

Prospects West Midlands

National Careers Service

Inspection dates

28 February–3 March 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	
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Advisers are well qualified, experienced and knowledgeable; they use their skills particularly well to put customers at ease, provide good information and help them identify their work or learning needs.
- Advisers structure sessions well and provide positive feedback to customers on their achievements. As a result, customers make good gains in confidence and feel more motivated to make progress towards their career and personal aims.
- Customers improve their confidence and understanding of the importance of well-developed English, mathematical and information and communication technology (ICT) skills to their future prospects, as a result of the good promotion, clear advice and targeted support from advisers.
- Advisers promote equality and diversity well; they ensure customers' cultures, heritage and identities are valued and respected.
- Leaders have successfully developed strong and effective working relationships with a range of carefully selected subcontractors across the West Midlands region. This ensures that the provision is widely accessible to a wide range of customers including those in priority groups.
- Leaders and senior managers have skilfully implemented a well-considered, effective and coherent strategy that supports the successful delivery of the National Careers Service provision in the West Midlands.
- Outcomes for customers are good; participation by students and employers in the Inspiration Agenda is exceptionally high and positive.
- A small minority of advisers lack the confidence to challenge the inappropriate behaviour displayed by a few customers.
- A small minority of customers do not understand what they need to do to improve, or are encouraged sufficiently by advisers to use their initiative.
- Customers' attendance at guidance sessions in some parts of the region are too low.
- Job and learning outcomes for customers in Coventry and Warwickshire, and those who live in Birmingham and Solihull and who state their heritage as white British, are low.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Prospects holds the National Careers Service contract for the West Midlands region. The region includes Coventry and Warwickshire, the Black Country, Birmingham and Solihull, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, Herefordshire and Worcestershire, covering a total of 12 local authorities and the West Midlands Combined Authority. The regional office is located in Birmingham.
- Prospects is the prime contractor and manages five subcontractors. Advisers meet with approximately 57,000 customers each year in around 120 sites across the West Midlands. The region includes a diverse mix of urban and rural communities, and includes significant pockets of urban deprivation. Prospects also delivers a range of other provision in the West Midlands including services for young people not in employment, education or training (NEET).

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Enhance the abilities of advisers who are less skilled in managing the negative behaviour exhibited by a few customers during one-to-one and group sessions by providing them with targeted training and support. Ensure that advisers routinely promote to customers key aspects of British values.
- Further develop advisers' skills in supporting customers to use their initiative and to manage their own progress and goals including the completion of their curriculum vitae (CV).
- Improve and refine the attendance strategy to suit the needs of each locality, and closely monitor the effectiveness of the actions taken to support those customers whose attendance is low.
- Ensure that leaders and managers quickly implement targeted actions so that customers achieve positive job and learning outcomes, regardless of geographical location or cultural heritage.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders, managers and staff are highly ambitious for the service. They have a clear vision and mission to provide high-quality careers advice and guidance to improve customers' economic prosperity through jobs and learning. All staff and managers play a pivotal role in helping the company to realise its mission and vision. For example, as part of the Inspirations Agenda, a national initiative to help inspire young people as they consider their career options, around 23,000 students from across the West Midlands have attended a range of career-focused workshops and events supported by 840 employers. This initiative has enabled students to find out about different career pathways and industries including those related to business and finance, retail and commercial, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, apprenticeships and employment opportunities aligned to local landmark initiatives such as high-speed rail 2.
- Partners, stakeholders, customers and subcontractors hold the company in high esteem and are appreciative of its approach to collaborative working. Partnerships with a range of agencies including local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, the Department for Work and Pensions and employers are very productive. Leaders and managers work with the strengths of each of the partners very well to meet the needs of customers from priority groups. They share local knowledge and management information to get an accurate view of the employment sectors where employers report difficulties in recruiting staff and where skills gaps exist, such as in the rapidly growing service sector.
- Partnership working with Jobcentre Plus is excellent. Work coaches engage well with advisers to ensure that most customers get a seamless and professional service. In a short period, advisers have established good working relationships with staff at almost all Jobcentre Plus offices. Most venues used by advisers for meetings with customers are of a good quality and provide a safe and welcoming environment. However, a few venues are noisy or do not provide a sufficiently confidential setting.
- Leaders choose subcontractors well to increase the reach of the service to various parts of the region and to meet the needs of specific customer groups. Subcontractors provide careers advice to the most disadvantaged groups to offer them knowledge, skills, hope and confidence. They enable these customers to explore options and make choices to enter careers and jobs. Staff and customers respect each other.
- The support and training for subcontractors' staff are good. The relentless focus on quality monitoring has established a culture of continuous improvement. Leaders ensure that subcontractors are given challenging targets that make best use of their strengths and help them contribute effectively to Prospects' ambitious vision.
- Staff are well qualified and experienced in delivering information, advice and guidance. They have substantial life experience and excellent interpersonal skills to support customers who face a multitude of barriers to finding a career, work or training. Many staff from both subcontractors and Prospects delivery teams have both guidance and teaching qualifications. They provide good-quality group sessions for customers on skills which are helpful in gaining sustained employment, such as communication skills.

