

# Prospects Services Ltd

## Inspection report

Unique reference number: 58867

Name of lead inspector: Nigel Bragg HMI

Last day of inspection: 5 February 2010

Type of provider: nextstep contractor

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## Information about the provider

1. Prospects Services Ltd (Prospects) is a national company delivering a range of careers, employment and training activities. It currently holds the London Learning and Skills Council (LSC) contract for nextstep services. This region covers 33 London boroughs and six Jobcentre Plus districts. Prospects also holds the contract for the Connexions service in 21 local authority areas and contributes to the delivery of the nextstep provision in the West Midland and Yorkshire and Humber regions. The proportion of Prospects' overall business supported by government funding is 95%. This inspection is of the London nextstep provision only.
2. Prospects' main headquarters is in Bromley, south London. Three district managers and two development managers support the nextstep regional manager. In addition, three managers have responsibility for improvement, training and contracts, and compliance. A quality coordinator and a management information coordinator each report to relevant functional managers. Prospects also employ a management information administrator and a subcontractor coordinator. Five members of staff, with responsibility for the telephone access point, provide administration.
3. Prospects have 41 advisers who deliver 30% of the nextstep contract. Approximately 300 advisers, working for 51 subcontractors, including three consortia, deliver the remainder of the contract. The nextstep service is available from 105 main venues and a variety of outreach locations including Jobcentre Plus premises.
4. London is an area of wide economic and social variation, with pockets of deprivation, even in boroughs which are generally prosperous. The unemployment rate of 7.5% for the London region is slightly lower than the national rate. As a region, London shares the highest rate of economic inactivity with Wales at 24.2%. The proportion of people from minority ethnic communities living in London is 32.5%, with 18% of the adult population having a first language other than English.

Type of provision	Number of customers in 2008/09
Universal services	67,401
Universal Plus services	2,162
Differentiated and personalised services (DPS)	29,737

## 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 3
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	Grade
Outcomes for learners	3
Quality of provision	3
Leadership and management	3
Safeguarding	3
Equality and diversity	3

## Overall effectiveness

- Customers make satisfactory progress in developing skills and confidence. The quality of nextstep advice sessions is satisfactory. Customers receive good quality information and gain an increased understanding of their future options. However, in a minority of sessions customers are insufficiently involved. Action plans are satisfactory. Prospects uses partnerships well to ensure that provision is available in a wide range of locations and venues. The use of resources, including information and communication technology, is satisfactory. Customers receive good personal support from advisers. However, advisers do not always effectively identify customers' literacy and language support needs. Strategic and operational management of change are good. Partnerships and communications with stakeholders, including subcontractors, are very good. Safeguarding arrangements and procedures to support equality and diversity are satisfactory. Prospects offers a good range of training for advisers. However, some recently recruited advisers have not yet started studying for an appropriate vocational award. Prospects manages its subcontractors satisfactorily, but managers do not set differentiated targets for customers' progression outcomes. Quality assurance is satisfactory.

## Main findings

- Progress outcomes for users of all nextstep services are satisfactory and show an improving trend. The proportion of customers starting a learning programme has significantly improved recently. However, the progress outcome rate for gaining employment overall has been consistently low.

