



Research Report  
No 693

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*Connexions Direct:  
Mystery Shopping Evaluation Study*

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

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## **Glossary**

The following terms have been used throughout this report:

“CXD”                      Connexions Direct

“The Service”        Connexions Direct

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introducing Connexions Direct

The Connexions Service provides impartial advice and support with the ultimate aim of raising the aspirations, participation and achievement of all young people. It provides a single point of contact on a diverse range of issues.

Connexions Direct (CXD) is part of the wider Connexions Service and offers confidential advice, support and information to 13 – 19 year olds seven days a week from 8am – 2am. Information, advice and support on issues such as work, careers, learning, health, housing and relationships can be accessed via telephone, live Webchat, email and SMS Text.

### 1.2. Introducing the Mystery Shopping Study

The aim of this study was to assess the Connexions Direct service being offered by the provider after one year of operation. The mystery shopping programme would provide an independent measure of the quality of the service being offered to young people. All aspects of the Service would be assessed with all four contact methods being measured using a wide range of enquiries.

## 2. Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used for mystery shopping the service.

### 2.1 The Mystery Shoppers

Twenty-one mystery shoppers, aged between 14 and 19, worked on this project. Twelve mystery shoppers were female and nine were male, reflecting the greater use of the service by females and the balance of shopping scenarios (see below). Whilst the majority of the mystery shoppers were supplied by TNS Mystery Shopping, six were supplied and managed by the Hertfordshire Connexions Partnership.

All mystery shoppers attended a face-to-face interactive training session in which

- mystery shoppers were introduced to the CXD service
- the purpose of the mystery shopping programme was explained
- the intended approach was outlined (including details of the scenarios to be adopted by mystery shoppers and the criteria to be used to assess shops).

### 2.2 Sample

495 contacts were made as part of the mystery shopping programme. The sample was constructed to broadly replicate the contacts the CXD Service receives in terms of day, time and contact method. In relation to the latter, the following sample sizes were adopted:

- 155 contacts were made by phone
- 155 contacts were made by webchat
- 105 contacts were made by email
- 80 contacts were made by SMS text

Fieldwork was spread over six consecutive weeks, starting in the final week of March and during the Easter holidays.

### 2.3 Scenarios

Twelve scenarios were developed in order to ensure a consistent approach to each enquiry by the mystery shoppers. These reflected the type of enquiries received by CXD and were based on the following broad topics:

- 5 Careers, learning and work
- 3 Relationships
- 2 Health
- 1 Your Rights
- 1 Housing

Each scenario consisted of an opening line (shown in bold below) along with background information to help the mystery shopper 'get in to character'. A prescriptive text was not used and mystery shoppers were encouraged to use their own wording in order to make their contact appear more credible and in turn to avoid the contact being recognised as a mystery shop.

**Scenario 1 - How do I become a plumber?**

*You are 14 and thinking of becoming a plumber when you are older. You want a “trade” and are interested when you are qualified, in becoming self-employed. You’re not interested in doing anything else.*

**Scenario 2 - I don’t know how to start revising**

*You are 16, in Year 11 about to take your GCSEs. You know you should be revising but don’t know how to get started. You have a computer with access to the internet which is in your own bedroom and your parents are supportive. Some of your friends have started revising already – some haven’t.*

**Scenario 3 - I want to be a hairdresser; how do I find out about courses?**

*You are in year 10, aged 15. You take your GCSEs next year. You are okay at school and expect to get 4 or 5 GCSEs at C and over. You want to be a hair dresser – but aren’t particularly interested in the beauty side of things.*

**Scenario 4 - I want to get a job but I’m still at school**

*You are 14 and living at home with your parents and want to earn some pocket money.*

**Scenario 5 - I’m worried about my best friend’s eating**

*You are 17 and still at school. You are worried about your best friend [girlfriend]. She is average build and height. Since a group of girls at school said that she was fat she decided she needed to lose weight and has put herself on a strict diet. You have noticed that she has stopped eating in front of you and have caught her throwing her lunch away a couple of times. She has lost a lot of weight and is always tired and never wants to do anything.*

**Scenario 6 - Can you get pregnant the first time you have sex?**

*You are 15 years old. Last night you had sex for the first time with your steady boyfriend. You have only just started your periods and they are still very irregular. You did try to use a condom but because you were both so nervous it split and now you are worried that you could be pregnant. You want to know if you can tell if you are pregnant straight away or if you have to wait before you do a test.*

**Scenario 7 - I’m thinking of leaving home, what do I need to do?**

*You are 18 and in full time employment. You get on well with your mum and dad but want your own space.*

**Scenario 8 - Someone keeps sending me horrible texts**

*You are in Year 8 (age 13) and keep getting texts from a girl/boy who used to go out with your girl friend/ boy friend. They are personally insulting to you about your weight/hair – about how thick you are etc. You have been getting them for 2 weeks now at all hours.*

**Scenario 9 - I want to move in with my boyfriend**

*You have been with your boyfriend for six months. You are 17, your boyfriend is 20 and is working and has his own flat and has asked you to move in with him. You have told him that you’re thinking about it. You are an only child and live with your parents who are quite over protective and don’t really get on with your boyfriend. You don’t pay them any board. You do want to move in with your boyfriend as you love him but don’t want to upset your parents. You don’t want to upset your boyfriend by telling him that you are not going to move in with him.*

### **Scenario 10 – Is smoking really bad for you?**

*You're 14 and all of your friends have recently started smoking. They have started to pick on you because you are the only one that doesn't smoke. You think that your best friend doesn't like smoking but is doing it just to look cool. You don't want to fall out with your friends but you're not sure that you want to start smoking because you have heard that it is bad for your health but you don't know how true that is – and you didn't like it the one time you tried. You know that you and your friends are too young to smoke.*

### **Scenario 11 - I want to do work experience, what do I need to do?**

*You are in Year 10 taking your options. You know a bit about work experience, but don't know how to find a placement. You don't know what you want to do when you leave school. You think you will do quite well in your GCSEs.*

### **Scenario 12 - I'd like to know more about Modern Apprenticeships; I want to be a joiner**

*You are 16 and in year 11 and due to leave school in the summer. You have no experience in the trade so need to start from the beginning. You think your GCSE result will be average. You live in a rural village so transport is a problem.*

## **2.4 Briefing Instructions**

Mystery shoppers were briefed to ask their opening line and then respond to the questions of the adviser. Alternative ideas for wording the opening line were given but mystery shoppers were encouraged to use their own wording to ensure that the enquiry appeared realistic. The mystery shoppers gave no further information about their issue beyond their opening line and were instructed not to volunteer any further information at the beginning of the enquiry.

The briefing notes also contained some *possible* follow up questions that the adviser may ask. Mystery shoppers were reminded that these provided a guide only and it was likely that further/different questions would be asked by the adviser. In addition they were instructed not to read the briefing information whilst talking to the adviser.

With the exception of SMS text calls, all contacts were recorded/printed to support quality checking.

## **2.5 Questionnaires**

Immediately after each mystery shop, the shopper completed a questionnaire which was designed to ensure a consistent and structured approach to feedback.

Four questionnaires were developed, one for each mode of contact. All questionnaires explored the delivery and content of the advice offered by CXD through a combination of questions requiring a 'categorical' response (for example: 'Did the CXD Adviser give their name? (Yes/No)' and a perceptual assessment (for example: 'Did the adviser's tone put you at ease?'). Each was split into three sections, 'Greeting', 'Dealing with your enquiry' and 'Overall'.

