

Young People in Connexions
Annual Report 2001 - 2002

Putting Young People

First

connexions

Foreword

The active engagement of young people is central to Connexions and this document celebrates our success at both local and national level. We are making the active engagement of young people a reality and I want to congratulate Connexions staff who have embraced this approach in the design and development of their services with such enthusiasm and commitment. I have been tremendously impressed by the many young people I have met during my visits to Partnerships - and fascinated to hear from them how they are helping to shape Connexions.

However, it is still early days and we have a long way to go. We have put in place a comprehensive strategy, which will enable us to build upon our success over the next year.

Together, we can go from strength to strength in making Connexions a modern public service, with young people's views, as customers, at the heart of its ongoing development. I hope that this report and the publications highlighted will encourage you to do even more.

Anne Weinstock
Chief Executive
Connexions



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Purpose

This publication is aimed at everyone who is committed to the involvement of young people and is directed at Connexions Partnerships, Government Offices, other Government Departments and voluntary youth agencies. It promotes and highlights the work of Connexions in involving young people in designing, delivering and evaluating the Service.

It presents a compelling picture of how young people have shaped and influenced Connexions during its first operational year at both local delivery and national policy level.

A poem...

I'm kept in the darkness, I don't know my rights
 Somebody tell me and turn on the lights
 Tomorrow's the future and you may not be there
 Let my views be heard – it's only fair!
 I should be taught to communicate ideas
 My thoughts and my feelings, my alarms and fears
 I can voice an opinion but it may not be real
 It's only an impression, just what I feel
 I believe in my head what I don't dare to express
 Because I'm a child my status is less
 I speak without knowledge of what I can do
 Listen to me 'cause I'm talking to you.

by Francine Lansdown of Article 12

Introduction

April 2001 to March 2002: a landmark year

Connexions is a new youth service providing advice, guidance, support and personal development service for all 13 to 19 year olds. Through Connexions Partnerships it brings together all the services that help young people and gives young people access to a Personal Adviser, someone they can turn to and can trust.

Connexions is an innovative and exciting development in the world of young people's service. It's about helping young people navigate their way through decisions about studying, jobs and careers. Through youth work it's about helping young people get the personal development opportunities they need to fulfil their potential and become the active citizens of tomorrow. It's also about helping those who have problems with drugs, alcohol, depression, are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Connexions puts young people's needs first – indeed without them there is no Connexions Service. Our vision is that by involving young people their voice will have a real impact on the way services are delivered.

A fundamental principle of Connexions is to listen to and take account of the views of young people. For many years, they have been the recipients of services rather than active participants in them. Connexions has begun to redress this balance.

In order for Connexions to succeed, it is imperative that young people are involved from the outset. Connexions, therefore, is a Service based upon identified rather than perceived need. As a result, it enhances young people's opportunities to learn about themselves and how organisations work. It also helps to encourage increased levels of youth participation in the wider community.

To support Partnerships in achieving this culture change we have produced the following:

- **'The Active Involvement of Young People in the Connexions Service: Guide for Managers & Guide for Practitioners'**
- **'Connexions Youth Charter Guidance'**
- **'Guidance on Involving Young People in the Governance of Connexions'**
- **'The Observatory' – a database resource containing more than 120 pieces of information about the ways in which young people are involved in Connexions and surveys/reports from Partnerships on the views of young people.**

The following sections highlight our work at local level and national level - and demonstrate the impact of our work. We begin with a young person and her views.



Section One: A young person's experience of Connexions

Nazia Abbas is a member of the London East Connexions Shadow Board and helped to recruit the Chief Executive. The Shadow Board is made up of twenty-two young people, aged 16-19, and includes 10 young people from a minority ethnic background, of which 4 were from an African Caribbean background, 2 from an Asian background, 4 from a mixed heritage and 7 white young people. Two have learning difficulties and have a support worker, and there is an even gender balance. The diversity of this group reflects the community in which young people work.

The partnership achieved this by building on existing networks with statutory, voluntary and faith groups to engage a diverse range of young people.

"I first heard about Connexions through a friend and initially thought it would be just another small project aimed at young people, which would run out of funds and probably close in a month or two. However, when I attended my first Development Action Group (DAG) meeting, I realised that it was a lot more organised and larger than the pessimistic picture I had in my mind.

There were young people of all ages from 10 different London boroughs. We discussed different issues and everyone got a chance to share and express their views/opinions. Despite the fact that at this point I didn't fully understand what Connexions was about, I definitely had a more optimistic overview of it.

I was then asked with another member of the DAG to attend a Shadow Board meeting at Guildhall. This gave me a much better understanding of Connexions. I also realised that when they said that the core of Connexions is young people - and that this is firstly and lastly who the Service is aimed at - they really mean it!

