

Department for Education and Skills
Connexions Service
Advice and guidance for all young people



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL
HC 484 Session 2003-2004: 31 March 2004

executive summary



- 1 Connexions is at the heart of government policy to improve the skills base and increase participation in education and training. Prior to the launch of the Connexions Service, the proportion of 16-18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training had remained fairly constant for some years at about 10 per cent, or approximately 181,000 people¹. As adults, these young people are much more likely than their peers to earn less in work, to be in poor physical health, and to have a criminal record. Non-participation at 16-19 is also a major predictor of unemployment at 21 and teenage motherhood.
- 2 The Connexions Service, which the Department for Education and Skills launched in England² in April 2001, radically changed the way that young people are supported during their transition to adulthood (**Figure 1**). Through providing impartial advice and guidance, Connexions aims to help all young people aged 13-19 (and 20-24 year olds with learning difficulties and disabilities who are yet to make the transition to adult services) make the right choices, giving them the opportunity to learn the skills they need to make a

1 How advice and guidance for young people has changed since the introduction of Connexions

	Before Connexions	Now
Access to a careers adviser	Advice was supplied by careers advisers who visit the school. The careers advisers tended to hold a career interview with most pupils in the school. In 1998, policy changes focused the work of careers advisers on young people deemed to be 'most in need'.	Schools identify young people in need of support and arrange for them to see a Personal Adviser. Young people may choose to contact Personal Advisers themselves, for example via their school or college, by calling the Connexions Direct helpline or by visiting a Connexions one-stop shop. There is a presumption that not all young people need to see a Personal Adviser.
Getting other types of advice	Young people needing advice on issues such as drugs, sexual health and financial matters needed to seek out specialist advice.	Personal Advisers can offer access to advice on a wide range of issues of concern to young people.
The role of schools	Schools had a duty to deliver a curriculum based programme of careers education. They also had a duty to provide the careers service with access to young people in order to provide careers advice and guidance.	Schools still have a duty to deliver a curriculum based programme of careers education. At present this applies to Years 9-11 but from September 2004 will apply to years 7-11. They also have a duty to provide the Connexions Service with access to young people in order to provide careers advice and guidance.
Performance targets	Careers services had input-focused targets, such as number of careers plans completed.	Connexions has outcome-based targets, such as reduction in number of young people who opt out of education, employment and training.

Source: National Audit Office

¹ Office for National Statistics/Department for Education and Skills Statistical Release SFR 31/2003.

² In Scotland and Wales, careers services for young people are delivered by Careers Scotland and Careers Wales respectively. These organisations provide careers advice for both young people and adults.

success of their adult lives³ and prepare for their future careers. It may also provide guidance on other issues which have traditionally been barriers to employment or undertaking education or training such as substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and youth offending. The service costs some £450 million per year. This is around double the budget of the careers services it replaces, but with a wider remit.

- 3 Partnership working is key to Connexions. Across England, 47 Connexions partnerships have been established between April 2001 and April 2003. The management boards for each partnership include a wide range of agencies providing help to all young people, aiming to provide a single integrated youth support service. Partnerships commonly include organisations such as social services, youth offending teams, careers companies, youth services, local authorities and drugs action teams. To ensure that young people are not 'falling through the gaps', Connexions aims to maintain a comprehensive tracking system for young people aged 13 to 19.
- 4 A new profession of Connexions Personal Advisers is being recruited and trained to provide advice and guidance to young people. Personal Advisers are not expected to be experts in all fields, but are able to identify individuals' needs, supply directly or broker the services they need and monitor their progress to ensure they are getting the necessary support. **Figure 2** shows the different ways in which a young person can contact Connexions to obtain advice.

2 How to get advice and guidance from Connexions



Source: National Audit Office

³ Connexions: the best start in life for every young person, Department for Education and Skills, 2000.

- 5 Connexions is intended to help all young people and is concerned that young people should regard it as being there for everybody, not just for those with problems. Within the context of this universal service, the key objective for Connexions is to reduce the proportion of young people aged 16-18 not in education, employment or training by 10 per cent between November 2002 and November 2004. Connexions also contributes to a wide range of cross-cutting targets.
- 6 This report examines:
- **the extent to which Connexions is making progress towards meeting its quantified objectives (Part 2)**, including statistical analysis of the reasons why performance varies between partnerships;
 - **the extent to which Connexions is meeting its wider objectives of providing a good quality advice and support service for all 13-19 year olds (Part 3)**, including surveys of 1,000 secondary schools and 150 Further Education colleges; and
 - **whether Connexions has built effective partnerships with the other agencies that serve young people (Part 4)**, based on visits to ten Connexions partnerships, five Government Offices of the Regions, and seven partner agencies and departments.