- Customers make good progress in developing confidence and self-esteem. They satisfactorily develop an understanding of what they need to do to make progress in training and employment, and the skills to do it. Safety and security are given an appropriately high importance by both Prospects and its subcontractors.
- Advice sessions are mostly satisfactory. Advisers generally have good communication skills which they use effectively to identify customers' goals. The better sessions have a clear structure, with effective use of information technology (IT) and provision of good quality information. However, some sessions are too adviser led, with insufficient customer involvement.
- Action planning is satisfactory, though some plans have insufficiently detailed and challenging actions. A few customers do not receive the plan at their interview. Some advisers do not effectively identify customers' literacy and language needs or make appropriate referrals, where relevant.
- Prospects uses partnerships very effectively to meet customers' needs. Customers can easily access a wide variety of locations. Most advisers use their good knowledge of training and support organisations well when signposting customers to options that offer a speedy response to training needs. However, some customers are not made aware of the full range of choices available.
- Strategic and operational management of change are good. The strategic management team is well informed and it provides useful challenge and support for operational managers. Prospects has managed the expansion of provision well.
- Partnerships with stakeholders and subcontractors are very good. The network of subcontractors benefits from good communications and good support to develop the service. However, Prospects has too few links with employers.
- Prospects offers a good range of training for all advisers. However, some of the new advisers, recruited several months ago to deliver the expanded service, have not yet begun to work towards an award. Not all advisers have attended recent safeguarding training.
- Prospects manages subcontractors satisfactorily. However, managers do not set subcontractors differentiated targets for customer progression outcomes which take into account customers' performance or their needs.
- Quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory and secure improvement. However, Prospects has not yet fully implemented its systems to quality assure advice sessions through observation. The impact of implemented policies is not routinely evaluated.
- Prospects' self-assessment process is satisfactory. The self-assessment report is self-critical and the associated quality improvement plan is thorough. However, Prospects makes insufficient use of stakeholders' feedback to inform the self-assessment process.
- Prospects makes effective and efficient use of its available resources to provide satisfactory value for money. Venues and locations for advice sessions are

appropriate and a suitable range of resources is used. However, some locations do not have sufficient privacy for advice sessions.

### What does Prospects Services Ltd need to do to improve

- Improve the quality of advice sessions by ensuring customers are better involved, that customers receive the full range of available options to them, and sessions are conducted in a private environment.
- Improve the quality of action planning by making sure all plans have specific and time-bound actions, and that all customers receive a copy.
- Ensure all advisers participate in training that gives them a good understanding of safeguarding.
- Ensure all staff receive appropriate development to enable them to better address customers' literacy and language needs.
- Fully implement the assessment of advice sessions through observation, and evaluate the outcomes from implemented policies, to help drive forward quality improvement.
- Further develop the skills of new advisers through their participation in relevant vocational training.
- Set and monitor customers' outcome targets for each subcontractor to support customers' achievement of challenging and realistic goals.
- Further develop the self-assessment process, including greater use of stakeholders' feedback to secure quality improvement.

### Summary of the views of customers as confirmed by inspectors

#### What customers like:

- the friendly, welcoming and helpful advisers
- the opportunity to telephone advisers to discuss issues of concern
- the useful action plan information
- the range of information on training and education courses given at advice sessions
- the improvement in personal confidence and self-esteem
- the opportunity to have more than one advice session
- the timely referral to education and training courses.

#### What customers would like to see improved:

- better use of the skills diagnostic tool
- longer individual sessions
- quieter venues offering better privacy for some advice sessions.

## Main inspection report

### Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

6. Current managerial arrangements provide sufficient capacity to make and sustain improvements. Prospects has demonstrated a good ability to manage change and develop the service. Partnerships and communication with stakeholders and subcontractors are good. The provider has established provision in a wide range of venues and locations to meet customers' need. Prospects is involved in a number of initiatives to support local and national priorities. Training for advisers is good and includes the opportunity to work towards relevant vocational qualifications. However, many new advisers have yet to begin studying towards a relevant award. The provider has satisfactorily implemented safeguarding arrangements across the network.
7. Prospects' self-assessment process is satisfactory but does not take sufficient account of stakeholders' feedback, nor does it include sufficient focus on the quality of advice sessions. The self-assessment report is generally evaluative and includes a satisfactory range of relevant self-critical judgements. The quality improvement plan adequately addresses the weaknesses identified through self-assessment. Prospects has an appropriate staffing structure with a suitable emphasis on quality improvement and staff development. Prospects uses a satisfactory range and quantity of resources to deliver the nextstep service.
8. Arrangements for management of subcontractors are satisfactory. Quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory and secure improvement. However, Prospects has not yet fully implemented its systems to quality assure advice sessions through observation. Prospects gathers the views of customers, but managers do not sufficiently analyse or use feedback to improve the provision. Prospects has not effectively evaluated the impact of implemented policies.

### Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

9. Users of all nextstep services make satisfactory progress and customers' progress outcomes show an improving trend. The proportion of customers starting a learning programme has significantly improved recently. However, the progress outcome rate for customers gaining employment overall has been consistently low.
10. Customers make satisfactory progress in understanding what they need to do to make progress in training or employment and in gaining the skills to do it. Customers are encouraged to identify and develop an improved understanding of current realistic employment prospects. They also develop a better awareness of the skills and knowledge they already possess and how to use these skills in a range of employment options.

11. Customers' self-confidence and self-esteem are improved well through the support and guidance provided by advisers. Many customers are more motivated to obtain qualifications and to increase their efforts to gain employment or training. Advisers sometimes discuss volunteering opportunities and work trials to help customers gain useful experience and develop work-related skills.
12. Customers feel safe within their nextstep venues. Advice session venues are usually welcoming and comfortable. Prospects gives safety and security at nextstep venues a high priority. Advisers generally emphasise the confidential nature of sessions.

### The quality of provision

Grade 3

13. The quality of nextstep advice sessions is satisfactory overall. Most advisers demonstrate a good range of communication skills, particularly listening and questioning. They use these skills effectively to identify customers' goals and any barriers to training and employment. The better advice sessions have a clear structure, with effective recording of session outcomes. Customers receive good quality information and take ownership of agreed actions. However, some sessions do not make best use of time and are too adviser led, with insufficient involvement of customers in decision making.
14. Action planning is satisfactory. In some interviews advisers carry out action planning particularly well. In these sessions customers are closely involved in developing a useful plan and agreeing actions that are specific and time-bound. The plans provide an accurate record of discussion topics and give customers useful contact information about organisations that are able to help them further. However, some plans are ineffective in helping customers progress. These contain insufficiently detailed and challenging actions, and they do not effectively record all the advice and information that has informed the discussion. A few customers do not receive the plan at their interview.
15. Provision satisfactorily meets the needs and interests of customers. The majority of venues have access to computers and the internet, which advisers use effectively in most instances. Customers receive useful information on a wide range of job profiles to help them identify suitable employment options. Advisers sometimes use activities for skills diagnoses to help inform customers' decisions on possible employment opportunities. Information for the development of curriculum vitae and other jobsearch skills is widely available and used effectively to support customers. However, some of the handouts do not sufficiently meet the needs of customers with literacy skills needs.
16. Prospects use partnerships well to meet customers' needs. The nextstep service is available in a wide variety of locations easily accessible to customers, including libraries, community groups and specialist subcontractors. Most advisers have a good knowledge of local training, education and support organisations that they use effectively to signpost customers to available

options. In a few instances, advisers do not inform customers of the full range of choices available to them.

17. Prospects provides satisfactory care and support for customers. Advisers engage well with customers and provide effective personal support through productive and mutually respectful relationships. Many advisers are multi-lingual and they are able to meet the wide variety of customers' communication needs. A few venues offer the opportunity of advice sessions outside normal working hours. However, advisers do not always sufficiently explore customers' literacy and language needs. Some customers do not receive appropriate referrals to providers which may be able to help them improve these skills. Most venues have private interview rooms available, but others do not. Advisers do not always check if customers are content with the level of privacy offered by the interview arrangements.