One of the key factors of Connexions which keeps us involved is the amazing amount of support given to us. For example:

- **The partnership are now committed to organising activities when we need them, arranging them at times convenient to us - i.e. Sundays.**
- **We are all treated as valuable individuals: i.e. our youth inclusion co-ordinator personally asks all of us for our most convenient times.**
- **We are sent text messages (for reminders, thanks and encouragement).**
- **Relevant information is posted to us.**

Members of the DAG went on a residential in Stratford-Upon-Avon. It was a planned weekend of training and interaction. When I heard the word training I thought - fun, not! However, it was definitely not the dull sort of training I had imagined. One of the main aims of the weekend was to understand Connexions better and to learn to work effectively as a team in order to form our Youth Board, which I had reservations about since we all came from different boroughs and backgrounds. The residential broke down the barriers between young people from different boroughs and with cultural differences and has helped the group work more effectively.

During the weekend our trainer made us do some pretty eccentric activities but it was all worth it. We also spent a great deal of time looking at and understanding Connexions and why our role is so vital. One of the most important pieces of work we did was on the Young People's Charter.

By the end of the weekend we were thoroughly exhausted but we came back feeling confident in Connexions, confident in ourselves - and in our ability to work as a Youth Board and represent young people in East London.

I was flattered and surprised to be given the opportunity to sit on an interview panel to select the chief executive of East London Connexions. I was nervous about participating, as it's a major role and there were only two other youth reps. But we all went through a day of training which helped us understand the criteria and our roles much better and boosted our confidence.

When it came to assessing the candidates, I was surprised at the reactions of the adult members of the interview panel. They treated our votes and opinions as equal to theirs. And the candidates gave our questions the same consideration as those of the adult members.

My experience of Connexions makes me feel that the future for youth inclusion is extremely positive."

Section Two: Not just lip service

It is not just one or two young people like Nazia who have been involved but a wide range of others across the country.

Involvement at every level

In the first 12 months of Connexions, over 17,000 young people have been involved in and consulted about the design and delivery of the Service. All 15 first phase Partnerships have involved young people in a wide range of activities – everything from governance to the planning and design of services and improving quality. A snapshot of their work to engage young people includes:

- In Coventry & Warwickshire young people had a significant involvement in the recruitment of PAs ensuring that those employed had the qualities that young people felt were important.
- In Cornwall & Devon young people have worked with the partnership to develop a website. Their involvement ensured that subject headings were more relevant to young people; a quiz was included and the website went beyond just providing careers information.
- In the Black Country young people have been involved as peer educators and as a result have been able to provide a wide range of support for young people.
- In Cheshire & Warrington young people are responsible for managing their own budget as part of their work on a Youth Reference Group making decisions on expenses and training for their involvement.
- Humberside established a young people's 'Ability Group' representing the views of young people with special needs ensuring the partnership offers a fully inclusive service.
- In Lincolnshire & Rutland a young people's group formed to revamp and develop the one-stop shop. Young people created publicity materials, redesigned the centre and influenced the type of advice available at the centre.
- In Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire young people have been involved in promoting the service using a Connexions bus ensuring that a wide range of young people are involved in and aware of Connexions.

- In Greater Merseyside 11 modern apprentices have been employed by the partnership to promote Connexions to other young people and encourage them to become actively involved in developing the service.
- In Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin young people presented feedback to the appropriate decision-makers, highlighting how the inadequate services act as a barrier to their involvement and learning. Their feedback had a direct influence on the future transport strategy.
- In South Yorkshire young people have produced a video for young people and practitioners promoting Connexions and highlighting how young people can become involved in Connexions and make a difference. The video has also been circulated to schools as a marketing tool for Connexions.
- In Suffolk young people are involved as peer mentors supporting young people who have difficulties in their lives.
- In London North young people from School Youth Councils organised a Youth Conference with the emphasis on two-way communication between providers of services and young people.
- In London South young people have been involved in developing a Youth Charter that means something to them and more importantly means something to other young people.
- Cumbria partnership held a series of focus groups to consult over 600 young people to help shape the service, particularly providing feedback on access to services, barriers to achievement and young peoples active participation.
- In West of England young people have had significant impact on each of the Local Management Committees (LMC), feeding back and influencing how adults should engage young people in the LMCs, timing of meetings, use of jargon, etc.

