

# National Careers Service: Strategic Options for Building a World Class Service

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The National Careers Service (NCS) was launched in April 2012, tasked with supporting and enabling the career choices of citizens in England. The NCS replaced Next Step, the former careers service for adults. The new Service has three channels (face-to-face, phone and web). Early announcements indicated that it was to be an all-age service. But at present for young people it has only a limited helpline and web service, with no local face-to-face provision (NCS providers can provide such services to young people, but not as the NCS).
- 1.2. The NCS is an important and welcome initiative. Much thinking about careers and career support has traditionally been focused upon young people and their initial transitions into the labour market. However, ‘career’ is not a once in a lifetime choice, but rather – as a pathway through learning and work – is built incrementally over time. The NCS has done much good work already, and provides a platform upon which to build. It has the potential to support people throughout their lives – through career building, job changing, redundancy, unemployment and retirement. But, as with all public services, there are important questions to address concerning prioritisation and ‘rationing’.
- 1.3. The careers sector is committed to work with the Government to make the NCS a success – both through our individual organisations and through the Alliance. We also wish to work closely with the National Careers Council.
- 1.4. **Key recommendation:** The CSSA and its member organisations welcome and support the NCS. We wish to play our part in helping the Service to develop and become more successful in assisting people in their lifelong learning and work pathways. This paper has been prepared in this spirit. We suggest that this paper be addressed by the National Careers Council and that the Skills Funding Agency and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills be invited to make a formal response to the issues outlined here. In particular, we recommend that the NCC should examine in-depth the feasibility and desirability of the strategic longer-term issues set out in Section 6 of this paper, leading to a public statement from the Government about the future vision and strategy for the NCS.

**Developed by:**  
 Paul Chubb  
 Keith Herrmann  
 Tristram Hooley  
 Heather Jackson  
 Prof Tony Watts



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## 2. Rationale

- 2.1. ‘Career’ describes the way in which individuals combine working, learning and living. In a dynamic labour market, this process of choosing, pursuing and adapting a career is an on-going one which continues throughout life. An approach which sees career as something that is ‘chosen’ whilst in school rather than ‘constructed’ throughout life fails to understand the dynamism of both individuals and the labour market. The vision of the National Careers Service as a lifelong and universal public service addresses this more sophisticated understanding of how individuals’ careers develop and evolve.
- 2.2. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development<sup>1</sup> set out three main public-policy rationales for publicly-funded careers services:
  - Supporting engagement with learning and improving the functioning of the education and training system.
  - Contributing to the effective operation of the labour market.
  - Supporting social equity and facilitating both social inclusion and social mobility.
- 2.3. The NCS seeks to deliver on all of these public-policy goals by supporting individuals to identify both their own skills gaps and those in the economy as well as assisting them to engage or re-engage with education and training to fill those gaps. It also supports individuals to rethink their relationship with the labour market, to manage unemployment and redundancy, to make purposeful choices about career changes, and to gain access to information and further help that can guide their participation in that market. In doing so, the Service seeks to promote the social mobility and social inclusion of its clients – raising their aspirations and empowering them to gain access to opportunities that might otherwise have been denied to them.
- 2.4. Thus the NCS has the potential to be not only a private good for its clients but also a public good, with its benefits being felt beyond its immediate client group. Looking ahead to the next stages of its development, the role of, and challenge for, the Service must be to balance the needs and interests (short- and longer term) of the individual with wider social and economic priorities. While there are inevitably requirements, in tight times for the public purse, to prioritise NCS services, it remains important that a universal Service exists to support the careers not only of those who are unemployed but also of those whose lives are changing (or could fruitfully change) in other ways.

## 3. Development of the NCS

- 3.1. The Service was announced by the then Minister for Skills, John Hayes, at the 2010 Belfast conference of the Institute of Career Guidance. He promised: ‘A single, unified careers service... [that would] build on Next Step and on Connexions because we must not lose the best of either.’<sup>2</sup> In practice this ambition has regrettably not so far been fulfilled: instead, the NCS has been reframed as, in effect, an adult service providing a limited online and telephone service for young people.
- 3.2. The transition from Next Step to the NCS was achieved in April 2012 with the development of a new brand and a launch event, but only a limited amount of service and resource development. This is evidenced by the NCS website which, despite an attractive rebrand, retains much of the content of the Next Step website and is still far from user-friendly for younger users. The courses database is also a cause for concern in that it currently does not provide comprehensive coverage of available opportunities; nor does it provide accurate, up-to-date information. It requires users to possess a substantial degree of pre-existing knowledge in order to achieve a successful search. There is also a pressing need to secure links from the national website to the quality-assured local labour market information which each NCS provider has at a local level. We wish to support the NCS in making its website much more effective and user-friendly for users of all ages.