- Leaders and managers conduct regular and rigorous checks on the quality of the service provided to customers. For example, the quality of action plans has improved as the targets within most of them are now more personal and specific to each customer. Through frequent formal and informal observations of the advisers, managers check the quality of individual advice and group sessions. Managers moderate the judgements made by the observers to ensure consistency of approach.
- Leaders and managers are committed to improving the quality of information, advice and guidance to ensure that all customers feel motivated to make informed choices about their careers and employment. Managers provide targeted training on identified weaknesses to sharpen advisers' skills. This includes webinars, coaching and sharing good practice.
- Leaders and managers know their provision well. They use a broad range of evidence to produce a largely accurate account of the performance of their service and the challenges they face to improve further. However, the self-assessment report does not focus sufficiently on the inconsistencies in service performance such as customers' low attendance in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, or the low proportion of job outcomes and learning outcomes for customers in Coventry and Warwickshire, compared to the rest of the West Midlands.

The governance of the provider

- Board members have substantial experience and expertise in the field of education, employment, training and careers guidance. They give their time and expertise generously to raise the profile of Prospects by facilitating networking with employers, local authorities and voluntary groups.
- Members of the board routinely visit the advice sessions, talk to the customers and observe guidance sessions to get a detailed understanding of the impact that planned interventions make to the lives of customers and the challenges the advisers face in providing such support. As a result, they have invested significantly in improving the use of social media and digital technology to provide a more efficient and effective service to customers.
- The board members have access to a good range of accurate and accessible management reports, which help them to ask the right questions and to hold senior managers to account; they challenge managers to improve the provision by evaluating the impact of the service on customers' lives.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- A culture of safeguarding is prevalent throughout the company. All staff, including subcontractors' staff, have benefited from recently updated safeguarding training. The training has extended their understanding of how to raise customers' awareness of keeping safe and protecting themselves from the dangers associated with radicalisation, extremism and online exploitation.
- Leaders and managers hold accurate records of background checks on all direct-delivery staff and managers. Managers investigate any complaints thoroughly to reinforce

customers' confidence in the company's commitment to protect them; where necessary they refer safeguarding cases to external agencies with whom they have good links. When an external agency concludes its enquiries, managers ensure that they learn from the incident. For example, by delivering training to staff on how to protect themselves from spurious allegations.