Involving young people from the top down

Young people are not only working with Connexions Partnership at a local level. They're also involved with national developments through a range of Connexions Service National Unit (CSNU) activities and events which have given them a chance to influence policy and practice from the top down. Here's a snapshot of some of the developments that have taken place over the last year:

- In developing national policy on the Connexions Youth Charter, young people were involved from the outset. Over 30 young people attended a residential and decided what key elements the charter guidance should include and how it should be presented. Young people were also members of a steering group overseeing this work by helping to shape the direction of the guidance, inputting ideas and commenting on drafts, which included the production of a guide for young people.
- In March 2002, over 50 young people involved with their local Connexions Partnerships as Board/LMC/Youth Board members attended a national consultation weekend to comment on draft guidance on involving young people in the governance of the Service. Their views and suggested training needs have been included in the guidance produced for Partnerships and other young people.
- CSNU worked with young people through the National Youth Association (NYA) to consider how Connexions can succeed, and what needs to be done to ensure that young people have a voice in its ongoing development (a key section within 'Transforming Youth Work'). The young people created a website to share the outcomes of their meeting with others (<http://www.youthconsultation.co.uk/tywnya>) and their views were a key element of a Ministerial Submission on the future of the Youth Service.
- A key personal development opportunity within Connexions is the Summer Activities programme. During their Best Practice conference in January 2002, young people worked with adults to highlight areas of good practice and how best to engage young people.
- Young people have made major contributions to Connexions national conferences and helped CSNU and Government Office (GO) staff to understand the wide range of issues that affect them, including the exclusion faced by many and the solutions they can offer.

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

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Section Three: The next step - looking to the future

Connexions is aiming to create a culture change in which all young people have the opportunity to participate in the design and delivery of the Service. It is important that the impact young people have had on the Service so far is clearly visible.

Both CSNU and Connexions Partnerships have made a great start - not only in involving young people but also in creating the environment and structures needed to remove unnecessary barriers to effective participation.

However, it is important to recognise that there is still some way to go in order to achieve a culture in which involving young people is the norm, rather than the exception. There are many challenges ahead and the next year promises to be an exciting one.

In order for Connexions to build upon this success, it must continue to involve a diverse range of young people. This will help to ensure that the Service is truly representative of the communities it is there to help, that it allocates sufficient planning and resources and that it provides adequate training and support - not only for young people but for adults too.

Over the next year we will publish:

Guidance on Rewarding Young People's Involvement (Autumn 2002)

This guide will be based on work carried out by the CSNU Funding Team. It also builds on feedback from young people and current practice from Partnerships and national youth organisations.

Guidance on Involving 'hard to reach' and Disadvantaged Young People (Spring 2003)

CSNU plans to produce guidance and case study evidence on the ways in which Partnerships are engaging 'hard to reach' young people in the design and delivery of Connexions.

Guidance on Involving Young People in the Recruitment & Selection of Connexions Staff (Spring 2003)

Building upon the experiences of Partnerships and young people, we will commission a nationally recognised agency involved in personnel issues to produce support material and guidance for Partnerships and young people.



Section Four: Case studies

From theory to practice: examples of good practice in involving young people

1. Peer groups and focus groups in Central London

Central London Connexions has established a Youth Involvement Group (YIG) comprising Youth Service managers across the seven boroughs of the Partnership. In summer 2001 the YIG decided to commission a peer research project to establish what young people wanted from Connexions.

A newly-appointed, part-time youth involvement co-ordinator recruited and supported the peer researchers in the focus group work and in the production of the video. Six female and two male peer researchers aged 16-18 were recruited, including young people from African-Caribbean, white English, Egyptian, Moroccan, Italian and Philippino-English backgrounds. All participated in a day's training covering communication skills, body language, interviewing and facilitation skills and the use of video cameras.

Impact

- The young people gained new skills and confidence, producing a video featuring footage of their work with focus groups and the views of young people. This video was featured at a Connexions conference held at the QEII Centre in December 2001. The video will be used to reach other young people to promote Connexions.
- The peer researchers worked with other interested young people to develop a draft Youth Charter, which is more in tune with the needs of young people and is written in a format more appealing to them.
- The young people learned new skills, such as how to adapt to different situations for example working with disabled young people and people from different ethnic backgrounds. They also gained interviewing, listening and facilitation skills.
- The Partnership found out directly what young people want and was able to plan services in response to expressed rather than assumed needs - such as access to PAs and opening hours.

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2. Young people are a reference point in Cheshire & Warrington

As part of its business plan for 2001, the Partnership and the two local authorities set up a steering group to focus on young people's involvement. This included Connexions staff and representatives from the two local authority Youth Services. A Young Person's Reference Group (YPRG) was established to encourage young people to have an input and comment on future developments. The YPRG was seen as more informal and flexible than a board and so likely to be more attractive to young people.

