

Prospects Services Ltd (London Next Step)

Focused monitoring visit report

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Prospects Services Ltd (Prospects) holds the contract for Next Step services in London. The region includes 33 London boroughs and six Jobcentre Plus districts. Prospects has 32 advisers who provide 15% of the contract. Approximately 400 advisers, working for 52 subcontractors and one subcontracting consortium provide the remainder of the contract. Prospects employs a team of managers based at its main headquarters in Bromley. This team has overall responsibility for the management of provision across the region and for its quality improvement. Prospects makes the Next Step service available in 105 main venues and about 450 outreach locations including Jobcentre Plus premises. London is an area of wide economic and social variation and with considerable diversity in the make up of its population.

At the previous inspection in February 2010, the overall effectiveness of provision was satisfactory, as were capacity to improve, outcomes for customers, the quality of provision and leadership and management. This report focuses on themes explored during this visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has Prospects made in developing and implementing its self-assessment processes to make greater use of feedback from stakeholders in evaluating provision and securing improvement? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous inspection quality assurance was satisfactory. The self-assessment report was evaluative and the associated quality improvement plan was thorough. However, Prospects made insufficient use of stakeholders' feedback in self-assessment and did not routinely evaluate the impact of quality improvement measures. Prospects now works more effectively with subcontractors to improve the quality of services to customers. It provides good support and training in self-assessment for managers and subcontractors. Quality improvement managers take careful account of subcontractors' feedback and have reviewed and simplified self-assessment documents and training materials. The self-assessment process is increasingly inclusive; the number of subcontractors and staff who are involved fully in the process has grown each year. Network meetings and workshops provide good opportunities for subcontractors to share self-assessment and quality improvement plans and communications are much improved. These improvements facilitate the exchange of good practice and innovation. Prospects' quality improvement plan is succinct and clearly addresses areas for improvement identified at self-assessment. Its implementation is monitored carefully. Prospects recognises that a few subcontractors are insufficiently self-critical in their judgements or improvement plans and over generous in their grades. However, it has appropriate plans to provide feedback on these reports and to improve self-assessment further.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has Prospects made in taking action to follow up customers and gather information on progression outcomes? What use does it make of this information to monitor performance and set targets? **Reasonable progress**

Outcomes for customers were satisfactory and improving at the previous inspection. However, the proportion of customers moving into employment was low and Prospects did not always make sufficient use of data on outcomes to set targets. Since then Prospects has been successful in following up a high proportion of customers to determine their progression outcomes, although not all subcontractors are equally assiduous in collecting this data. The number of customers progressing into learning is now high, although the proportion entering employment remains low. Prospects has taken action to improve advisers' emphasis on employment as an outcome for customers and to improve subcontractors' follow-up arrangements, but it is too soon to see the impact of this action.

Prospects analyses data on participation and uses this information effectively to monitor provision and set targets for improvement or to adapt provision to meet customers' needs more effectively. For example, having identified that a comparatively low proportion of customers had declared a disability, Prospects has trained advisers to discuss this topic more confidently with customers. In order to ensure that it was successful in reaching ex-offenders and offenders in the community, Prospects now subcontracts to organisations that specialise in working with this group of potential customers.

Quality of provision

How much progress has Prospects made in implementing an observation programme to monitor and improve advisers' practice? **Reasonable progress**

The quality of sessions was satisfactory at the previous inspection but Prospects' development and implementation of an observation system for quality assuring and improving interventions were incomplete. Following careful consultation with its subcontractors and advisers, Prospects has made significant improvements to its guidance and procedures for observing advice sessions and group work and has been successful in establishing these procedures across provision. Observation records are generally very detailed and rich in judgements on the quality of advisers' practice. Prospects analyses information from subcontractors' own observations of advice sessions and takes suitable action for improvement if necessary. Its observation system has been helpful in guiding Prospects' training programme and improving individual advisers' practice. However, observers do not always provide sufficient detail in the summary section of observation reports to support advisers' further development. Although observers provide good feedback on the quality of skills action plans, their reports pay insufficient attention to the quality of the planning processes used by advisers. Although its observation programme is now well established, it is too soon to see the full impact of Prospects' action to improve the quality of sessions.

How much progress has Prospects made in ensuring that all action plans are sufficiently specific and detailed, and that all customers receive a copy at the end of their advice session? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous inspection, customers' action plans provided insufficient detail on the advice and information advisers had provided for customers and the actions agreed with customers were insufficiently specific. Advisers did not always give customers a copy of the action plan to take away with them. Since then, Prospects has provided very effective training and clear guidance to advisers to help them improve. Advisers' understanding of what should be included in customers' action plans is good. The quality of action plans seen during this visit, following action for improvement by Prospects, was good. These plans provided a detailed and fluent account of customers' needs and circumstances, their goals and how these might be achieved. Actions for customers were clear, specific and included good guidance on how the target was to be achieved. The advisers observed during this visit involved customers effectively in agreeing proposed actions. However, not all advisers are yet skilled and comfortable with building completion of the action plan seamlessly into advice sessions. Although it monitors action plans and action planning carefully and takes action to improve when necessary, Prospects has not gathered sufficient data to judge the full effectiveness of its efforts to improve action planning.

How much progress has Prospects made in improving privacy for customers' sessions? **Significant progress**

At the previous inspection a small proportion of sessions paid insufficient attention to customers' privacy. Most venues made private interview rooms available, but others did not. Advisers did not always check if customers were content with the level of privacy offered by the interview arrangements. Prospects has been particularly successful in raising the level of awareness of the need for privacy among their advisers and subcontractors, with a clear focus on assessing and meeting the privacy needs of customers. The quality assurance of sessions is now effective in evaluating privacy arrangements for customers. Its network of regional liaison managers has helped Prospects and subcontractor staff to work more closely with Jobcentre staff to ensure that the most suitable accommodation is available for advice sessions. No concerns about privacy have been raised by customers in their feedback either to Prospects or through other surveys, including those carried out by inspectors. Prospects and subcontractors acknowledge the limitations of a few locations for sessions, particularly in busy Jobcentres, and work hard to ensure that advisers are effective in meeting customers' need for privacy.

Leadership and management

How much progress has Prospects made in ensuring that advisers have a suitable range of skills and knowledge, in particular in relation to safeguarding and Skills for Life? **Significant progress**

Although training was good at Prospects' previous inspection, not all advisers had attended recent safeguarding training. Advisers did not always promote Skills for Life to customers who might need them and not all advisers were working towards a

suitable qualification in information, advice and guidance. Prospects now takes very effective action to ensure all advisers participate in training and have a suitable range of skills and knowledge to help customers. It gives advisers very good support to develop their skills and enable them to achieve National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in information, advice and guidance. Two adviser cohorts are now working towards higher level qualifications. Prospects carries out suitable checks on training provided by subcontractors and uses observations well to monitor advisers' knowledge and use of skills learned. It has increased its use of online methods for training advisers and is using this well to keep advisers up to date. Advisers are now more confident about reporting safeguarding concerns or broaching discussions on Skills for Life with customers. Prospects is quick to provide training when a specific need is identified, for example in working with customers with a disability, in preparation for a national exhibition or on the use of labour market information.

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