

Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership (Northwest nextstep)

Inspection report

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Type of provider: nextstep contract

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Information about the provider

1. The prime contractor for nextstep Northwest is Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership (GMCP). GMCP works with 26 subcontractors to provide nextstep services in Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Lancashire and Greater Merseyside. GMCP provides approximately 40% of services directly and its main subcontractors, CXL Ltd, Connexions Cheshire and Warrington, and Connexions Cumbria provide 21%, 12% and 11% of the contract respectively. Subcontracting organisations vary in size, type and specialist area of expertise in addition to the provision of information and advice. They include organisations working with offenders and ex-offenders, people with mental health problems or disabilities, the long term unemployed and those at risk of redundancy. Services are offered at 484 venues across the region. These include subcontractors' main centres and outreach locations including Jobcentres. GMCP has also formed links with employee representative organisations such as trades unions in order to widen access to provision.
2. GMCP has a regional manager for nextstep services in the Northwest. He is supported by two operational managers, one for the north and one for the south of the contract area, and a team of eight support staff who have responsibility for quality, compliance, management information and administration. In addition to its nextstep contract, GMCP holds a range of other contracts. This inspection is of its nextstep provision only.
3. The GMCP contract covers a diverse geographic area including the rural and coastal expanse of Cumbria; agricultural and urban Lancashire; the city and surrounding conurbations of Liverpool and the relatively affluent areas of Cheshire and Warrington. The sub-regions vary in population profile and degree of economic prosperity; Merseyside includes some of the most deprived wards in the UK. Greater Merseyside is the most densely populated urban area with 1.5 million people living in its six districts. Unemployment rates in Greater Merseyside are higher than for England as a whole.

Type of provision	Number of customers in 2008/09
Universal services	22,510
Universal Plus services	1,342
Differentiated and personalised services (DPS)	13,256

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 3
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Capacity to improve	Grade 2
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	Grade
Outcomes for learners	3
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	3
Safeguarding	3
Equality and diversity	3

Overall effectiveness

4. The overall effectiveness of provision is satisfactory. GMCP has established an effective subcontractor network offering access to provision across a large and diverse geographic region. It has responded well to the need for development of provision during a period of changing economic circumstance and priorities for the service. The quality of nextstep sessions is good and GMCP makes particularly effective use of partnerships to support customers. Strategic leadership of provision is good. Managers have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in provision and take action to improve where necessary. They collect a wide range of data and use it well to plan the service but do not always make effective use of it in evaluating the quality of provision. Outcomes for customers are satisfactory and they make satisfactory progress. However, too many customers fail to attend their sessions. Many customers' action plans are poorly written. GMCP has insufficiently effective arrangements for monitoring and improving the quality of nextstep sessions.

Main findings

- Progress outcomes for customers on the differentiated and personalised and universal plus services are good. Progress outcomes for customers on the universal service are satisfactory; the proportion gaining jobs is satisfactory and improving.
- The quality of sessions is good. Most sessions are well structured to identify customers' needs, provide appropriate information or advice in response and

help customers overcome barriers to participation. In less effective sessions, time is not used productively and customers are not sufficiently involved in decision making.

- Partnership working is good. Advisers have very good knowledge of local provision, work collaboratively with existing partners and one another and take effective action to form new partnerships. They provide effective referrals for customers to help them access appropriate specialist support and advice from external organisations.
- Strategic leadership at GMCP is good. The board of directors and managers successfully set and communicate a clear vision for the nextstep service. They involve staff effectively in the successful introduction of service developments.
- Communications between GMCP and its subcontractors are good. GMCP supports subcontractors well. It takes effective action to share good practice but the impact of this process is not evident in all aspects of the nextstep service.
- GMCP's self-assessment report is good. Inspectors' findings and grades matched almost all those in the report. GMCP effectively monitors implementation of the associated development plan to assess progress in improving provision. However, it does not make sufficient use of the data it collects to identify areas for improvement.
- Customers' progress within and between sessions is satisfactory. Most customers make progress appropriately towards their short-term goals and develop increased confidence, motivation and self-esteem following their sessions. However, this information is not well recorded or used by GMCP to monitor provision.
- Safeguarding is satisfactory. GMCP has good arrangements for ensuring that only those with appropriate clearance have access to customers or their personal information. Most advisers have an adequate understanding of safeguarding matters. However, sessions in Jobcentres do not always allow confidential topics to be discussed privately and a small number of venues have not been formally risk assessed.
- GMCP's promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. It makes good use of data to plan provision and monitor the extent to which it enables participation. It takes suitable action to improve the performance of those groups in which there are disparities. Equality and diversity is included appropriately in advisers' induction.
- Attendance rates are poor. Advisers have low expectations of customers' attendance. A high proportion of customers referred from Jobcentre Plus do not attend their booked nextstep appointments.
- GMCP does not make effective use of direct observation to assure the quality of advice sessions. It has carried out too few observations. Observations are not effectively moderated. Observation records do not include adequate action planning for improvement.

- Most action plans for customers are poorly completed and are not helpful to customers. Too many action plans lack specific targets. Some contain too much unnecessary information on customers' backgrounds.

