

Careers Advice Service

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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' monitoring visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on the 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. Broadcasting support services (bss) became responsible for the operation, staffing and delivery of the Careers Advice Service and its predecessor service, learndirect Advice, in 1998. learndirect Advice was previously inspected in 2005.
2. In October 2008, strategic responsibility for learndirect Advice transferred from the University for Industry to the LSC, and the service renamed the Careers Advice Service (CAS). The LSC has extended its contract with bss until 2010. LSC funding constitutes 30% of bss' total turnover.
3. CAS provides free information and advice on courses, funding and childcare, and careers guidance, by telephone and email. The service is unique in the UK and available to all individuals in the UK aged 16 or over. The website provides 24 hours a day access to the service.
4. CAS uses two call centres, Manchester and Leicester, to deliver services. A dedicated bss team, split between the two sites, manage the service supported by a number of central teams.
5. Most calls are handled initially by one of 47 information advisers, who provide information on courses and specific campaigns. Referral to one of 62 learning advisers supports callers who need a greater depth of information on a particular career. In depth careers guidance is provided by one of 75 careers coaches.
6. During the inspection, CAS handled 9,373 calls and 1,311 emails. Between September 2007 and August 2008, around 600,000 telephone calls, of which 120,000 were guidance sessions, and 100,000 emails, were handled. Over 70,000 of these callers had qualifications below level 2. Around 55% of callers are aged 25 to 50, 55% are women and 49% are employed.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Satisfactory: Grade 3

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

7. The overall effectiveness of CAS provision is good. Achievement and standards, the quality of provision and leadership and management are good. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

8. bss' capacity to improve CAS provision is good. It has made a number of successful improvements in direct response to the findings of the previous inspection. It uses current and historic data very well to forecast, manage and monitor its performance. Any under-performance against a wide range of criteria is identified quickly and remedial action taken. The service is efficient and resources are planned well to meet demand. bss' development and support for its staff is good. Advisers' are highly skilled and professional. Staff turnover is very low. Callers' feedback on the service they receive is very positive. The volume of careers guidance calls has risen to just below 30% of total calls within only two years of inception.
9. bss identified most of its strengths and areas for improvement through its first self-assessment. Improvement actions are considered well and generally successful, but mostly short- to medium-term. The self-assessment process is satisfactory, but is not used as the core of an overall quality cycle or quality improvement process.

Key strengths:

- Good outcomes for callers
- Good information, advice and guidance
- Particularly effective support for callers with additional needs
- Particularly thorough performance monitoring and management of the provision
- Very effective planning and resourcing of provision to maintain service levels
- Good staff development and support

Key areas for improvement:

- Poor listening skills by advisers in some sessions
- No safeguarding arrangements in place
- Insufficient use of self-assessment within overall quality improvement arrangements

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

10. Outcomes for callers following their contact with CAS are good. This was partially identified in self-assessment. In the six months to August 2008, 69% of callers entered learning or employment, or improved their employment status, following a guidance session. In the same period, 63% of callers entered learning or employment after an advice session. Around 55% of callers started a learning programme. These outcomes compare favourably to CAS' nearest comparable adult information, advice and guidance service, nextstep.
11. Callers' self-confidence and motivation improves following their contact with the service. Most gain a very clear idea of the relevant and achievable pathways and options available to them. Callers are able to clarify their goals and identify how barriers to progress can be overcome. All of the past callers to the service contacted during inspection were very positive about their experience of CAS.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

12. The quality of provision is good, as identified through self-assessment. The quality of the information, advice and guidance provided for callers is good. The service meets individual caller's needs well. Clear, detailed and constructive information is provided by advisers. Skilled advisers support individuals very well by email, as many times as needed, to make very effective improvements to their curriculum vitae.
13. All advisers use their specialist knowledge particularly well to meet callers' needs. Referrals between the different levels of CAS are good. Most advisers make very thorough checks on callers' understanding during advice and guidance activities. Advisers are encouraging, reassuring and positive in their approach to callers. Action planning is good; negotiated targets are clearly recorded. Advisers' approach to action planning is consistent. Action plans are offered in Braille, audio, and email formats, and as hard copy by post.
14. Advisers make information searches seamlessly during their discussions with callers. For example, they very quickly match callers' needs to home or geographical locations and the type of course required. Resources to support delivery of the service are extensive and used particularly well by all levels of advisers. A regularly updated intranet provides up-to-date information on all service and campaign information as well as details of funding options and comprehensive, job sector specific information. Information for job profiles is collected and updated in close co-operation with professional bodies and sector skills councils. Current labour market information provides advisers with good knowledge of national and local labour market conditions and trends. However,

at busy times, the intranet's response time slows and, in some cases, advisers' screens freeze during calls.

15. In some sessions, advisers' listening skills are poor. Some learning advisers pay insufficient attention to a caller's main request and spend too much time investigating minor queries. In a very few sessions, advisers failed to respond to callers' repeated indirect requests for help with literacy, numeracy or language needs. Callers' recording of email addresses and telephone numbers is not always checked sufficiently well to ensure callers have noted the information accurately.
16. CAS meets callers' needs and interests well. The service is available and appropriately staffed between 08:00 and 22:00 seven days a week excluding Christmas and New Year holidays. The provision has grown in the past two years to meet the needs of callers for advice and guidance by telephone and the internet. Currently, 30% of caller and email demand is for careers guidance. bss also manages a large number of calls in response to national campaigns, many of which are complementary to the main service. For example, callers who wish to seek to stay indefinitely in the UK gain practical information about the Life in the UK test, including access to courses. Callers also respond to a number of campaigns to improve their literacy and numeracy skills and are sent free motivational CDs and promotional material.
17. Support for callers, including those with additional needs, is particularly effective. Callers use the guidance service for as long as they feel necessary. Advisers are particularly sensitive and responsive to callers at risk of redundancy, recently unemployed or other major personal events. Advisers make appropriate referrals to external agencies when the support required by callers is beyond their remit. For instance, one emailed relevant support contacts and information about flexible learning options including home study to one caller, who is dyslexic. The brokerage service for minority language callers, through which advisers provide intermediary support, is good.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