Mystery shoppers were also asked to take into account the different forms of contact in making their assessments. Assessment of SMS text services raises particular issues since the limits of SMS text imposes constraints on what can reasonably be offered by services using this mode. However assessment of this mode was important as it's used by young people to contact the service.

Copies of the questionnaires can be found in Appendix A.

### 3. Overview of Results

The following two sections look at the results by contact type and by scenario; this section summarises the key points.

To ensure a consistent approach, mystery shoppers were instructed to make only two attempted contacts on the telephone and webchat, before abandoning their attempt. 90% of the telephone calls and 87% of the webchats were successfully completed. Responses were only received to 65% of the emails and 80% of the text messages. Investigations are continuing to establish whether all original enquiries were successfully received by the service and whether a reply was sent, but never received. As a result, the base sizes reported here are lower than anticipated.

The web technology worked well; 91% of mystery shoppers were able to make contact on their first attempt and contact was maintained throughout the webchat in the vast majority of contacts. Although webpages were only used in 53% of webchats, when they were used, 96% could be viewed and 96% were rated as useful.

Encouragingly, over 90% of contacts, across all contact methods were answered with clear advice, with advisers remaining impartial and using clear, professional language.

The ratings for whether the adviser appeared to have read/listened fully to the enquiry varied from 93% on email to 83% on text. Comments from the mystery shoppers indicated that they were more likely to think their enquiry had not been read fully, if they received a standard reply which was not tailored to their scenario; the lower score given on text reflected the use of 'canned' replies used by the Service.

Only three-quarters of mystery shoppers felt that they were given the correct amount of information and in all instances where this question was marked down, a lack of information was cited as a problem, no-one reported that they were given too much information. Comments from the mystery shoppers indicated that they welcomed being given multiple options to explore further to help with their enquiry. Whilst a referral to another agency was recognised as a good solution to some scenarios, the way this was handled by advisers, made a difference to the mystery shoppers. Mystery shoppers welcomed some interest in their enquiry and commented that they felt "fobbed off" if they were immediately given a different agency to contact.

The percentage of advisers asking data collection questions was low. Whilst the mystery shopper's age was asked in 86% of telephone calls, the percentages asking the shopper's location, where they had heard about the service, their ethnicity and if they had used the service before, ranged from 68% to 51%. On webchat, further questions were asked in 69% of contacts.

A reminder that the service could be contacted again was only given in half of calls and webchats, although the figures were higher for email (90%)

## 4. Results by Contact Type

The following section reviews the results by each of the four contact types and combines all scenarios.

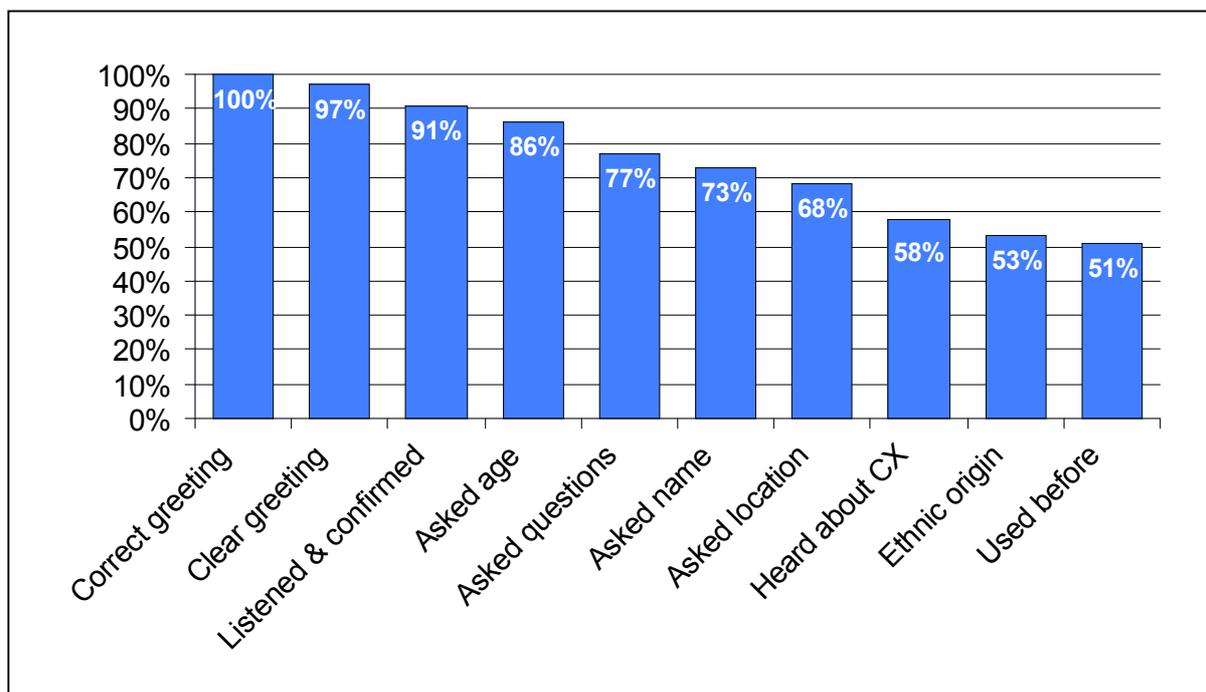
### 4.1 Telephone

In order to ensure a consistent approach to all calls, instructions were given detailing the number of attempted contacts mystery shoppers should make and how long they should wait to speak to an adviser. Mystery shoppers were advised to wait for one minute if they were not dealt with immediately, after this time they should hang up and make another attempt five minutes later. After two attempts to speak to an adviser, no further attempts were made and the call was abandoned. Using this process, sixteen calls were abandoned and the total number of successfully completed calls was 139, 90% of the original sample size. The following results are therefore based on 139 calls.

A correct greeting (“Hello, Connexions Direct” (or similar)) was given on all telephone calls and 91% of advisers demonstrated that they had listened to the enquiry by reconfirming the key points. The percentage of advisers asking questions however were lower (see Figure 1 below). Whilst the mystery shopper’s age was asked in 86% of calls, the figures then drop off with:

- 68% asked the mystery shopper’s location,
- 58% asked where they had heard about the service,
- 53% asked ethnicity and
- 51% asked if the mystery shopper had used the service before.

