

Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership Ltd

Focused monitoring visit report

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership Ltd (GMCP) launched Next Step Northwest (excluding Greater Manchester) in August 2010. GMCP secured two prime contracts for Cheshire, Warrington and Greater Merseyside, as well as Cumbria and Lancashire, making up the Next Step Northwest region. GMCP is a registered charity delivering information, advice and guidance services to young people and adults. GMCP has its own delivery team that delivers a large proportion of Next Step services in Greater Merseyside and a small proportion in Cheshire and Warrington. Across the two regions, GMCP manages 26 subcontractors to deliver the Next Step contract, in addition to its own delivery team.

At its last inspection in 2009, inspectors judged overall effectiveness of the provision as satisfactory. They also judged outcomes for learners, leadership and management, safeguarding, and equality and diversity as satisfactory and capacity to improve and the quality of provision as good. The recommendations for improvements in that report form the basis of the selected themes for this inspection. This report focuses on the themes explored during the monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has GMCP made to strengthen the self-assessment processes to improve provision for learners?

Significant progress

At the previous inspection, inspectors judged GMCP's self-assessment process to be good. It has maintained that standard and carried out further work to extend and improve the effectiveness of its arrangements. For example, it has developed the processes for reviewing the quality of its subcontracted provision to improve the evidence used in self-assessment. It has also developed arrangements to collect and use the views of subcontractors and individual advisers when formulating actions for improvement. GMCP has made good use of a review, conducted by an external body, to enhance the effectiveness of the self-assessment processes and judgements on the quality of its services. The most recent self-assessment report is evaluative and self-critical and accurately reflects the inspectors' findings. The associated development plan continues to be both detailed and challenging. It now links closely to the achievement of priorities outlined in the two regional delivery plans. GMCP has continued to make good use of the development plan to improve the quality of its customers' experience. It now makes appropriate use of data to identify areas for improvement. However, the development plan does not always provide adequate success measures for use when monitoring progress.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has GMCP made to improve the non-attendance rates for customers and the capture of positive outcomes since the previous inspection?

Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection, GMCP has taken a range of actions to reduce the number of customers who fail to attend scheduled advice sessions. It now maintains detailed three-weekly schedules that show adviser attendance for all centres so that all relevant staff, such as partners who refer customers, are aware of session availability. Partners also hold their staff more accountable for customer attendance. A detailed strategy document clearly and succinctly describes the roles and responsibilities for all those concerned in the process. GMCP maintains a close overview of individual subcontractor performance. Non-attendance rates have declined from 50% to 30%.

GMCP has also taken actions to improve recording of customers' positive outcomes. It continues to emphasise procedures to track the outcomes for as many customers as possible. However, GMCP's success varies by region at the six-month point, with the South contract achieving on average 29% and the North 33%. GMCP's data only cover two full three-month contracting periods. These indicate satisfactory positive outcome rates for the contract in the North, although they have declined from 65% to 48%, and low outcomes of 32% and 34% in the two periods for the contract in the South.

Quality of provision

What progress has GMCP made to improve the quality of interventions so that they are all well structured and the customers are effectively involved in making decisions and prioritising options?

Significant progress

Since the last inspection, GMCP has made significant progress in improving the quality of customer interventions. Improved quality and compliance audit procedures place greater emphasis on subcontractors to monitor their own performance. GMCP has enhanced observation processes to include more joint observations with subcontractor staff, moderation activities to ensure consistency in grading and a closer review of documentation from non-observed delivery. GMCP now takes a much firmer approach to monitoring subcontractors' performance. The well-established observation processes focus on key aspects of an intervention. In particular, they focus on the overall structure of the interview and the quality of target setting and action planning. Observation records capture a wider range of information; they lead to effective guidance and action plans to improve the performance of the adviser. Observation criteria effectively address all of the relevant aspects of the process. The proportion of inadequate sessions has decreased.

GMCP has joined a 'Prime Contract' quality group with four other contract holders. This encourages the sharing of best practice and contributes to moderation exercises. GMCP has delivered a range of specific training events for advisers including interview techniques and delivery of group sessions.

What progress has GMCP made to improve the quality and completion of customers' action plans so that they provide a clear guide for action and a record of customers' progress during and between sessions?

Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection, GMCP has enhanced arrangements to ensure that it checks the quality of customers' action plans systematically, and identifies and acts upon subcontractors' development needs. Inadequate action plans sampled by GMCP incur financial penalties. Observed advice sessions were helpful to customers and produced satisfactory action plans; customers contributed appropriately to their development. However, in weaker sessions an over-emphasis on the initial contracting process reduced the time available to explore customers' needs and aspirations, and for action planning.

GMCP has a clear focus on raising its subcontractors' ability to quality assure their action-planning processes, which is supported by centrally-designed staff development and training for managers to moderate the quality of action plans. However, plans to disseminate this training across the region are incomplete. Representatives from almost all subcontractors have attended the first phase of training to equip them to disseminate the training within their own organisation. However, only around half have completed this training in their own organisations. Although the disseminated events use the same training materials, they vary in length. Although most session evaluations are positive, some indicate that the training is allocated insufficient time.

Leadership and management

What progress has GMCP made in implementing arrangements that effectively monitor health and safety in all venues and provide appropriate privacy for advice sessions?

Significant progress

Since the previous inspection, GMCP has given the improvements to health and safety and to the confidentiality of advice sessions a high priority. Good arrangements now protect advisers and customers and ensure privacy in advice sessions. GMCP effectively monitors the clear and comprehensive requirements set for subcontractors, which fully address the area for improvement identified at the previous inspection. For example, GMCP has identified those subcontractors whose accommodation and working practices have not delivered the high level of health, safety and confidentiality required by the service. It has liaised effectively with these

subcontractors to resolve concerns and to raise significantly the standards expected during advice sessions. GMCP makes very good use of routine audit and observations to monitor and improve the quality of advice sessions. It has introduced relevant and detailed policies and processes to bring about further improvement.

What progress has GMCP made to ensure that all staff receive training that updates them and gives them a good understanding of equality, diversity and safeguarding?

Reasonable progress

Over the last six months, in addition to training to improve action planning GMCP, has also delivered a good range of training to raise staff skills, increase their confidence and update them in their day-to-day work. Training has included group-work skills, skills' health checks, managers' observations and moderations of service interventions, and safeguarding and equality and diversity workshops. GMCP plans further training during 2012. Training in the use of the Next Step customer recording software and web tools has reduced the input error rate from 30% to 5%. GMCP has registered 17 staff for the level 6 diploma in career guidance and development. Mandatory training in equality, diversity and safeguarding meets the specific requirements of staff roles. Detailed training materials show a good focus on the needs of vulnerable groups such as ex-offenders. Recent training raised staff awareness of the needs of customers with mental health conditions. Quality review records show that subcontractors' staff have a satisfactory understanding of equality and diversity. GMCP also uses other methods of updating staff, such as inviting visiting speakers to the subcontractors' network meetings. GMCP has systems in place to collect information about which advisers have attended training, but it is still not clear that it maintains an accurate attendance record.

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