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Letter from Sir John Holman to DfE and DWP Ministers re: Careers Guidance System in England

Dear Ministers,

This letter summarises my recommendations for the future of the careers guidance system in England. It is based on 18 months' worth of conversations with careers practitioners and sector representatives, employers, schools, colleges, local bodies and a range of other interested parties, as well as a review of available evidence from the Department for Education (DfE), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the wider sector.

The recommendations are set out in the form of nine strategic principles, with some specific proposals under each. These are designed to address some particular issues I have identified with the existing infrastructure, but also what I believe to be the best way to shape careers services across government in the future to achieve a truly aligned and 'all age' careers system.

These principles are intended as a framework for further action; setting the direction for more detailed work to develop and implement specific proposals to realise the overall outcome I set out below. If realised fully these principles will represent, in some areas, a significant shift in the organisation and impact of the careers infrastructure in England.

Vision for the future careers guidance system

The recommendations set out in this letter are underpinned by my overall vision for publicly funded careers guidance in England:

To ensure all people, whatever their age or situation, can get to the next and better stage of their career, through high quality careers guidance and relevant education, employment and training options, based on comprehensive and dynamic information and data.

A careers guidance system funded by taxpayers' money should work to the benefit of both individuals and the economy as a whole; careers advice must be fully integrated with advice on relevant education, employment and training options in order to practically realise an individual's careers ambitions and match them to the needs of the local and national economy. Wherever possible the advice relating to careers, including occupations, skills, jobs and training options, should use a common language to aid clarity on next steps.

The Strategic Principles

The nine principles I have developed are, as far as I know, the broadest and boldest attempt yet to define a strategic framework for publicly funded careers guidance. They have been tested with a wide range of external parties. The individual principles may need some merging and rationalisation, but I would urge Ministers to make sure the underlying principles are visible in a future Careers Strategy as it emerges.

Strategic Principle 1

Government's collective careers guidance activities should be underpinned by a public strategic framework, which provides overarching direction, priorities and objectives for careers services and is underpinned by a common taxonomy, information and data architecture

The careers guidance system in England is delivered through a range of organisations, and different elements are overseen by different parts of government. With this fragmentation comes a risk of confusion for those who need careers support, and of duplication and poor value for money. It is crucial to bring more coherence to this system, to ensure all relevant parts of the system are working towards a common, collective outcome. I do not think a major merging of individual delivery services is required to meet this aim, but a common strategic framework must be developed and made public to guide all aspects of careers guidance delivery as part of a collective whole. This framework must set a clear and coherent national direction, while being flexible enough to respond to local economic priorities and the needs of individual users of the system.

This strategic principle provides the fundamental underpinning to all the other principles, and without it they cannot succeed. All relevant parts of government, in particular DfE and DWP, should be involved in the design of a common strategic framework. As part of this they should commit to a set of shared, measurable outcomes for effective careers guidance, with appropriate governance arrangements to monitor progress and take account of local contexts. An external advisory group, with strong employer representation, should be set up and involved in both the design and subsequent delivery of the strategy, and should be appointed by the Prime Minister to ensure this work is given sufficient cross-government priority and co-ordination. There should also be a common branding for all elements of government-funded careers guidance, for adults and for young people, so the components are recognised as part of a larger whole.

Strategic Principle 2

For young people in education DfE should continue to delegate the delivery of careers activity to schools and colleges, with a single organisation providing support and challenge. Consideration must be given to the most appropriate body to support 16- and 17-year-olds that are not participating in education or training.

I believe that the current principle of delegating responsibility for the delivery of careers services to schools and colleges is the right one and should continue. It gives them a clear stake in the system and provides the opportunity for careers education to be integrated into the wider curriculum. Although there are challenges, The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) has been a significant driver behind the improvement of the careers offer in schools and colleges, and there should continue to be a single organisation providing that strategic support, underpinned by the Gatsby Benchmarks, to ensure stability and continuity. This single organisation should be capable of innovating and inspiring schools and colleges, especially in

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the digital sphere. Without this the current improvement in Careers guidance for young people is likely to grind to a halt.