<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*. Paris: OECD.

<sup>2</sup> Hayes, J. (2011). Speech to the Institute for Career Guidance annual conference 2011. Available from <http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/john-hayes-icg-conference-2011>



3.3. Since the launch there has been some attempt to market the new Service and to raise its visibility. But the resourcing for this has been low due to the constraints of the Treasury embargo on advertising public services, which was marginally freed up at the launch of NCS but has significantly hampered wider publicity for the new Service. Without the kind of advertising campaign that promoted Learndirect<sup>3</sup>, the new Service has struggled to establish itself in the popular perception; yet it has so much that it can offer.

3.4. Whilst the NCS has yet to secure its position as a universal lifelong provider of career support, it has been more successful in finding a niche as part of a package of support for unemployed adults. This has been particularly supported by the policy of co-location with Jobcentre Plus. Although there are some concerns about this (see 4.3 below), it provides potential for the NCS to add distinctive value in supporting a range of initiatives and programmes to promote sustainable employment and economic growth.

3.5. Now that the transition from the old arrangements to the NCS has been completed, the time is ripe for us all to work together – the Government, those who work in and with the Service, and those who use it – to look forward and to identify how the Service should develop. Fulfilling the promise of the Service as set out in the NCS policy document will require shared vision, ambition and clarity, as well as effective promotion to, and engagement with, potential service users.

#### 4. Immediate issues to address

**4.1. The Service's purpose.** There is a need to create a strong shared public statement on the purpose of the NCS. It would be welcome if the sector and Government could work together on such a statement, to affirm the Service's role in supporting individuals' advancement and progression through learning and work, as well as in the identification of skills deficits and the provision of support to people seeking to attach or reattach to the labour market. In addition, all users need clarity on their entitlements – where they can get what, and from whom.

**4.2. The Service's role with young people.** The Service has been largely focused upon adults, but has been used to provide an online and telephone career support service for young people, as well as to deliver specific services for the Youth Contract. This position, where the Service is aimed at adults but offers some limited services to younger people, is not the coherent approach to all ages to which we all have aspired. The all-age vision needs to be reaffirmed. Meanwhile, there could be opportunities to make incremental steps towards that vision. An example is how we might seek to address the web provision, which displays uncertainty about audience, and is poor in its provision for younger clients.

**4.3. The client base.** The policy of co-location with Jobcentres has much to commend it. But if this becomes the main place where the Service is available, the universal and client-centred service to which we aspire is likely to become de facto re-defined as a service for the unemployed. Consideration needs to be given, for example, to the impact of the Skills Guarantee and mandation of Jobcentre customers on the resources and role of the Service. There has also been inconsistency in how co-location has been implemented by some Jobcentre Plus managers<sup>4</sup>, which with goodwill across departmental boundaries should be capable of being successfully addressed.

**4.4. Investment in marketing.** The viability of the NCS as a universal careers service is dependent on gaining a level of recognition with the general population (both young people and adults). But the level of public awareness about the Service remains low, and it is currently difficult to identify how people will encounter it, other than through referral from other programmes and education providers. There are concerns that the lack of marketing (see 3.3 above) has resulted in



<sup>3</sup> In the early years of the Learndirect service, supported by extensive national marketing, it achieved brand recognition figures of over 80%, and attracted over a million calls a year, demonstrating the huge potential demand for a service of this kind (see Watts, A.G. & Dent, G. (2008). The evolution of a national distance guidance service: trends and challenges. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 36(4), 455-465). Comparable figures for the NCS phone and email/webform services (which now cover young people as well as adults) are not available, but would certainly be substantially lower than this: current data indicate that the number of users for these services is under 150,000 a year.

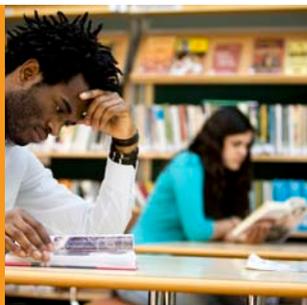
<sup>4</sup> Careers England (2012). Co-location: The Next Step Careers Service.



a false suppression of demand for the NCS. Low demand or demand that has only emerged from a particular section of the populace (e.g. the unemployed) is likely ultimately to undermine the Service's political viability. Hence we need to work together to seek out every opportunity to enhance awareness of the NCS amongst the wider general public.

