

The Perspective of Connexions' Personal Advisors

9.1 Data sources

We were able to interview 14 of the Connexions' Personal Advisors who work in West Norfolk and also spoke to four Connexions-Norfolk managers. It was considered important to elicit the views of Connexions personnel in the light of their close and in many cases continuing relationships with NEET young people.

9.2 The importance of early intervention

One of the strongest messages coming out of the study as a whole was the belief that earlier intervention to support students at risk of becoming NEET was thought to be one of the most important priorities in terms of improving NEET outcomes, and this came through very consistently in terms of Connexions' PAs' perspectives on NEET issues:

- "It does actually start in their education probably from primary school... some people lose their motivation quite early so by the time we start working with them they are already in a mindset that thinks 'I'm just going to get a job'... but not realising the difficulties in this".
- "A lot of them have in effect dropped out before 16... we are working with them when they are virtually not working within school... they're being excluded from school a lot".
- "We tend to start with them at year 9 but for some of them, even year 9 is leaving it a bit late. A lot of the lessons and courses relating to jobs and transition don't appear on the curriculum until after year 9".
- "There's a lot of good practice in Special Schools.... I worked at one where anyone who came in was asked to talk about what job they did... it's so important to broaden their understanding of what choices and courses and jobs there are... it gets them thinking about the wider picture... at least starting to think about things... they start thinking about transition at an earlier stage.. because of reviews, it gets embedded. In some schools there are kids who don't really start thinking about it until year 11 and by then it's a bit of a rush.... They haven't done any background research".

- “I feel that more needs to be done in primary schools – the time of transition is crucial and should be targeted... learning habits and attitudes are acquired early... it’s too late if you start to address these in secondary schools or post 16”.
- “I’m supposed to work with 16 to 19 but unless I get them earlier than that I can’t do anything... at 16 they’re just... it sets people up to fail”.

9.3 Course provision

Several respondents felt that in terms of course provision, there were still “gaps and shortages” for students who were not “straightforward level 3” learners. In particular, it was felt that there were not enough apprenticeships available, and that there were many young people who might be particularly well suited to this progression route rather than college based courses. It was also felt that there was not always as much appropriate provision in terms of foundation courses. Some respondents intimated that they thought that there were still some students who were going for level 3 courses which they were not well equipped for, sometimes because of self-esteem factors, and sometimes because of parental pressure. One respondent suggested that a stronger “steer” would be helpful in terms of IAG. It was felt that there were some good E2E and work based learning courses, but often these were oversubscribed, and those laying on the provision would simply choose from the strongest youngsters available, leaving many young people disappointed.

- “You still seem to be getting pupils who are going on to do A level just because their mates are doing it... or because they sort of drift into it because it’s the main route and it’s still the high status route... there’s still a perception that the other stuff is for the thickies...”
- “There still aren’t the courses at foundation level that will help the ones that are really struggling...”
- “The college courses aren’t there at the lowest entry level”.
- “I’ve got one young man at the moment who wants to do horticulture and there is no entry level, you can only go and do NVQ Level 2 in horticulture, which means they do need GCSEs in order to get on to a horticulture course”.

- “You can sometimes get them on E2E but often they come out of that and just go back into being NEET again.... Good course but...”
- “The biggest problem is the kids with D to G grades, this is where the problem is, things like plumbing.... A lot of the boys want to do it but they can’t because they didn’t get the grades, so what courses are there for these pupils?”
- “There are some good work based learning programmes.... MTS do a very good one on carpentry and there are others which are OK but there aren’t enough places for all of them so they can be very selective... they pick the best ones and the others are left disappointed”.
- “Youngsters who have been in the PRU are even worse off often in terms of qualifications but they are quite positive when they leave at 16.... School has not been great for them but they think this is going to be a turning point... things will be different... they want to get a job but then there is nothing for them... it’s difficult and by Christmas they are starting to lose motivation”.

Several PAs commented on the very high levels of motivation of the young people who had recently come over to Norfolk from Eastern Europe (and contrasted this with the sometimes anti-education attitudes of the indigenous students). They wondered whether more might be done in terms of providing intensive out of hours/weekend English courses for these students, many of whom were desperately keen to do well but were held back by being limited in terms of their written and spoken English:

- “A lot of the EAL kids are some of the nicest I’ve ever worked with... they follow instructions to the bottom line... they are so keen and committed... not like the ‘why do we have to do this?’ that you get from some of the other kids. Once they get going in English they are away, but if they don’t get going and struggle, some of them end up going back”.