Despite this progress the careers delivery landscape for young people remains fragmented, with a range of organisations, such as the National Careers Service, DWP's Support for Schools programme, DfE's Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge for schools and colleges programme and others all offering careers-related guidance services- including ones specifically aimed at preventing young people becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). This leads to the risk of confusion and inconsistency in how government organises and maximises the impact of its careers offer to young people. In addition, there are several groups of young people who do not attend a school or college (chief among them those who are NEET but also, e.g., students in Independent Training Providers and those who are home-educated) who are not in scope of the government's full strategic support offer.

In order to address these gaps, I am not recommending the merging of the different delivery organisations into one, but rather that these organisations are bought under a single strategic umbrella function. DfE should carry out further work to scope the remit of this function in more detail, but I particularly recommend it should have responsibility for coordinating, commissioning and overseeing local careers delivery services for young people based on clear evidence of need. It should have a clearer quality function set out, to monitor and share best practice in delivery for all institutions supporting young people. It should also have a specific role to oversee, co-ordinate and target work to support those at risk of becoming NEET when they leave school or college- working with Local Authorities (LAs) as appropriate. I believe it is important that these outlined functions are based outside of government in order to encourage innovation and to be as responsive as possible to enable it to be recognised as a centre for expertise in young people's careers guidance.

For those young people who do become NEET, LAs have an existing statutory responsibility to 'encourage, enable and assist' them to participate in education or training. However, there is inconsistency in the level and effectiveness of jobs and careers support that LAs offer, as this is largely dependent on the degree of priority this is given in each area. Limited data sharing at key transition points between schools, colleges, LAs and DWP also make it difficult to target support towards young people with the greatest needs. LAs should retain statutory responsibility to support young people who are NEET, but I encourage DfE to explore further options for how best to address these issues. This should include how to better facilitate sharing of best practice on careers guidance, consideration of a formal arrangement between LAs and careers hubs to work together and jointly commission and manage appropriate careers support to ensure clear referral pathways, and strengthening statutory guidance to LAs to set clearer guidelines for what action they should be taking to ensure young people who are NEET receive high quality careers guidance as part of the wider range of support services they require.

Strategic Principles 3 and 4

For adults (18 and over), DfE's focus should be on adults in work, helping them into successful long-term careers (or series of careers), by supporting them to gain better education, training and skills. The relationship between adult careers advisers and local colleges should be strengthened.

DWP should provide careers information and guidance to people who are out of work or in low paid work in order to move more of this group away from universal credit and into good jobs as a priority - but the objectives and incentives of the short-term jobs support and longer-term careers advice should be complementary, not competitive.

DfE, through the National Careers Service (the Service), and DWP, through Jobcentre Plus (JCP), are the key government organisations providing face to face careers and jobs guidance respectively to adults. They work closely together to deliver this, with around half of referrals coming from JCP and both focusing largely on those who are long-term unemployed and who are low skilled/in low-paid work. It makes sense for jobs and careers support to be closely linked in order to ensure that more people move into sustainable employment, and there is no disagreement that when at its best the two services work effectively together to achieve this aim. But- during the course of my work I have also witnessed and gathered several examples of issues with how the current system of delivering jobs and careers guidance works in practice- including referrals to the Service not taking place when appropriate, duplication of effort with careers advisers focusing on short-term employment advice (esp. CV writing) rather than longer-term careers planning, and a lack of data sharing to support collective decision-making and monitoring of an individual's progress. Although this is not a comprehensive review of current practice, at the least I think it fair to conclude that there is inconsistency in delivery, a degree of confusion about respective roles and responsibilities between JCP work coaches and Service advisers, and a lack of shared objectives, often leading to a disconnect between immediate jobs support and careers advice and a missed opportunity to make the most of professional careers adviser support.

