

Serco Ltd

National Careers Service contractor

Inspection dates		30 September – 4 October 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
Outcomes for learners		Good-2
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 benefit from very good access to careers information advice and guidance.
- Customers are very satisfied with the quality of the service provided and almost all state that advisers understand and meet their needs well, or very well.
- Customers make good progress and build their confidence well. Over a third of customers who were not in education employment or training at the time of their initial call have moved out of that group at the time of their follow-up call.
- The vast majority of customers develop a good awareness of their current English, mathematical and functional skill levels and the importance of improving these.
- As a result of good interactions, customers develop a good understanding of their current position, the options available to them and the barriers they need to overcome.
- Advisers use well a variety of methods, including open questions, to establish accurately career options and pathways.
- Advisers provide good support to customers.
- Strong leadership and outstanding performance management ensure that advisers, and the service that they provide, continually improve.
- Staff focus particularly well on safeguarding young people and their personal information.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- Too few customers request the option of a follow up call.
- Only a very few customers benefit from a transcript of their interactions with advisers.
- On a few occasions, advisers do not successfully establish customers' starting points or develop their understanding of career pathways.
- In a few cases, advisers do not use questioning sufficiently well to engage with customers and focus too much on mandatory service-improvement questions.
- Managers have been slow in developing and implementing self-assessment policies.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Continue to increase the proportion of customers who take up the option of a follow-up call.
- Improve the effectiveness of interactions with customers by:
 - ensuring all advisers consistently make good use of open questions to assess customers' needs in detail
 - ensuring that advisers focus more astutely on discussing relevant options for young people
 - developing and promoting the ability for young people to receive a transcript of discussions across all communication channels.
- Review how the service-improvement questions are used and consider alternative ways of gathering the information.
- Develop the self-assessment process and link it with clear action planning to drive improvement.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Customers benefit from very good access to careers information advice and guidance. Serco's management actions and focus on service delivery ensure that it meets, or in a few cases exceeds, the wide range of key performance indicators for delivery of the service. These indicators include hours of availability, percentage of allowable non-availability, and a range of call centre statistics; such as waiting times and call abandonment rates. ▪ Customer satisfaction rates are very high and exceed the challenging targets set by the contract. The proportion of customers who say that the service understands and meets their needs well, or very well, is high and increasing. For the last two months, it has been at 96%. The proportion of customers who rate the service as positive has risen from 90% during the first full year of the contract, to 94% during the year to date. ▪ Serco recognises that it needs to be more effective in capturing information about the status of customers. It has worked well to increase the proportion of this from 70% of customers in November 2012, to 86% of customers in August 2013. Managers use these data very well to analyse the profile of customers and identify any gaps in outcomes. ▪ Customers develop a good understanding of their starting points and the guidance and advice the service can provide to help them. Because of good discussions, customers' ability to identify and overcome barriers to learning and career progression is markedly increased. However, in a few cases, advisers do not explore these starting points and barriers sufficiently well so that the young person is not clear about them. ▪ Customers develop a good understanding of the options that are available to them, or the young people for whom they are responsible, and how to take their career forward. Serco's quality audit data show that the proportion of interactions where discussions about next steps are good has risen from 76% in April 2012, to 89% in July 2013. However, in a few cases, customers are not sufficiently aware of their career options at the end of the interaction. ▪ Customers make good progress and build their confidence as a result of the good quality of interaction provided by advisers. Of those customers who have a follow up call, 67% report a positive change in their circumstances with less than 1% reporting a negative change. Over one third of the customers who receive a follow up call and were in the not in education employment or training group at the time of the initial call have moved out of that group by the time of the follow-up call. 	

