

Suffolk County Council (East of England Next Step)

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Suffolk County Council holds the Skills Funding Agency contract for Next Step services in the East of England. The region covers the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. A small team of advisers employed by Suffolk County Council provides the Next Step service across the region. Approximately 400 advisers, working for 46 subcontractors, cover the remainder of the contract. The East of England has both urban and rural populations and wide social and economic variations.

At the previous inspection in April 2010, the overall effectiveness of provision was satisfactory, as were its capacity to improve, outcomes for customers, the quality of provision and its leadership and management. This report focuses on themes explored during this visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has Suffolk County Council made in coordinating its quality assurance activities and action planning to improve the quality of provision and customers' experience?	Reasonable progress
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Suffolk County Council used a range of suitable quality monitoring processes at the previous inspection, but did not always prepare or implement clear action plans for improvement following its monitoring. Quality monitoring was not sufficiently well coordinated or used effectively to justify judgements in the self-assessment report. Since then, action planning has improved significantly. Suffolk County Council now ensures that all quality monitoring activities result in plans for improvement or development and it monitors their implementation carefully. Action to improve uptake of the service in underperforming subcontractors has been successful. Advisers are more confident about identifying and promoting Skills for Life in sessions. Subcontractors have a better understanding of Next Step requirements, and of how to improve the quality of sessions and action plans for customers. The Council now has a clear quality cycle that brings together its monitoring and improvement activities and contributes effectively to managers' understanding of the quality of provision. Its implementation of the cycle is up to date, but not complete and it is too soon to see its full impact. Suffolk County Council currently makes insufficient use of a full range of impact measures to evaluate its action for improvement, although several are planned.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has Suffolk County Council made to gather and analyse information on progression outcomes in order to evaluate its promotion of equality and diversity and improve the quality of provision?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, Suffolk County Council followed up a suitable number of customers to determine their progression outcomes, and these outcomes were satisfactory. However, it made insufficient use of this data to evaluate provision or monitor its promotion of equality and diversity. The Council has revised its follow-up procedures and now requires its subcontractors to contact their customers to determine the progress they have made. In the second quarter following the introduction of this process, the number of customers successfully contacted was satisfactory. The outcome rate for these customers was also satisfactory, with some good progression to employment for customers who were unemployed. However, not all sub-contractors are equally assiduous in following up customers. Suffolk County Council now makes good use of the information it gathers to ensure that it reaches the diverse populations in its region and to monitor the outcome rates for different groups of customers. These show that the Council is effective in responding to circumstance such as large scale redundancies, and that no significant disparities exist in participation or progression between the different groups. However, Suffolk County Council does not routinely analyse outcome rates by subcontractor to help monitor impact or set targets for improvement.

How much progress has Suffolk County Council made in developing systems and procedures to improve attendance at face-to-face sessions across the region?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection, attendance rates across the region varied significantly and were often low. Waiting times for appointments were generally satisfactory although in some areas they were too long. Customers' punctuality was satisfactory. Since then, attendance rates have been addressed very successfully and across the region, they have increased from 63% at the previous inspection to 74% at the monitoring visit, and are now close to Suffolk County Council's current target. The Council has put in place a range of effective initiatives to improve customers' attendance at sessions. Advisers communicate well with customers through text messaging, telephone calls and email, to remind them of appointments. Marketing material for customers is informative and effective in encouraging attendance. Referral agency staff have a better understanding of the benefits of Next Step, which they pass on to customers. An analysis of poor attendance by venue has helped Suffolk County Council to make locations for customers more accessible. The Council has streamlined the booking system and customers now have appointments at venues that are more convenient for them. Liaison arrangements with local Jobcentres are used well by Next Step staff to help promote the service to potential customers. Waiting times remain satisfactory overall, although longer waiting times have been reduced.

