

# Serco Limited: National Contact Centre

National Careers Service

## Inspection dates

15–18 November 2016

Overall effectiveness		Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good	
Quality of information, advice and guidance	Good	
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good	
Outcomes for customers	Good	

## Summary of key findings

### This is a good provider

- Information, advice and guidance provided by the service are highly appropriate and beneficial to customers.
- Knowledgeable and skilled advisers identify customers' individual needs and differences and help them make confident, informed and independent decisions about their future career or learning.
- Almost all customers are satisfied with the information, advice or guidance they receive from impartial, friendly and supportive advisers.
- The very clear focus on English and mathematics ensures that almost all customers appreciate the importance of these subjects to their career development or aspirations.
- Effective performance management, coaching and staff development ensure that advisers deliver high-quality information, advice or guidance.
- The very effective promotion of equality and diversity, including British values, enables all staff to demonstrate and maintain impartial and non-judgemental delivery of their information, advice and guidance.
- The promotion and implementation of safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty are highly effective. This means that all staff, particularly advisers, recognise, identify and respond readily to protect customers from potential harm or danger.

## **Full report**

### **Information about the provider**

- Serco holds the National Careers Service contract for the National Contact Centre (NCC). The NCC is the central point of contact for all initial calls to the National Careers Service. It is an impartial, national service for England, which is available for customers over the age of 13. Adult customers who contact the service by telephone receive information only. NCC staff transfer telephone customers who require advice and guidance to area-based contractors. Any customer contacting the service through digital channels receives information, advice and guidance.
- The NCC provides information, advice or guidance to over 280,000 customers each year. Around 60% of these interactions are by telephone. Digital communications such as web chat, email and text messages make up the remainder.

### **What does the provider need to do to improve further?**

- Collect and use data more effectively, including on digital sessions, to increase insight into customers' needs and to tailor more expertly the information, advice and guidance that customers receive.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management

**Good**

- Managers at NCC demonstrate a good ambition that focuses well on delivering a high-quality service to meet the needs of customers. Senior managers focus effectively on the quality of provision and they successfully encourage and support their staff to deliver the expected high standards. They also have good plans in place to develop further digital platforms such as web chats and interactive screen sharing, so that customers are better able to engage with the service in a wider and more accessible range of formats. Managers make particularly good use of the detailed analysis and review of customer feedback.
- The performance management of advisers is strong. A detailed and rigorous process provides a wide range of evidence to support managers' and advisers' delivery of a high-quality service. Regular one-to-one meetings between team managers and advisers provide good opportunities to review performance and identify any training or other support needs. Team managers and lead advisers frequently monitor performance both remotely and via side-by-side reviews. Staff share and learn from each other to make improvements through peer reviews. Managers also carry out regular and effective six-monthly performance development reviews with advisers in their team.
- All staff benefit from access to a wide range of professional development and training. Good access is provided to national vocational qualifications in information, advice and guidance (IAG) at levels 3, 4 and 6. Team managers and lead advisers have also accessed leadership and management training. In-house Serco training packages, including a number of mandatory training modules on subjects such as the corporate code of conduct, provide a good range of opportunities for staff to enhance their knowledge and skills.
- Managers use an effective self-assessment framework to judge the effectiveness of their work. Their judgements are largely accurate and give managers a good measure of the strengths and areas needing further development. In a small number of instances, they make judgements against a statement that focuses too strongly on an outcome for the customer that they cannot fully substantiate.
- Managers and staff make very good efforts to engage with a wider range of agencies to promote the NCC and strengthen the links between young people, education, employers, local enterprise partnerships and schools. NCC managers and staff also provide professional development training for school staff in careers advice and guidance. They work hard to develop and nurture links, and collaborate well, with an increasing number of agencies and IAG networks. An education and awareness team engages with an increasing number of schools, sixth-form colleges and colleges to promote both the NCC and the National Careers Service.

- NCC managers and staff actively promote equality, diversity and British values very well. Through effective training, advisers recognise and challenge any inappropriate language, comments or prejudices. Managers expect advisers to maintain an ethical, impartial and professional approach throughout all customer contact. Advisers factor customers' disability needs into their interactions well to ensure that they meet the needs of these customers effectively and appropriately. They also make good use of an external interpretation service to enable customers with little or no English to access the service.

### **The governance of the provider**

- Serco managers monitor the delivery of the National Careers Service contract closely. They provide effective oversight of the provision and, when required, challenge the performance of senior managers well.

### **Safeguarding**

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Managers' promotion of safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty is very good. Managers follow all required recruitment practices; all staff undergo appropriate and rigorous safety checks before starting work. All staff receive extensive and detailed safeguarding training and they update this annually. Staff benefit from a further range of training modules as part of Serco 'Essentials', including training in health and safety and data protection.
- Team managers, lead advisers and advisers respond well when they identify a potential safeguarding, radicalisation or extremism issue. Two managers review identified instances to consider whether they need to refer these to a relevant agency. They then follow up referred issues quickly to assure the high welfare standards.

