

Suffolk County Council (East of England nextstep)

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 58867

Name of lead inspector: Nigel Bragg HMI

Last day of inspection: 16 April 2010

Type of provider: nextstep contract

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Information about the provider

1. Suffolk County Council's Enterprise Employment Advice and Guidance Division hold the Skills Funding Agency contract for the East of England nextstep service. The service covers the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridge, Essex, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. The council has other publicly funded contracts including those for work preparation programmes. This inspection is of the nextstep provision only.
2. A head of service is supported by a head of contract with responsibility for business management and partnerships and, two managers for contracts and quality respectively. In addition, the provider employs a business support services manager, two regional employment and skills managers and a resource officer. Three clerical assistants provide administrative support.
3. Six members of staff are directly employed to deliver 5% of the nextstep service. A small team of independent advisers is used to deliver the nextstep service across the region where specific need is identified. The remainder of the contract is delivered by 255 advisers from 44 subcontractors. The service operates in approximately 250 venues across the region. The main providers of the service are Suffolk Community Learning and Skills Development, Norfolk Guidance Services, Cambridge Community Learning Services, Essex Adult and Community Learning and Hertfordshire Careers Services Limited.
4. The East of England is an area of wide social and economic variation. The region consists of both urban and rural populations. A diverse ethnic minority population encompasses new migrants from the eastern European Union accession states as well as more established minority communities. Some areas, notably within Cambridgeshire, Luton and Hertfordshire have experienced significant local increases in unemployment. However, the current unemployment rate for the region is lower than the national average at 3.4%.

Type of provision	Number of customers in 2008/09
Universal services	25768
Universal Plus services	2213
Differentiated and personalised services (DPS)	11681

Summary report

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

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

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness of the provision is satisfactory. Progress and outcomes for users of all nextstep services are satisfactory but show a declining trend. Overall, the development of customers' self-confidence, motivation and self-esteem is good. Customers feel safe. Waiting times for appointments are generally satisfactory although in some areas they are too long and attendance rates are low. Advice sessions and action planning is satisfactory. Partnership working is satisfactory overall and very effective in Luton, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Essex. However, in some districts opportunities for advisers to liaise and refer customers to external agencies are restricted. The provider has too few links with employers. Advisers do not always effectively promote Skills for Life provision. The provider has successfully responded to the changing needs of the service through a recent restructuring of its management team. Managers provide clear direction for the provision of nextstep services. The contractor consults effectively with partners and subcontractors in planning provision and carefully monitors progress in achieving identified goals. Whilst the provider carries out thorough contract monitoring of subcontractors, and has sound quality assurance of nextstep activities, it does not implement sufficient action planning to secure improvement. The self-assessment process is satisfactory. The promotion of equality and diversity and safeguarding is satisfactory. However, the contractor does not fully analyse and evaluate outcomes by specific minority groups. The contractor has not yet ensured that all advisers participate in appropriate equality, diversity and safeguarding training.

Main findings

- Progress and outcomes for users of all nextstep services are satisfactory but show a declining trend. The proportion of customers starting or completing a learning programme since their advice session is good.
- Customers' development of self-confidence, motivation and self-esteem is generally good. They become much clearer about their employment options and opportunities and receive relevant information on which to base occupational decisions.
- Customers successfully overcome personal and practical barriers to employment and in many cases make good progress towards improving their economic and social well-being.
- Attendance rates of nextstep customers in Essex are good but vary significantly across the region and are often low. Referral agencies do not consistently give customers sufficient information as to the function and benefit of attending a nextstep advice session. Customers feel safe.
- Advice sessions and skills action planning are satisfactory. However, many plans do not include timescales for identified actions or contain sufficient prioritisation and detail. Advisers have too few opportunities to observe outstanding practitioners.
- During nextstep advice sessions, advisers do not always sufficiently address customers' literacy and numeracy needs or inform them about the occasions when confidentiality cannot be maintained.
- The service has responded effectively where employers have implemented redundancy proceedings. However, the contractor does not have enough additional employer links.
- Communication with the network of subcontractors is good. The contractor provides clear direction for the planning of provision and to build capacity in the network.
- The contractor has good quality assurance processes. However, the provider has yet to coordinate fully these activities and make sufficient use of the information they provide to prepare action plans for improvement.
- Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. Advisers' understanding of safeguarding is satisfactory but not all of them have attended recent updating training.
- Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. Robust arrangements ensure that all staff with access to customers have been through appropriate vetting checks. An externally accredited safeguarding course is mandatory for all advisers and is particularly well monitored to ensure all staff pass the modules. Venues are subject to satisfactory risk assessments.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Not all advisers have participated in recent and relevant training. The contractor does not fully analyse and evaluate detailed equality data for comparative purposes.

