

Careers England Policy Commentary 11

This is the eleventh in an occasional series of briefing notes on key policy documents related to the future of career guidance services in England.

The note has been prepared for Careers England by Professor Tony Watts.

Conservative Party Policy Statement on Skills (including key references to career guidance provision)

1. *Summary.* The Conservative Party has issued a ‘policy green paper’ on skills¹ which includes important statements of intent in relation to career guidance services. In particular, it proposes an all-age careers service in England, and funding to support a careers adviser in every school and college. The current state of the political-party opinion polls makes the paper of particular interest.

2. *Context.* The sub-section on ‘better careers advice’ is one of three within a section on ‘a demand-led training revolution’ – the others being ‘lifelong learning accounts’ and ‘putting employers centre stage’.

3. *Rationale.* The paper makes a number of criticisms of existing careers advice provision:

- That ‘in around two-thirds of schools in England, careers advice is co-ordinated or delivered by staff without any formal qualifications in the field’ (p.17).
- That, while the broad range of services offered to young people at risk represent ‘valuable services to which we are committed’, ‘less than a quarter of young people advised by Connexions (22 per cent) actually require the kind of integrated support it was designed to deliver’ (p.17).
- That while for the minority of young people in question ‘these issues do need to be addressed in a joined-up way, there have been major concerns that the merging of careers advice with other Connexions services is not delivering the focus on careers advice that young people need, especially for those with the greatest skills needs’ (p.17).
- That ‘although we welcome moves towards a more comprehensive adult service, there is a danger that the Government is repeating the mistakes it made with the establishment of Connexions. The new service will be expected to both provide universal careers advice and guidance and more targeted support to priority groups such as unemployed people. The result is likely to be that the objective of universal and impartial careers advice is overshadowed by the urgency of targeted programmes’ (p.18).

¹ Conservative Party (2008). *Building Skills, Transforming Lives: a Training and Apprenticeships Revolution*. Opportunity Agenda Policy Green Paper No.7. London: Conservative Party.

4. *Proposals.* The paper makes two major proposals:
- That funding should be allocated ‘for a careers adviser in every secondary school and FE college in England’ (p.26).
 - That there should also be ‘an all-age careers service to provide an easily-accessed source of community-based advice and guidance for everybody’ (p.26), comparable to the all-age services in other parts of the UK and in New Zealand. This will sit ‘alongside Connexions’ (p.27) (which presumably, although not explicitly stated, will be confined to holistic services for young people at risk).
5. The report also includes a third proposal, which is that more information and guidance should be provided online, and in particular that it should include information comparable to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* in the USA. This long-established annual handbook is now ‘accessible online, providing information on the nature of each occupation, the necessary training and qualifications, the current number employed in the occupation, the employment outlook and average earnings data’ (p.26).
6. *Costs.* The paper estimates the costs of what it terms its ‘revolutionary all-age careers service’ as being £285 million: £180 million for the full-time advisers in every school and college; £100 million for ‘the all-age element of careers advice’; and £5 million for website development (p.29). Against this it offsets £40 million likely LSC spending on adult guidance by 2010/11 and an estimated £209 million (elsewhere rounded to £210 million) that ‘the Connexions budget will use for careers advice by 2010’ (p.28). In other words, only £35 million would be additional money.
7. *Commentary.* The relationship between the main two proposals is unclear. In relation to the first one (for a professional careers adviser in every school and college), the paper notes that ‘these professionals have been cut in many schools’ (p.26). Both this comment, and the use of the term ‘careers adviser’, suggest that the authors have in mind school and college students’ access to what would in the past have been an externally-based careers adviser. This could mean that they are proposing to reaffirm the importance of such careers advisers, but henceforth base them within schools and colleges (either as part of, or separate from, the all-age service²). If so, this would carry out the last rites on the traditional partnership between internally- and externally-based services.³ Alternatively, the proposal could represent a significant reaffirmation of the partnership model: that the careers advisers within schools and colleges should work in partnership with the new all-age service, in which case their proposed role is presumably likely to be closer to that traditionally carried out by careers teachers and careers co-ordinators within schools and colleges.

² The section on funding (p.27) lists them as part of ‘new all-age careers advice’ but separate from ‘all-age service’.

³ See Watts, A.G. (in press). The partnership model for careers education and guidance in schools and colleges: rise, decline – and fall? *Career Research and Development: the NICEC Journal*.

8. If the latter is the case, it could mean that the UK could move from a country in which the professionalism of careers specialists has been restricted and (in recent years) in serious question to one of the most broadly professionalised countries in this field in the world.⁴

9. *Concluding comments.* The paper represents a statement of intent, put out for consultation, rather than a formal policy commitment. The consultation offers an important opportunity to clarify the issues identified in para.7 above.

10. The proposal for an all-age service reflects several recent statements by John Hayes, the Shadow Minister for Vocational Education.⁵ It is closely in line with one of the main policy goals for which Careers England has consistently been lobbying.⁶

Professor Tony Watts
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⁴ In Finland, school students have access both to professional counsellors within their schools and also (though less so in recent years) to the services provided on an all-age basis to vocational psychologists within the labour administration. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1996). *Mapping the Future: Young People and Career Guidance*, pp.85-93. Paris: OECD. It is difficult to think of another comparable example.

⁵ For example, in the debate on the Education and Skills Bill in the House of Commons (*Hansard*, 14 January 2008, col.721). Also, in more detail, in the debate on the same Bill in the Public Bill Committee (26 February 2008). In addition, John Hayes has written about the merits of an all-age service in a CPS paper. Hayes, J. & Kelly, S. (2007). *Towards a Gold Standard for Craft*, p.25. London: Centre for Policy Studies.

⁶ See Careers England (2007). *An All-Age Strategy for Career Guidance Services in England*. London: Careers England.

