

nextstep Greater Merseyside

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Adult information, advice and guidance

Description of the provider

1. The **nextstep** services contract in Greater Merseyside is held by Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside is a division of the organisation's finance and corporate services directorate. It is based in Liverpool and works with 20 subcontractors, including Connexions. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside is managed by the adult team manager. The **nextstep** team includes a subcontract co-ordinator, compliance co-ordinator, management information co-ordinator, administrative support and an adviser. The adult team manager is responsible for performance management, quality improvement, equal opportunities and diversity and skills for life arrangements.
2. Approximately 73% of information and advice services are subcontracted through 20 subcontractors from locations across six local authorities. Over 70 advisers deliver **nextstep** services. A range of delivery mechanisms are used to provide information about learning, training and work opportunities including a telephone helpline, individual advice sessions, a website, and printed information. Some subcontractors provide advice via group work and through information in different community languages.
3. Seven of the subcontractors work closely with people with disabilities or minority ethnic groups and two organisations work with those of an offending background. The remaining subcontractors target hard-to-reach clients. Advisers hold, or are working towards, national vocational qualifications in advice and guidance at levels 3 or 4.
4. There is a broad referral network of stakeholder organisations, ranging from voluntary and community organisations, **learnirect**, trade unions, libraries, training providers, prisons and further education.
5. Clients not eligible for an advice session are directed to other sources of information, other contracted services or **learnirect** advice. A client information line takes referrals from **learnirect**, calls from the public, and subcontractor advisers. **nextstep** centres mainly operate through either a fixed appointment system and/or a system of drop-in.
6. Between August 2004 and January 2007, 21,297 clients without a level 2 qualification received their first advice session. Of these, 877 were successfully contacted for the six-month follow-up survey.
7. For the business year August 2006 to July 2007, **nextstep** Greater Merseyside was allocated targets under its core LSC contract to provide 9,894 people with advice services and 74,205 people with information. Clients eligible to receive advice services under the core contract must be qualified below level 2.
8. A range of national and regional **nextstep** priority groups were identified by Greater Merseyside LSC. These included 15% of the core contract targeted at clients with a learning difficulty or medical disability and 17% targeted at people age 50 and over. The overall advice and information targets were exceeded. Targets associated with priority groups were broadly achieved.

Subcontractors visited

nextstep subcontractors	Visited on inspection
Action for Blind People	
Adult Guidance Ethnic Minorities Employability Project	*
Connexions	*
Greenbank	*
HMP Liverpool	*
Halton Enterprise and Employment	*
Halton Library Service	
Halton YMCA	*
Hope Centre	*
Liverpool Community College	*
Mencap	
Nacro	*
Opportunities Shop	*
Pagoda Chinese Community Centre	*
Shaw Trust	*
Standguide	*
Starting Point	*
Tomorrows People	*
Transport and General Workers Union	*
Trees Employment Service	

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision		Satisfactory: Grade 3
Capacity to improve		Good: Grade 2
Quality of nextstep provision		Satisfactory: Grade 3
Leadership and management		Good: Grade 2
Quality improvement	Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2	
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3	

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

9. The overall effectiveness of the provision is satisfactory. The quality of the **nextstep** provision is satisfactory, as is equality of opportunity. Leadership and management, and the arrangements for quality improvement are good.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

10. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has demonstrated that it has a good capacity to further improve the quality of its services. It has a comprehensive range of quality improvement arrangements which are well established across the network. All the quality assurance and control arrangements are focused on improving the clients' experience. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has a proven record of developing and extending partnerships which integrate its own services effectively with those of other agencies. It has a quality steering group which works very effectively to maintain momentum on improvement initiatives and spread their impact. It has not been inspected previously, but its own records indicate that it has driven effective improvements in the quality of advice sessions and action plans for clients over the previous 18 months. It has also improved its procedures for observing advisers delivering advice sessions and for collecting client feedback.
11. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has just completed its second cycle of self-assessment. Its procedures are inclusive and draw thoroughly on the results from internal inspections, the views of subcontractors and client satisfaction surveys. The process is well managed and the consultation phase this year was modified to give greater prominence to several key themes as a result of experience gained in the first year. Subcontractors have a very good understanding of the process and strong ownership of the judgements in the report. The report correctly describes most of the main strengths and areas for improvement identified during the inspection, although it also incorrectly claims some standard practices as strengths. It correctly graded leadership and management as good but overestimated the quality of the **nextstep** provision.

