

Suffolk County Council

National Careers Service contractor

Inspection dates		5–9 August 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory-3
Outcomes for learners		Requires improvement-3
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-2

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- Customers improve their confidence and motivation significantly. They develop good job seeking skills and make good progress in recognising what they need to do to improve their future employment prospects.
- A good proportion of customers attend two or more advice sessions and work well between sessions to gain good skills to carry out job seeking independently.
- Most information and advice sessions are good or better and prepare customers well to find jobs or to secure promotion at work. Advisers inspire most customers to consider a wide range of possible career and learning options.
- Advisers are experienced, well qualified and use their skills effectively to support a wide range of customers from varying backgrounds including those currently in employment and others with no previous work history.
- Staff promote equality well and value diversity; they conduct advice sessions in an environment of mutual respect which values difference. Customers attend a wide variety of convenient and safe locations.
- Leaders have an ambitious vision for the service; they have improved the quality of provision for customers and they manage the performance of staff well.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- The proportion of customers who progress into education or training is low.
- The proportion of customers with declared disabilities who gain jobs is low.
- The proportion of women and customers from Asian backgrounds who gain promotion at work is particularly low and the plans to resolve recently identified variations in the performance of different groups of customers are underdeveloped.
- The provider does not set subcontractors challenging individual targets for customer progressions.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Significantly increase the number of customers who progress into training and education by:
 - ensuring advisers provide customers with specialist practical advice in developing the new skills and expertise needed by employers
 - ensuring all action plans contain detailed enough short term goals that are clearly prioritised
 - establishing progressively challenging interim actions for customers to help them understand exactly what they need to do to improve
 - setting subcontractors challenging targets for customers' progression and monitor them even more closely.
- Increase the number of customers who gain jobs and achieve promotion at work, particularly women those from Asian backgrounds and the higher qualified individuals by:
 - pinpointing areas of underperformance by different groups and rapidly putting in place a comprehensive action plan to significantly raise performance
 - supporting customers with higher-level qualifications to succeed by providing high standard coaching that develops the confidence and attitudes needed to gain employment within skill shortages areas.
- Improve the quality of advice session by ensuring all:
 - advisers fully involve the customers throughout the session, particularly in group sessions and when agreeing and recording the action plan
 - customers benefit from a confidential and conducive environment when participating in advice sessions.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
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- Outcomes for learners require improvement. Attendance has significantly increased since the previous inspection, with the vast majority of customers attending well. Customers are punctual, participate well and make good progress in their advice sessions.
- At the previous inspection, the proportion of unemployed customers who progressed to employment was low. Staff have steadily increased this and according to the provider's unvalidated data the proportion of customers who progress into work is now in line with the national targets agreed by the funding agency.
- Only one third of customers who were followed-up by the provider during 2012/13 have progressed into training or education. This is low and at least ten percentage points below national targets, but it is improving.
- The proportion of customers who gain promotion at work following advice sessions is almost in line with agreed targets, but few women and customers from Asian backgrounds gain promotions at work.