**Figure 1 – Greeting & Dealing With Your Enquiry (Telephone)**



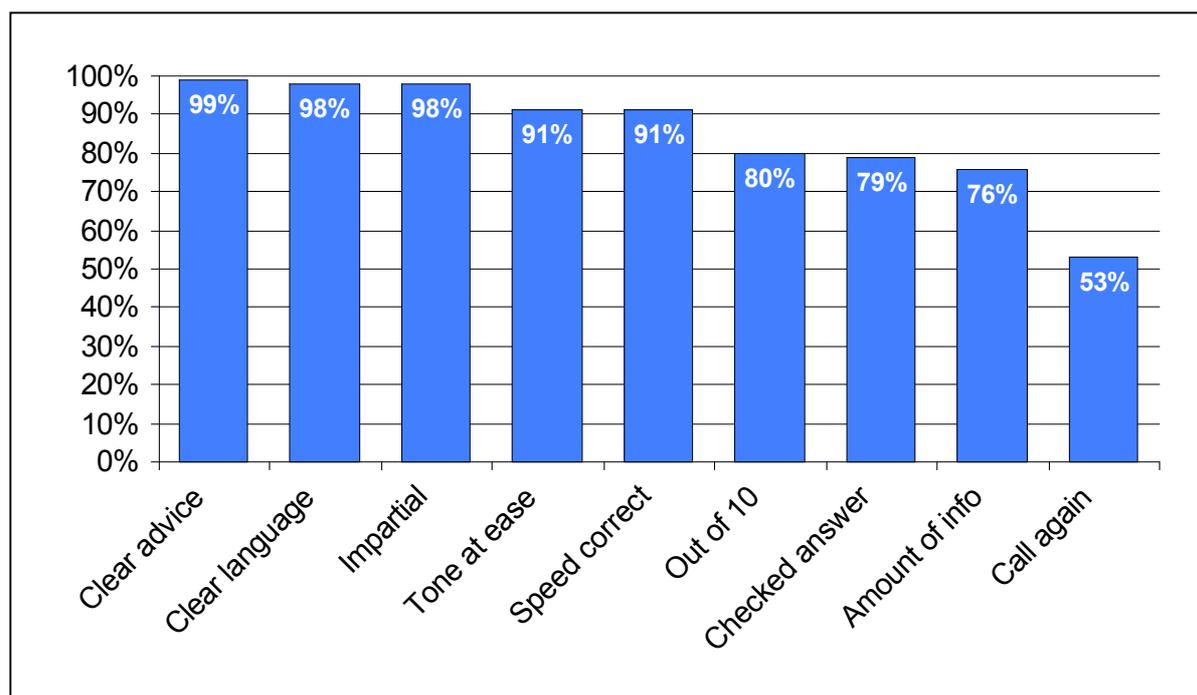
Although there were 42 calls, where all five of these questions were asked, there were seven where none were asked and the mystery shopper's comments in these instances included:

- *"None of the questions were asked...and he wasn't very helpful."*
- *"Sounded tired and uninterested and the advice was quite vague."*
- *"The advisor didn't ask any questions and give much advice or reassurance."*
- *"He didn't sound too bothered."*

The results for those questions examining how the adviser dealt with the mystery caller's enquiry were predominantly very good. Five questions were rated over 90% (refer to Figure 2 below). Clear advice was given by advisers who remained impartial and used clear language in the vast majority of calls. The comments in these instances included:

- *"She spoke in a clear easy to understand language and I felt at ease to ask her questions."*
- *"The adviser was very supportive and clear and reassured me that I was doing the right thing."*
- *"I felt comfortable with the Connexions adviser and was happy the way my query was answered. The adviser was constantly checking that everything was clear and I was happy."*

**Figure 2 – Overall Scores (Telephone)**



Two areas require further attention however. Just 53% of advisers mentioned that they could be contacted again if further advice was needed and only 76% of mystery shoppers felt that they were given the correct amount of information. In relation to the latter, in all instances where a 'no' was given to this question, mystery shoppers stated that they were not given sufficient information and their comments included:

- *"All she did was to tell me to ring a number. That's it."*
- *"Although the call itself was fine, hardly any help or information was given."*
- *"I felt that the information given was not enough for me. I needed to know more."*

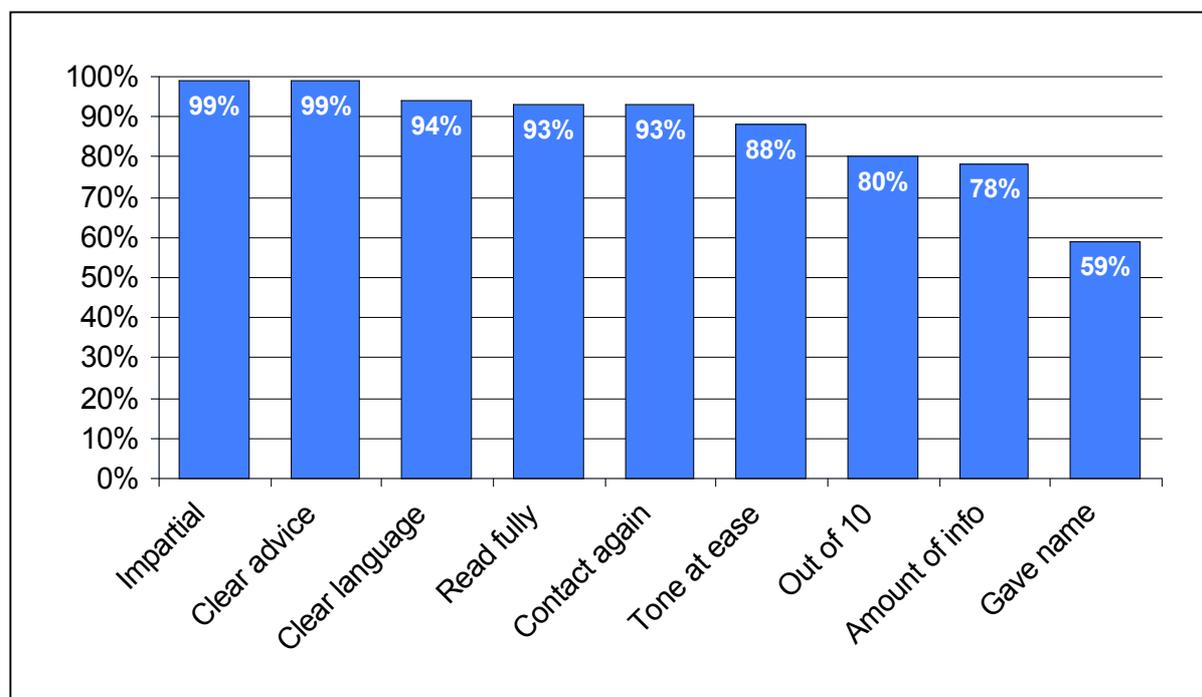
The overall rating for how the telephone enquiries were handled was 8 out of 10. However ratings did range from 1 to 10, with two calls rated as 1 out of 10 and twenty-eight rated as 10 out of 10. One mystery shopper who awarded 10 out of 10 commented:

*“My call was put through quickly and easily and I felt the advisor understood my situation. I was given copious amounts of information and advice on how to proceed with my investigation. All of it was clear and easy to understand.”*

#### 4.2 Email

Responses were received to 65% of the emails and the base size was therefore lower than anticipated, at just 68. The low response rate is a major concern and investigations are continuing to establish whether our emails were received at Connexions and whether replies were sent, but not received. The following figures are based on all contacts where a reply was received.

**Figure 3 – Overall Scores (Email)**



The overall rating given by the mystery shoppers was 8 out 10, although there were variations in the ratings from 3 out of 10 (one email) to 10 out of 10 (11 emails). As with the telephone calls, the advice and language were rated as clear in over 90% of contacts and 99% of advisers were rated as impartial. In the few instances where a ‘no’ was given to these questions, comments from the mystery shoppers included:

- *“Felt the adviser’s lack of punctuation made the e-mail more difficult to read.”*
- *“The adviser’s language was far too formal and at first I didn’t grasp the advice - had to read a few times to understand.”*
- *“Very short email. One sentence didn’t make sense and there were a few spelling mistakes.”*

A reminder that the service can be contacted again, was given in over 90% of emails and the mystery shoppers judged from the advice given, that the majority of their emails had been fully read.

