

CXK Limited

National Careers Service

Inspection dates

14–17 February 2017

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

- Skilled advisers work very effectively with customers; advisers use their understanding of customers' strengths and personal challenges to agree appropriate goals and set manageable targets.
- Leaders, managers and trustees work together very effectively to raise standards, improve the quality of service and increase the level of positive outcomes for customers.
- Advisers know their local areas well; they make very good use of labour market information and the learning opportunities and support available to help customers achieve their goals.
- Advisers are very successful in enabling customers facing redundancy to find alternative employment.
- Customers with significant barriers to success, such as poor mental health or high levels of anxiety, receive very good practical, supportive and sensitive advice and guidance.
- Partnership working with most Jobcentre Plus offices, employers and the local enterprise partnership in the region is very strong, has a good focus on the most vulnerable customers and supports the job and training priorities across the South East region.
- A small number of skills action plans produced by advisers do not meet the high standards set by CXK.
- The attendance rate in parts of the region is too low.

Full report

Information about the provider

- CXK was established in 2002 as Connexions Partnership Kent and Medway to support children, young people, adults and families throughout Kent, Medway, Essex and Sussex. The organisation provides support, advice and guidance to help people progress into employment, education or training.
- CXK holds the National Careers Service (NCS) contract for the South East region of England, which covers six local authorities (including three unitary authorities). The area covers Essex, Southend, Thurrock, Kent, Medway and East Sussex. CXK's main head office is in Ashford, Kent. CXK delivers 65% of the contract, and further subcontracts the remainder to other organisations in the region. Advisers meet with roughly 25,000 customers each year at around 70 sites across the region. There are approximately 80 advisers working across the region.
- In addition to the NCS contract, CXK delivers direct information, advice and guidance services to a range of schools and colleges. CXK is the regional provider for the National Citizen Service. CXK also delivers mentoring, participation, early help and education contracts.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that completed skills action plans reflect the unique circumstances of each customer. Advisers should ensure that customers, including those with poor reading skills, understand their action plans and are fully involved in identifying the agreed actions in order to improve their ability to complete the actions and make good progress.
- Ensure that managers provide more timely and effective individual support to advisers where the quality of the skills action plans and/or training sessions they develop for customers does not meet high expectations.
- Develop, and establish across the region, actions to improve attendance rates, including building on the successful work started by the contact centre and more effective use of data to analyse the range of reasons for non-attendance.
- Ensure that senior advisers provide more timely and effective individual support, including the sharing of very effective practice, to advisers where the quality of service does not meet the high expectations set by CXK.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders and managers have an ambitious mission and vision for the organisation. They focus on how the organisation seeks to meet the needs of individuals, families and communities and enables them to access education, employment and training through targeted careers advice. Managers and staff are highly motivated to achieve this ambition.
- Leaders at CXK have a clear strategic direction for delivery of the NCS provision across the south-east of England. Leaders make good use of up-to-date labour market information and the very strong links with Jobcentre Plus, local enterprise partnerships, employers and other partners. They ensure that advice and next-step guidance services contribute to local and regional employment and skills priorities, including the Inspiration Agenda. In particular, advisers focus on those customers who may be at risk of redundancy.
- Managers make good use of carefully selected subcontractors to meet the needs of customers across a wide geographical area. The targets they set for subcontractors are appropriately challenging. Communications between managers and subcontractors are good. The regular network meetings provide very effective opportunities for both CXK, as the prime contractor, and its delivery partners to meet, share good practice and focus on quality improvement. Subcontractors greatly value these opportunities and recognise that they enhance the effectiveness of the services they provide to customers.
- Leaders and managers place a strong focus on raising standards through well-managed quality improvement activities. For example, the observation process is effective in both assuring and improving the quality of information, advice and guidance given to customers during planned one-to-one and group sessions. Observers accurately identify strengths and areas for development to enhance advisers' performance, and take swift action to help maintain and improve the quality of advice and guidance.
- Managers use data well to support operational delivery and improvement. They analyse the performance of priority customers quickly and accurately. Leaders and managers regularly scrutinise how well subcontractors deliver their contracts. Managers quickly identify areas of underperformance such as the low, but improving, job and learning outcomes and then agree detailed improvement plans. Across the contract, and particularly in the Essex area, leaders recognised that too many customers failed to attend their appointments. Leaders recently developed an attendance strategy to improve customers' attendance rates but it is too early to judge its impact.
- Advisers are very well qualified for their roles. They benefit from carefully considered and regular continuous professional development that boosts their confidence and skills in delivering an effective service. A wide range of professional learning courses further develop the skills of advisers and complements mandatory professional training. However, managers do not fully monitor the effectiveness of training linked to individual performance. As a result, the quality of a small minority of skills action plans completed by advisers is not of a good enough standard.
- Managers monitor staff performance well. All staff participate in an annual appraisal process with individual improvement targets which closely align to key business objectives. The quality of target setting and evaluation on a few adviser appraisals is not

always sufficiently precise to support improvement.