- 4.5. If the Service is to fulfil its potential, it needs to invest resources in marketing its services. While we welcome the community engagement activities that are being undertaken in many regions, the visibility of the Service would be helped by running a number of high-profile media campaigns focusing on different issues. For example, the Ministerial announcement (by John Hayes) to the House of Commons of a career health check at 50 has the potential to capture the imagination of the press and the general public; limited media campaigns at the beginning of the year and late summer (when demand has historically been at its highest) would have the dual benefit of meeting demand and raising the profile of the Service. Given Treasury restrictions on marketing budgets, we would also recommend commercial sponsorship for such campaigns — an approach that has been very successful in the past.
- 4.6. Professionalising the NCS workforce.** The Government has made the commitment that it wishes to see 50% of the NCS workforce holding a relevant qualification at QCF Level 6 by 2015. This is welcomed; it is recognised that the new Career Development Institute (CDI) will play a pivotal role in realising this goal. Securing a relevant Level 6 qualification should also encourage registration with the CDI and ensure a formal commitment from careers practitioners to continuing professional development and ethical practice. The CSSA and its members are committed to the professionalisation of the whole of the careers workforce. We are keen to support both Government and the CDI in this respect, and would welcome regular dialogue on how we can contribute further to this goal.
- 4.7. Developing a community of practice.** The Government's support for the creation of a strong independent professional body (the Career Development Institute) embracing all careers professionals is to be welcomed as the means for maintaining standards and creating a broad community of practice, but it urgently needs start-up support if it is to become a reality. In addition, we welcome the work being undertaken by NCS prime contractors (and many sub-contractors) with regard to ongoing CPD, in particular their commitment to realising the Level 6 targets. We also believe that there is a need to create a 'community of practice' between NCS staff working for different employers across the country. Such a community would make a significant contribution to the CPD activities of all NCS providers as well as to the quality, understanding and sharing of good practice between practitioners generally. Learning how things work in other areas can bring another perspective to the work of individual practitioners in their own areas and can be an important dynamic in improving the quality of provision.
- 4.8. Web development.** Low levels of investment in the NCS website, which has so far received very limited attention and development funding, need to be addressed. The website has many good features, including some strong content (though it is far from user-friendly for younger users), but includes too much material drawn across from the old Next Step site, without updating or redesign.
- 4.9. We need to review how expertise can be invested in the development of the website, its associated social media channel and the courses database. The site provides a strong base but currently reproduces very similar content to other careers websites and does not make good use of cross-linking and referral to the best resources that are available elsewhere. Furthermore, it is too static and not strongly informed by local career and labour market information. There would be substantial value in developing the site's conceptual coherence, investing in content creation and facilitating interaction with the site through social media.
- 4.10. Integration of the face-to-face, telephone and web channels.** An important element of the service design of the NCS is the way in which it offers three channels through which careers support can be accessed (face-to-face, telephone, web). This element of the Service is comparable with leading world-class practice,





and it is important that the three-channel approach continues to be developed. More needs to be done to integrate the different channels of the service, and to support the customer journey between these different channels. For example, the 'About Us' section of the website needs to include references to the face-to-face advisory service; and whilst the website directs those who want to contact an adviser to call the telephone service, we need to explore how to enable some users to make contact directly. It would be valuable to review the linkages and seek ways to enhance them, e.g. exploring how the professional expertise in the face-to-face service might be harnessed in the form of web content.

## 5. Developing the service

**5.1. Extending co-location to build publicly accessible careers hubs.** There would be value in the NCS extending its range of partners to broaden its visibility. Early in the development of the Service, for example, John Hayes suggested that it would be co-located with a wide range of organisations. While this vision has been implemented to some extent, there is room for it to be developed much further, through the creation of careers hubs in libraries, further education colleges, citizens' advice services, places of worship, community centres, supermarkets and shopping centres. Locating independent NCS careers advisers in such locations could bring significant added value to the NCS (so long as care is always taken to maintain impartiality, quality control and confidentiality). Consideration should also be given in this respect to the needs of young people outside schools and colleges: the closure of Connexions centres has resulted in many young people (both in and out of work) having nowhere to go to seek further career support.

**5.2. Co-ordinating the range of overlapping services providing career support.** There is currently a proliferation of unco-ordinated and potentially wasteful funding initiatives, with DfE, EFA, SFA, DBIS and DWP all working too frequently in isolation, and with poor co-ordination of funding from sources such as the National Lottery. We should explore how the NCS might be used as the provider of 'first choice' by all government departments in areas related to the Service's distinctive goals and values, rather than launching separate initiatives with wasteful tendering and duplicated contract management: this would make sound economic sense for the Exchequer as well as for individuals, employers and the wider economy.