## Leadership and management

Grade 3

18. Leadership and management meet the needs of the organisation and its subcontractors. Prospects' strategic and operational management of change is good. The strategic management team is well informed and it provides useful challenge and support for operational managers. Prospects has managed change well in relation to the expansion of provision. Following an internal review of the organisation, managers successfully restructured the service in August 2009. Performance was improved and better aligned to operations with Jobcentre Plus districts in response to the introduction of the integrated employment service. Prospects has implemented a capacity-building project to support the employment of new advisers throughout the network that meets the needs of the expanded service.
19. As part of its safeguarding arrangements, Prospects has given appropriate priority to the development and implementation of a safeguarding policy and procedures to protect nextstep customers. Prospects has effectively used consultation with relevant agencies to inform these improvements. The contractor holds a suitable central record of Criminal Records Bureau checks made on nextstep staff. Record updating procedures are satisfactory. Monitoring of safeguarding of vulnerable adults is satisfactory across the service. Where advisers have raised concerns, Prospects' senior management has effectively dealt with them. Prospects has used a training needs analysis to identify development needs. However, not all advisers have attended recent updating training. Advisers have a satisfactory understanding of safeguarding arrangements. The provider ensures advice sessions take place in safe and secure venues. Risk assessment arrangements are satisfactory.
20. Prospects promotes equality and diversity adequately across its services. Prospects uses an appropriate range of data to plan the nextstep service to meet identified need. The provider has chosen its subcontractors and venue locations well to lessen barriers to participation, especially for hard-to-reach

customers, by providing easy access. Prospects uses an adequate range of data and targets to monitor participation and progress outcomes for different customer groups. Prospects appropriately identifies differences in performance and implements relevant improvement changes. However, the contractor does not fully use routine data analysis by subcontractor for comparative purposes. The profile of the advisers in many areas reflects well that of the community served. Prospects provides nextstep customers with good access to advice sessions in a wide range of languages other than English. Advisers adequately promote equality and diversity during advice sessions and ensure that customers have an appropriate appreciation of their rights and responsibilities. Advisers have participated in relevant equality and diversity training. However, Prospects does not maintain clear and detailed records of who has been trained and when.

21. Partnerships with stakeholders and subcontractors are very good. The network of subcontractors benefits from good communications achieved through regular meetings, emails and information posted on the website. Prospects provides good support to subcontractors. The provider has ensured that an appropriate selection of subcontractors gives good geographic coverage and provides a suitable range of specialist services, such as those for customers with mental health problems. However, Prospects has too few links with employers.
22. Prospects offers a good range of training for all advisers, including a thorough induction for new advisers and a comprehensive on-going training programme. This includes the opportunity to work towards an appropriate vocational qualification and a pilot project in the use of cognitive behavioural therapy within advice sessions. Several months ago, the provider recruited a significant number of new advisers to deliver the expanded service. However, these members of staff have not yet begun to work towards an award.
23. Prospects manages subcontractors satisfactorily through a process of monthly performance reviews, quarterly review meetings and annual on-site monitoring visits. However, it does not set subcontractors differentiated targets for customers' progression outcomes which take into account their performance or customers' individual needs and circumstances.
24. Quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory and include regular evaluation of action plans and observations of advice sessions. Moderation meetings attended by Prospects and subcontractors' staff are effective in improving the consistency of judgements on the quality of action plans and advice sessions. However, Prospects has not yet fully implemented its systems to quality assure advice sessions through observation. Prospects does not routinely evaluate the impact of implemented policies as a quality improvement tool.
25. Prospects' self-assessment process is satisfactory. The self-assessment report is self-critical and accurate and the associated quality improvement plan is thorough. However, Prospects makes insufficient use of stakeholders' feedback to inform the self-assessment process. Improvements to feedback

arrangements through an online questionnaire and focus group meetings are underway for the next self-assessment cycle. Prospects obtains and analyses feedback from customers, although it does not use it sufficiently to improve the service.

26. Prospects makes effective and efficient use of its available resources to provide satisfactory value for money. Appropriate venues and locations and a suitable range of resources are used. However, in some locations there is insufficient privacy for customers during advice sessions.

## Information about the inspection

27. 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 LSC and data on learners and their achievement.
28. 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, and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the nextstep services the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Prospect Services Ltd, 5 February 2010.				
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		67,401	2,162	29,737
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? How well do learners progress?	3 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?*	n/a			
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?	2			
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	3			
Leadership and management	3			
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2			
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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