- The vast majority of customers develop a good awareness of the need to improve their English, mathematical and information and communication technology skills; however, in a few cases, customers do not fully understand the importance of these skills by the end of the interaction.
- Too few customers request the option of a follow up call, to determine progress. Serco is aware of this and has worked well to increase the take up of this option. From a very low figure of 17% of customers in November 2012, take up has increased to 36% of customers in August 2013. However, this proportion is still too low and, as a result, Serco is not able to explore fully the impact of their work.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good, as reflected in the grade for outcomes. As a result of good information, advice and guidance, customers are much better aware of the options available to them and what they need to do in order to progress towards their goals.
- The vast majority of information and advice interactions are good and help customers focus well on where they can find information about their plans, for example, information about specialist services, website information, such as the national apprenticeship service, and relevant professional bodies. Advisers skilfully use the wealth of information that they have developed to help customers gain knowledge and plan well to progress into continuing education, employment or training.
- Although the quality of interaction is good, most customers do not benefit from a transcript of the interaction. Customers who provide an email address at the start of a web chat session can select an option to get a transcript of the session. However, most customers do not take up this option. Customers calling the service have no option to receive a transcript of the session and have to make their own notes. The few customers who use the text messaging and email channels do get a transcript.
- Advisers work well with customers to identify their starting points, using a variety of methods. They usually use this information well to aid progress towards gathering information on specific learning or career goals. Advisers discuss in detail individual customers' barriers to participation in education, employment or training. However, on a few occasions advisers do not identify customers' starting points sufficiently well or explore the options available to them in enough detail.
- During interactive sessions, the vast majority of advisers meet customers' individual needs extremely well. Advisers provide excellent support to customers and are caring and empathic. Where customers have more specialist needs, advisers take a very sensitive and confidential approach to help individuals find the best course of action or deal with a particular barrier. In these cases customers are able therefore to make realistic and practical decisions regarding their future education, employment or training.
- Parents and guardians, who are calling on behalf of young people, receive effective and focused advice and guidance to help them support collective decisions within the family unit. This is particularly relevant when the young person is moving from compulsory education into the next stage of their life. Teachers also benefit well from this service. For example, in one observed interaction a headteacher, calling on behalf of her students, was extremely impressed with the quality of the service provided and the wealth of information available.
- Advisers usually make good use of questions and discussions to explore customers' needs. Many advisers use open questions and supportive prompts to encourage customers to talk about their situation and their goals. Advisers are good at engaging with customers and establish a very good rapport with them.
- In a small minority of interactions, advisers use too many closed questions and focus too much on the mandatory questions used by the service to establish statistics, which spoils the flow of the discussion or ends it. For example, on one occasion, a customer only had limited time

available and wanted a specific answer but the adviser repeatedly asked where the customer had heard about the service and the customer terminated the interaction.

- Advisers use their skills, knowledge and experience well. They have a detailed knowledge of the education and careers sectors and use this to help customers from the very wide range of backgrounds and direct them to appropriate information. Advisers use general labour market information well; however, they are less clear about local information. In some cases, customers are not eligible to use the service. Where this does occur, advisers take the time to explain fully where the customer can seek appropriate help and information.
- In most cases, advisers work extremely well to help customers identify their English, mathematics and information and communication technology skill levels. Advisers help customers understand clearly their qualifications and further development options. Advisers make it clear the importance of these skills in general and how they relate to customers' specific goals. However, during a small minority of interactions, advisers do not sufficiently explore options and promote further study.
- Advisers promote equality and diversity well, where appropriate. They focus strongly on cultural backgrounds and personal circumstances to help inform discussions and identify next steps to aid customer progress.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Serco's managers lead and inspire a highly effective team. Staff provide a service that meets or exceeds contractual requirements, such as prompt response to calls. In addition, they work as a committed team focusing on quality of service and continuous improvement, despite several structural changes at senior level and corporate acquisitions of companies that have hosted the contract.
- Managers use well an impressive array of systems, policies and protocols to ensure quality and continuous improvement. Along with formal procedures, staff regularly communicate and cooperate informally to make the service even better. Advisers willingly help each other, particularly when a novel or difficult enquiry arises, such as how to get funding for HGV training or whether a parent is now criminally liable for the non-attendance of a 17-year-old at college.
- Staff development and performance management is outstanding and contributes significantly to continuous improvement. Managers use extremely well a rigorous quality framework to monitor closely all aspects of the provision. They use the results of this monitoring well in performance reviews, which give staff clear improvement targets that they routinely meet. In the rare cases where staff are underperforming, managers rapidly implement improvement plans and sanctions.
- Comprehensive training helps drive up quality. Training is extensive and continuous. Staff attend formal off-the-job training covering such things as changes in university admission procedures or revisions in funding arrangements for young people's learning. Impressively, where staff miss a session, through absence or shift patterns, a daily training log continues to alert managers to this until each staff member receives the training from colleagues or completes self-study.
- Managers and staff share good practice exceptionally well. Staff routinely meet to examine, and learn from, recordings or transcripts of interactions with customers. All this monitoring and development work has led to continuing improvements in the quality of service, as evidenced by customer feedback. However, as recognised by the service and the inspection, they could still improve the quality of a small number of interactions.
- Serco has been slow to implement a formal self-assessment process. Managers are using a 2013 strategy paper to focus on key areas of the provision and implement more substantive changes. Managers have recently used the extensive quality monitoring data already available, including customer feedback, to carry out a formal self-assessment. The report identifies accurately broad strengths and areas for improvement in the service. However, the lack of clear action planning,