- The self-assessment process is inclusive and accurate. It provides a reliable overview of what the organisation does well, and what it needs to do to improve. Managers make good use of subcontractors' and customers' feedback to inform the self-assessment process. An effective programme of internal inspections accurately identifies areas for improvement. Managers take prompt action to address any weaknesses. Improvement plans are clear, focus on quality improvement and are regularly reviewed and updated by managers.

The governance of the provider

- Trustees are suitably qualified and experienced to fulfil their role. They benefit from good training to understand their responsibilities to safeguard customers and to meet their obligations under the 'Prevent' duty. They utilise their wide range of experience and expertise to good effect and provide a high level of challenge both to the executive and senior leadership team. For example, they closely analyse data and performance information to challenge leaders and are adept at requesting specific reports where they need to understand more clearly aspects of weaker performance.
- Trustees have a good understanding of the needs of the local communities served by CXK and work well with senior managers to ensure that its mission and strategy match the needs of customers and the wider community well.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders and managers work very effectively with external agencies. They use their expertise and advice to ensure that a comprehensive range of policies, strategies, interventions and referrals is in place to help keep all customers safe, including the most vulnerable.
- All staff, including those of subcontractors, have benefited from access to a range of appropriate safeguarding training including the 'Prevent' duty. This ensures they have good awareness of potential concerns and contribute to a culture of constant curiosity and vigilance. Managers and staff deal with safeguarding concerns sensitively, taking prompt and appropriate action when situations arise. Arrangements to ensure the safe recruitment of staff are effective.
- Trustees are active and knowledgeable about CXK's safeguarding activities; they receive an informative quarterly safeguarding report that aids their understanding.

Quality of information, advice and guidance

Good

- Advisers identify customers' starting points well. They ascertain their job history and job and learning goals effectively. They also identify any potential barriers that might hinder their progress.
- Advisers explore customers' previous experiences and skills carefully, using good listening and questioning skills to clarify understanding and identify appropriate actions. In most sessions, advisers make good use of the time available to ensure customers benefit fully,

resulting in customers' improving their knowledge and confidence and starting to take responsibility for their short-term actions to progress towards achieving their goals.

- Advisers place a strong focus on promoting customer's skills development. They alert customers to the availability of internal and external workshops, covering topics such as interview techniques, job search and confidence building, very effectively. They reinforce the importance that employers place on information and communication (ICT) and mathematics skills. Advisers are adept at helping customers identify and make best use of their transferable skills in their curriculum vitae (CV).
- Advisers effectively signpost customers to a range of training services and resources; for example, to adult community learning, job club, libraries for use of computers, as well as information on voluntary work. Nearly all advisers make good use of the NCS website tools such as skills health checks and job profiles to raise awareness of different job opportunities and support customers' decision-making.
- Advisers are engaging, empathetic and respectful and provide good support and encouragement for customers. When dealing with complex personal issues, advisers support customers effectively and professionally, resulting in customers becoming more focused and motivated and more positive about their options. Advisers have good knowledge of local support, such as disability or welfare rights centres.
- Most advisers provide good feedback to customers on their approach to job search and what they need to do to improve; for example, to have a more targeted and realistic approach to job applications, the use of covering letters and speculative approaches to employers. Advisers promote the importance of customising CVs, to reflect the diverse nature of different job roles. The large majority of customers participate well in their information, advice and guidance sessions, using the experience to develop their career management skills.
- A small minority of action planning is insufficiently effective. On occasions, action plans are too generic and actions lack sufficient personalisation to help customers make progress. In these circumstances, actions often focus too much on achieving short-term goals, such as updating the CV, rather than sufficient actions to support the achievement of the customers' longer-term goals. Advisers occasionally complete plans without the customer present. Not all actions have specific timescales attached to them.
- A few group and one-to-one sessions do not meet the high standards set by managers. They focus too much on giving information, both verbal and written, rather than engaging customers in discussions. As a result, in these sessions customers do not develop a good enough understanding of the breadth of services available through the NCS. The resources that advisers use in sessions are not always adapted to meet the need of customers, such as those who have poor literacy skills. Advisers do not always provide sufficiently detailed feedback to customers to improve the quality of their CVs.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- Almost all customers value and benefit from good-quality information, advice and guidance sessions, grow in confidence and feel more optimistic about their futures. Advisers successfully help customers recognise and value their existing skills and experiences that they had not previously thought were relevant to their career

