

Consultation Document: 'A Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy for Northern Ireland'

The response of NAEGA

NAEGA, the professional association for the promotion of adult guidance for learning and work, is pleased to submit a response to the recently published Consultation Document 'A Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy for Northern Ireland'. NAEGA welcomes the publication of this comprehensive and timely document, responding as it does to the economic priorities set out in the Leitch agenda for the achievement of world-class skills in the UK by the year 2020.

NAEGA is a UK-wide organisation and so is especially pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the strategy for Northern Ireland, which we regard as the original home of guidance for adults in the UK. Much of the current good practice in impartial, client-centred adult guidance throughout the UK and beyond derives from a model of practice developed and tested over many years in Northern Ireland, particularly by the internationally respected Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA). The commitment of Northern Ireland over many years to high quality guidance for adults was never more evident than in 2004, when NAEGA held one of its largest and most successful conferences in the City of Armagh. This was attended by policy makers, practitioners and researchers from across the UK and the Republic of Ireland, with EGSA and other NI guidance colleagues taking leading roles in the organisation of the event.

More recently, NAEGA members have played an active part in the Review of IAG services in England, the outcomes of which were embedded within the Leitch Review of Skills, which the CEIAG strategy also addresses. It is interesting therefore to note the differing solutions arrived at in NI and England. In the former, an integrated, government-led careers service, with a strong focus on 14-19 is seen as the answer. In the latter, a differentiated service, with a distinct 'adult advancement and careers service' is to be established.

Although NAEGA's *raison d'être* is the promotion and encouragement of the provision of adult guidance, we believe that there is scope for a variety of models of delivery for guidance on learning, work and careers, for both young people and adults. Thus our membership includes those managing and delivering 'all-age' guidance services in Scotland and Wales, as well as those delivering services exclusively to adults in England. In our view it is the **quality** of the service offered and delivered that is paramount, not the structures that enable that delivery. It is with this perspective that we have chosen to comment on those aspects of the consultative document that have a direct or indirect bearing on the provision of **services to adults** rather than on technical questions of delivery structures and resources.

The consultation questions

1. LMI

NAEGA endorses all efforts to improve the availability of up-to-date labour market information to guidance staff and their clients. However, we have concerns about 'the use of LMI to influence the career choices of both young people and adults'. Local labour markets may offer plenty of low-skill, low wage job opportunities, but relatively few higher level jobs, whereas a regional or national perspective may be far more effective in raising aspirations,

and ultimately encouraging investment by individuals in education and training at higher levels. We are concerned also that over-reliance on LMI could jeopardise the impartiality that the document rightly identifies as essential to good advice and guidance.

2. Careers Advice and Guidance for Young People

NAEGA believes that all young people and adults should be entitled to accessible, impartial, high quality advice and guidance about learning and careers throughout their lives. This must begin with effective careers education in school and at every stage of learning. The CEIAG Guide cited is based on the very well-respected and tested DOTS model: the crucial issue will be in the training and support of specialist staff in educational settings to deliver that model effectively and consistently.

3. Different levels of service: Careers Resource Centres

In the document, the differentiated levels of service proposed for the new Careers Resource Centres are targeted specifically at adults initially but are eventually intended to become all-age providers. Some of our members are familiar with the Sampson *et al* Florida State model and recognise its strengths, but we are not clear about the evidence base that was used to determine this version of the model as suitable for Northern Ireland, which already has extensive and effective services targeted directly at adults. The rationale behind the intention to create a service targeted at adults which then becomes an all-age service is also unclear. If an all-age service is ultimately intended, why not design that in from the outset? Conversely, if adults have been found to have the greatest need for such a focused and carefully differentiated service, why then change the model to include young people who will in most cases necessarily need more than the basic self-help service and inevitably skew the balance of delivery? We understand that some of these centres are already being piloted and that 'following evaluation it is proposed to roll this model out to other areas'. Are the pilots testing the benefits of all-age and exclusively adult services separately in order to provide a better comparative evidence base for the planned roll-out?

4. Careers Advice and Guidance for Adults

Much of this section of the document deals with the Careers Resource Centres addressed above. We have studied this section of the report with care and can find no specific mention of Northern Ireland's (and the UK's) own pioneering, independent but significantly public-funded Educational Guidance Service for Adults. We were surprised to read that 'these services are currently available through the Careers Service and other providers but, because of limited resources, are not promoted actively.' That is certainly not the impression that our members in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK have of the extensive and targeted adult guidance provision available through EGSA and other agencies. Indeed, as the Minister himself said, celebrating EGSA's 40th Anniversary at its conference in October:

'EGSA has demonstrated that guidance is a force for change'

This omission and the failure in the document more generally to acknowledge the contribution of agencies other than the Careers Service is at odds with the 'strong collaboration' between stakeholders that is espoused in the Executive Summary. Experience across the UK over the past 40 years has shown that any effective guidance system must be based on genuine collaboration between a wide range of agencies in mutually respectful

partnerships and networks. Only in this way can comprehensive information resources be maintained, effective referrals made between agencies, and good practice shared, to the benefit of the client. The re-contracting mentioned in 7.6.13 will need to take cognisance of these issues as well as addressing potential overlap, which may not in fact be as economically damaging as gaps in provision, even if resources are saved in the short-term by 'rationalising' services.