### **Quality of information, advice and guidance**

**Good**

- Advisers provide appropriate IAG that supports customers' personal development well. The combination of advisers' skills, strong support and direction from managers, good resources and the clear structure of most interactions with customers, leads to successful responses to customers' varied needs. Advisers, for example, are adept at advising customers about: organisations to approach for learning; how to address issues at work; and what to consider if customers are interested in undertaking an apprenticeship.
- In most cases, advisers ensure that responses to customer enquiries link to relevant digital services, including employment vacancies, support with curriculum vitae writing, further and higher education course or sources of funding. Advisers are efficient and helpful in transferring eligible customers to local careers service provision.
- Advisers dedicate a suitable proportion of time during telephone, email and web-chat sessions to capture and confirm exactly what customers require. Through their communications with customers, advisers find out about their existing qualifications, work experience, current situation, concerns and career aspirations. Advisers use this information well to provide customers with valuable information, advice or guidance.

- Advisers check customer motivation adeptly, for example when completing a job profile or making contact with a local college. Advisers summarise very carefully with customers agreed actions and outcomes, and provide detailed written summaries and transcripts to digital customers. This is a strong feature of information, advice and guidance given by email and web chat.
- Advisers expect and encourage customers to take ownership of their next steps and to make well-informed decisions. In all sessions, advisers promote a wide range of online resources for customers to carry out independent research that meets their particular needs and interests.
- Through effective use of technology and information sources, advisers provide customers with instant resources and information while reflecting on what customers say. The technology allows advisers to conduct tasks such as interacting with customers and local services, gathering data for managers, providing links to external websites and checking information directly for customers to respond to their questions. Advisers ensure that they model a high standard of written and spoken communications at all times.
- Advisers remain impartial when responding to customers, and when supporting or challenging to help them achieve their goals. Where customers appear to have unrealistic aspirations or inaccurate prior understanding, advisers remain sensitive while providing objective information and advice. Advisers maintain high levels of tolerance and understanding for the wide spectrum of customer backgrounds and cultures and remain calm, firm and positive when challenging offensive behaviours from customers.
- Advisers check customers' prior attainment of English and mathematics. They promote these subjects strongly and give appropriate information and advice in all but a very few sessions so that customers can remove potential barriers to future courses or careers.
- In a small minority of cases, advisers focus too rigidly on meeting requirements to collect management data about the service. In these cases, customers leave sessions prematurely, or advisers do not go beyond customers' limited knowledge of their own needs to provide more nuanced information, advice or guidance.

## Personal development, behaviour and welfare

**Good**

- Customers gain confidence and self-assurance after their interactions with advisers. They reinforce this in their positive feedback to NCC managers.
- Customers speak highly of the welcoming, supportive and knowledgeable advisers who provide them with useful and impartial information, advice and guidance. This helps customers demonstrate positive attitudes and show enthusiasm to take the next steps in their independent research.
- NCC leaders and managers promote an open and supportive culture. Consequently, customers feel safe in sharing personal circumstances; they know they are communicating with advisers who take their safety and confidentiality seriously. In rare cases, advisers do not identify fully the underlying causes for long-term absences that might influence customers' future well-being at work.

- Staff are sensitive and courteous in their dealings with customers and are good role models. They challenge the use of derogatory, aggressive or abusive language quickly and purposefully. As a result, all communications with customers are respectful and well structured.
- Advisers ask customers about their qualifications in English and mathematics and make it clear how these qualifications relate to the customers' future career pathway or course. This very clear focus on English and mathematics ensures that most customers appreciate the importance of these subjects to their career development and aspirations.

### **Outcomes for customers**

### **Good**

- NCC meets, and often exceeds, the performance standards for the delivery of information, advice or guidance to the customers who contact them.
- Survey data, collected by NCC and an independent polling organisation, shows that almost all customers who respond to the surveys are satisfied with the information, advice or guidance they receive from advisers. A majority of these customers move on to further learning or progress at work. For example, their interactions with advisers spur them on to apply for a course, ask for a pay rise, seek promotion or change career path entirely. Response rates to customer surveys are very low. This means that managers base their analysis of performance measures on the feedback of a very small minority of customers.
- Data that digital customers enter about their age, gender, ethnicity or disability is not included in records about customer interactions. This means that the data that managers submit to fulfil their contract does not enable them to make fully informed judgements about the effectiveness of their work with customers.

## Provider details

Unique reference number	1240210
Type of provider	National Careers Service
Principal/CEO	Rupert Soames
Telephone number	0191 2695285
Website	<a href="https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk">https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk</a>

## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the account manager, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and survey data to gather the views of customers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed telephone and web-chat information, advice and guidance sessions, and reviewed transcripts of sessions and quality reviews of adviser performance over time. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

## Inspection team

Chris Jones, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Tim Gardner

Her Majesty's Inspector

Steven Sharpe

Ofsted Inspector



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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
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