

THE ADULT ADVANCEMENT AND CAREERS SERVICE AND ADULT LEARNERS: A NIACE POSITION PAPER (JANUARY 2008)

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an initial response to the proposal for an Adult Advancement and Careers Service as outlined in *Opportunity, Employment and Progression: making skills work*¹, and is a revision of the earlier NIACE Position Paper on the Adult Careers Service (November 2007). It outlines what we regard are the key issues and some possible questions to inform the government's thinking on service design.

Trials for the Adult Advancement and Careers service are planned for the next two years, with the service fully operational from 2010-11. The existing **learnirect** advice and **nextstep** services will be brought together within a new organisation, which will work in close partnership with Jobcentre Plus and a range of statutory and voluntary advice services. A policy framework for the development of the new service will be available early in 2008.

While NIACE remains supportive of the development of an Adult Advancement and Careers Service, there are some issues about the service as currently outlined which we would like to explore further, in particular:

- Previous reforms of Information, Advice and Guidance for adults have been well intentioned but often not achieved their goals. There are important lessons to be learned from earlier experiences.
- While the word 'universal' was used to describe the offer of the Adult Careers Service, we are aware that this is not being so widely used in the description of the Adult Advancement and Careers Service. We are concerned that the need to target and prioritise the unskilled, low-skilled and workless may be at the cost of wider access to a whole range of other adult learners. We are also concerned that the imposition of systems which apply access criteria can actually create barriers to the very priority groups they are intended to favour.
- Adults frequently seek guidance at a time of crisis, change or transition. It is important that any entitlement to the new service reflects this.
- A review of current quality assurance arrangements and workforce competency requirements will be necessary to meet the needs of the new service.
- In order to deliver the government's vision, planning arrangements should be based on the views of service participants: users, providers as well as policy makers (and their intermediary agencies).

¹ *Opportunity, Employment and Progression: making skills work*, DIUS/DWP, November 2007

2. ADULT GUIDANCE REVIEWS

Background

There have been a number of reviews of adult guidance provision over the last twelve years. There are important lessons to learn from each of them.

The 'Free to Enter Pay to Stay' model (FEPS)

A review in 1996 resulted in the 'Free to Enter Pay to Stay' (FEPS) model and the redefinition of guidance as a three-stage process: Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG). The basis of this approach was that *information* and *advice* would be free at the point of access, and more in-depth *guidance* services (where required) would be paid for by individuals through the development of a *guidance market*.

While a range of guidance initiatives were developed to meet the needs of specific priority groups – e.g. *enhanced services*; the *adult guidance pilots* and, more recently, *skills coaching* – the availability of a visible, accessible 'Guidance' market failed to materialise and the breakdown of information, advice and guidance into separate, discrete activities was found to be hard to implement.

National Policy Framework and Action Plan

In 2003, in response to the Skills White Paper (2003), the DfES *National Policy Framework and Action Plan on Information, Advice and Guidance for Adults* sought to clarify expectations and levels of service from the Information, Advice and Guidance offer in the following way:

'Information' within the context of the IAG programmes, means the provision of information on learning and work, without any discussion about the relative merits of the options, through:

- Printed materials such as leaflets.
- Audio-visual materials such as videos.
- Computer software on CD rom or via the internet.
- Verbal information to the client on a face-to-face basis or through local or national helpline services such as **learnirect** or worktrain.

'Advice': the provision of advice requires more interaction with the service user, usually on a one-to-one basis. It may require explanation of some of the information provided, how to assess and use information, and a recognition of when more in-depth services may be required.²

² *National Policy Framework and Action Plan*, 2003, paragraph 14, p. 8.

While 'Guidance' remained in the broad description of services within the framework it was not a defined part of the offer. This confusion was compounded by the fact that the IAG service became one of the main vehicles for the emerging policy priority of adults without Level 2 qualifications – i.e. *information* would be free at the point of access, with *advice* being rationed to those who had not achieved a first Level 2 qualification. As a consequence, a large number of adults who fell outside of this group were effectively excluded from face to face services.