**5.3. Ensure quality and value.** It is important to ensure that quality standards are embedded both within the NCS and across the careers market, as part of the government's 'market-making' role. The existing requirement to meet the Matrix Standard for IAG currently applies to all NCS prime and sub-contractors. It needs to be established as the national benchmark for the careers sector, to encourage private providers to engage with quality assurance and thereby build consumer confidence in the services offered. This would make it easier not only to establish the NCS brand but also to develop viable platforms to extend the brand beyond its current levels of penetration (see 6.5 below).

## 6. Longer-term options: towards a strategic role for the NCS

**6.1.** Currently the remit of the NCS is largely as a delivery organisation: NCS providers are funded to deliver careers services to individuals. In the longer term, however, the NCS could adopt a much more strategic role in supporting the education and employment system and in the development of a wider careers support market. It is important that consideration be given now to these longer-term options. Possibilities to consider include:

**6.2. Fund the NCS to take on a stronger capacity building role.** The NCS could be developed as a resource for innovation, knowledge support (LMI) and capacity-building for other organisations. In this model the NCS would be seeking to empower other organisations to deliver strong and quality-assured career support, rather than seeking to deliver all services directly to clients.

**6.3.** In relation to schools and colleges, for example, it would be possible for the NCS to take on the kind of capacity building approach adopted for the Careers Service in New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> There are widespread concerns about the way in which



<sup>5</sup> See Watts, A.G. (2007). Career Services: a Review in an International Perspective, pp.40-44. Wellington, New Zealand: Career Services.



young people are or are not being sufficiently prepared for their futures; the NCS could play an invaluable role in assisting every school through supporting career learning and bringing up-to-date local labour intelligence into every school. This role would be particularly timely given the transfer of responsibility for career guidance to schools and the collapse of Connexions as a national service.

6.4. The NCS could also be supported to take on a parallel capacity-building role with employers. Much career development takes place while people are employed. Employers provide individuals with a framework and resources for their professional development, often through line management, HR management and staff development processes. There would be value in the NCS building expertise in career development within the workplace and providing a mechanism for the transfer of good practice between employers, as well as offering a resource for employers and employees with acute career development needs, e.g. redundancy.

**6.5. Opening up the NCS brand.** Raising the visibility and profile of the NCS has already been mentioned as a key issue. The stature and reach of the Service could be further enhanced by developing a model for brand extension. Options here might include:

- Opening up use of the NCS brand so that providers in the Service could use it to take their services to organisations (including schools and employers) and individuals willing to buy charged-for career guidance services.
- Franchising out the NCS brand and associated collateral to organisations, which would pay the Government a fee. The organisations would earn their income from customers, whether schools, adults or others. This would allow a wider range of providers to operate as part of the Service.
- Extending the boundaries of the NCS to cover all quality-assured career development provision delivered by qualified careers professionals. This would provide a strong incentive for private providers to engage with quality assurance, with a common brand as a basis for marketing and public visibility.

6.6. Such steps would be in line with the OECD statement that, although access to career guidance is a public as well as a private good, wider adoption of market-based funding methods could allow provision for adults to expand rather than contract, by recognising the value of quality-assured services within the private sector and promoting them through association with the NCS brand. In such a mixed funding model, the OECD indicated three roles for government:

- To stimulate the market in order to build its capacity.
- To assure the quality of services, both to protect the public interest and to build consumer confidence.
- To compensate for market failure, especially in the case of high-need groups unable to pay.<sup>6</sup>

The NCS could play a key role in supporting the Government in these respects.

## 7. Key recommendation

7.1. The CSSA and its member organisations welcome and support the NCS. We wish to play our part in helping the Service to develop and become more successful in assisting people in their lifelong learning and work pathways. This paper has been prepared in this spirit. We suggest that the paper be addressed by the National Careers Council and that the Skills Funding Agency/DBIS be invited to make a formal response to the issues outlined here. In particular, we recommend that the NCC should examine in-depth the feasibility and desirability of the strategic longer-term issues set out in Section 6 of this paper, leading to a public statement from the Government about the future vision and strategy for the NCS.

Convened under the auspices of the CIHE, the Careers Sector Stakeholders Alliance 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.

Chair: Sir Martin Harris

Convening Committee: Keith Herrmann (Convenor), Ian Borkett (TUC), Vivienne Brown (Scotland), Margaret Dane (AGCAS), Sarah Finnegan-Dehn (Careers Wales), Paul Holme (British Chambers Manchester), Prof. Tony Watts

Tel: 079 00 697 544

Email: kherrmann@me.com



<sup>6</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap, pp.120-121. Paris: OECD.