3.7 **Focus Groups.** Two methods of focus groups were used:

- A small number of specific groups involving parents were identified as the basis for testing out use of focus groups:
  - Parents/carers whose children act as carers
  - Foster parents
  - Parents whose children are unemployed

- Parents whose children are disabled
- Parents whose children are involved in crime
  
- Parents and carers who complete the questionnaires are also being asked to indicate whether they were prepared to take part in wider discussions.

Before undertaking the major testing exercise, the questionnaire format was trialed by members of the group with a small number of parents. The University of Lincolnshire and Humberside also subjected it to evaluation.

#### **4 FINDINGS:**

4.1 The questionnaires were distributed all over Lincolnshire, the response rate was (25%). The questionnaire provided useful information about several issues regarding the needs of parents and the design of the new service (Connexions) but it did not target the less privileged parents, the ones whose children are not at school, the ones that are disengaged. The majority of parents who completed the questionnaires were parents whose children were at school, who were themselves were involved in the children's education because they talked to the school, they thought their child's education was important and they were able to support their child in higher education.

4.2 Although we attempted to arrange eight focus groups in different places in Lincolnshire by contacting the following: a youth offending team, a community contact centre, parents who replied to the questionnaires, a school, a school with youth service involvement, foster parents combined with questionnaire replies, school combined with parent teacher association and Share the Care, only two took place. Both focus group sessions took place in the evening and were school related. The most successful focus group was held at a school where seven parents attended, all female, middle aged. Prior to the focus group parents were sent a letter, explaining the purpose of the focus group. At the beginning of the session the professional explained what the new service (Connexions) would be about and then she asked questions similar to the ones in the questionnaire but more general. There was plenty of time for all the parents to express their views. The session lasted about two hours. All the parents participated equally and they were very involved in the discussion. This was mainly related to the excellent interpersonal and communication skills of the professional as well as to the need that these parents expressed for a person to share and to talk to. The parents in this group although they found the questionnaire well written, clear and coherent and not too long they all preferred focus group sessions with a professional that they could trust and they could relate to. Lack of previous contact was not a problem or a disadvantage neither for the professional nor the participants. Actually it was an advantage because all parents revealed that sharing with a stranger is sometimes easier and less embarrassing than talking to someone that you already know, someone for example in your child's school. Parents pointed out important qualities for a facilitator:

- Reliable and trustworthy
- Honest
- Good listener
- Empathetic

- Reflective
- Caring
- Experienced
- Understanding

- 4.3 They also put forward the idea of a drop-in centre where they could go after five in order to get help and support about their children's learning, careers and lives. The second focus group session was not successful. It was arranged to take place in the Careers and Guidance Service in Sleaford. Although four people had agreed to attend only two turned up. One of them was not even a parent but the Vice Principal of a school whose Principal was very keen on Connexions. The other lady was a parent for the Parents and Teachers Association of the school. The professional knew both of these people. Although the session lasted for two hours not much came out of this method. The discussion was very general and without a focus. The professional felt very uncomfortable because of the very low number of participants. She thought that training in delivering a focus group session was necessary. Both of the participants found the questionnaire interesting and useful but they were extremely concerned about the difficulties regarding involving parents, especially by inviting them to focus group sessions. They thought that to some extent this was an unavoidable and unsolved problem, and were unhappy at what they perceived to be the level of school involvement required. Outreach and contacting the parents through their children was considered by the Focus Group as an option.
- 4.4 Working with other agencies proved problematical as a number of agencies were supportive and helpful but unable to commit due to time constraints and a lack of understanding. Inability to engage parents was the main reason for only two focus groups taking place. Although contact was made with parents the response to attend focus groups was very limited. Attempts to use other agencies highlighted the difficulties experienced by them in establishing and maintaining contact.

### KEY ISSUES

- 5.1 The professionals involved should have directed time away from their main duties and responsibilities in order to remain committed throughout, and to ensure that the rural nature of Lincolnshire is adequately covered.
- 5.2 Liaison between agencies should be at management level but with staff also being informed to allow for sharing of information and effective joint working relationships to take place.
- 5.3 The group spent considerable time compiling a questionnaire, and following discussion with parents, this proved not to be their preferred method of contact. This method only proved useful in obtaining the views of committed parents.
- 5.4 Staff delivering focus groups need relevant and good quality training prior to professional delivery. From the experience of the focus group, parents identified the qualities needed in a facilitator. Use of a planned format for delivery of focus groups ensures that all facilitators are working to common standards and have a structure to follow.

## APPENDIX 4

### 6 RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure time and commitment of professionals.
- Take action to improve the interpersonal and communication skills of the professionals through training.
- Identify specific populations who have been neglected and are actually in need for instance: parents of unemployed young people, ethnic minorities, parents of young people involved in crime, and the agencies who work with them.
- Ensure effective inter-agency relationships.
- Use alternative methods and not postal questionnaires to engage parents.

**MEMBERS OF THE 'PARENT'S' ACTION TEAM**


**Initial Group**

Jan Gunter	Health Visitor - Public Health Practitioner
Janet Flett	Lincolnshire Health Authority
Stephanie Bagnall	Lincolnshire Careers and Guidance Services Ltd
Angela Bates	Joint Project Manager (Chair)
Julia Andrew	Platform Skegness
Shirley Wilce	Lincolnshire Careers and Guidance Services Ltd
Maria Tsouroufli	Lincolnshire and Humberside University
Chris Barrs	Lincolnshire Careers and Guidance Services Ltd

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Young people have important and sometimes complicated questions about their future learning and career options to consider. It can often seem like a puzzle with no easy clues to follow.

Whilst families play a vital part in helping young people to make their decisions, specialist advice, guidance and support is also available from a range of agencies including schools, Youth and Careers Services, Health and Social Services, Voluntary and Community Services, the Police and others.

From April 2001, a brand new youth support service called  will be launched and will be available to all teenagers (13-19) in Lincolnshire and Rutland.

It will introduce new ways of working for all youth support agencies ensuring that resources are targeted to those who need support the most and that services are delivered in a new way to meet the identified needs of young people.

No longer will young people be passed from one agency to another without anyone being responsible for making sure that they get the information, advice, guidance or support they need.

The various youth support agencies will begin to work together to achieve common goals which include:

- \* Increasing the number of young people who choose to remain in learning at 16.
- \* Removing any barriers to learning.
- \* Helping all young people to reach their full potential.

Every teenager will have access to good quality information on all education, training, leisure and cultural activities, on health and lifestyle issues and on all forms of support that teenagers and you might need. They will also have access to advice and guidance to help them make decisions on their next steps about learning and life.

Every teenager will also have access to a Personal Adviser.

For this service to be really effective and useful to young people and yourselves, we need to make sure that your views and opinions are identified and included in its design.

We would be grateful if you could spend a few minutes completing this questionnaire. You will not be able to be identified, so please feel free to give your honest thoughts and opinions. The information you provide will be collated and used to help develop this new service.

Once completed, please return the questionnaire using the attached stamped addressed envelope.