A planned approach to a single brand also failed to materialise around this time, with the advice line remaining as **learnirect** and the face-to-face services taking on the **nextstep** brand. It has been argued that this separation has resulted in a targeted service in face-to-face work and a universal service in web-based and telephone advice and guidance.

Cross-government review of guidance for adults

The 2005 Skills Strategy is where the commitment to the current long-term ambition for guidance was laid out:

*'165. So this is our long term ambition: that everyone should be able to get help if and when they want it to take stock of where they are in their lives and their careers; to review where they would like to get to; and assess what steps they can take to get there. Some of that can be done through self-assessment, and many people will continue to rely on advice and guidance from informal sources and community groups. But some of it demands high quality, expert guidance, meeting each individual's needs.'*³

The Skills Strategy identified achievements in the development of an 'extensive infrastructure for information and guidance services', but also acknowledged that:

'168 ... at present, that infrastructure is not achieving anything like its full potential in providing high quality, individual information, advice and guidance for adults who want it. Too few people are aware of the services or do not think it would be relevant to their needs.'

*'169. The eventual goal is to build up this infrastructure to support adults to progress in their careers and their lives. This would be a universally available, highly respected, and well used service offering linked information on jobs, qualifications, training and related services such as childcare. It would make use of the existing wide range of web-based self-assessment and diagnostic tools, but would also give guidance online, over the telephone, or face-to-face for people wanting help to identify the best way of getting on. It could provide supplementary guidance services that people pay for, alongside a core of free services.'*⁴

³ Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work, HMG, 2005, Chapter 4, p.41, para 165

⁴ Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work, HMG, 2005, Chapter 4, pp. 42/43

As a result of these findings, the cross-government review of information, advice and guidance provision for adults was commissioned. The work of the review involved extensive mapping of existing research around adult guidance as well as consultation with the sector through workshops, newsletters and a review website. The result was the proposition for a new universal Adult Careers Service which would have the clear purpose of driving forward progression in learning, work and careers.

Learning from history

History illustrates that despite a raft of good intentions (and the development of some excellent practice via the phone and face-to-face services) the way that adult guidance has been funded, delivered and rationed over the years has often been at odds with the underlying commitments to ensuring **all** adults who want it will have access to high quality guidance.

NIACE believes that it is important that as far as the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service is concerned lessons are learned from the successes and failures of previous efforts to reform the provision of IAG for adults. This would include looking beyond adult guidance in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of Connexions, and beyond England in terms of Careers Scotland and Careers Wales.

3. LEARNING, SKILLS AND TRANSITIONS

Skills and qualifications

Where qualifications enable individuals to develop and progress they are both beneficial and essential. Where the acquisition of qualifications is part of a target driven agenda, however, there is a risk that the need to 'tick boxes' to meet targets will take priority over the commitment to the delivery of services which address individual needs and potential. The risk that has been put to us by practitioners is that performance targets related to qualifications might distort the impartiality of advice and guidance at the point of delivery.

The acquisition of skills that can be accredited through qualifications is only half of the story for adults and their employers. In a paper taken to the Guidance Review Working Group on what employers want from a universal IAG service for adults, a mixture of different types of 'skills' were listed: people with the right attitude; good communications skills; an ability to work productively in a team; specialist and technical skills; and managerial skills.

Some of those listed can be gained through the acquisition of qualifications; others require a broader approach to learning and development. All are necessary (to differing degrees) if individual adults are to be able to progress and advance within an increasingly complex and changing labour market.

NIACE believes that an integrated, developmental approach to the acquisition of skills is necessary; one that effectively balances the learning needs and interests of the individual with the needs of the employer and the achievement of government targets. While a qualifications-driven agenda is an important response to the skills needs of the economy, it is only part of the solution.

Transitions across the lifespan

NIACE recognises and welcomes the commitment to a lifelong approach to guidance, but remains concerned that the need to prioritise and target within constrained resources will limit the extent to which the Adult Advancement and Careers Service offer will be available to **all** adults. It is notable that the term 'universal' is not as widely used when describing the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service as it was with the Adult Careers Service.