I therefore recommend that in the short-term (within this Spending Review period) DfE and DWP should build on the joint ways of working principles they have already developed by putting in place a strategy for closer co-operation in collectively delivering jobs and careers guidance for adults. This should include developing joint key performance indicators linked to existing employment and skills objectives, setting out a clearer articulation of relevant roles and responsibilities in delivering employment and careers support and how the two fit together as part of one whole, and working with the Unit for Future Skills to develop a clear data sharing agreement to help understand customer needs and monitor impact across the wider employment and careers journey. There should also be arrangements for more co-ordinated joint planning at a local and regional level, and it will be necessary to ensure that both DWP and DfE services align with local policies and priorities.

In the longer-term (post- Spending Review) I believe the strategic direction for the National Careers Service should increasingly focus on helping people to move into more economically advantageous roles. This is crucial to help people into a 'better' stage of their career and to

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support a more productive economy. In practice this would likely mean focusing face-to-face Service resources further towards those already in work, or out of work but with strong transferable skills, and basing more careers advisers in colleges and other community spaces rather than in Jobcentres. In turn, JCP would need to take on more responsibility for delivering formal careers advice to the clients it already works with who are out of work or in work but on low pay, through an evolution of its existing in-work progression programme. I believe this is a better way of organising collective government resource in order to deliver its employment and careers objectives as well as integrating jobs and careers support more effectively, but I acknowledge the resource implications of this proposal for DWP. I encourage DfE and DWP to explore how a shift in roles and responsibilities could best work in practice in order to achieve this longer-term strategic direction- and specifically recommend piloting the proposal to place a greater number of Service advisers in colleges given their central role in supporting people of all ages to upskill and reskill.

DfE and DWP should undertake further work to review the employment and careers support offer for 18-year-olds and the ways in which young peoples' participation is tracked, to ensure clear and consistent support is provided as they make the transition from young person to adult.

Strategic Principle 5

For both young people and adults, government should have robust procedures to assure the quality of delivery of careers guidance.

We are seeing encouraging evidence of improvement in our careers system in schools and colleges as part of a 21st-century, modern system that is built on employer engagement, the dynamism of careers leaders and local collaboration through careers hubs. From a standing start, the Gatsby Benchmarks have now been adopted by over 4,200 secondary schools and colleges and they provide us with a measure, for the first time, of what world class looks like. To maintain this forward momentum, it is essential that the Gatsby Benchmarks remain at the heart of the government's strategy for careers.

The benchmarks are a powerful self-improvement tool that allow schools and colleges to audit their careers provision and self-assess progress over time. To build on this and further accelerate the improvements in careers programmes for young people, I recommend that government now looks at ways to increase the *independence* of quality assurance of careers guidance in schools and colleges. Effective quality assurance in education often involves peer and expert review. This approach is collaborative and, through challenge and support, can provide unique insights by identifying areas for improvement and capturing effective practice. I note that DfE has already started work to test and seek feedback on what such a system of peer and expert review might look like in the short and long-term and encourage you to continue to prioritise this work, alongside the proposed Ofsted review, so that government has a clear, independent view of the quality of current careers provision in schools and colleges.

There is also an opportunity to look more systematically at the quality assurance of careers guidance for adults and to consider the roles that DfE and DWP both play and whether, longer-term, there is scope to bring greater robustness and coherence to the overall approach to quality assurance throughout the careers system. The thinking in this area is less well developed and I encourage government to give greater prioritisation to this work moving forward.

Data on careers destinations is the ultimate measure of whether careers guidance has been successful. DfE, through local authorities, collects and publishes destination data. However, that data is quite lagged and it takes a long time to be validated. I encourage DfE to put a renewed focus on how to best collect destinations data in a way that can be used to strengthen quality assurance and accountability measures in careers.

Strategic Principles 6 and 7

Information about occupations and careers should be based on a single source of government-assured information and data which is transparent, accessible to all users and third parties, and up to the minute. It should be accessible in different formats by different demographics and include information on the skills needs of employers and the economy, both locally and nationally.

The single information source should make it possible for people, and their advisers, to see the connection between skills needs (local and national) and the opportunities available to them to acquire those skills through publicly funded training. Local skills needs should reflect the local skills improvement plan.

