

Design Features for an All-age Careers Service in England

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1. Context

- 1.1. The UK Careers Sector Strategic Forum welcomes the announcement¹ by John Hayes, the Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, of the Coalition Government's commitment to establish an all-age careers service in England, subsequently confirmed in its newly launched Skills Strategy². The Forum also welcomes the Minister's affirmation of the need to strengthen career guidance as a profession, reflected in the report of Dame Ruth Silver's Task Force on the Careers Profession³ and in the recent Browne Review on higher education funding⁴.
- 1.2. This Briefing Note outlines some core principles that need to be incorporated in the design of the new service, identifies some of the key issues that need to be addressed in developing the service, and offers the help of the UK Careers Sector Strategic Forum in tackling these issues.

2. Core principles

- 2.1. The all-age service needs to be viewed as a backbone for a world-class system of careers services in England. Principles that need to be adopted in developing this system include:
 - *Access*: that all citizens should have access to careers services when they need them, at any stage through their lives.
 - *Quality*: that the quality of such services should be assured, both through the professional standards of careers practitioners, and through organisational quality standards.
 - *Impartiality*: that these quality standards should ensure that there is always access to impartial career guidance, free of institutional interests.
 - *Balance between aspiration and realism*: that careers services should focus on individual aspiration and potential, but should also ensure that career decisions are well-informed in terms of course progression and the needs of the labour market.
 - *Career self-management*: that careers services should be designed to help individuals to manage their own careers, knowing how to access support where it is needed.

¹ Speech to Institute of Career Guidance Annual Conference, Belfast, 4 November 2010.

² Skills for Sustainable Growth: Strategy Document. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010.

³ Towards a Strong Careers Profession. Report of the Careers Profession Task Force for the Department for Education, 2010.

⁴ Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education. Report of the Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010.

3. Issues

- 3.1. Eight key issues need to be addressed in developing the all-age service.
- 3.2. The first is the balance between services for young people and for adults. There is a risk that the headlines about graduate unemployment, the numbers of young people not getting a place at university, and the close to a million young people not in employment, education or training, will cause the design of an all-age service to be skewed to young people. The Next Step service represents a major advance in the development of careers services for adults. It is critical that the all-age service builds on this advance, rather than eroding or dismantling it. The new service should also seek to build on best practice within the Connexions network.
- 3.3. The second is the structure of the all-age service. There is a strong case for it to be contracted on a regional or sub-regional model: a regional model would make the organisational units roughly comparable in size with those that have been successfully adopted in the rest of the UK. In addition, Connexions Direct could be integrated with the Next Step telephone- and web-based services. Developing a fully integrated and sustainable customer record management system will also be a key requirement, both for following up user destinations and for ensuring continuity in service delivery: this could be linked to the proposed new Lifelong Learning Accounts.
- 3.4. The third is the importance of partnerships with other providers. This is particularly important in the case of schools, where it is linked to the relationship between career guidance and careers education within the curriculum (which includes experiential activities, and is important in the development of career management skills). But it extends to partnerships with further and higher education institutions (which could include Aimhigher work), with employers and work-based learning providers, with trade unions (including Unionlearn), with Jobcentre Plus, with the voluntary and community sector, and with the private sector.
- 3.5. The fourth is concern about the proposal that schools should make the decisions about careers service provision to be offered to their students. This leaves students' access to impartial career guidance dependent on the management priorities of institutions, and the knowledge and understanding of school-based staff. Institutions' interests are not always congruent with the individual interests of students or with the wider public interest. If the proposal is to be successfully implemented, care needs to be taken to ensure that these issues are addressed through appropriate policy levers. For example, Ofsted could ensure that schools are held accountable for their careers service provision, using the national quality benchmarks developed for the all-age service.
- 3.6. The fifth is the relationship of the all-age service to the wider market in careers service provision. It is proposed that schools should be able to choose from a range of accredited providers. If this is the case, how is the organisational and professional quality of these providers to be assured? What is to be their relationship to the notion of an integrated customer record management system? More broadly, what is the potential of the market for leveraging private investment in careers service provision from individuals, employers and/or new social enterprises? How can public policy help to regulate, stimulate and quality-assure the growth of this market? As recommended by the Careers Profession Task Force, the Forum supports the establishment of recognised professional qualifications and standards for careers practitioners. Compliance with these standards and quality benchmarks should be required for all contractors delivering the new all-age service.
- 3.7. The sixth is the role of technology. New technologies have huge potential for extending access to services, and the range of services. They offer, for example, new ways of accessing support from a wide range of key informants (including people already in the course or occupation). But this should be seen as complementary to, not a replacement for, access to help from a careers



professional. Such access can itself be provided via technology (as a medium rather than a resource), but face-to-face access remains vitally important too.

- 3.8. The seventh is staffing. The current uncertainties about transition arrangements to a new all-age service and the significant budget cuts at local level mean that the careers profession is haemorrhaging talent. Labour force data⁵ show that highly experienced and qualified careers practitioners are losing their jobs at an alarming rate. Any new service will need the best talent, and a clear transition plan from Government, if it is to be a world-class service.
- 3.9. The eighth is resourcing. With all the positive signals about an all-age careers service, there is as yet little information about how it will be resourced, and how this will relate to the funding of career guidance provision for young people. Current estimates from Forum members suggest that around £280m is currently spent within Connexions on IAG services for young people, and around £80m on the new Next Step service for adults. If the Browne Report recommendations are to be followed, the former (which covers around 2.6m individual careers sessions for young people) needs to be expanded rather than reduced. If the funding for such provision is to be managed by schools, how much funding will be transferred from local authorities to schools, how much 'new money' will there be from the Department for Education for schools, and what is the transition period between the current system and the new service? If the budget is expected to come from existing school budgets, what credibility can be given to the aspirations for the new all-age careers service? More broadly, what is the scope for drawing in DWP funding to supplement BIS and DfE funding? At the same time, the premium on efficiency in public services will demand that the careers sector is open to radical reform and adopts transformative and innovative practices. This will mean doing more with less, pushing for greater collaboration across the careers profession (the formation of the Careers Profession Alliance represents an encouraging first step in this respect), and tackling the uncomfortable and difficult decisions that need to be made.

4. Consultation

- 4.1. As a national strategic leadership network, the UK Careers Sector Strategic Forum offers a vehicle to government to address these issues and to tackle the decisions that need to be made in a way that involves a wide range of stakeholders, acknowledges the different perspectives that stakeholders may have, and ensures that a commonly agreed set of principles informs the design of the new all-age careers service. If the Government establishes a separate stakeholder group for the new service, its relationship to the Forum should be clarified.
- 4.2. Experiences from elsewhere in the UK in relation to the existing all-age careers services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland could inform the design of the new service in England. As a UK-wide network, the Forum can provide access to relevant expertise and insights from across the UK and further afield.
- 4.3. The Forum would welcome an initial meeting with the Minister to explore these issues, and to establish an appropriate consultative process for the future.

The UK Careers Sector Strategic Forum is a strategic leadership network of careers sector stakeholders. It aims to formulate a national strategic framework for careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) to address the issues of access, transparency, quality, equality, and continuity, and to identify areas where UK-wide co-ordination would be helpful.

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⁵ TUC and Unison database.