What does GMCP need to do to improve further?

- Take action to monitor and improve customers' attendance at advice sessions.
- Continue to improve the completion of customers' action plans so that they provide a clear guide for action and a record of customers' progress during and between sessions.
- Implement arrangements for monitoring and improving the quality of all nextstep interventions to ensure that they are well structured and involve customers effectively in making decisions and prioritising options.
- Make better use of data in order to identify areas for improvement in the service.
- Develop a system to ensure that potential risks to health and safety are systematically checked and recorded in all venues and that they offer sufficient privacy for confidential sessions.
- Ensure that all staff participate in training that updates them and gives them good understanding of equality, diversity and safeguarding.

Summary of the views of customers as confirmed by inspectors

What customers like:

- the good information and advice on education, training and work that they receive
- their welcoming, knowledgeable and supportive advisers
- the help in making choices about their futures
- the increased awareness of their existing skills and knowledge
- the confidence and motivation that sessions give them
- the information on voluntary work
- the information on jobsearch skills and techniques
- the facilities and help provided to enable them produce CVs and letters of application.

What customers would like to see improved:

- better information about nextstep services before the sessions, particularly from Jobcentre Plus advisers
- the timeliness of appointments or follow-up action by advisers
- the privacy of locations for sessions

- more time for discussion
- a less noisy environment for sessions.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the informative and professional service they receive, tailored to meet individual employers' and employees' needs
- provision of information and advice at short notice, during a period of redundancy
- the confidence that the service has given employees
- the provision of redundancy advice services to those who would otherwise be ineligible
- the opportunity to contribute to the development of the service.

What employers would like to see improved:

- advisers trying to do too much in the time available
- the quality of financial awareness sessions in the redundancy advice programme.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

5. GMCP'S capacity to make and sustain improvements is good. The quality of its provision and strategic leadership are good. Managers have successfully communicated a clear vision for future development of the nextstep service. Staff are involved effectively in implementing changes to improve the service. GMCP engages in productive partnerships to enhance nextstep provision. It has a suitable management structure, although it recognises that it has insufficient staff in some key functions.
6. GMCP's self-assessment process is good. It makes very effective use of feedback from subcontractors to arrive at clear, relevant, evaluative and accurate judgements about the quality of provision. The associated quality development plan is detailed and challenging. GMCP makes good use of the plan to drive forward improvements.
7. GMCP monitors subcontractors thoroughly and takes suitable action if it has concerns about their performance. It provides subcontractors with good support and development opportunities. Communications between GMCP and its subcontractors are good. It collects and analyses a suitable range of data. However, it does not always make effective use of the results of this analysis to plan improvement. GMCP's collection and use of customers' views is satisfactory. However, it carries out insufficient evaluation of the impact of action it takes in response to this feedback. Resources, including accommodation, information technology and access to reference material, are satisfactory. Quality assurance of advice sessions is not sufficiently effective.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

8. Progress outcomes for customers on the differentiated and personalised and universal plus services are high and their progression into training is good. Progress outcomes for customers on the universal service are satisfactory and the proportion gaining jobs is improving.
9. Most customers leave sessions with an increased awareness of their existing skills and the barriers impeding their progress. They are given good information on how to improve their chances of gaining employment or progressing in their careers. Many customers also receive satisfactory information on how to improve their literacy, numeracy and language skills. If appropriate, customers are given satisfactory encouragement to participate in volunteering activities. Customers make satisfactory progress during sessions. They are suitably motivated during sessions and their confidence and self-esteem grows. However, this information is poorly recorded on their action plans.

10. Advisers ensure that customers feel welcome and are safe. They routinely inform customers about health and safety matters, confidentiality and data protection.
11. Attendance at sessions is low and too few customers take advantage of opportunities for subsequent advice sessions. Advisers have low expectations of customers' attendance. Some sessions in Jobcentres are too short to be of benefit to customers, especially where appointments are over-booked and several customers arrive at the same time.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

12. The quality of nextstep sessions is good. Most are effectively structured and focused on removing customers' barriers to entering employment or training. Advisers make confident use of a good range of listening and questioning skills to establish good rapport with customers. They are successful in raising customers' expectations and self-belief. Advisers make efficient use of local labour market information to help customers. They give satisfactory support for developing curricula vitae (CVs) and researching alternative careers and give relevant, up-to-date and impartial information to customers. Weaker sessions are poorly planned and advisers use a limited range of skills. Customers are not sufficiently involved in decision-making processes. Barriers to future employment or learning are not always clearly identified.
13. Advisers are satisfactorily qualified and experienced. Increasing numbers of advisers specialise in, for example, debt counselling, housing advice and mental health issues, which they use to good effect to provide advice for customers.
14. The needs and interests of customers are well met. A good range of accessible premises is used for nextstep sessions. Coverage in urban and most rural locations is good and in some areas there is satisfactory access to sessions outside normal working hours. Waiting times for nextstep appointments are usually satisfactory. However, some Jobcentre Plus advisers are poorly informed about the function of nextstep and they do not give adequate information to the customers they refer to the nextstep service.
15. Partnership working is good. Most advisers are well informed about local training provision, specialist agencies and the sources of funding for which customers may be eligible. They are particularly effective in referring customers to the most appropriate provider or agency. Liaison with employers is responsive and the nextstep service is valued by employees who are under threat of redundancy.
16. In better sessions, action plans are skilfully completed and are used well to structure the discussion. All customers receive copies of their action plans at the end of their session. However, many action plans are poorly completed. They are not sufficiently concise and sometimes contain too much unnecessary information on customers' backgrounds. Targets are not sufficiently specific.