Meeting the quantified objectives of the Connexions Service

- 7 Connexions is on course to meet its objective of reducing the proportion of young people aged 16-18 who are not in education, employment or training by ten per cent between November 2002 and November 2004. The proportion fell by 8 per cent in established phase 1 and 2 partnership areas between November 2002 and November 2003, and 3 per cent overall taking the newer phase 3 partnerships into account. The partnerships we visited are confident of meeting the target by November 2004.
- 8 There are wide variations in performance between partnerships. The statistical analysis we used to determine the reasons why some partnerships have been more successful than others showed that the only statistically significant factor is the percentage of young people who were not in education, training or employment (NEET) at the time that the partnership was launched. All things being equal, those partnerships that recorded higher percentages of NEET at launch achieved larger reductions by November 2003.
- 9 Connexions has significantly improved the quality of information about the education, employment and training activity of 13 - 19 year olds. Development of a national information system which, by September 2004, will be extracting data from partnerships' databases, has helped to improve accuracy. The new system provides the most complete national picture to date. In developing their databases, partnerships recognised the importance of complying with data protection legislation and some had been slower to move on from establishing detailed data-sharing protocols to actual data-sharing.

- 10 As partnerships identify more young people who are not in education, employment or training, they will find it harder in the short term to meet their target of an overall reduction in the number of such people. For example partnerships have worked hard to obtain data on young people from partner agencies, with varying results. Where they have received good cooperation, they have often become aware of young people who are not in education, training or employment but who were previously unknown to the Connexions Service. In the short-term, this valuable work makes it harder for the partnerships to achieve their targets, especially those in their first year of operation when the number of 'new' young people identified is at its highest.
- 11 Connexions partnerships have well developed but diverse systems for identifying young people requiring intensive support. Personal Advisers invest substantial amounts of time and effort in supporting those with multiple barriers to education, employment and training but it is not always clear whether this has been an effective use of their time. There may come a point when further investment will cease to be cost-effective. Partnerships would benefit from greater analysis of interventions by Personal Advisers to establish the effectiveness of their work and to ensure they are deployed in a way that provides the best outcomes.
- 12 Some partnerships consider that the focus on the participation target detracts from the other valuable work that partnerships do. The Department has sought to clarify how the service to all young people should be delivered, but has found it hard to develop performance indicators to measure their success. The research they have commissioned into customer satisfaction could provide a good baseline for measuring how well partnerships are delivering the universal service.
- 13 The Department recognised that some schools feared a withdrawal of resources and therefore agreed transitional arrangements during the first year of Connexions to ensure that schools received at least the same level of help as they received from the careers service. To provide a safeguard within the system for individual schools, the Department issued guidance to partnerships that all schools should receive a minimum level of one day per week contact time with a Personal Adviser. Although Connexions holds no definitive data to show whether the guideline has been implemented for every school, our survey of schools found that the majority were receiving the minimum level of support. Only 13 per cent of schools (compared to 24 per cent prior to Connexions) reported an allocation that amounts to less than one day a week. We found that while overall resources provided to schools have increased by a mean of 117 hours per school per year, around half of schools report a reduction in the time they receive from Personal Advisers. The reduction varied from one day per year to three days per week. The evidence suggests that there has been a significant redistribution of resources between schools.



Rachel - Personal Adviser

A graduate with a Personal Adviser Diploma and careers guidance qualifications, Rachel works in an Education Out of School centre for children who can't be educated in mainstream. She also works within a secondary school, and works with the NEET group in her area. She says, "As well as offering careers advice and guidance we offer personal support in a vast array of areas - for poor attendance, family problems, not keeping up with homework, drugs and alcohol, teenage health, pregnancy - any issue preventing them having a successful life in and outside school."