Key strengths

- Good use of advisers' specialist knowledge to meet clients' needs
- Particularly effective support for clients to overcome their personal and practical barriers
- Good strategic management

- Particularly productive operational partnership working
- Good selection of subcontractors to widen participation
- Very comprehensive quality improvement arrangements

Key areas for improvement

- Low rates of progression into learning
- Insufficiently well developed interview skills in some sessions
- Insufficient evaluation of the performance of different client groups
- Insufficient monitoring of positive outcomes rates for clients

Main findings

Quality of nextstep provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Achievement and standards

12. The range of positive outcomes for clients is satisfactory. Overall, positive outcome achievement rates have averaged 48% over the last two years. Between August 2005 and July 2007, 36% of the clients successfully contacted, who were unemployed at the time of their advice session, progressed into employment.
13. Rates of progression into learning are low. The rate of progression into learning over the same period has been low and is not improving. For example only 10% of clients who were successfully contacted over the last 2 years had started a learning programme.
14. Many clients have been unemployed or out of learning for long periods of time before their advice session and they often have poor self-esteem and unclear personal expectations. Following their advice sessions clients gain in self-confidence, motivation and ability and they are better able to make informed decisions about their future. A significant number have additional barriers to progression such as homelessness and substance misuse. Advice sessions for these clients are good at providing small and achievable steps towards changing their lives.

Quality of provision

15. Use of advisers' specialist knowledge to meet clients' needs is good. Subcontractors have specialist knowledge which is particularly well applied to meet clients' individual needs. This is recognised in the self-assessment report. Clients have good access to well-located, appropriate provision that meets their needs. Advisers apply their knowledge and expertise well to ensure that individual needs are met and that clients have access to a range of options for their wider needs. For example, clients from other countries are made aware of culturally equivalent documentation and legislation to help them find employment or appropriate training. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has made good links with local employers to support people facing redundancy.
16. Support for clients to overcome their personal and practical barriers is particularly effective. Advisers use their extensive links with other agencies well to make effective referrals to meet the diverse personal and social needs of clients. Many clients overcome significant personal and practical barriers to employment and training. For example, a single parent was referred to a specialist financial adviser to identify how to finance a path to higher education. Advisers take prompt and effective action to facilitate access to appropriate specialist agencies. Advice and information are carefully focused to overcome problems that have held clients back in the past.
17. In some sessions interview skills are insufficiently well developed. The standard of advice sessions overall is satisfactory or better. However, the less effective features of a significant number of advice sessions included advisers applying their interviewing skills too narrowly. For example, insufficient attention was given to clients' own comments.

Advisers would not always check or clarify clients' statements and in some cases advisers did not give clients sufficient opportunity to talk fully about their needs and aspirations.

18. Action-planning is satisfactory overall. Most plans are sufficiently detailed and accurately reflect discussions with clients. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has implemented training and support for action-planning for all its subcontractors. A series of relevant training courses gives advisers ample opportunities to share good practice and to gain qualifications and additional skills. For example, a significant number of advisers are enrolled on a course to develop their skills and understanding in the provision of literacy and numeracy support.
19. Clients' literacy, numeracy and language support needs are adequately explored in advice sessions. Where appropriate, clients are referred to provision or assessment to meet their needs.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity
Quality improvement

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3
Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

20. Leadership and management at **nextstep** Greater Merseyside are good. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has good strategic management and a clear sense of direction which promotes the value of information and advice services for adults. It has continuous and constructive dialogue with strategically important groups such as the probation service, local chambers of commerce and local authorities. It uses these very effectively to broker a coherent range of services for its clients and other local residents. Strategic relationships are supported by clear high level agreements between the different organisations. It carefully manages the relationship between the **learn**direct helpline to ensure that referrals are dealt with speedily. It manages its own extensive network of subcontractors to ensure they play a specific role in supporting the priorities set out by the LSC and other strategic bodies. Where new priorities develop, it engages with new subcontractors who can meet these needs and manages the departure of others in a timely and constructive manner. The main contractor co-ordinates its directly-delivered services very effectively to ensure they align well with those services provided by other subcontractors. It uses existing Connexions premises to provide a flexible network of locations which can be used as demand fluctuates across the district.
21. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has particularly productive operational partnerships. This was identified within the self-assessment report. It provides good professional development for staff through relevant training workshops on topics such as influencing skills and assessment. This training has, for many subcontractors, developed their capacity to improve and allowed them to extend their **nextstep** support services. In HMP Liverpool it makes excellent use of a broad range of funding streams to provide a highly integrated multi-agency advice, support and training service for all prisoners. HMP Liverpool has one of the lowest reoffending rates in the country. All **nextstep** subcontractors meet together regularly to share their knowledge and practices. Additional to this **nextstep** Greater Merseyside organise local group meetings to plan and take actions to meet locally identified concerns and needs.