Quality of information, advice and guidance

Good

- Customers appreciate and respond well to advisers' good communication and engagement skills when discussing their past employment history and future career aspirations; this helps them to feel at ease at an early stage in their session. Customers gain in confidence during their sessions and feel more motivated as a result.
- Advisers are well qualified, highly skilled and experienced in identifying the needs of customers, their barriers and aspirations, to help them gain employment or enter into learning. They use labour market information well to help inform customers about opportunities in education, training or employment, in order to help them select the most appropriate career and job choice.
- Customers make good use of the range of available resources, including the National Careers Service and employer websites, job bulletin boards and social media, to gather information on job vacancies and new careers.
- Most advisers use a range of effective questioning and listening skills particularly well to support a wide range of customers from varying backgrounds to identify their work or learning needs. For example, re-shaping advice and explanations, re-phrasing questions and developing vocabulary with customers for whom English is an additional language.
- Most advisers plan one-to-one sessions well, and accurately assess each customer's starting point. They ensure that agreed goals are realistic and will help the customer achieve their personal and career aspirations. Advisers provide positive and motivating feedback to customers on their achievements and on how these may be used to enable them to reach their short- and long-term goals. However, for a small minority of customers, the goals recorded in the skills action plans are too general and do not focus well enough on the necessary actions required to achieve their desired employment and personal aims.
- Advisers place a high priority on encouraging customers to improve their English, mathematics and ICT skills. For example, advisers signpost customers to local training courses which will help them to improve their numeracy and literacy skills or to gain industry recognised qualifications, such as the construction skills certification scheme card, that enhance their chances of securing employment.
- In a very small minority of sessions, particularly within group workshops, advisers do not set expectations clearly enough to enable the customer to understand how the National Careers Service can assist them. As a result, customers lose interest. In a few instances, advisers complete CVs on behalf of their customers and do not sufficiently support the development of their ability to work on their own initiative and independently.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- Advisers act as positive role models for their customers and help them develop their resilience and self-worth. Customers make good use of focused information and advice sessions that help them to develop confidence and improve their self-esteem. Most advisers develop customers' independence well by guiding them to appropriate sources of careers-related information to help them to progress with their job search. Most customers gain the knowledge of where to search for jobs or how to access suitable courses to help them develop their skills further.
- Most customers are punctual, well presented and motivated to improve their employment prospects. They are polite and respectful and value the impartial advice provided by advisers. They clearly enjoy their sessions and want to know how to improve their career options. They respond quickly and positively to instructions and requests from advisers.
- Advisers effectively inspire customers. During the sessions, most customers become more motivated to participate in the discussions and, as a result, adopt a positive attitude to seeking employment and furthering their career opportunities. Advisers encourage customers to pursue alternative options for employment, such as volunteering, apprenticeships, self-employment, working overseas or advocacy roles in the community.
- Advisers are particularly effective in using specialist advice and guidance to promote and support learning. They effectively signpost customers to appropriate external support, such as budgeting workshops to manage household finances, or provide access to suitable clothing for a job interview. They also supply advice on disclosure for customers recently out of custody.
- Advisers provide a safe environment in which customers feel safe and engage well in sharing their starting points and barriers to progression. Most advisers promote customers' understanding of how to stay safe when using the internet and social media. Customers are able to apply this understanding well so that only appropriate information is included in their CV and online job applications.
- Most customers appreciate the importance of improving their English and mathematics skills in the context of their career aspirations. For example, a customer plans to work towards a level 2 qualification in English to help her progress to employment as a teaching assistant. However, in a very small minority of cases where customers have specific learning needs such as dyslexia, advisers do not have access to specialist adapted resources such as simplified text or coloured overlays.
- Most customers feel valued and respected. Sessions are conducted in an environment of mutual respect which values difference. Where relevant, advisers broaden customers' appreciation of equality and diversity appropriately. In a small minority of cases, advisers do not raise customers' awareness of the importance of confidentiality and respect for others' opinions sufficiently during group and one-to-one sessions. They do not systematically challenge well enough inappropriate behaviours exhibited by a few customers during discussions, or place a sufficiently high priority on raising customers' awareness of key aspects of work and life in modern Britain.
- While attendance at advice sessions has improved over the last twelve months, too many customers still fail to attend their scheduled appointments, particularly at Jobcentre Plus venues. Advisers make every effort to remind customers about their appointments, by

text message, email and telephone. However, such strategies are not always successful, particularly for clients located in areas such as Herefordshire and Worcestershire, where attendance is much lower than the rest of the West Midlands.

Outcomes for customers

Good

- Outcomes for customers including those in both priority and non-priority groups are good. The proportion of customers who successfully progress to positive learning or employment destinations from their initial starting points is high, and above the in-year contractual targets set for the organisation by the Skills Funding Agency.
- Customers, many of whom are in receipt of out-of-work benefits or have complex and varied barriers to work, including disabilities and/or mental health needs, state that advisers give generously of their time. As a result, they quickly improve in confidence and motivation during face-to-face sessions. As their needs are addressed, they make good progress towards their career and personal aims. Advisers sensitively explore and identify customers' backgrounds, starting points and barriers to progression effectively and agree challenging improvement actions.
- Prospects' staff work closely with many employers, providing tailored support for employees who are under threat of redundancy or re-deployment. For example, a group of administrative staff based at a university affected by a proposed redundancy were offered targeted help to resolve a range of emotional conflicts associated with the challenge linked to a significant career change. They were assisted to identify their transferable skills; as a result, they developed a more informed and improved level of understanding as to their future options.
- Prospects meets customers' needs well and aligns provision closely with identified regional and local priorities, for example as part of the re-development of Birmingham New Street Station, around 450 customers from some of the most deprived areas in Birmingham were assisted in securing employment in 'Grand Central', a major retail project located within the railway station complex. Other initiatives, including 'Boots on the ground' and 'Resort World', have provided customers with access to a range of jobs in the hospitality, retail and customer services sectors.
- Inconsistencies in the achievement of different groups of customers have steadily reduced, although a few still remain. For example, job and learning outcomes are much lower for customers based in Coventry and Warwickshire than in other parts of the West Midlands. Outcomes for customers located in Birmingham and Solihull who state their heritages as white British are lower than for other groups of clients.

Provider details

Unique reference number	1236952
Type of provider	National Careers Service
Principal/CEO	Nick Bell
Telephone number	0121 262 3960
Website	www.prospects.co.uk

At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Jobchange Telford & Wrekin Council Phoenix Training Services (Midlands) Ltd Specialist Recruitment Services UK Ltd East Birmingham Community Forum Ltd
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Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the area director West Midlands as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. 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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