aspirations. They use this information well to improve customers' CVs and job applications. The vast majority of advisers use their knowledge of local job vacancies and other opportunities to help customers focus on realistic and achievable options.

- Nearly all customers who attend sessions respond very well to the advisers' supportive and positive approach. As a result, customers feel safe and secure when talking to advisers. In most cases, customers are punctual and value the care and attention provided by advisers. A significant proportion of customers, including those moving from Employment Support Allowance to Jobseeker's Allowance have poor mental health or very high levels of anxiety. Advisers are skilled at reassuring these customers, helping them think positively about the future and helping them seek other specialist support.
- Advisers and customers work well together on the key areas necessary for a customer to make progress towards a learning or job outcome. In the majority of cases, advisers discuss agreed action points and gaps in English, mathematics and ICT or the need to gain additional qualifications. For example, a customer aiming to move into the healthcare sector from retailing developed good actions to improve their level of mathematics skills and gain a necessary qualification in science.
- In addition to the NCS website and resources, the majority of advisers make good use of a wide range of other available resources. Advisers use their local knowledge effectively to encourage customers to investigate other appropriate options. For example, long-term unemployed young people are encouraged to consider schemes run by the Prince's Trust, including initiatives to boost opportunities for unemployed young people by bringing together partnerships of employers, education providers and others.
- Despite the concerted efforts of managers and advisers, the number of customers failing to attend appointments, particularly in the Essex area, is too high. However, advisers based in the contact centre, using the telephone to hold information, advice and guidance sessions, have good rates of successful contact. The recently introduced joint working with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers attending the Intensive Action Programme (IAP) is improving attendance rates for customers who traditionally had very poor attendance. As a result, the proportion of IAP customers no longer claiming benefits has improved significantly and is now good.
- Although all advisers have received training in fundamental British values, too many lack the confidence or skills to promote these values during advice and guidance sessions.

Outcomes for customers

Good

- The vast majority of customers make good progress from their starting points. In particular, customers who lack focus on gaining the skills or qualifications necessary to become employed or improve their prospects increase their levels of motivation and gain a better understanding of the importance of basic qualifications and employment experience. Where customers have unstructured lifestyles or other significant barriers to progress, advisers concentrate on ways to overcome these barriers before focusing on qualifications or skills development.
- Customers either being made redundant or at risk of redundancy benefit from dedicated group and one-to-one sessions. Advisers worked with a range of employees from local companies that were making redundancies. Nearly all of the employees found other

employment as a result of improving their CVs, developing good interview skills and concentrating their job search activities in the areas they were most likely to be successful.

- CXK staff are very successful in increasing the effectiveness of partnership working between schools, colleges, training providers, employers, local authorities and the local enterprise partnership through the Inspiration Agenda – a government initiative to provide more real-life contact with the world of work. As a result, the young people that took part in workshops and other activities had a better understanding of what employers are looking for and felt more prepared for a job interview. Their awareness of apprenticeship opportunities also increased significantly.
- As part of the Inspiration Agenda, staff worked closely with organisers of an initiative called the Big Bang Fair. Over 8,000 young people from across the region attended science, technology engineering and mathematics activities, and CXK advisers and managers delivered interactive group sessions to encourage young people to consider different career opportunities and routes into education, training and employment.
- CXK managers analyse the achievement of different groups of customers. Variation in the differences in performance of different groups is small, although customers who declare they have a learning difficulty and/or disability achieve at a slightly higher rate than other groups.
- In a minority of cases, advisers do not encourage customers sufficiently to use their initiative and develop their independence. For example, on occasions, advisers complete a CV on behalf of the customer, rather than empowering the customer to produce it independently.

Provider details

Unique reference number	1236779
Type of provider	National Careers Service
CEO	Pauline Smith
Telephone number	01233 224 244
Website	www.cxk.org

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of operations and quality, 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 online questionnaires to gather the views of customers and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed one-to-one and group information, advice and guidance sessions.

Inspection team

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