Individuals move both between and through different life stages and transitions across a lifespan, some of which are fixed (e.g. from learning to work, from work to retirement) and some of which are unplanned (e.g. redundancy, divorce, bereavement, unemployment). In a paper presented to the Annual Conference of British Educational Research in September 2007⁵ Lynch and Field assert that these transitions are becoming more frequent and more difficult to negotiate:

'It is widely asserted that transitions are both more frequent and more troubling experiences than in the past.... Transition has reportedly become a constant, whether experienced directly and personally or indirectly as part of the contexts of everyday life. Moreover, the direction and timing of transitions is less and less tied in predictable ways to clearly defined passages from one role or status to another; on the contrary, change may be unexpected and often unwanted; it can be seen as an inevitable aspect of life in a dynamic, highly competitive, largely globalised market economy.'

Transitions and mobility in changing labour markets are also addressed in work undertaken on the Australian Blueprint for Career Development⁶, where the case is made for a lifelong approach to career guidance which acknowledges that:

- *Lifelong learning occurs intentionally or unintentionally.*
- *The world of work is undergoing constant and rapid change.*
- *Individuals change and develop throughout life.*
- *Transition from school is but one of several transitions individuals will make in a lifetime.*

⁵ 'Getting stuck, becoming unstuck – transitions and blockages between learning contexts', Lynch and field, University of Stirling; a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), 6-8 September 2007.

⁶ *Managing Life, Learning and Work in the 21st Century: Issues informing the design of an Australian Blueprint for Career Development*, 2006, McMahon, Patton, Tatham, p.11.

- *Skills and knowledge learning at school will need repeated updating.*
- *The work goals of individuals change with increased self-awareness and skills development, awareness of new and emerging work opportunities, and lifestyle accommodations.*
- *Individuals need to be responsive to their own needs as well as the needs of other and availability of work opportunities.*
- *Individuals may seek the services of career professionals several times in a lifetime for assistance with career development issues.*

In his lecture to the Fabian Society⁷ in 2004 John Denham MP (now Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills) very much took the service user's perspective when he outlined the complexity of self-improvement pathways, the role of the workplace in progression and advancement and the importance of designing services around the needs of individuals:

'The paths to self-improvement for those working in smaller companies, in some large private companies, or in the worst jobs in the public sector, are likely to be complex and different for each individual. People are starting from very different types of employment; different levels of skills; and different senses of what they can achieve

Some could move on to better jobs....

There will be new opportunities in the expanding public sector.

Many will, though, need to get more from the work they currently have.

For some, it may be the ability to assert the employee rights that Labour has made available.

For others, it may be that their best opportunity lies in the expansion and development of their employer's business...

Others may have reached the full potential of work for their current employer. For them the need is to develop a strategy for moving forward to find a better job with better prospects, or perhaps to start their own business.

In short, it is a challenging task for anyone to undertake, let alone someone who lacks the confidence and self-belief to think they can move forward.

Most crucially, services are not designed around the needs of the individuals. No matter how good the co-ordination between agencies with their own targets and agendas, it may remain impossible for the individual to navigate their way through the system. It is one thing to signpost people to existing services and provision; another to shape that provision around them.'

⁷ 'Making work work: creating chances across the labour market', John Denham Lecture to the Fabian Society, 17 May 2004.

Complex needs will often require complex responses by practitioners appropriately trained and qualified, and with an understanding of the learning, skills and labour markets. Encouraging, motivating and enabling are key features of adult career guidance. While NIACE supports the prioritising of the low-skilled, unskilled and the workless, if the new service is to be truly client-centred it will need to be accessible to individuals outside of these groups who are facing difficult or challenging choices or transitions.