Lower scores were achieved for the amount of information given (78%) and again, all mystery shoppers who felt they were not given the correct amount of information, commented that they were given too little. Comments for email included:

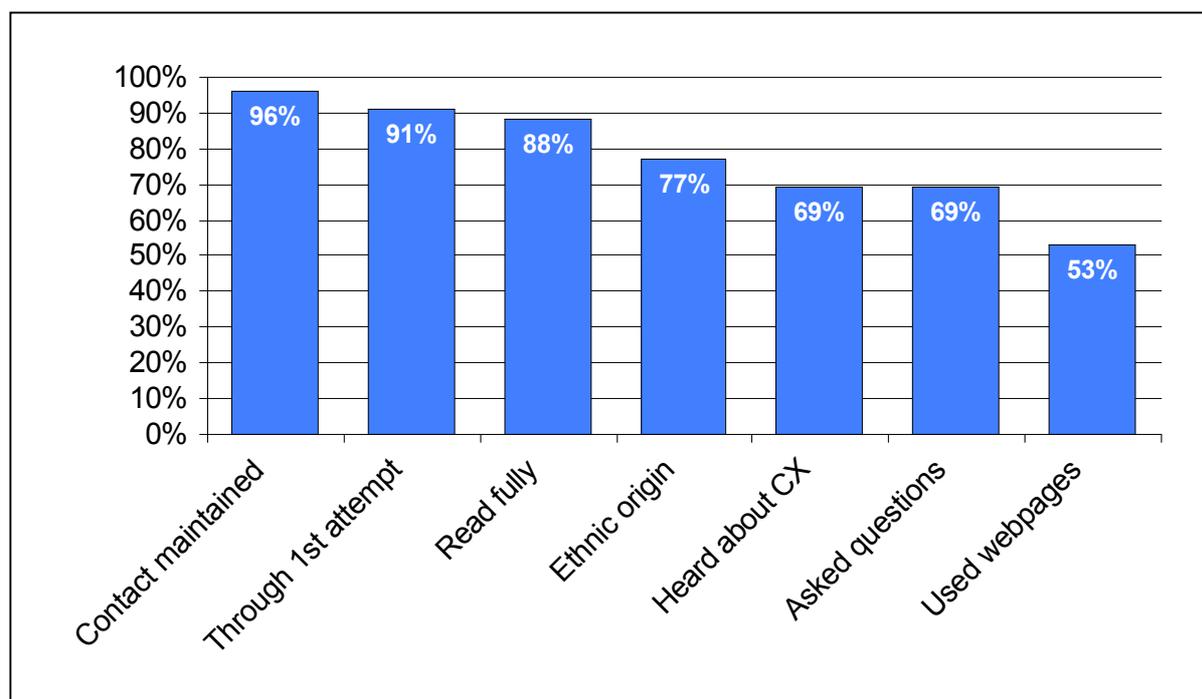
- *“Only one piece of information given, felt it was not enough.”*
- *“Answered question, however, didn’t go into much detail or offer any advice that would put me at ease.”*
- *“Only a website given. No other advice.”*

### 4.3 Webchat

In order to ensure a consistent approach to all webchats, mystery shoppers were instructed to make two attempts to get through before abandoning the contact. On each attempt, the mystery shopper was to wait for 2 minutes to establish contact. Using this approach, 87% of webchats were completed successfully and the following results are based on the 135 successful contacts.

91% of mystery shoppers were able to make contact on their first attempt and contact was maintained throughout the webchat in the vast majority of contacts (see Figure 4 below).

**Figure 4 – Dealing With Your Enquiry (Webchat)**



88% of webchats were rated as being read fully and the comments from the mystery shoppers who felt their enquiry had not been read fully included:

- *“Didn’t properly answer my question and didn’t tell me the hours I could work until I asked the second time.”*

- *“There were some parts of the chat where I felt completely misunderstood.”*

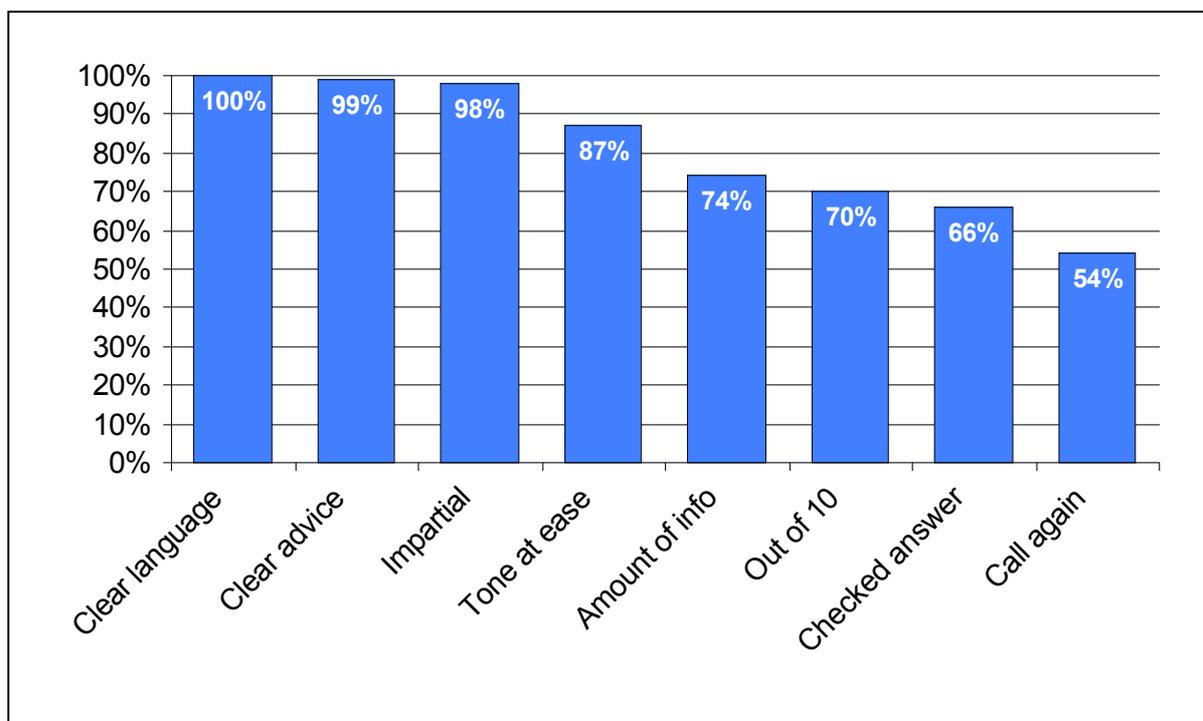
Although webpages were only used in 53% of webchats, when they were used by advisers, 96% could be viewed and 96% were rated as useful. Webpages were used on all twelve scenarios.

Encouragingly and as with telephone and email contacts, there were high scores for the language and advice being clear and the adviser remaining impartial. In fact, for this contact method, all mystery shoppers rated the language as clear (see Figure 5).