5. Careers Advice and Guidance for Young People and Adults Vulnerable to Social Exclusion

NAEGA welcomes the proposals to create a team of dedicated careers advisers to work with the most vulnerable groups of young people and adults. The collaborative delivery model described, in partnership with relevant voluntary, community and statutory bodies is to be welcomed, although in the case of adults in particular, issues of client confidentiality must be addressed.

6. Quality assurance

The dual use of Northern Ireland specific quality assurance indicators and of the nationally-recognised **matrix** standard provide a robust framework for quality assurance of the new services, providing these are linked to an effective system of staff training and CPD. However, caution is urged about the over-reliance on measurable indicators and a corresponding lack of emphasis on qualitative evidence for the purposes of continuous service improvement. In particular we would urge that the systems adopted pay particular attention to the long-term benefits and impact of guidance on the lives of individuals and their families, not simply in terms of short-term placement outcomes on courses or in employment. We also note that there is no explicit mechanism for using feedback from practice to identify gaps in learning and training provision, which could be a missed opportunity in the development of an integrated service.

7. Forum of delivery partners

This proposal is welcome as it demonstrates a commitment to partnership working not wholly present in the rest of the proposals. It will be important therefore to ensure that this body is more than an occasional discussion group and is able to make recommendations based on the evidence it collects from clients and other stakeholders to policy makers. Attempts in England to create such fora have not succeeded, largely because there was no effective mechanism for structured dialogue with policy makers.

8. Extended schools model

This would appear to offer opportunities for the provision of advice and guidance within familiar community settings and as such should be welcomed. However, in part this proposal appears to be in response to problems arising from a previous decision to co-locate Jobs and Benefits offices and careers services. Although adults may welcome the opportunities to access more than one type of service in one location, in practice care must be taken not to confuse voluntary services for self improvement with the provision of other types of service, either statutory benefit-related services, or services for children, in settings in which adults may not feel comfortable. We are therefore surprised that there is little reference in the document to the provision of services in places where people work, either through initiatives

such as Unionlearn, or by other types of collaboration with employers, such as the employment-based projects reported on by EGSA at their recent conference.

9. Review of work-based learning for careers staff

NAEGA sees high quality initial staff training and effective and responsive CPD as the foundation for any effective guidance service for adults. Whilst the expansion of opportunities for careers staff to gain experience in a variety of workplace settings will no doubt be invaluable, just as important is maintenance of their skills and knowledge base about the practice and techniques of guidance and opportunities for reflective practice. They will also need an excellent and up-to date knowledge of the rapidly-changing education and training system in the UK and beyond, for example, the routes to higher level qualifications through vocational pathways.

10. Impartiality versus the needs of the economy

Effective educational and careers guidance must have regard to the wider economy and the trends in the job-market, but if individuals are to make effective contributions to society and the economy they need to be able to make informed decisions about their lives, learning and work that suit them and their circumstances. Guidance will only be effective in achieving this if it is impartial, and enables adults to make those decisions in a considered and unconstrained way, even if in the short-term, these are not necessarily the most economically beneficial, either for themselves or the economy. The wider benefits to society will be felt in the contributions made in the family, the workplace and the community of better-educated, better-skilled and more fulfilled individuals.

Conclusion

The CEIAG proposals offer a coherent view of the proposed future management of careers education, information, advice and guidance services to young people in Northern Ireland. Less clear are the Government's intentions towards the provision of coherent, impartial advice and guidance services to adults. The introduction of a new model which does not appear, as set out in this document, to be rooted in existing best practice in Northern Ireland is of concern, especially as the collaborative, partnership approach mentioned elsewhere in the document appears to be lacking in this initiative. We understand that a further report is to be published on a recent review of guidance services to adults. We would hope that its conclusions would be fully incorporated into the CEIAG plan before any further major changes are implemented.

With those caveats, NAEGA congratulates all those involved in the development of this ambitious strategy for Northern Ireland and would be pleased to receive and comment on any further consultations, as we are happy to endorse the aspiration that:

'...young people and adults will develop the skills and confidence to make the most of their life choices and follow the career paths that suit them best.'

Appendices

NAEGA Annual Report 2007
Draft NAEGA Manifesto (2007)