4. KEY ISSUES FOR THE OPERATING MODEL

Developing specialist and generalist provision

Both the 2005 Skills Strategy and *World Class Skills* emphasise the importance of providing a service that '*will ensure that everyone is able to access the help they need*'. Fulfilling such a commitment requires a diverse offer, not a single one, and some individuals will have very specific needs. For example:

- Migrant workers, eligible asylum seekers and refugees.
- Older workers.
- Mid-life career changes.
- Adults with mental health conditions.
- Adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Ex-offenders.
- Guidance (planning) for retirement and old age.
- Accreditation of previous experience.

Specialist services will need to be made available, either by signposting to discrete services or as an integral part of the wider offer. NIACE is keen to ensure that the needs to those adults with literacy, language and numeracy needs are expertly supported by the new service. NIACE recognises the complexity of putting together 'packages' of support for people with, for example, learning difficulties ('learning disabilities' in social care terms) and that this is a specialist job. However this approach needs to have an adult careers guidance voice at the centre of it.

Delivering a standardised menu

The original proposal for an Adult Careers Service included a standardised menu of services, intended to ensure that the service offer would be the same regardless of where, when or how an individual made their first point of contact. We welcome, in particular, the development of a range of web-based diagnostics (skills screening/skills health checks).

We understand that the offer for the Adult Advancement and Careers Service will be more diverse, drawing together a range of support on jobs, skills, financial issues, childcare, housing and other personal issues:

*'We will invite a range of advice organisations in up to 10 localities to work closely with us in developing a joined-up advice service, covering issues such as housing, employment rights and childcare as well as skills and jobs.'*⁸

While we welcome this recognition of the often complex needs of adults wishing to progress or advance, we would urge that the **core** career guidance offer remains clear, and that the concept of a standardised menu of services is retained.

Quality and workforce competency

LSC-funded provision is currently quality assured through LSC contractual requirements, the **matrix** Standard and Ofsted, some of which have conflicting requirements, and none of which is likely to meet the needs of the new service. Also, any future quality assurance brand needs to be public facing and actively promoted so that individual users know how to identify a quality assured service which is staffed by appropriately trained and qualified staff.

It is also NIACE's view that a complete review of the initial training and continuing professional development arrangements for the current IAG guidance workforce needs to be undertaken, to make it fit for purpose for the new offer. A Sector Qualifications Strategy needs to be developed. At present it is not even clear which Sector Skills Council is responsible for the adult careers advice sector. NIACE's position is that it should be within the footprint Lifelong Learning UK.

Reviews have been undertaken in the past but never implemented. Some of the suggestions that have emerged from previous reviews have been the development of:

- Core skills alongside specialist knowledge (enabling practitioners to select an appropriate cluster of modules).
- Specialist skills – e.g. for those working with migrant workers, older workers and in a range of other community-based provision.
- Specialist awards for those working in specific locations – e.g. Jobcentre Plus, further education colleges, higher education institutes and online learning centres.
- A personal adviser role.
- A mentoring/advocacy role.
- Vocational 'champions' – recognising the value of career guidance for specific jobs or careers.
- Clear links and career pathways to the training and continuing professional development framework for young people's services.

⁸ *Opportunity, Employment and Progression: making skills work*, DIUS/DWP November 2007 p. 23

- The importance of all training and development being underpinned by a sound understanding of the principles and theoretical constructs that underpin the career guidance process.

Importantly, the private careers counselling sector and staff in higher education institutions must be drawn into the wider IAG workforce. NIACE would also like to highlight the need for regular professional supervision for those doing guidance work. This need should be addressed at the outset in terms of human resource planning for the new service.

Careers education and career management skills

We believe the development and promotion of the ability of individuals to acquire their own career management skills should be a key feature of the Adult Advancement and Careers Service. Enabling individuals to understand what is required in the management and development of their own careers empowers them to take responsibility for their progression in the future. One of the ways this can be achieved is through the provision of careers education (and advancement) programmes, which would include:

- Self-reflection and review.
- Skills auditing (including the potential for APEL).
- Encouraging aspiration.
- Managing change.
- Making decisions.
- Opportunity awareness.
- Assessing risks (including financial risks).
- Understanding labour markets.