Advisers do not always make sufficient use of technology to complete customers' action plans.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

17. Strategic leadership of provision is good and is effective in supporting national and local priorities. GMCP's board of directors and managers have successfully set and communicated a clear vision for development of the nextstep service. Staff have a sound understanding of the contribution they make to the successful introduction of service developments. GMCP has planned its nextstep provision to include a suitable range of subcontractors and provide good geographical coverage. Subcontractors include an appropriate range of organisations providing specialist support for individual customers and groups.
18. Communications between GMCP and its subcontractors are good. GMCP provides valuable financial help to subcontractors to support the initial employment and training of nextstep advisers. Other resources, including accommodation and information technology, are satisfactory. GMCP makes effective use of meetings and training events to identify and share good practice. However, the impact of this is not evident in all aspects of the nextstep service.
19. Safeguarding is satisfactory. GMCP prioritises safeguarding and has introduced a range of measures to help protect vulnerable adults. It keeps a central register of CRB checks on all advisers and has good arrangements for ensuring that only those with appropriate clearance have access to customers or their personal information. GMCP includes subcontractors' safeguarding arrangements in the topics covered during quality reviews. Most advisers are trained in safeguarding by their employers and GMCP has arranged further training for advisers. However, GMCP does not hold details of which advisers have been trained, and when. It has not ensured that risk assessments are routinely carried out in all nextstep locations.
20. GMCP's promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. It makes good use of data to identify areas of greatest need and plan provision to meet those needs. Customers have good access to provision in a wide range of locations and from specialist providers where appropriate. GMCP promotes a culture of respect for individuals and customers are treated well and fairly by advisers. It monitors the performance of subcontractors carefully to ensure that they are meeting local and regional needs. GMCP and its subcontractors provide training in equality and diversity for advisers but GMCP does not routinely collect information on which of its advisers have participated. GMCP collects and analyses data on participation and progress outcomes for customers. There are no significant disparities in the performance of different ethnic groups but GMCP has identified that outcomes for low skilled women are low in comparison with outcomes as a whole. It has taken suitable action to tackle this imbalance and improve outcomes for this group by enlarging its network of subcontractors. The profile of staff working on nextstep programmes does not

yet reflect the population served by GMCP but it has taken suitable action to improve by setting up a specialist apprenticeship programme.

21. The strategy for collecting feedback from users to help improve the nextstep service is satisfactory. GMCP's response to customers' concerns is timely. However, it does not always evaluate the impact of the changes it has made in response to feedback.
22. GMCP's self-assessment process is good. Its report is admirably succinct and evaluative. Inspectors' findings matched almost all the report's judgements and grades. GMCP carefully monitors implementation of associated development plan to ensure it makes progress in improving quality.
23. GMCP has thorough processes for monitoring the performance of subcontractors against agreed targets. It takes appropriate action to correct subcontractors' underperformance and it provides good support and development to help them improve. However, it does not check its subcontractors' performance as frequently as its policy requires. Although GMCP collects and analyses a wide range of data on provision, it does not always use this to help determine action for improvement.
24. Arrangements for the quality assurance of advice sessions through direct observation are not sufficiently effective. GMCP has carried out too few observations of sessions. Observations do not focus sufficiently on customers' experience. The recorded outcomes of observations are not properly moderated and records do not include action plans to improve advisers' performance.
25. GMCP makes satisfactory use of its resources to provide value for money. The management and provision of resources across the nextstep network are satisfactory. Most advisers have access to, and make use of, a suitable range of resources to support customers. Most customers benefit from advice sessions that take place in an appropriate environment. However, sessions in many Jobcentres are not sufficiently private. GMCP has not yet taken effective action to improve attendance at sessions.

Information about the inspection

26. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's regional manager, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding bodies, and data on customers and their achievement.
27. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires customers and employers had recently completed on behalf of the provider. They also observed information and advice sessions, progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the nextstep programmes the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership (Northwest nextstep)

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Universal service	Universal Plus service	DPS
Approximate number of enrolled learners	37108	22510	1342	13256
Overall effectiveness	3	3	3	3
Capacity to improve	2			
Outcomes for learners	3	3	3	3
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3			
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3			
How well do learners progress?	3			
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	3			
How safe do learners feel?	3			
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	3			
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	3			
Quality of provision	2	2	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2			
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	3			
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2			
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	3			
Leadership and management	3	3	3	3
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2			
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	3			
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	3			
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3			
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3			
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3			
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	3			

*where applicable to the type of provision

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