Providing a good quality advice and support service for all 13-19 year olds

- 14 Personal Advisers play a critical role in the success of the Connexions Service. They must provide advice that is accurate, comprehensive, timely, realistic and readily understood by young people. Where Personal Advisers do not have specialist knowledge, they must be able to refer young people to someone who can help them. Partnerships have successfully recruited some 7,722 Personal Advisers, 95 per cent of the expected complement.
- 15 To be fully qualified, Connexions Personal Advisers must have an appropriate professional qualification to at least skill level 4 /NVQ level 4 or equivalent in a relevant professional discipline (e.g. careers guidance; youth work; social work) and have completed either the Diploma for Personal Advisers or the Understanding Connexions training programme. The diploma, which is the expected qualification for Personal Advisers working with a caseload of young people with multiple difficulties, takes around eight months to complete and is equivalent in level of difficulty to the second year of a degree programme. Take up of training has been slower than expected. As at September 2003, 50 per cent of Personal Advisers were fully or partly trained.
- 16 Those young people who have had contact with Connexions Personal Advisers rate the service they received highly. A large-scale departmental survey found that most young people who had met a Personal Adviser felt that Connexions had a lot to offer and that it had helped inform them of their options.
- 17 There are far fewer Personal Advisers now than was envisaged when the Connexions Service was being planned. If Connexions operated to the caseloads that were deemed to be manageable at the pilot stage, they would require in excess of 15,000 Personal Advisers. However, Connexions does not have the financial resources to employ this number of Personal Advisers. This places more pressure on schools and colleges to play their role in providing good quality advice to young people who are still in education.
- 18 Our survey of schools found that the majority feel that they do not have the capacity to provide appropriate levels of careers education and guidance for young people. At around two-thirds of schools, careers education and guidance is coordinated or delivered by staff without any formal qualifications in the field. Over a third of schools reported that staff are unable to identify and refer young people in need of specialist support. Two-thirds of schools consider that at present staff do not understand fully the role of Personal Advisers although a series of guidance notes to brief schools about the Connexions Service has been issued. The most recent publication, Building Connexions, a toolkit for the implementation of Connexions in schools was issued in March 2003. Some Connexions partnerships are working with schools to address these problems.
- 19 More than half of schools are satisfied with the contribution of Connexions to their school. While they are confident in the work that Connexions does with young people who most need specialist support, only half are satisfied with the level of response to the needs of other young people in schools. A high proportion of schools reported that they receive funding from their local partnerships to purchase guidance materials, though this is not mandatory under current contractual obligations. Colleges generally consider Connexions is having an input to a wide range of services, but their expectations of what Connexions should be doing are much higher. Areas in which more support would be appreciated include advice on sexual health issues and affordable housing.



- 20 Connexions is developing new ways for young people to access advice and guidance. For instance, Connexions Direct (www.connexions-direct.com) is a new service that provides information and advice on a wide range of topics via the telephone, the web, web chat facility, email or text message. Between April 2001 and August 2003, the service received 65,000 contacts from young people, mainly by telephone. The service will be available nationally by April 2004. In addition, over 400 one-stop shops bringing together a range of local services under one roof and 1,400 community access points for young people are open or planned by Connexions partnerships. On average, there are 40,000 visits to one-stop shops and community based access points each week.
- 21 Awareness of Connexions is paramount to its success. Following a £2.2 million national advertising campaign in summer 2003, departmental research found that 70 per cent of young people now have a basic awareness of the Connexions Service. More could be done to raise awareness among school staff of the range of advice and support the Service can offer in order to make appropriate referrals to the Service.

Building effective partnerships with other agencies



- 22 If Connexions is to succeed, it needs to build effective partnerships with other agencies. These partnerships should be based on trust, a clear understanding of each others' responsibilities and objectives, joint working to avoid duplication of effort, and sharing of resources and information. Services for young people should be coherent, so that by approaching Connexions, they can be confident of receiving the right advice from the most appropriate source.
- 23 The Connexions Strategy was launched with the joint commitment of seven Secretaries of State⁴. Where barriers to joint working have emerged, these have been local rather than national. The headquarters staff at the partner agencies and departments we consulted were broadly happy with their relationships with the Connexions Service and were clear about what Connexions wants to achieve. These partners did not feel that there were any structural reasons that would prevent Connexions partnerships working together with their staff at a local level. The partnerships we visited agreed that local relationships and personalities were the crucial factors determining how quickly they were able to move to true partnership working.
- 24 Partnership building and working at the local level has been successful. A MORI survey commissioned by the Department found that 78 per cent of stakeholders regard joint working between agencies providing services to young people in their areas as effective, compared with 40 per cent prior to the establishment of Connexions partnerships. A minority of stakeholders had concerns that resources were not allocated to the right services within the partnership, and that there was low awareness of the service in their area and confusion over what different services offered.

⁴ The secretaries of state who signed the Connexions strategy document represented the following departments: Social Security, Culture Media and Sport, Home Office, Environment Transport and the Regions, Education and Employment, Cabinet Office, and Health.