What does East of England nextstep need to do to improve further?

- Ensure all advisers participate in training that gives them a good understanding of equality, diversity and safeguarding.
- Improve the coordination of quality assurance activities and action planning to improve the quality of provision and customers' experience.
- Improve the skills action-planning process so that customers are clearer about the specific actions required, their priorities and the timescales within which to complete them.
- Ensure all nextstep advisers are able to improve their skills through the observation of outstanding practitioners so that all customers experience high-quality interventions and derive maximum benefit from them.
- Improve the promotion of Skills for Life provision to ensure all customers have opportunities to improve their competencies and acquire qualifications.
- Make better use of equality data analysis and evaluation to inform decision making for improvement.
- Improve employer engagement to provide services to meet the needs of people in employment who are considering career changes or progression opportunities in their workplaces.
- Monitor and improve attendance at sessions to maximise advisers' time and resources and to reduce waiting times.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What customers like:

- the informative and encouraging advisers
- the good range of information including local jobs and voluntary information
- the help in making career plans to fulfill long-term aspirations
- the opportunity to develop confidence when applying for employment
- the friendly and welcoming atmosphere at venues
- the availability of a skills action plan that they can take away
- the constructive feedback from advisers about the quality of their curriculum vitae
- the advice given on the disclosure of spent custodial sentences.

What customers would like to see improved:

- the information about the nextstep service given by some referral agencies
- quieter interview venues in some Jobcentre Plus offices
- shorter waiting times to see the adviser
- better advertising of the nextstep service

- more availability of evening sessions.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

5. Communications between the contractor and its subcontractors are good and partnership working is improving. The contractor has taken successful action to improve provision, for example, by restructuring its management team. It responds well to feedback from subcontractors and customers when they identify areas for improvement and it has effectively built up its network of advisers. Managers provide clear direction for the provision of the nextstep services. The contractors strategic plans are effectively monitored. However, planned objectives do not sufficiently focus on outcomes for customers. The quality of its nextstep service is satisfactory. Progress outcomes are satisfactory but show a declining trend.
6. The most recent draft self-assessment report is broadly accurate, with grades awarded at the inspection matching those given by the provider. Quality assurance systems are strong and used well to identify strengths and areas for development. However, the contractor does not follow-up its quality assurance activities with sufficient action planning to secure improvement.
7. The provider has established provision in a wide range of venues and locations to meet customer need. However, in parts of Norfolk provision overly favours urban venues. Out of office and weekend provision is sparse. Effective attendance monitoring has yet to be implemented. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory, as are the safeguarding arrangements introduced across the region. However, not all advisers have benefited from recent updating training in equality and diversity and, safeguarding.

Outcomes for customers

Grade 3

8. Progress outcomes for users of all nextstep services are satisfactory but show a declining trend. The proportion of customers starting or completing a learning programme since their advice session is good.
9. Overall, the development of customers' self-confidence, motivation and self-esteem is good. They become much clearer about employment options and receive relevant information on which to base occupational decisions. When appropriate, customers receive good information about education and training courses that helps them make realistic decisions about their futures.
10. Customers successfully overcome personal and practical barriers to employment. In many cases they make good progress towards improving their economic and social well-being. Where customers do not make sufficient progress in or between sessions, it is usually because their needs are not sufficiently identified and prioritised at the outset. In many cases customers receive good advice during their nextstep session that helps them develop an effective awareness of the beneficial role voluntary work can play as a possible route into paid employment.

11. Customers feel safe in the locations where they attend for their nextstep intervention. Waiting times for appointments are generally satisfactory although in some areas they are too long. Customers' punctuality is satisfactory. However, attendance rates across the region vary significantly and are often low.

The quality of provision

Grade 3

12. Overall, advice sessions are satisfactory. In the better sessions, advisers are skilled at using a wide range of helping skills. They are particularly good at interacting with customers and involving them fully throughout the session. Advisers are very knowledgeable about career opportunities and use labour market information effectively to support customers' identification of potential career options. Customers are provided with accurate, up-to-date, impartial and easy to understand information. In the weaker sessions there is too little customer involvement in decision-making, targets are not sufficiently explored or prioritised, and actions for improvement are incomplete. Time constraints in some sessions restrict the extent to which customers' barriers to employment can be effectively explored. Although advisers explain that interventions are confidential, they do not always inform customers about the occasions when confidentiality cannot be maintained. Referral agencies do not always give customers sufficient information to ensure they know why they are attending a nextstep advice session. Advisers have too few opportunities to learn from outstanding practitioners. Advisers do not always effectively identify a customer's literacy and numeracy needs or highlight the benefits of improving their competencies as a contribution to removing barriers to success.
13. Action planning is satisfactory. Skills action plans are text processed and satisfactorily record customers' skills, experiences and the actions they need to take to improve their employability. Plans usually contain a good range of references for customers to follow-up. However, in a few cases plans do not include timescales for completion of actions or sufficient detail. Gains in employability skills and distance travelled, especially following multiple interventions, are not always recorded in adequate detail.
14. The nextstep provision satisfactorily meets the needs and interests of customers. Resources are satisfactory. In many centres there is a good range of careers and work-related documentation. Advisers have access to good computing facilities with internet connections. Many advisers do not have well-developed text inputting skills and give insufficient attention to health and safe working practices when using computers.
15. Partnership working is satisfactory with the exception of Luton, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Essex where it is very effective. Customers are appropriately referred to specialist external agencies where they are satisfactorily helped to overcome barriers to employment, education and training. Arrangements for customers with additional needs are good. However, in some parts of the region there are too few opportunities for advisers to liaise and refer customers