- Senior managers have recently conducted a detailed analysis of the comparative performance of different groups. According to the provider's own data in 2012/13, the performance of different groups shows significant disparities. For example, the rate of progression to education and training for women was higher than that for men. The proportion of customers with declared learning difficulties and/or disabilities who gain jobs is low. Overall performance across the region is similar, but the proportion of customers in Essex obtaining jobs and the proportion gaining promotion within work in Hertfordshire and Suffolk are lower than other parts of the region.
- Customers develop good job seeking skills and know what to do to overcome the obstacles that impede their progress and as a result become more confident and better motivated. They act on the advice they receive and make good progress in completing agreed actions. Customers with complex support needs improve their independence and work ethic and become better informed about the training and employment options available to them. A few advisers do not sufficiently inspire those customers who hold higher-level qualifications to seek high quality jobs and do not provide these customers with specialist advice regarding new and emerging industries.
- A good proportion of customers take up their entitlement to subsequent information and advice sessions and an appropriate proportion benefit from more than their annual entitlement of three sessions. Most customers make good progress in completing agreed actions between sessions.
- A high number of customers gain sufficient understanding of the importance of good English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) for work when pursuing their career and learning goals. Their improved skills have enabled many customers to progress into better quality, more sustained employment.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good, although the overall grade for outcomes does not reflect this standard. Most information and advice sessions are good or better and effectively prepare customers to focus on future actions to help them progress independently. Skilful advisers swiftly and accurately identify customers' starting points and barriers to participation in training and employment.
- During advice sessions, advisers meet customers' individual needs effectively and provide them with sensitive support and firm challenge. This enables customers to make realistic decisions regarding their careers. For example, following notification of redundancy, an adviser helped a customer successfully to resolve significant emotional conflicts and as a result, consider future career options more objectively. However, advisers are less effective in meeting customers' individual needs during group sessions. Customers report good gains in personal confidence, self-esteem and motivation following participation in advice sessions. Most advisers encourage customers to consider critically their progress and to identify areas for further development.
- Advisers are experienced, well qualified and use their skills effectively to support a wide range of customers from varying backgrounds including those currently in employment and others with no previous work history. The vast majority of advisers have a sound understanding of their local area. They use up to date labour market information well to direct customers to useful progression opportunities. Advisers promote the benefits of using the National Careers Service (NCS) effectively and use an adequate range and variety of resources to help customers progress. Customers benefit from convenient venues that are safe and ensure adequate privacy during advice sessions. However, a small minority of sites are noisy or do not provide a confidential setting for advice sessions.
- In the better advice sessions, advisers manage the sessions well to use the available time fully. They ask customers good challenging questions and inspire them to consider a wide range of possible career and learning options. Skilful advisers encourage customers to take responsibility

for their own progress and ensure customers are fully involved in producing a mutually agreed and detailed action plan.

- In the few weaker advice sessions, advisers are distracted by using the electronic customer database and do not sufficiently secure customers' commitment to achieve the agreed improvement action plan. In a small number of cases, advisers complete the action plan too early in the session before completing an exhaustive investigation of the available options.
- The large majority of advisers successfully ensure that customers clearly know what they need to do to improve their future prospects. For example, an adviser skilfully supported a customer with memory loss to help them retain information about their future planned actions. However, in a few cases advisers do not set detailed enough goals or sufficiently prioritise short-term goals to guide customers well or to help assess customers' progress at subsequent sessions.
- Customers undergo an adequate assessment of their English and mathematics skills with timely referral to more specialist agencies for further diagnostic testing where appropriate. During advice sessions, advisers routinely emphasise how effective English, mathematics and ICT skills improve customers' personal life and job prospects.
- Advisers make sure all customers are clear about the services available to them. Working relationships with Jobcentre Plus staff are strong and benefit customers well. In most cases, advisers refer customers to useful support agencies. For example, a customer overcame their substance misuse, which was the main obstacle to finding and securing a job, after the adviser referred them to a specialist support agency. However, advisers do not always identify customers' language skill development needs and do not effectively direct individuals to relevant specialist support.
- Staff promote equality well and value diversity; they conduct advice sessions in an environment of mutual respect, which values difference. Where appropriate, advisers broaden customers' appreciation of the need for equality and diversity at work and in learning. Most subcontractors provide advice sessions in the evenings and at weekends for the convenience of customers. Customers benefit from advice sessions that take place in a wide variety of convenient and safe locations.