18. Performance monitoring and management of all aspects of the provision by bss is particularly thorough. This was identified in self-assessment. bss generates large amounts of performance data each day, and uses it very well to monitor the performance of the service against daily, medium and longer term targets and against key performance indicators set by the LSC. Detailed internal reports are generated daily, weekly and monthly, and communicated widely within bss and to the LSC. The outcomes of externally conducted surveys are used well to identify and monitor CAS strengths and areas for improvement; external surveys include 'mystery shopper' calls to CAS.

19. Very good arrangements have been developed by bss to monitor, support and improve the quality of its advisers' performance. Their performance is closely monitored against a wide range of performance indicators including the number of calls or emails handled, and action plans produced. Line managers carry out thorough monthly face-to-face assessments with each adviser. Advisers are supported well to improve.
20. A very wide range of data on callers is collected routinely. However, detail about each caller's starting point is insufficient to measure the extent of his or her subsequent progress. This was identified in self-assessment. Caller numbers or comparative outcomes are not always recorded or monitored by ethnicity or disability. Insufficient sharing of good practice in improving callers' curriculum vitae takes place between the Manchester and Leicester-based careers coaches.
21. The planning and resourcing of CAS is very effective in maintaining service levels, as identified in self-assessment. The forecasting of call volumes and peaks and troughs in demand, throughout the day and up to six weeks in advance, is thorough and accurate. A good range of historical data sources and marketing information is used well by bss for planning processes. Advisers are scheduled in sufficient numbers to meet demand and maintain a high level of service. Experienced additional staff are drafted in quickly to meet any unexpected surges in demand. The percentage of calls answered compared with those received is high and consistently at or above 95%. Advisers use the planning system well as a scheduling information and communication tool. The minority language service has a 90% response rate; significantly higher than at the previous inspection.
22. Staff development and support are good. Advisers are valued and take pride in their work. Staff turnover is exceptionally low, at 1% in 2008. Advisers have good opportunities for career progression within bss and experience intensive induction and supportive monitoring programmes. Adviser training programmes are planned well and relevant. Programmes include interpersonal skills, advanced interview skills, action planning and clarifying caller needs. Advisers improve their practice following training. bss has developed very effective e-learning portfolios to support careers coaches' development. The portfolios promote professional networking and engagement in forums on topics such as redundancy.
23. Advisers are supported well to achieve relevant qualifications. All current learning advisers are qualified in information, advice and guidance at level 3. All but eight of the 75 careers coaches have achieved level 4 and the remainder are about to begin their NVQs. Ten careers coaches are taking, and five more have completed, a post-graduate certificate in telephone guidance.
24. The self-assessment process is satisfactory. bss produced two creditable self-assessment reports within a three month period, having never previously been required to carry out a self-assessment process. Its self-assessment process involved a wide range of input from bss staff and the LSC. The first self-assessment was insufficiently evaluative but provided a good profile of most key strengths and areas for improvement. The second was highly evaluative, but

lacked description. In practical terms, the two self-assessment reports are complementary, and sound. The proposed self-assessment grades generally matched inspection grades.

25. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory. bss has a satisfactory range of equality and diversity policies and all staff complete thorough equality training broadly contextualised around a customer service-based business. Outcomes for a high proportion of the callers to the service are good. Advisers are trained well to ensure callers' diverse needs are met and they are very effective in directing callers to the most appropriate form of information, advice or guidance. bss has no direct responsibility for the promotion of CAS and has no influence over the type of caller that accesses the service. However, bss operates the minority language advice service which helps widen participation and providers. It provides information and advice in eight community languages: Punjabi, Sylheti, Somali, Polish, French, Farsi, Urdu and Gujarati, from the Leicester centre. bss promotes the language service well across England through the work of its community liaison officer. Users can also access the service by text phone. Information in Braille, on CD or in other languages is available on request. bss routinely captures and reports on callers' demographic information specifically: age, gender, geographical region, employment status, qualification level and in some cases ethnicity and disability but does not collect data on comparative outcomes for different caller groups.
26. bss has no arrangements for safeguarding. No Criminal Records Bureau checks have been completed on advisers, but plans are in hand to do so. No safeguarding policies or guidance notes for managers and staff are available. No awareness training or support for staff is in place to ensure a consistent response and understanding across the organisation on its safeguarding responsibilities. Around 7.5% of callers are aged under 18.
27. bss makes insufficient use of self-assessment as the core element of its overall quality improvement arrangements. Self-assessment and quality improvement planning are both at an early stage. The current approach to quality improvement is based primarily on short- and medium-term needs rather than an overall, comprehensive evaluation. The use of evaluation of the overall provision to contribute to quality improvement is insufficiently systematic. This was not identified in the self-assessment report.

What callers like:

- 'I'm not on my own. I know who to go to, to get the help I need'
- 'It was wonderful. There was no stupid music playing while I was put through to the learning adviser'
- 'It's given me some hope that maybe I can get a job. I know there is someone else out there who is willing to help'
- 'The people are really nice'
- 'Very organised'
- 'Very helpful. I'd recommend it to a friend'
- 'Helped me to clarify my thoughts and prioritise my actions'
- 'The follow up email contained useful websites'
- 'A knowledgeable adviser. He covered everything'

What callers think could improve:

- 'They tried to be helpful but I ended up going round in circles'
- 'The career coach had some gaps in knowledge; didn't know about the specialist area of teaching abroad'