There is considerable experience of this type of programme in parts of the adult learning and training sector, and we would welcome the opportunity to explore how this level of service could be delivered as part of the wider Adult Advancement and Careers Service offer.

Entitlement, values and standards

The Adult Advancement and Careers Service will require clear statements of entitlement; an underpinning code of values or principles; robust quality assurance arrangements; a workforce trained and qualified to an appropriate level and transparent access arrangements for individual users.

Branding for the new service will be an important feature of both the quality assurance arrangements and marketing approaches.

5. QUESTIONS TO INFORM SERVICE DESIGN

NIACE is pleased that there is now a commitment to ‘push on’ with service development and try out approaches. However our analysis of the **current** position of the proposed service raises a number of questions that we feel should be addressed in the **early stages** of service design.

What will the new service be called?

It has been noted that ‘advancement’ appears in lower case in recent documents, whereas in earlier iterations of policy ‘Careers’ is capitalised. Advancement, whilst having the benefit of being a relatively fresh concept, is not the most accessible term and might conceivably be regarded as too generic. Perhaps it would be best to get the concept of ‘adult careers’ in England right before pushing ahead into unknown territory.

What will be the service’s governing set of principles?

A lot of work has been done on this over the years by a number of agencies. NIACE believes that a set of open and transparent design principles should be published as soon as possible, building on the good work of those in the IAG Review developed with practitioners. As the policy environment has moved on since the IAG Review, it would be sensible to have some form of future-proofing for the new service so that new concepts and innovations can be readily assimilated into the service at a later stage.

What will be the transition arrangements from current services to the new service?

NIACE welcomes the government’s recognition of the successes of current brands such as **learn**direct and **next**step. We hope that proper transition arrangements will be put in place to ensure continuity and minimise disruption to service users.

How will staffing capacity and capability be planned for?

Through its close link with providers and practitioners, NIACE is aware that in terms of staffing and staff development 2010-11 is ‘tomorrow’. Adequate planning to ensure correct staffing levels and workforce skills needs to be in place. Government should work with employer and practitioner bodies to ensure this is planned for in an open and transparent way. Learning from the successes of work by para-professionals and volunteers will be important in terms of building on the work of Union Learning Representatives and Community Learning Champions.

How will the new service work with arrangements for IAG that is embedded in learning provision?

This is a central strand of the LSC’s policy objectives for IAG and needs to be considered alongside discrete provision for adults. This will ensure a more joined up service from the service user’s perspective.

How will the new service place information technology in the hands of the users to document and celebrate their achievements?

There is emerging practice in the use of Electronic Portfolios as tools for personal progression. NIACE supports innovative and creative ways of encouraging citizens to collate and present their existing knowledge, skills and experience.

How will the service link with those in other UK countries, English regions and localities?

In part this has been addressed by developments in Scotland, but there are issues in thinking through what the new service will look like in relation to all age services and strategies. Furthermore, enhanced roles for local authorities, through sub-national arrangements for economic development, and via IAG for early years, children and young people all need linking to service design. **We are conscious of moves towards an all age strategy (as opposed to service) for England. NIACE broadly supports this aspiration as long as the needs of adults is not seen as subsidiary to young people.**

When will existing evidence that supports the proposed model be published?

NIACE supports the case for publishing the final report of the IAG Review. We are conscious that many practitioners contributed professional time to this review and have been unable to see the final report. In view of the wider context of the proposed Advancement and Careers Service, subsuming the Review's evidence base in that of Leitch is widely misunderstood in the sector.

How will all participants in the new service be involved in its development?

Within the principle of co-design of public services, NIACE is interested in how government proposes to involve services users, practitioners, policy makers and planners in the process. We believe that such processes will give the proposed new service the best chances of success.

NIACE welcomes feedback on this paper and questions raised. We are aware that practitioners and adult learners will have other concerns and suggestions. Please do not hesitate to contact us.

Contact officers:
Mark Ravenhall
Mark.Ravenhall@niace.org.uk
Helen Plant
Helen.plant@niace.org.uk