- 25 In most cases, partners regard relationships now as much better than when Connexions was first launched. Partners are clear about what they can expect from Connexions and are working well alongside them. Where problems still remain, the most common difficulty is the practical sharing of data on young people.
- 26 The relationship between Connexions partnerships and Local Learning and Skills Councils is a vital one in determining the success of the Connexions Strategy. Connexions partnerships must work with Local Learning and Skills Councils to ensure that learning opportunities in their area meet the needs of local young people. We found evidence of much goodwill between the bodies, but varying progress in the extent to which they share information. In the strongest partnerships, Local Learning and Skills Councils and Connexions work closely together to ensure that young people get the right opportunities at the right time. There were examples of innovative practices that could be replicated nationally, such as working to provide Further Education courses that start in months other than September.

Conclusion

- 27 The Connexions Service has made good progress in improving the way that young people receive advice and guidance. It provides good quality advice to young people who are seen by Personal Advisers, and is working well to build strong partnerships with other agencies. The proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training fell by 8 per cent in the established partnership areas between November 2002 and 2003, indicating that the Service is on track for achieving the target of a 10 per cent reduction in the proportion of young people not engaged in education, employment or training. This would be a significant step forward as the proportion has remained static for some years. The fact that 181,000 16-18 year olds were estimated to be outside of employment, education or training in 2002 (ONS/DfES First Release SFR 31/2003) demonstrates the importance of preventative work at an early stage in a young person's life. There is still a risk that not all young people who would benefit from advice are receiving it. This gap is due to Connexions operating with fewer resources than was originally anticipated, together with a lack of clarity regarding the respective role of schools and the Connexions Service in providing careers advice to young people. Closing this gap would help ensure that young people make the most of their opportunities.

Recommendations

28 Our findings and conclusions lead to the following recommendations.

The Department should:

- 1 **encourage partnerships to set local targets for reducing the level of young people not in education, training or employment that best reflect local conditions.** The ten per cent target is a national target, but all partnerships are expected to achieve it. While all the partnerships we visited were confident that they would achieve it, there were marked differences of opinion as to whether the target was sufficiently challenging. Each additional 1 per cent reduction nationally would mean 1,700 young people re-engaging in education, employment or training with economic savings of £165 million.
- 2 **use the data they now hold on young people and their case histories to analyse the optimum level of intervention for those who need intensive support.** The national database, when fully operational, will allow insights into how often young people leave education, training and employment, and for how long. This information could be used to explore whether the level and type of interventions by Personal Advisers has any influence on these outcomes. Such an analysis could inform the discussion on how far Connexions can expect to achieve a continued reduction in the percentage of young people who are not in education, employment or training.
- 3 **review whether schools have the capacity to provide adequate careers education and guidance to young people.** At present, not all schools are confident that all their pupils enjoy an appropriate level of support. The Department should identify the causes of this gap and ensure that all young people who need it have access to high quality, impartial advice and guidance. For example, it may be necessary to train a higher proportion of schools staff in qualifications that allows them to coordinate and deliver careers advice and guidance. It will also be essential to clarify the respective roles of Connexions and schools in providing careers education, advice and guidance.
- 4 **set a clear target for when the Department expects the majority of Personal Advisers to have completed Connexions specific training.**
- 5 **revise the current approach to funding partnerships so that partnerships have greater certainty over the budget they will receive over a three-year period.** At present, funds are allocated annually, so partnerships are wary of making long-term commitments to partners or making capital investments.
- 6 **develop measurable performance indicators for the full range of a partnership's activity.** These indicators could build on the research that the Department has already commissioned into customer satisfaction, looking at issues such as the value that young people place on advice and the perceived approachability and professionalism of Personal Advisers. It might be possible to include questions about the Connexions Service within existing omnibus surveys of young people.



Connexions partnerships should:

- 7 **continue to work with partner agencies to implement data-sharing agreements, learning from and replicating the successes that have already been achieved in some parts of the country.** Partnerships should, where possible, take advantage of web-based electronic data-sharing to enable information on young people to be shared systematically with local partners. The Department should also remain apprised of and contribute to the development of a unique identification number for young people, making it easier to track their progress.
- 8 **work with schools to ensure that all staff fully understand the role of Personal Advisers and know when to refer young people for specialist support.** Many Partnerships already work with schools to advertise the presence and role of Connexions in schools. The level of success for Connexions depends on the extent to which schools cooperate with Connexions to coordinate support mechanisms for young people.

Partner departments and agencies should:

- 9 **encourage front-line staff to cooperate fully with Connexions partnerships,** being aware that the Connexions Strategy is a cross-cutting approach that has been endorsed by seven secretaries of state. In particular, all staff involved in data-sharing with Connexions partnership should implement data-sharing agreements as soon as possible, learning from the successes that have already been achieved in some partnership areas within the framework of data protection legislation.