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22. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has a satisfactory overall approach to skills for life. It has identified low levels of literacy and numeracy amongst the Greater Merseyside population as a particular barrier to adult participation in learning and work. Many subcontractors provide skills for life training and qualifications alongside their **nextstep** service. Approximately one third of all learning undertaken after a **nextstep** intervention is linked to a skills for life need.
23. Arrangements to manage the resources are satisfactory. Clients and advisers use a suitable range of information and communication technology. The **nextstep** delivery centres stock an appropriate range of information about learning and employment opportunities.
24. Equality of opportunity at **nextstep** Greater Merseyside is satisfactory. A good selection of subcontractors is used to widen participation. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside subcontractors provide a range of additional programmes for clients to progress onto. They work hard to ensure client's diverse needs are met and they are very effective in signposting clients to other support, employment and training agencies. They are successful in working with a range of service providers, community partners and carefully chosen subcontractors to widen participation in the **nextstep** provision across Greater Merseyside. Participation in **nextstep** services has increased by over 2,500 clients in the last two years. Over the same period participation rates by people from minority ethnic communities and people with a disability has also increased.
25. Evaluation of the performance of different client groups is insufficient. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside satisfactorily monitors the overall participation rates by all types of client groups for LSC contractual purposes. However, they do not sufficiently analyse the impact of the **nextstep** service for all clients groups. For example, the impact of the **nextstep** service for those clients who have been referred onto English for speakers of other languages or skills for life literacy and numeracy support and training is not evaluated.
26. Quality improvement at **nextstep** Greater Merseyside is good. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside has very comprehensive quality improvement arrangements. These are well established, regularly reviewed and fully understood by all parties. All subcontractors work together very effectively to ensure these arrangements are applied consistently across the network. Subcontractors also contribute to a well structured quality steering group which oversees and monitors the improvements in quality across the service. The quality framework for improvement is well designed. It is based on a process of regular observations of advice sessions, a thorough regime of internal inspections and an integrated hierarchy of improvement plans covering individual subcontractors and the overall service. The internal inspection regime is particularly good at identifying areas for improvement within individual subcontractors, providing support to rectify these and then verifying that improvements have been made through reinspection.
27. Monitoring of positive outcome rates for clients is insufficient. **nextstep** Greater Merseyside does not monitor positive outcome achievement rates with its subcontractors sufficiently. Although formal positive outcome achievement targets exist for all subcontractors, they are given too little prominence during performance reviews or quality monitoring visits compared with those concerned with the number of advice sessions delivered.

What clients like:

- The advice sessions – ‘it was one of the best interviews I have ever had’
- ‘The advisers listened as well as giving out advice’
- ‘I was given lots of helpful information about training’
- ‘I enjoyed the role-play that helped me with interviews’

What clients think could improve:

- ‘I would have liked more information on language courses’
- ‘I would have liked the opportunity to have more advice sessions’

Annex

Learners' achievements

Outcomes of **nextstep** provision 2005 to 2007For clients without a level 2 qualification when they first contacted **nextstep**

Outcomes		Date of first advice or enhanced services session							
		Feb 07 – July 07		Aug 06 – Jan 07		Feb 06 – July 06		Aug 05 – Jan 06	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A	Number of clients who received their first advice or enhanced services session during the period	5836		4625		5150		3394	
B	Of those in A the number of clients successfully contacted for the six month follow-up survey	344	6	244	5	118	2	454	13
C	Of those in B, the number of clients who have successfully completed a Learning programme since their advice session	13	4	20	8	2	2	17	4
D	Of those in B, the number of clients who have started, but not yet completed, a Learning programme since their advice session	46	13	23	9	10	8	42	9
E	Of those in B, the number of clients who have continued with, but not yet completed, a learning programme they were already on	9	3	13	5	2	2	34	7
F	Of those in B, the number of clients who were unemployed at the time of their advice session	284	83	204	84	102	86	405	89
G	Of those in F, the number of clients who are now in employment	82	29	78	38	39	38	163	40
H	Of those in B, the total number of clients to have achieved a positive outcome	150	44	119	49	52	44	253	56