to external agencies. The service has responded effectively to redundancy when this has occurred. However, the nextstep service is insufficiently promoted to employers to benefit employees considering career changes or progression opportunities.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

16. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Managers provide a clear direction for the provision of nextstep services. They consult effectively with partners and subcontractors to prepare clear strategic plans linked to national and regional priorities for the service. Managers monitor the implementation of these plans carefully and provide regular progress reports to senior staff. The contractor has taken successful action to restructure the management team to improve performance and implement integrated employment and skills trials. However, planned objectives pay insufficient attention to outcomes for customers.
17. Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. The contractor has placed appropriate priority on developing and implementing procedures to protect all nextstep customers. The provider has made good use of consultations with appropriate agencies to support these improvements. An adequate central record of nextstep staff Criminal Records Bureau checks is held, regularly monitored and updated. Across the nextstep service the contractor satisfactorily monitors the safeguarding of vulnerable adults and responds appropriately to concerns raised. Advisers' understanding of safeguarding is satisfactory. The contractor has provided some staff training in safeguarding. However, not all advisers have attended updating training. Recording of all relevant training and development carried out by advisers is incomplete. Whilst nextstep advice sessions take place in safe and welcoming venues, the contractor does not comprehensively monitor records of accidents, incidents and 'near misses'.
18. The promotion of equality of opportunity is satisfactory. The contractor has made effective use of local and regional information to implement a network of subcontractors that includes adequate provision for under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Interventions take place in a wide range of venues that have suitable transport links and access for customers with impaired mobility. Incidents or complaints are effectively monitored and responded to by the contractor. During nextstep interviews advisers promote customers understanding of their rights and responsibilities, confidentiality and data protection. However, not all advisers have participated in recent and relevant equality and diversity training. The nextstep provision adequately targets hard to reach groups and effectively ensures the removal of barriers to participation by customers from the wider community. Provision in most of the region is appropriately located. However, in parts of Norfolk the service is heavily concentrated in the larger urban centres. Across the region the service is not generally available outside of office hours or at the weekend. The contractor collects an appropriate range of progression data for comparative purposes but

does not fully analyse and evaluate outcomes by specific minority groups to inform an action plan for improvement.

19. The contractor collects and analyses feedback from customers and takes prompt and effective action on the rare occasions a concern is identified. Quality assurance procedures are thorough and provide detailed and informative reports on the quality of provision. To assess the quality of advice session the provider observes interventions using a well-designed process. Observers generally make accurate judgements on the quality of sessions which are moderated. However, the observation records are not always sufficiently evaluative or justify the grade awarded. Advisers are not given sufficiently timely or detailed feedback on their performance or an action plan for improvement where necessary. Similarly, the contractor monitors the quality of action plans carefully and analyses them to provide detailed reports, but does not give advisers sufficient feedback on their performance. Contract monitoring of subcontractors by the provider are thorough and have been effective in driving-up performance. Although the contractor provides effective support where a subcontractor's is under-performing, an adequate action plan for improvement is not set.
20. The self-assessment process is satisfactory. In preparing the report, the contractor consulted relevant stakeholders, as well as making effective use of the information from its quality assurance activities to produce a broadly accurate assessment of the provisions quality. However, the report contained insufficient information to justify all its judgements.
21. The contractor makes effective and efficient use of its resources to provide satisfactory value for money. However, with the exception of Essex where attendance is good, too many customers do not attend their nextstep appointments.

Information about the inspection

22. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's contract 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) and data on customers and their achievement.
23. 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. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the nextstep services the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

East of England nextstep.				
nextstep				
Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Universal service	Universal Plus service	DPS
Approximate number of customers	99300	67401	2162	29737
Overall effectiveness	3	3	3	3
Capacity to improve	3			
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			
Do learners feel safe?	3			
Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	n/a			
How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	3			
Quality of provision	3	3	3	3
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	3			
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?	3			
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?	3			
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	n/a			
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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