However, as with the telephone, a reminder that the service can be contacted again was only given in just over half of contacts and the amount of information given was marked down for being too limited. Mystery shoppers who felt they were not given enough information commented:

- *“The adviser did the absolute minimum - pasting a URL and then not asking any further questions about the enquiry whatsoever. It seemed as if the adviser couldn't wait to end the conversation.”*
- *“The adviser gave me relevant website information. Didn't ask me further questions on my current situation or offer more than one option to gather more information on plumbing.”*
- *“Although she helped me by showing me BBC Bitesize I felt she was just trying to pass me onto someone else as she kept talking about the website even when I said the site was good but still didn't know where to start, she didn't help that way.”*

**Figure 5 – Overall Scores (Webchat)**



The overall rating out of 10 for this contact method was 7, with ratings ranging from 1 out of 10 (one webchat) to 10 out of 10 (six webchats). Comments from those rated most highly included:

- *“The advisor replied quickly and provided me with plenty of information.”*
- *“She was extremely helpful. Gave me information to look into, gave lots of detail and asked relevant questions for me to think about. She was very approachable, understanding and friendly.”*
- *“Asked lots of questions and gave me ones to think about before making a decision. Very helpful and friendly and gave information to look into.”*

#### 4.4 Text

The response rate to text messages was 80%, with 64 texts receiving replies. 83% of responses were judged as being based on reading the mystery shopper’s message fully, with mystery shoppers marking down where a general or “canned” response was received such as:

- *“Hi, it’s hard to advise by text. If you need to talk in confidence I can arrange for an adviser to call you if you send us your name and number.”*
- *“It is hard to offer advice over SMS. You may like to visit [www. Connexions-direct.com](http://www.Connexions-direct.com) where you can talk to us over webchat or email or call us on 080 800 13219.”*

94% of mystery shoppers rated the information as easy to understand and the overall rating for this contact method was 6 out of 10. Whilst this is lower than for the other contact methods, the limits of text as a mode of contact should be remembered. Five text replies were rated as 1 out of 10. Comments from the mystery shoppers in these instances included:

- *“Message read; I assume there will be, your local Connexions can I help you z£@ £@£@@@££- £w@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@+447229240P26@@@@@@@@ @I as.”*
- *“Poor reply by the adviser which failed to give even the most basic of advice. There was more or less no point in replying at all.”*
- *“Absolutely no help at all, just told me to contact them.”*

Seven texts were rated as 10 out of 10 and the replies in these instances included:

- *“For further info call the apprenticeship helpline on 0800 150600 or your local Connexions Centre. To find where your nearest centre is call us on 080800 13219.”*
- *“There are rules and regulations that you need to be aware of if you want to get a job while still at school. Could you call us and we can tell you more.”*
- *“It is possible to get pregnant any time you have sex, especially if it was unprotected. Contact us back if you need further support.”*

It was clear from the ratings of the mystery shoppers, that they expected the advice to be tailored to their enquiry, even if the advice was to contact the service.

## 5. Results by Scenario

The following section reviews the results by scenario and incorporates additional feedback received at a meeting in Hertfordshire with a second group of young people and PAs. They were asked what the most appropriate type of advice would be for each scenario. This helped to further assess the appropriateness of responses received to the mystery shops.

For each scenario, four comments from mystery shoppers have been included below, where they summarise the advice they were given and their attitudes towards this advice. The mark out of 10 given by the mystery shopper has also been included, but it should be remembered that this mark is subjective and based on all aspects of the mystery shop, not just the advice itself.

### 5.1 Scenario 1 - How do I become a plumber?

The most common response to this enquiry was to recommend information from the Connexions website (54%) and in particular, the jobs4U section where information on plumbing is available. 49% of mystery shoppers were advised to contact a local Connexions Partnership for further assistance with this enquiry. The feedback from Hertfordshire suggested that young people would value being given further local information sources or being directed to information on the Connexions website.

When asked to summarise the advice they were given and their feelings towards this advice, four mystery shoppers commented:

*Advised me to look into work based training and modern apprenticeships. I was shown more information on plumbing from the Connexions website and [apprenticeships.org.uk](http://apprenticeships.org.uk). The adviser replied quickly and provided me with plenty of information. (Webchat 10/10).*

*I was told the usual way into plumbing is through a modern apprenticeship, you need 3 GCSEs (D or higher). A full course in plumbing is available. Go to local Connexions for career advice & more information at the website. I was given copious amounts of information and advice on how to proceed with my investigation. It was clear and easy to understand. (Telephone 10/10)*

*I was told to look at the website given ([www.realworkrealplay.co.uk](http://www.realworkrealplay.co.uk)) and go to local Connexions. Although he gave me a website to look at it felt like he was trying to get through the conversation as quickly as possible (Webchat 4/10)*

*I was advised to call my local Connexions office. The adviser didn't ask any questions about my name, age or anything else. (Telephone 3/10)*

### 5.2 Scenario 2 - I don't know how to start revising

In response to this scenario, 70% of mystery shoppers were advised to look at other information sources, such as bbcbite size and the 4learning websites. 58% of mystery shoppers were given self-help ideas such as using visual aids, post-it notes and putting together a revision timetable. The feedback from Hertfordshire suggested that young people would welcome being directed to a local partnership, this happened on 9% of mystery shops using this scenario.

Comments from the mystery shoppers for this scenario included:

*The advice was very clear, I was given revision techniques such as revision timetables, using visual aids such as post-it notes, I was given multiple websites to revise from. Helpful and impartial advice such as don't worry and what to do. (Telephone 10/10)*

*Adviser gave 5 sites to look at, helped me with breaking up revision and how to plan it and also made sure the harder subjects I revised more for. Lots of advice was given as well as personal help at calculating times of revision and basically everything I needed. (Webchat 9/10)*

*Simply said look at [www.bbc.co.uk/radio/onlife/education/index.shtml?revision#topics](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/onlife/education/index.shtml?revision#topics) and it should help. Or if I need any more support contact local Connexions. Only one piece of information given, felt it was not enough. No name was used, it seemed rushed. (Email 5/10)*

*The text I received said "Hi, it's hard to advise by text, if you need to talk in confidence call us on 08080013219 or email [www.connexionsdirect.com](http://www.connexionsdirect.com) open 8am - 2pm every day". (Text 2/10)*

### **5.3 Scenario 3 - I want to be a hairdresser; how do I find out about courses?**

The most popular response from advisers dealing with this scenario was to recommend contacting a local Connexions Partnership (72%), whilst 33% recommended information from the Connexions website. Feedback from Hertfordshire also suggested that the Connexions website would be a useful tool, but they felt too, that speaking to an adult, such as a teacher or staff at a local salon, would be of benefit. Comments from the mystery shoppers included:

*Sent careers information and said I could make an appointment to speak with a careers adviser locally. Also gave information on apprenticeships i.e. what qualifications I would get, and gave me their details. Asked lots of questions and gave me ones to think about before making a decision. Very helpful and friendly and gave information to look into. (Webchat 10/10)*

*Asked why I wanted to be a hairdresser & for how long. Also had I spoken to anyone about it, said could give me information on college courses or job training - [www.lifetime-publishing.com](http://www.lifetime-publishing.com). Gave lots of detail and asked relevant questions for me to think about. She was very approachable, understanding and friendly. (Webchat 10/10)*

*Look at [hotcourses.com](http://hotcourses.com) or speak to local Connexions or talk to Connexions direct. They gave no information on hairdressing or what a course was about. Didn't give her name or address me with my name. (Email 5/10)*

*Said that Connexions was a national company and cannot provide information of local college courses. Gave me a link to a site with a careers guide. (Webchat 5/10)*

### **5.4 Scenario 4 - I want to get a job but I'm still at school**

The most common response to this scenario from advisers was to give information on the subject (48%) including details on the number of hours permitted and the type of work which can be carried out. Self-help ideas such as putting together a CV, visiting local shops, searching in the Yellow Pages were suggested in 42% of contacts. The young people in Hertfordshire suggested that the most helpful responses for this scenario would be to given

local information sources and suggestions for adults to speak to; both of these options were suggested in 26% of contacts.