Several PAs made the point that there were some young people who were very difficult to find courses or work placements for because of the very severe nature of their problems:

- “Some won’t go out of the house... they are recluses... there are one or two the health services seem to have given up on... Some of them have big problems with health and housing that are more

important than jobs and courses... if people are homeless... It can be very difficult to get somewhere to live in the Kings Lynn area and often when they do get fixed up with somewhere they end up getting kicked out... it's hard to keep track of them and they go back into the cycle once again".

- "Another big group is the kids who pretty much stopped going to school in year 9 or year 10. They lose a lot of their social skills because of that. It's very difficult to get them engaged in anything. It's not true of all of them... some of them come in here (the Connexions Centre) and end up going off to college".

Another difficult issue with what were termed 'core' as opposed to 'transient' NEET was the influence they sometimes had on other members of a group. Their inclusion would sometimes deter other at risk youngsters from attending courses or sessions:

- "There are very difficult decisions to be made sometimes in terms of inclusion.... When Barry joined the group he started messing around with one of the other lads he knew and the whole atmosphere of the sessions changed. In the end I had to tell him not to come in for the good of the rest of the group".

Another important point for consideration arising out of our interviews with PAs and some of the experienced tutors working with at risk youngsters was the importance of course pedagogy. There was a widely articulated feeling that it was not just a question of course content and specification, but of devising courses which were different in terms of learning approaches to "traditional" classroom based approaches. The majority of respondents did seem to feel that the development of diplomas would improve educational opportunities for potential NEET youngsters, but only if they provided a more active, "learning by doing" approach. PAs who worked with traveller pupils mentioned a very good college course which had the potential to be very successful with traveller pupils, but which lost some students because the first two weeks of the course were very much classroom based and traditional in approach: "As soon as they get in to the actual brick laying, or whatever it is, you know, the practical stuff then they stick to that".

There was also thought to be an issue in terms of the timing of courses and (perhaps unsurprisingly), the inability to provide “roll-on, roll-off” provision for transient NEET youngsters. Together with the absence of ideal progression routes, the hiatus between courses and projects was felt to be a major problem in sustaining the momentum in keeping youngsters “on track”, and not giving them the excuse or opportunity to lapse back into “bad habits”. This again brings up the point about how important effective transition support is to these young people:

- “With a lot of E2E courses, there’s a big gap.... often months... before anything is available in terms of college courses... they lose interest. E2E needs to be extended or some bridging activity put in place so that they are within sight of the starting line at the college. If they finish in April... that leaves a gap of several months”.

In addition to timing of courses, it was felt that there were wide variations in terms of the quality of E2E courses. Agencies which were mentioned as being “high quality” or which at least elicited positive comments from PAs included Education and Youth Services, The Prince’s Trust, Deerpark House, MTS, The Foyer and Claxton House. Some thought might be given to exploring exactly what it is that these providers do which makes them examples of good practice, so that this good practice can be made more transparent.

9.4 The effect of targets

Several respondents felt that the higher profile accorded to NEET issues and the targets set for NEET reduction had been helpful in focusing more attention on helping pupils who were not as likely to progress straightforwardly to level 3 courses, although it was also felt that some schools had responded more proactively and energetically than others. There was an understanding that NEET reduction was not the only target which schools were having to meet. There was a feeling that for some schools, improving the academic profile of the institution was a more urgent priority than NEET reduction. There was also an understanding that for National Challenge schools, the fact that they were threatened with closure if they did not meet the 30% A-C pass rate at GCSE led to pressure to concentrate resources and attention on those pupils who were

"in the ball park" of 5 A-Cs (see Beadle, 2009, for further development of this point). However, in some respects, targets were felt to be unhelpful, and resulted in time being wasted in managing the figures rather than doing things that really made a difference, or short term expedients which were designed more for cosmetic reductions in NEET figures at particular points in the year:

- "You are aware sometimes when you are asking them about a destination that you need a result... you just need to get them to say something that means they are sorted... there isn't always time to discuss appropriateness.... You've just to move on and get them all done for the audit date".
- "There are some three week courses that seem to do nothing more than just getting them off the register... what message does that send to them, if that's all there is on offer.... One of them said to me 'They don't do courses for people like us'".
- "Some of the short term courses.... the three weeks here.... ten weeks there... the things that help with the figures but aren't going anywhere... it just gives them the feeling of a big nasty circle... they don't think it will lead to anything and neither do we".
- "You find that you are pushing them on to things and you get worried that you are not really doing a good job".
- "We've got a target... make sure they all have an identified destination.... You can be so focused on getting that out of them... getting that target fulfilled.... rather than genuinely taking time to make sure they are making the best choice... pressure, pressure.. If we hit the target they will give us more government money..."
- "The 5 A to C thing does get through to the kids... it contributes to some of them making the wrong choices..., I can do level 3, I can do A Levels, big badge, big tick, well done, mummies are going to love them, you know, and they're in the, in the cool thing now, because, I mean, it's not cool to work hard in high school, so suddenly you're a real thicko if you didn't get 5, so it's not cool not to do level 3, you must be thick..."
- "The government now say that it's got to include English, maths and ICT, but at the bottom line you've got kids who are not going to access all of that and they're the ones that'll be on the streets, and nobody's going to care about them, unless we put on courses that they actually want to achieve in".

OWN might consider how to ensure that best use is made of targets relating to NEET. The Nuffield Review of 14-19 provision noted that the sector had been "subject to many superficial targets that have failed to address underlying problems" (Nuffield Review, 2006: 15). Is it possible to refine the systems so as to keep the targets which are generally thought to be helpful, whilst reducing the time and effort spent in pursuing targets that are thought to be at least to some degree about massaging the statistics relating to NEET issues?

9.5 IAG and induction issues

This appeared to be an area where there was some good practice but where there were some variations in the quality of IAG and induction and transition processes. PAs were keen to stress the effectiveness of visits, "taster courses" and face to face discussions and question and answer sessions between tutors and potential students but felt that there were still some cases of students making ill-informed "brochure choices":

- "I don't believe that they, sometimes they're aware, in the prospectus they see some pictures, the, the actual prospectus, especially the college, is very wordy... very, very wordy, it doesn't actually describe some of the courses actually... they just think they, that they know what it is that they're going to do, like for instance, like Art and Design, they think they're going to draw all day, don't realise there's another aspect of it, you know, and... so quite often it's, it's the lack of information beforehand, because, as I said to you, I'm a great believer in transition, and I do think that they should have more than just a filling of the application form and then go to an interview. The Open Day at this particular college is not actually very informative either, it's basically showing, showing them the building, they need to be going in to different departments, speaking to teachers, finding out exactly what the course content is. But the Open Day is just showing them the building. So, you know, there's that could be improved I think a lot as well".
- "The most important thing is that I wish schools would take their young people to visit places like the college, take them in to an

individual department, so they get to talk to the teachers and tutors”.

- “What they want to do is go and have a wander, have a look around, sit in the refectory, you know, this is where you go, this is the reception, this is where you pick up your forms, you know...”
- “Because they’ve not had guidance they sometimes make bad choices and we know that because we pick them up.... They’ve chosen A level... they’ve gone along with their mates, or their mum or dad say ‘that will be good’, but they haven’t researched these subjects and they don’t get that help unless they ask for it”.
- “It is a lot about guidance... some of them really haven’t talked to anyone about their choices and they are not confident enough to ask when they are not sure about things or don’t know enough to decide. You’ve got to be quite a confident person to do that”.
- Traveller students appeared to pose particular challenges in terms of culture clashes between traveller families and school systems. Two of the PAs who specialised in working with traveller young people stressed that although there were some schools and teachers who handled these issues very adroitly and sensitively, it was an area where good practice was not always disseminated across schools. It was felt that some teachers did not always realise the educational potential of traveller students because of these cultural differences. Some schools had got traveller parents to come in and do INSET work with staff to develop a better understanding of culture issues particular to traveller young people and this was thought to have been very helpful and valued by both communities.

9.6 Perceptions of good practice and “what makes a difference”

Teachers’ skills of interactions with at risk young people.