Leadership and management

Good

- Suffolk County Council's members and officers through Realise Futures provide strong leadership and management of the service. Leaders have an ambitious vision for the service and foster an environment of continuous improvement which results in the service meeting the differing needs of the customers well. They have made a significant investment in developing advisers' expertise. The service provides a comprehensive programme of training which has improved advisers' practice. Advisers are well qualified and skilful.
- Staff manage the work of subcontractors well; they carefully select successful providers when awarding contracts and effectively challenge subcontractor underperformance. Staff closely monitor the quality of subcontractors' work and adopt a collaborative approach to improving the service for customers. Experienced managers provide under-performing subcontractors with timely additional support. However, if the subcontractor is not effective in bringing about improvements, managers take decisive and timely action, including contract termination, to raise quality for customers.
- Specialist staff have designed a comprehensive information system which includes an effective online booking system for advice sessions. This benefits customers and has reduced waiting times for advice sessions. Most subcontractors and Jobcentre Plus staff use the system well to monitor attendance well and as a result, attendance at advice sessions has improved significantly in the last year. Managers set subcontractors customer participation and progression targets, but these are the same for all subcontractors and do not take full account of the differing capabilities of the individual subcontractors.

- The management of staff performance is good. Managers undertake regular observations of advice sessions and provide advisers with useful developmental actions to help them improve. However, the numerical scoring system they use for grading observations is unnecessarily complex and the moderation of observations show that many are over-graded. Managers take firm action to tackle underperformance and provide advisers whose performance requires improvement with good training and observe their practice within three months.
- Staff routinely monitor the quality of skills action plans, but the evaluation criteria is overly complex and staff who conduct these evaluations are not appropriately experienced in delivering advice sessions.
- Self-assessment is critical and involves all partners. Managers make extensive use of performance data and stakeholder feedback, including the views of staff and customers, to evaluate the quality of provision. Senior managers carefully scrutinise the self-assessment reports from subcontractors and use these well to arrive at the judgements in the self-assessment report.
- Leaders ensure that the service closely meets regional and local priorities. They select subcontractors carefully to provide wide coverage, both in terms of geography and specialist provision. The service also works closely with many employers to provide specialist support for employees who are under threat of redundancy or redeployment.
- Staff demonstrate a strong ethos of equality. The service includes provision which attracts and specifically caters for diverse customer groups including homeless people, those with mental health problems, migrants and women in need of refuge. Managers analyse customer progression data well and have identified gaps in the performance of different groups. However, they have not sufficiently investigated the reasons for the variations in performance of such groups.
- The service meets its statutory requirements to safeguard customers. Advisers and others in contact with adult learners have Disclosure and Barring Service checks and undertake appropriate safeguarding training. Managers from Realise Futures monitor closely subcontractors' compliance with the recruitment check requirements for relevant staff. Managers deal swiftly and appropriately with reported safeguarding issues.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Suffolk County Council

Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	National Careers Service
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Outcomes for learners	3	3
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	2

Provider details

Realise Futures	
Type of provider	National Careers Service contractor
Age range of customers	18 and above
Approximate number of all customers over the previous full contract year	81,737
CEO	Deborah Cadman
Date of previous inspection	April 2010
Website address	www.suffolk.gov.uk

Provider information at the time of the inspection	
Number of customers	21,781
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ F1 Computer Services & Training Ltd ■ Adult Community Learning Essex ■ ASCEND ■ Central Bedfordshire Authority ■ Essex Probation ■ Learning Partnership Bedfordshire & Luton Ltd ■ Norfolk Guidance Service ■ Watford Women's Centre ■ West Suffolk College ■ SPS Pitman Training

Additional socio-economic information

Suffolk County Council's Adult Community Services hold the Skills Funding Agency contract for the East of England National Careers Service. Since November 2012, Realise Futures on behalf of Suffolk County Council has managed the service. Realise Futures is a not for profit community interest company. The service covers the counties of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and the four unitary authorities of Luton, Peterborough, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock. The council has other publicly funded contracts; this inspection is of the NCS provision only. All customers are adults and the majority are aged 25 to 49. The majority are from white ethnic heritage. A small minority have a declared disability. A few are ex-offenders.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Victor Shafiee HMI

Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the Head of Contract for the east of England national careers as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors observed information and advice sessions and used data on customers' achievements to help them make judgements. They conducted group and individual interviews to gather the views of customers and employers. Inspectors have reflected these views throughout the report. The inspection took into account all of the NCS provision at the provider.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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