with responsible persons or target dates for action, lessens the chances of successful change and makes it difficult to assess the full impact of this work.

- Serco meets the needs of customers well, through both the expertise of advisers and excellent use of a wealth of information that the service has gathered in its online 'knowledge network', a resource developed by all staff. Advisers make excellent use of quieter periods to develop and update this resource, and their familiarity with it. Stringent quality assurance ensures the accuracy and currency of the information. The resource covers an enormous range of topics, from becoming an astronaut or a wedding planner to activities that might usefully improve the chances of success for someone applying to become a doctor.
- Advisers provide appropriate links to local support and advice services. However, the strategy of having a national call centre means that it is a challenge, which the service has yet to overcome, for advisers to tailor careers advice to meet any specific local labour market needs. The numbers of callers to the service has declined over the past 18 months and Serco has not been able to identify clearly the causes for this. Serco does not have a contractual responsibility to market the service but has used its own funds for targeted marketing purposes, although with limited impact.
- Serco successfully ensures that there is no discrimination when young people or parents and guardians ask for advice, and that any disadvantaged young people receive appropriately tailored guidance. Comprehensive training, advice, protocols, close monitoring, action planning and the many ways of contacting the service all contribute to this success.
- Managers and staff focus extremely well on safeguarding. Serco meets its statutory requirements to safeguard customers. Live interactions are one-to-one and the chatroom is moderated extremely well as an adviser has to approve all posts before they go live. Information security is excellent and the service has impressive protocols and support for advisers engaged with customers. This means that potential risks for young people are, as far as possible within the context of this remote contact, dealt with appropriately and rapidly. Staff make prompt and effective referrals to other services. Managers monitor this carefully and review actions in detail.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Serco Ltd

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	2	2
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	2

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
National Careers Service	2

Provider details

Type of provider	National Careers Service contractor
Age range of learners	13-18
Approximate number of all customers over the previous full contract year	85,000
Head of Central Government Serco Global Services, UK & Europe	Gary Robinson
Date of previous inspection	N/A
Website address	www.serco.com
Provider information at the time of the inspection	
Number of customers	1500
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)

Contextual information

Serco Ltd holds a prime contract to deliver the National Careers Service telephone service for young people aged 13 to 18. The service operates from 08:00 to 22:00 seven days a week. It provides a telephone helpline where advisers provide information advice and guidance to customers during an initial call. In addition, the provision includes a live web chat service for one-to-one interactions with advisers. Customers who contact the service by telephone or web chat can elect to receive a follow up call four to six weeks (or 12 to 14 weeks if aged 16 or over) after the contact. Customers can also ask for support via text messaging or email. The service also provides a moderated chatroom and a message board.

Serco delivers the service from a call centre in Newcastle. Customers of the service can be young people, their teachers, parents/guardians, or other relatives or professionals working with young people. Due to the nature of the service, the provider does not always identify information about the customer, such as age, education or employment status. At the time of inspection, the majority of interactions was by voice, with a small minority of interactions by web chat and a small minority of calls not within the remit of the service. A few customers use the email service and a very few use the other communication channels.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector	Derrick Baughan - HMI
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Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors, assisted by the account manager as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans. Inspectors also used providers' own data about outcomes for learners since the start of the contract, to help them make judgements. Inspectors listened to telephone calls from customers, observed web chat sessions and reviewed transcripts of text message and email interactions. Inspectors reviewed recording of calls and transcripts of web chat, text message and email interactions. Inspectors spoke to customers who had contacted the service during the week of the inspection.

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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