The young people were recruited mainly from existing youth projects and included five young women and three young men aged 16-18, one of whom was a wheelchair-user. The YPRG met twice before taking part in a residential weekend to discuss a broad plan for the year.

Support for the YPRG was co-ordinated by a Connexions staff member and senior youth workers. Adults originally chaired meetings and took notes, but now the young people decide who should take on these tasks. In the first year, the group has maintained a core membership (including the five original members) although up to 20 young people have attended.

Travel expenses have been paid for YPRG members who have been given control of a small budget (£2,000 in 2001/2).

Impact

- The group re-wrote an adult-drafted Youth Charter, deciding on its design and format. They also suggested that this was signed by Steve Hoy (Chief Executive of Connexions Cheshire & Warrington) and by Anne Weinstock, to demonstrate that they agreed with its values.
- They have been consulted about the Service's draft confidentiality policy, which was amended to reflect the concerns raised by the young people, especially on issues of consent.
- The young people have improved their employment potential by being able to put their work in the group on their CV. Some have taken these skills further by getting involved in Millennium Volunteers (MV).
- Through the involvement of this group of young people, Service staff now understand that young people must contribute to the design and delivery of services through a range of creative processes. Referrals to the YPRG are now made by PAs as well as the Youth Service (which helps to overcome the issue of caseload management). The young people have developed team-working skills and become more confident in expressing their views because they can see they are making a difference to Service delivery.

Pictured above: Chief Executive, Steve Hoy, signs the young people's entitlement charter at the opening of the Connexions centre at Crewe

3. Merseyside explores information sharing

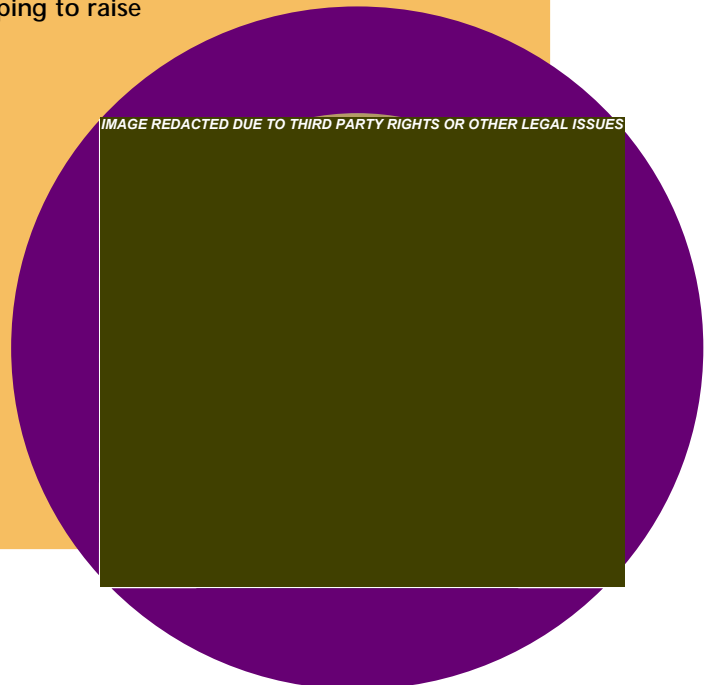
The Merseyside Connexions Tracking Pilot provided an opportunity to gain an understanding of young people's views on information sharing and data tracking - and to explore their perceptions of current agency data storage/exchange. They also gave their views about the Connexions Service.

Some 66 young people were consulted and all received either a £10 gift voucher or a free activity such as a canal barge trip. Certificates were also issued in recognition of their involvement in Connexions.

Impact

- Young people helped to develop a draft consent form to be signed by clients when information needs to be shared between agencies. The young people wanted their peers to be fully aware of where the information was being sent, what it was being used for and which information was being transferred. They also wanted to feel sure it would be safe with a third party.
- Due to the young people's input, the pilot recommended to the Partnership Board that the consent of young people be sought when exchanging information between agencies.
- Some groups of young people have become more involved in Connexions as a result of this exercise. The Liverpool 8 Group has made a presentation to the Partnership Board on their involvement in the Service to date. This presentation involved skills training for young people and will be made available on CD Rom.
- The initial lack of awareness of young people about data protection and their individual rights has informed the tracking pilot's recommendations on raising awareness of such issues with young people, including implications for PA training.
- A leaflet has been produced: 'A young person's guide to information held by Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership.' This is helping to raise awareness of Connexions among other young people.

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Much of this report is based on 'The Observatory' - a database of information about how young people have been involved in the design and delivery of Connexions. For more details about how to get information from The Observatory, or to share information and good practice with us, please contact Anthony Evans or Sue Machin on 0114 259 3260 or email sue.machin@dfes.gsi.gov.uk.

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