Quality of provision

How much progress has Suffolk County Council made in using its quality monitoring and observation programme to improve advisers' practice? What impact has this had on advisers' skills and the action plans they prepare with customers?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection, Suffolk County Council had a well-designed observation process that provided broadly accurate assessments of the quality of information and advice sessions for customers. However, it did not follow those up with sufficiently timely feedback or detailed action plans to help advisers improve. Since then, the Council has made helpful revisions to its observation criteria and guidance. It has a suitable observation plan and is up to date in its implementation. Observations now lead to effective action plans for advisers' development or improvement. The Council takes prompt corrective action if advisers' performance is unsatisfactory. However, some observation records provide too much description and too little judgement on the quality of activity taking place. Suffolk County Council has established an effective quality improvement group. The group moderates observation and action plan reports and judges that the quality of sessions and of action plans has improved since the previous inspection. Its judgements on the quality of sessions observed and action plans reviewed during this visit broadly matched those of inspectors. However, the cycle of observations is not complete and it is too soon to see the full impact of the programme.

How much progress has Suffolk County Council made in developing advisers' confidence and understanding of Skills for Life so that they promote these more effectively in sessions?

Reasonable progress

During the sessions observed at the previous inspection, advisers did not always identify customers' Skills for Life needs or promote provision to meet those needs effectively. Since then, Suffolk County Council has focused closely on improving advisers' confidence and understanding of Skills for Life. It checks subcontractors' Skills for Life strategies during contract review meetings to ensure that they pay sufficient attention to this aspect of advisers' work. The Council has provided suitable training in identifying and meeting Skills for Life needs at workshops, during conferences and by using specialist external organisations. Advisers are now more confident about discussing Skills for Life with customers. The advisers observed during this visit paid careful attention to checking customers' needs. They made good use of strategies for discussing these needs with customers and provided helpful advice on how to obtain on-line support and other help for their customers. Suffolk County Council's observation reports pay careful attention to the effectiveness of advisers' skills in discussing Skills for Life with customers. However, the Council has not gathered information or data to evaluate the impact of its action to improve advisers' confidence or skill in identifying and promoting Skills for Life.

What progress has Suffolk County Council made to improve its arrangements for employer engagement?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, Suffolk County Council responded effectively to redundancy when it occurred. However, there was insufficient promotion of the service to employers to enable employees considering career changes or progression opportunities to benefit from the service. The Council has now included improved work with employers in its stakeholder engagement strategy and has increased its emphasis on working with employers. It has carried out a useful analysis of current engagement across the service and prepared a detailed study of the local labour market. Next Step staff now provide information on the service to a suitable range of employers' representative organisations and they are establishing stronger links with companies to help support employees. Individual subcontractors give good examples of engaging with employers to improve take-up of the service by employees. However, Suffolk County Council recognises that this work is still at an early stage of development. Although feedback from employers who have used the service is positive, Suffolk County Council currently has no other measures to judge whether its actions are sufficiently effective.

Leadership and management

How much progress has Suffolk County Council made in training advisers in equality and diversity, and in safeguarding? What progress has it made to ensure that it has an accurate and up-to-date record of advisers' participation in training?	Reasonable progress
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Advisers' understanding and promotion of safeguarding and equality and diversity were satisfactory at the previous inspection. The contractor had provided some staff training, but not all advisers had attended in-depth or updating training. Records of relevant training and development carried out by advisers were incomplete.

Arrangements for providing and recording training have improved. Suffolk County Council now has a clear focus on ensuring that staff receive training that gives them proper knowledge and awareness. It provides suitable on-line training and assessment and new contractual arrangements ensure that all assessors are appropriately trained. The Council is developing and improving its own equality training and has provided specialist training for particular staff, for example in dealing with customers recovering from strokes. The fulfilment of training requirements forms part of the contract monitoring process and Suffolk County Council now keeps complete records of training for the whole network. All staff have completed suitable training in both safeguarding and equality and diversity. Staff value the training they have received and feel they have increased their confidence and awareness at work. However, Suffolk County Council does not have information or data on the impact of this training on the quality of advisers' work.

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