As I have already highlighted, government careers guidance is often inconsistent and unclear, making it confusing for users and difficult for them to be confident that they are accessing relevant information. Creating a comprehensive and government-assured 'single source' of careers information, including a comprehensive data architecture and consistent careers taxonomy which links labour market information at both a national and local level with occupations, skills and qualifications needs, is fundamental to delivering my overall vision for the future careers system. Building this, and making it publicly available, will mean the government can have confidence that careers information, wherever and however people access it, can be truly beneficial, supporting them to progress their jobs and careers as well as supporting a more productive future economy. The Unit for Future Skills is a vital enabler of the single source of data architecture and its work should be prioritised to meet this aim. Agreeing a common taxonomy and language to describe occupations, skills and qualifications across government is also a crucial but complex part of this work and needs to be championed with as much vigour as data.

Delivering a single source of careers information will require substantial resource and commitment on a long-term basis in order for it to be properly realised, and I urge government to give this work proper prioritisation. As part of this government needs to agree a clear place for the single source to be owned and held accountable from in order to ensure the work is

driven forward and all relevant parts of government are properly co-ordinated to support ongoing delivery. I consider that the best place for this is within DfE. The key test for success will be whether third parties such as UCAS are using the single source, as the diversity and innovative energy of careers intermediaries in the private sector are an essential part of the wider careers guidance eco-system.

The government's own online careers guidance services, including all relevant websites and digital tools providing careers and skills-related information, should incorporate the single source data architecture and taxonomy once developed. New tools should also be developed in a way that fully integrates and is compatible with this.

Strategic Principle 8

There should be a balance between meeting local needs and national needs. Careers guidance should be clearly aligned with Local Skills Improvement Plans and co-ordinated with relevant devolved authorities. FE Colleges should be a core part of ensuring local careers and skills needs are met.

In the context of the government drive for greater devolution and as part of its levelling up aims, I believe there is a real opportunity to ensure that the future careers guidance system delivers provision which is more responsive to local economic need. In the course of my work, I have heard many different accounts of how well the current national framework for careers provision works in different regions, both in terms of how well delivery is co-ordinated on the ground and in how well local careers provision can be flexed to meet local needs. Finding the right balance will ensure that no matter where they live, people are equipped to make career and employment decisions which are properly informed by both regional and national labour market priorities.

Further work is needed to determine what future careers service delivery should look like in practice as part of this wider devolved landscape, and I encourage government to trial different approaches, including through the devolution trailblazers, to test what might work most effectively. But in considering any new local flexibilities government should retain a national minimum standard for good careers guidance to ensure consistency of provision. In addition, while local enthusiasm for greater devolution is to be welcomed, some assessment needs to be made, against agreed criteria and by an appropriate national organisation, such as the CEC, of whether individual regional bodies have the expertise and capacity to take on greater responsibility for careers guidance. Poorly implemented local delegation would be worse than no local delegation.

Local Skill Improvement Plans (LSIPs) are fundamental to this part of the strategy, and where they exist should be the driver for shaping and organising local careers guidance delivery as part of wider skills priorities identified- as well as being used to inform the single source of careers information at national level. As far as possible the LSIP should represent the totality

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of the skills needs in a particular area in order to inform comprehensive and relevant careers guidance for people of all ages.

Strategic Principle 9

All those who may need or want to use government's careers guidance offer need to understand what is available and how they can access it. The careers guidance offer needs to be clearly communicated, and to support this, all government's careers offers should be delivered under a common branding.

There is no point in implementing these strategic principles if those who need careers guidance support are not aware that it exists, or how to access it. The National Careers Service in particular seems poorly advertised to anyone beyond the priority groups it proactively targets. I strongly encourage government to develop a clear communications strategy for careers guidance, linked to the wider skills, training and employment opportunities available, in order that more people can take advantage of the government's careers offer. Wherever possible I suggest that government communications campaigns linked to careers have a clear call to action signposting the National Careers Service website as the 'front door' for further information on careers options, and that all government's careers-related information and online guidance tools are also hosted on, or clearly signposted from, this site. I also recommend that all elements of government-funded careers guidance, for both adults and young people, are delivered under a common branding, so that the components are recognised as part of a larger whole.

Yours sincerely,

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