Feedback from the mystery shoppers included:

*Suggested the types of jobs I could do at fourteen. Go to lots of places in my area and see if they have any work. May require a work permit from the council. Have a chat at local Connexions as they could help with finding a job. Gave lots of information but was also given places I could get more information from (Webchat 10/10)*

*I was told detailed information about restrictions of work for 14 year olds and the types of jobs that could be done. Additionally, the website - [www.Connexions-direct.com/index.cfm?Pid=75&catalogueContextID=120](http://www.Connexions-direct.com/index.cfm?Pid=75&catalogueContextID=120), was given. Gave detailed information about the subject, was friendly and helpful. Did not remind me that I could contact Connexions again. (Email 9/10)*

*Talk to friends and family who can get me a job. Adviser seemed to want to get webchat over quickly but gave lots of useful websites. (Webchat 6/10)*

*Told me to create a CV and give it in to any shop. Very quick. (Email 6/10)*

### **5.5 Scenario 5 - I'm worried about my best friend's eating**

59% of advisers recommended that the young person should speak to their friend, although various approaches were suggested, for example asking if the friend wants to talk, showing your concern, encouraging the friend to speak to an adult or to contact the Connexions website. Looking at other information sources, such as the websites for teenshealth, NHS Direct and Childline websites, was suggested in 41% of contacts; the same proportion were advised to speak to a parent or teacher about their concerns.

Feedback from Hertfordshire suggested that the young people there would welcome being directed to the appropriate section of the Connexions website; a suggestion which was made by 21% of advisers. Feedback from our mystery shoppers in response to the advice they were given, included:

*The adviser said to try and talk things through with my friend and offer support. They suggested websites with useful information. Also said to try and convince my friend to talk to a Connexions adviser online. The adviser was helpful and seemed interested and concerned. She asked numerous questions ensuring I was satisfied with her response and was eager to resolve the problem (Webchat 10/10)*

*The adviser said that I should try phoning an eating disorder helpline and getting further information that way. He also provided details of my local Connexions branch and ways in which they can help. The adviser was extremely helpful and asked many questions. The advice was relevant and useful (Telephone 10/10)*

*Just to be there for my friend when she needs me. Didn't give me any information on the subject, didn't really give me any advice (Webchat 4/10)*

*Ask my friend to speak to Connexions (Telephone 2/10)*

### **5.6 Scenario 6 - Can you get pregnant the first time you have sex?**

45% of mystery shoppers contacting Connexions with this scenario were given information on the issue, which included various levels of explanation around the emergency

contraceptive pill and details on when a pregnancy test could be taken. 42% of mystery shoppers were given local information sources such as the addresses for nearby clinics. Both of these approaches were favoured by the young people and advisers in Hertfordshire.

42% of mystery shoppers were given details of other national information sources where they could gather help and advice; these included RUthinking, the BBC website and NHS Direct. Feedback from our mystery shoppers included:

*Asked if I had unprotected sex, when I had sex, and said to take the morning after pill. Gave me nearest centre. Asked if I felt comfortable about visiting it and if there was someone I could go with. Said I won't know if I'm pregnant straight away. Put me at ease, was friendly and gave detailed answers to my problem. Gave me reassurance. (Webchat 10/10)*

*"It is possible to get pregnant any time you have sex, especially if it was unprotected. Contact us back if you need further support." (Text 10/10)*

*It is possible to be pregnant especially if contraception was not used. Gave me website and a telephone number for a sexwise helpline. Answered question, however, didn't go into much detail or offer any advice that would put me at ease. (Email 5/10)*

*He said to go to FPC or chemist for ECP & gave two addresses. He was quite nervous when I first asked him; there was a long pause in the middle. It did make me a little uncomfortable. He didn't ask me any questions (Telephone 5/10)*

### **5.7 Scenario 7 - I'm thinking of leaving home, what do I need to do?**

National information sources for gathering further advice were recommended in 44% of mystery shops, whilst contacting a local Connexions Partnership was suggested in 37%. Feedback from Hertfordshire suggested that young people would welcome being given local information sources or given advice about that they should do there and then. Feedback from the mystery shoppers included:

*I should make an appointment to see my local Connexions adviser as they will be able to help me better, as they can relate to my region. I felt comfortable with the Connexions adviser and was happy the way my query was answered. The adviser was constantly checking that everything was clear and I was happy. (Telephone 8/10)*

*Moving out was a big step and I had to think carefully but enjoy it. Budgeting was important as is who you want to move in with, when etc. I was very pleased with this website and felt the adviser was clear and supportive with his advice (Webchat 9/10)*

*Told me to contact the local housing authority. Very unhelpful and did not ask further questions about my specific situation. Did not check my question was answered to satisfaction or remind me to contact Connexions again for more advice if I wanted to. (Webchat 3/10)*

*"It is hard to offer advice over SMS. You may like to visit [www.Connexions-direct.com](http://www.Connexions-direct.com) where you can talk to us over webchat or email or call us on 080 800 132". Poor reply which failed to give even the most basic of advice. (Text 1/10)*

### **5.8 Scenario 8 - Someone keeps sending me horrible texts**

54% of advisers suggested that the mystery shopper should speak to an adult in this situation. The adults recommended included parents, teachers and the police. This

approach was favoured by the representatives in Hertfordshire. 51% of advisers also gave self-help ideas, such as changing the mobile phone SIM card and speaking to the network provider.

Feedback from the mystery shoppers included:

*He was sympathetic and gave lots of useful information that could help a lot. He suggested the Connexions website, going to police, talking to the person causing harm or teachers at school. He said I could call back if I had any trouble. He was very friendly and comforting while still being professional. (Telephone 10/10)*

*Told me to keep the texts but not to reply. To tell my Mum and maybe report it to the police. Maybe contact phone company and try to block the number texting me or get a new SIM card. Be careful who I give that number to. Adviser was really sympathetic and checked that I was happy with the information (Webchat 10/10)*

*Told me to contact my mobile network provider to get the number blocked or contact the police. Very short e-mail, not very friendly or helpful. Didn't give me any information or contact details. Did not remind me to call Connexions (Email 3/10)*

*Said to either approach the girl, change my SIM card, or ring network provider. To be honest he didn't sound too bothered (Telephone 3/10)*

### **5.9 Scenario 9 - I want to move in with my boyfriend**

The most common suggestion for this scenario was for the mystery shopper to speak to their boyfriend and/or parents (64%), a response which the representatives in Hertfordshire agreed would be the most workable. Feedback from the mystery shoppers included:

