

OPINIONS



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Why a website will never give good careers advice

Careers education and guidance is more than just providing information about jobs says Janet Downs. It cannot be offloaded to employers or delegated to website and phone lines

The quality of careers education and guidance (CEG) has plummeted since the days of the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI), which did much to improve the status of vocational education in its widest sense: generic work-related skills. This was achieved by a combination of class-based CEG, collaboration with local authority professional careers officers, work-experience for pupils in their last year of compulsory schooling (years 10 or 11), sharing best practice via small hubs within a larger area consortium, area-wide TVEI related in-service training (TRIST), help from local employers and support from central government.

The site is so dull that it can't fail to leave users uninspired

Employers provided work experience, helped with initiatives such as industry days, careers conventions, mock interviews and Young Enterprise. Industry and newspaper days and the like became normal practice in schools, all of them promoting the "soft" skills that employers demand: problem-solving, team work and perseverance.

The professional careers service was involved too, providing help with many of the initiatives, but more importantly ensuring that every young person had at least one face-to-face, individual careers interview. Today, the National Careers Service provides careers guidance for all young people in England from the age of 13 through a website so dull that it can't fail to leave users uninspired. Its counterparts in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland are far more inviting and user friendly.

But no website is a substitute for a face-to-face meeting with a properly trained, independent, professional careers advisers, the kind of people Michael Gove had in mind when he told the education select committee in December 2013 that the

call for independent careers advisers was driven by "self-interested people" who were spouting "garbage". David Laws, in his book *Coalition*, describes how Gove had a visceral hatred of careers officers along with local authorities, cross-party committees and sex educators. Laws wondered if Gove's loathing of professional careers advisers was because of an unsatisfactory interview during his youth. He did not speculate what caused his detestation of sex educators.

CEG is not just about promoting generic work-related skills. It should also give pupils the tools to make decisions wisely. This ability is based on developing self-awareness and applying this when choosing post-school routes. It entails a wide knowledge of the different pathways and the qualifications needed to follow them. Unfortunately, judging schools on the proportion of pupils they send to university works against this. Schools are encouraged to act in their own interests rather than in the interests of the pupils.

The tone of much rhetoric surrounding employer involvement in CEG suggests employers can do this better than schools. Schools and employers are in partnership, but the ultimate responsibility for CEG lies with schools. It cannot be offloaded on to employers.

Although employers are essential partners in any CEG programme, they should not be used as substitutes for properly trained, professional careers officers. No employer can be expected to know all the possible post-school routes and how to apply for them. But employers have a vital role in activities such as providing work experience, mock interviews, helping on Industry days/STEM days, careers conventions, supporting initiatives such as "Inspiring the Future", offering taster sessions for pupils wanting to experience a typical day in a particular job and mentoring pupils.

CEG needs properly trained professionals working full-time. It also needs a teacher in charge of careers in schools. Again, this needs high-quality training – being responsible for careers isn't just pointing pupils to a website and sticking up a few posters. Yet for all the rhetoric about high-quality careers education being essential, it is unlikely the government will support the development of CEG in schools or local careers services run by professionals. This would demand investment at a time when school financing is already inadequate.



LOUISE PAGE JENNINGS

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Three basic guidelines for effective consultation

Consultation is never a silver bullet to securing planning permission, but it is necessary and de-risks the process, says Louise Page-Jennings

The government's ambitious target to build 500 new schools by 2020 is leaving many communities stuck between the need to provide much-needed school places and finding the right location to do so.

To find a site for a free school, the Education Funding Agency (EFA) currently searches an area with an identified need and then pulls together an application, leaving many communities feeling as if they have been presented with a fait accompli. Very often the land won't be purchased until planning permission has been granted, but residents feel that there is pressure on the council to grant permission, as the alternative is a chronic lack of school places.

Recent projects I have worked on all share a common theme; the proposers of schools assume that, because a new facility is being provided, the community will be supportive. Residential developers expect resistance during planning, but school applications are often more difficult because there is opposition to development on top of general contention around education provision. Specific issues on applications differ: in one case, the community was concerned about traffic and loss of green space; in another, which also included residential development, the community felt it was being forced to agree to a residential development to fund the new school.

In both of these cases, better and more timely local consultation would have prevented escalation, mistrust and delay, and engaged a wider audience that could have had more diverse views. Consultation is never a silver bullet to securing planning permission, but is necessary and de-risks the process.

The challenge in applying for planning permission for new schools is to incorporate good public engagement across many areas, in a process that local residents and elected leaders will judge as sufficiently transparent and objective. There will always be common concerns, such as an increase in traffic, behaviour of children and the loss of local amenity space, but by following the principles below, lines of communication can be established and understanding

between all parties can grow.

Here are three basic guidelines for good consultation:

Early

Early engagement with members of the local community provides an opportunity to mitigate the sense of a fait accompli by allowing time to identify and alleviate concerns, as well as getting people involved so early that they can be part of a movement shaping their own future.

Transparent

The more honest and open a consultation is, the better. Nothing arouses suspicion and mistrust more than vague, evasive answers and a feeling of things being done "behind the scenes".

Proposers of schools assume the community will be supportive

Thorough

Being thorough in an approach to consultation means engaging widely, not just near the site. It is likely that parents living further away will be more supportive of a planning application, as they will be unaffected by development.

Digital tools, such as Commonplace, can also help. Unlike social media platforms, Commonplace builds an auditable and consistent database of responses and local opinion. This combination means that such tools have a key part to play in de-risking the planning process for the new schools.

The EFA, trusts and government locally and nationally need to be seen to be working with local communities, and avoiding the assumption that the benefit and munificence of the "gift" will mean that local issues will be smoothed away. Instead, offering a bottom-up process of local engagement and building trust will lead to better and more effective decision-making and hence investment of public funds.