Several of the PAs made the point that often it was adults’ skills of interaction with at risk young people which was one of the key determinants of whether advice and interventions had a positive effect. Often, one of the biggest variables on the course was who was running it... whether the tutor could create a good, positive working atmosphere with

the group and get them to feel relaxed about talking about things, with a degree of mutual respect. In several cases, courses worked not because of the content, specifications or level of the course, but because of the rapport between tutor and student, which meant that the student would genuinely commit to trying to learn. As one PA remarked of a one day course for NEETs in the west of the county:

“She’s great, since she’s been with the group she’s really motivated them, she’s, you know, she’s got them coming out to her, they absolutely love her, you know, she’s done First Aid... you know, there’s young people here that didn’t think they could achieve at all, and it’s only because she’s just put the time in that, you know, they come for a few weeks here on the programme and it’s just, it’s just really building confidence and, and getting them to participate, you know, I mean it’s just working with them...”

The PAs felt teachers’ skills and commitment to working with NEET at risk youngsters was one of the variables that influenced some students’ susceptibilities to becoming disengaged from education; they felt that not all teachers either enjoyed working with at risk pupils or were committed to working with such pupils:

- “You still come across teachers who will say that they did not take on the job, you know, they took on a, a role of further education, they didn’t take on the job of teaching 14-year-olds or people with learning difficulties, you know, people with autism, or, you know...”
- “A lot of traveller pupils are actually very well motivated and keen to do well if they have teachers who are good with them and recognise that they like practical, active forms of learning... A lot of them are really bright kids but not all teachers recognise that”.
- “There are still a few teachers who shout at them.. who just stand and yell, and the young people that we work with again, you know, they’re not used to being shouted at, from about the age of 12 young travellers are instantly adults, making their own decisions, and, you know, if somebody tells them to do something without an explanation, and just being shouted at...”
- The quality of transition arrangements and support. Several PAs suggested that confidence and dependability were 'issues' with

some at risk students and that "moral support", reminders, someone at hand to help with queries and uncertainties, were all things that could help them "make it through" to a course or interview. They stressed that whereas some students could sort themselves out, there were some "who could go either way" depending on the amount of support offered.

As noted in section 9.5, the opportunity to visit the college or new institution and talk face to face with future tutors, meet other students who would be at the college and look round the social areas of the college was thought to be a major factor in getting students to "stick" with their plans. The college was particularly praised by the assiduousness of its support over helping students with their bus pass arrangements. Connexions' PAs and other Connexions' support workers often travelled with youngsters to interviews, helped them with phone calls and letters, and generally supported them in trying to ensure that they turned up on time and did not forget appointments, but it was acknowledged that there were limits to how much time they could spend with each person, and it was felt that youngsters often had good working relations with at least some of the support staff they had worked with in schools, and that more use might be made of such channels of support in transition periods.

Liaison, access and working relationships with schools

Although for obvious reasons the PAs were reluctant to pass negative comments about the schools they worked with, it was apparent that there were some schools where they felt there were particularly helpful arrangements for access, good communications, the facilitation of collaborative working to help with students who had quite serious and complex problems, and in terms of schools which seemed to value their role and potential helpfulness in working with at risk and less straightforward pathways for pupils. There was a feeling that their services were most valued in schools which had large numbers of pupils who would not be progressing through to A level courses, although it was clear that there were some schools of all "types" who went out of their way to be helpful in working collaboratively with the Connexions service. The following extracts attempt to give some indications of what PAs found

helpful or thought were elements of good practice in addressing NEET issues:

- "I think we are quite fortunate in this area, most of the Connexions' Coordinators we liaise with go out of their way to be helpful although there are perhaps some schools which feel that they can handle these issues through their own systems".
- "There are some schools where they go out of their way to try and make sure that pupils turn up if you are due to have an interview with them. A big bane of life working with NEET pupils is that they are not always the most reliable and they sometimes don't turn up to appointments. Occasionally you are left to chase things up yourself but some schools are above and beyond the call of duty in terms of the care they take to get the pupils there for us".
- "If definitely helps if there is continuity in terms of personnel... when you have worked in the school with the same person and you have established trust with them... they start to see you as part of the working day and you start getting a regular flow of referrals from year heads who can see that you might be able to help".
- "There are some schools who do have really good purposeful meetings with everyone there.... the school nurse.... other support workers.. a realistic plan is drawn up, it's recorded, actioned, followed up".
- "It's important that schools and colleges work together with Connexions... it would also be helpful to have a later cut off date so that they can change courses. At the moment they come to us saying that an A level isn't working, it's horrible and it's too late to change... that's something they could work on... quicker action and response when students realise they have chosen the wrong course".