*Don't get pulled both ways, let your parents and boyfriend know how you feel. Don't give up your education. Financial difficulty and strain will put a lot of pressure on relationships. Adviser was empathic and gave me very practical advice. Told me that I shouldn't feel pressurised into rushing into anything (Telephone 9/10)*

*Recommended the housing section on the website. Advised speaking to all parties involved. Was sympathetic and offered practical, detailed advice. Could have taken conversation further, wasn't judged and was very friendly and helpful (Webchat 9/10)*

*Said I should explain to my parents why I want to move in with my boyfriend and find out why they don't want me to. Parents would want what is best for you and that I should wait until time is right. Very short email. One sentence didn't make sense and there were a few spelling mistakes. Gave me advice but did not offer any additional information sources so that I could investigate my problem further (Email 5/10)*

*Said your parents are responsible until you are 18, after that, you can make your own decisions. There was no information or help given, they did not ask how old I was (Text 2/10)*

### **5.10 Scenario 10 – Is smoking really bad for you?**

37% of advisers gave information on smoking, including the health risks and diseases associated with smoking. This approach was one of two favoured by the representatives in Hertfordshire, the other approach being given national sources of further information.

34% of advisers suggested self-help options, in particular speaking to the friends who were pressurising the mystery shopper to start smoking. The feedback from the mystery shoppers included:

*I was told smoking is bad for you and illegal under the age of 16. It is your decision to smoke and you shouldn't if you don't want to. Try and talk to your friends about it or bring your best friend to one side and tell her how you feel. Can't you agree to disagree? I felt comfortable speaking to the Connexions person (Telephone 10/10)*

*Told me related illnesses and death statistics and said I would smell. Asked if I wanted to smoke. Friends should respect my decision. Gave me quite detailed information on the subject (Telephone 8/10)*

*Advised me not to smoke, as he knows from his own experience it's very hard to give up. It's expensive and it's not worth risking your health. He did not remain impartial or give me much information, but I felt able to talk to him (Webchat 5/10)*

*Gave website <ash.org.uk> and said don't be pressurised. Gave a good website but was hard to understand. Referred to me as Dan, but I had said I was Mark (Email 6/10)*

#### **5.11 Scenario 11 - I want to do work experience, what do I need to do?**

The most common response from advisers was to suggest contacting a local Connexions Partnership (56%), whilst 35% suggested speaking to a parent or teacher, the latter being an approach favoured in Hertfordshire, who also suggested being given details of where further information could be found on the Connexions website would be helpful. Feedback from the mystery shoppers included:

*Asked what my interests were and suggested I contact local shops, businesses and friends or family. Advised that local Connexions office would have a list of vacancies. The adviser asked plenty of relevant questions and was pleasant. Easy to understand & wished me luck and said to call back if I needed more help. (Telephone 9/10)*

*Asked is the school helping find placements and what would I like to do? Talk to work experience co-ordinator & write to organisations and see if they do work experience. Contact many people so I get a variety. Gave lots of relevant information & asked further questions (Webchat 9/10)*

*You could write or ring around some local companies; ask friends and relatives if they know anything. Do your relatives work somewhere you would like to go? The advice was short and basic and I was not given extra info. There were some parts where I felt completely misunderstood and being ordered to do something (Webchat 4/10)*

*Adviser didn't seem to know what to say. Said to ask a teacher as they're a national helpline without local information'. Said to speak to Connexions adviser (Webchat 5/10)*

#### **5.12 Scenario 12 - I'd like to know more about Modern Apprenticeships; I want to be a joiner**

Contacting a local partnership was suggested in 79% of mystery shops, a response favoured by the group in Hertfordshire. In 58% of mystery shops advisers suggested national information sources, such as the websites Realworkrealpay and apprenticeships.org. The representatives in Hertfordshire also favoured being given information about apprenticeships during their initial contact with a Connexions adviser (an approach used in 30% of mystery shops). Feedback from the mystery shoppers included:

*For vacancies for apprenticeships to go to my local Connexions partnership and for more information about apprenticeships to visit the website [www.apprenticeships.org.uk](http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk) and the job4usection on the Connexions website. The adviser was very friendly and gave the right amount of detailed information verbally but also sources to find out more - very helpful. She checked if she had given enough information and if I wanted to ask more (Telephone 10/10)*

*Gave me a website on apprenticeships and gave me local details for a Connexions centre. Very helpful and fully understood what I needed (Email 10/10)*

*He told me that the best thing is to phone the local Connexions. Not much information given (Telephone 3/10)*

*She said talk to local Connexions, that was it. Did not ask why/what I liked about job. Also was not most pleasant to talk to (Webchat 4/10)*

## 6. Conclusion & Recommendations

This wave of mystery shopping has highlighted aspects of the Service where a good performance is being achieved, but it has also revealed areas of weakness and has identified clear areas for improvement. The following section looks at the positive aspects first and then moves on to examine where improvements can be made.

Advisers on the telephone displayed good greeting and listening techniques. The majority gave a correct greeting and demonstrated that they had listened to the mystery shopper's enquiry and subsequent answers. The language used by advisers was appropriate and professional and easily understood by the mystery shoppers.

Clear advice was given in almost every mystery shop by advisers who largely remained impartial and were empathic. Although most advice was clear, the mystery shoppers welcomed advisers giving several possible solutions to their issue and various avenues to explore.

The webchat technology worked well with the vast majority of mystery shoppers able to make contact on their first attempt and this contact was maintained in most webchats. When webpages were used, almost all mystery shoppers reported that they could be viewed and that they were helpful. The successful use of webpages and the positive feedback from shoppers may indicate that they could be used more often to help young people with their enquiries.

The percentage of advisers gathering data on the mystery shoppers was lower than expected. Although age was asked in the majority of calls, the percentage of advisers asking where the mystery shopper lived, where they had heard about the service and their ethnicity ranged between one-half and two-thirds of the sample. Advisers are also expected to ask if the young person has any disabilities; this mystery shopping programme did not track whether this question was being asked and it should be included in future mystery shopping programmes. Feedback from advisers suggests that some find it hard to find a suitable place in a conversation to gather this information and further training of advisers would help in this regard.

The percentage of advisers reminding mystery shoppers that they can contact the Service again, was disappointing. Subsequent discussions with advisers has highlighted that some advisers thought they should not be asking this question in order to stop persistent users of the Service. Whilst there are a small minority of young people who use the Service on a very regular basis, the reminder should be given and a solution to help persistent users is required.

The response rates to emails and texts were disappointing. This impacted on the base rates for results and limited some of the conclusions which could be drawn on these two contact methods. Further work is continuing to establish where the breakdown occurred (were the emails and texts received by the Service in the first place? were replies not sent properly?). These issues should also be considered in developing the sample size for future mystery shopping work to ensure an acceptable base size for reporting.

A high degree of inconsistency in the advice and service being given by advisers was revealed. Whilst the majority of advisers did maintain professional empathy and gave non-judgmental advice, there were instances when this was not the case. The quality and

quantity of advice also varied greatly. One-quarter of all mystery shoppers reported that they were not given enough information (none of the mystery shoppers reported that they were given too much information). Whilst some enquiries did end with the mystery shopper able to explore various avenues for helping them with their enquiry, many felt that they were not given enough advice and were simply referred to another agency.

For some scenarios, a referral was recognised by the mystery shoppers to be the most suitable answer to their enquiry, however the way they were referred made a difference to their perception of how their enquiry was handled. Mystery shoppers expected a certain level of interest in their issue and a certain level of information; a referral made too early on during the enquiry, led some to question why they had contacted the Service in the first place. In addition the use of canned text responses was particularly criticised by mystery shoppers who quickly recognised that the answer they had received was neither personal to them nor tailored to their particular enquiry.

The Service needs to guide and train advisers to give the most effective advice, whilst at the same time managing the high volume of enquiries received. Advisers should know where they can find the advice and further information needed by young people, rather than simply acting as a referral mechanism.

Feedback from advisers suggested that the inconsistency in the Service had resulted from different training being given over the last year. It is clear that some quick wins can be achieved by ensuring that all advisers are given the same advice and training.

## **7. APPENDIX A – Questionnaires**

<b>Telephone: Greeting</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Q1	Were you able to complete this call?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q2	How quickly was the call answered (from the first ring to speaking to an adviser)		
Q3	Was the greeting clear?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q4	Did the greeting include "Hello Connexions Direct (or similar)"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q5	Did the adviser give their name?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q6	If you were put on hold at any point, did the adviser explain what they were doing?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Telephone: Dealing With Your Enquiry</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Q7	Did the adviser ask your name?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q8	Did the adviser ask your age?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q9	Did the adviser ask where you live?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q10	Did the adviser ask what your ethnic or origin is?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q11	Did the adviser ask if you had used Connexions Direct before?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q12	Did the adviser ask you where you had heard about Connexions Direct?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q13	Did the adviser listen to your question & responses and confirm their understanding?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q14	Did the adviser ask you further questions about your query?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q15	What response(s) did the adviser give to your enquiry? <i>Tick all that apply</i>		
	Recommended my local Connexions Partnership	<input type="radio"/>	
	Recommended local information sources (other than Connexions) <small>e.g. library</small>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Recommended information from the Connexions Direct website	<input type="radio"/>	
	Recommended national information sources (other than Connexions) <small>e.g. websites or helplines</small>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Advised me to speak to responsible and relevant adult <small>e.g. a teacher, doctor, nurse, adult relative</small>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Advised to speak to person giving cause for concern <small>e.g. friend (scenario 5), boyfriend (scenario 9)</small>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Suggested self-help options <small>e.g. breaking up revision, revising with friends</small>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Given useful relevant or detailed information about the subject	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Telephone: Overall</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Q16	Did the adviser's tone put you at ease?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q17	Did the adviser use clear, easy to understand language, whilst being professional?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q18	Did the adviser remain impartial?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q19	Was the speed of the conversation correct?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q20	Did you understand the advice/information given?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q21	Were you given an acceptable amount of information?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q22	Did the adviser check that your question had been answered to your satisfaction?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q23	Did the adviser remind you that you can always call again?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q24	Taking the whole call into account, what mark out of 10 would you give this call?		



<b>Email: Greeting</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Q1	Did you receive an initial acknowledgement to your email?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q2	How quickly did you receive a response to your email? <i>If no response was received, write 'None' in for the number of hours and finish here</i>		
Q3	Did the adviser give their name?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Email: Dealing With Your Enquiry</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Q4	Did the adviser appear to have read your email fully?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q5	What response(s) did the adviser give to your enquiry <i>Tick all that apply</i>		
	Recommended that I call Connexions Direct/they would contact me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Recommended my local Connexions Partnership	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Recommended local information sources (other than Connexions) <i>e.g. library,</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Recommended information from the Connexions Direct website	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Recommended national information sources (other than Connexions) <i>e.g. websites or helplines</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Advised me to speak to responsible and relevant adult <i>e.g. a teacher, doctor, nurse, adult relative</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Advised to speak to person giving cause for concern <i>e.g. friend (scenario 5), boyfriend (scenario 9),</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Suggested self-help options <i>e.g. breaking up revision, revising with friends</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Given useful relevant or detailed information about the subject	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Email: Overall</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Q6	Did the adviser's tone put you at ease? <i>The adviser should make you feel valued and encourage you to continue with your enquiry. You should feel comfortable asking your question</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q7	Did the adviser use clear, easy to understand language, whilst remaining professional?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q8	Did the adviser remain impartial? <i>The adviser should not judge you</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q9	Did you understand the advice/information given?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q10	Were you given an acceptable amount of information?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q11	Did the adviser remind you that you could always contact Connexions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q12	Taking the whole assessment into account, what mark out of 10 would you give?	<input type="text"/>	

<b>Text: Greeting</b>			
How quickly did you receive a response to your text message? <i>If no response was received, write 'None' in for the number of minutes and finish here</i>			
<b>Text: Dealing With Your Enquiry</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Did the adviser appear to have read your text fully?		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What response(s) did the adviser give to your enquiry? <i>Tick all that apply</i>			
Recommended that I call Connexions Direct/they would contact me		<input type="radio"/>	
Recommended my local Connexions Partnership		<input type="radio"/>	
Recommended local information sources (other than Connexions) <i>e.g. library,</i>		<input type="radio"/>	
Recommended information from the Connexions Direct website		<input type="radio"/>	
Recommended national information sources (other than Connexions) <i>e.g. websites or helplines</i>		<input type="radio"/>	
Advised me to speak to responsible and relevant adult <i>e.g. a teacher, doctor, nurse, adult relative</i>		<input type="radio"/>	
Advised to speak to person giving cause for concern <i>e.g. friend (scenario 5), boyfriend (scenario 9),</i>		<input type="radio"/>	
Suggested self-help options <i>e.g. breaking up revision, revising with friends</i>		<input type="radio"/>	
Given useful relevant or detailed information about the subject		<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Text: Overall</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Did you understand the advice/information given?		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Taking the whole assessment into account, what mark out of 10 would you give this assessment?			

## 8. APPENDIX B – About TNS Mystery Shopping

TNS Mystery Shopping is the product specialist of TNS, the world's third largest market information company. We have been providing mystery shopping programmes to a variety of industry sectors for more than 10 years. We have considerable experience of working with a wide variety of organisations in both public and private sectors.

Our role is to assist our clients improve standards at the customer/staff interface. We provide unrivalled expertise, the highest levels of data quality and the most advanced reporting tools available. The measurement we provide, and the practical recommendations we deliver, empower our clients to drive service performance throughout their organisations.

The commissioning of a mystery customer programme is only the beginning of the service improvement process. Mystery shopping must become a measurement for action at all levels throughout the organisation.

TNSMS has identified four critical factors that constitute successful mystery shopping, and, ultimately, the delivery of excellent customer service.

- *Development of Measurement Standards*

Our focus is the objective measurement of service at the point of delivery allowing us to provide actionable data to clients. The messages being delivered should complement key service action points. Data must be understandable and actionable, at every level.

- *Data Collection & Data Quality*

Our commitment to delivering data quality is reflected in our approach to shopper training and briefing. We will always recommend the correct level of shopper training based on a client's specific needs. The scenarios used should be credible and

- *Reporting*

The communication of performance to programme participants is an essential component of service improvement. The TNS commitment to IT and data delivery systems allows our clients' access to the most advanced data reporting, data dissemination and data analysis tools available.

- *Communication*

The delivery of service messages can be as important as the message itself. We invest considerable time in communicating the benefits of the message to participants.

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