9.7 What makes a good PA?

As with all other elements of the workforce involved in working with NEET or potentially NEET young people, some PAs may be more effective in their work than others. We spoke to experienced PAs, ones who came across as accomplished in their jobs, and who had been "recommended to us" as

good, experienced, effective personnel. We also spoke to several Connexions' managers and asked them what made an effective Connexions' PA, what would they be looking for at interview to appoint a PA, what advice would they give to someone starting out as a Connexions' PA? The following extracts attempt to give a representative view of the responses we received:

- "Diplomacy... not just with the kids but with the schools. It's very important to be careful in what you say and to weigh your words and feelings about situations carefully. It's very easy to upset a school and if you do that you are up against a brick wall. Don't get anyone's back up or it will be very difficult to work cooperatively with people in the school, either in terms of working with adults or getting the same access and opportunity to work with pupils".
- "Part of it is good judgement in terms of knowing when to leave people alone... when it is not a good moment. We've got over 100 young parents and young girls who are pregnant and sometimes they want help and sometimes they want to be left alone, they just want to enjoy being a mum".
- "More than anything, it's being a good listener... to both students and adults. Listening to what people say, keeping an open mind and not being too impatient to impose your own solutions and agendas, not being too pushy".
- "The number of times they say, 'You're the first person I've ever told this to'... that's the sort of person that you need to be... that means that they will be open to you and that they trust you. If they don't trust you, nothing you say will make any difference to them. More than anything you've got to have good interpersonal skills".
- "You've got to develop the ability to put them at ease. A lot of them are not very confident, they are nervous... it might be their first one to one interview... they might have very poor eye contact and be very awkward... You mustn't rush things".
- "It's partly about being really patient and determined, being prepared to go the extra mile with them and follow things up... go out of your way to be really helpful so that they can see that you are really on their side doing your best for them".

- “The job has changed and although it is obviously still about careers advice at one level, it is a world away from what that meant 20 years ago and the best PAs have grasped that and they realise that they are social workers, they are not just detached providers of information”.
- “Putting things to them in such a way that it’s just a suggestion.... Something for them to consider that they might not have thought of... and in the end they sort of come round to thinking about it for themselves... getting them to take some responsibility for their own actions and decisions”.
- “If you have your own agenda which you try to push too forcefully, too soon.... You’ve got to be patient. Let them talk a bit first and listen to what they say, take an interest. You might have to listen to them talking about their mobile phone for a bit...”
- “I think it helps to have a bit of real life experience... it you’ve worked with people in poverty, with problems... you understand them a bit better and you know how to talk to them more skilfully”.

One PA mentioned that when working in another county, there had been a system whereby PAs were able on occasion to spend modest amounts of money..... often under £5.... to buy a snack or the ingredients for a basic meal for a NEET client. It was felt that the benefits of this form of help were often out of all proportion to the sums of money involved in terms of allowing positive relationships to develop, and securing time to talk at length to clients who might otherwise have been elusive and evasive. The suggestion was made that a very modest system based on these principles might be helpful in dealing with some “core” NEET young people. Several PAs felt that it was important to continue outreach work as young people in rural areas had less opportunities than those in Kings Lynn and Norwich.

9.8 More difficult times?

Several of the PAs we talked to reported that the recent recession is already having an impact on job opportunities and apprenticeship provision in the area. This was thought to be a real problem, both in terms of a reduction in the number of jobs without training for NEET available who just wanted any sort of job, and progression routes for students who had recently completed level 2 courses at the college. It is important that

any temporary increases in NEET rates are not construed as a reflection on the amount of time and effort that is going into helping to reduce the number of young people without worthwhile employment, education and training opportunities. Targets need to be flexible and reviewable as well as challenging (Imyson, 1998).

- “There are students coming out of the college with level 2 plumbing qualifications and needing to go on to level 3 apprenticeships and no one is taking people on, the places are not there... and I think this seems to be the same for bricklaying and electricians”.
- “Yes, in hairdressing I haven’t found one place prepared to take anyone on this year... I usually have at least two or three opportunities that come up”.
- “It’s got worse in the Kings Lynn area and Kings Lynn has never been the easiest place in terms of job opportunities for young people”.
- “I think that there aren’t a lot of opportunities out there for them, and because at the moment it’s even more limited”.