

Responding to the economic downturn: how advice practitioners are helping to meet the needs of unemployed adults

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Developing a well qualified and better skilled workforce, capable of making and implementing realistic and achievable plans for progression and development, is dependant on individuals being able to draw upon the help and support of relevant services at the time that is right for them.

The *nextstep* service, as delivered in Suffolk under the auspices of Suffolk County Council (SCC) as contract-holder, was the subject of one of the case studies described in Hawthorn and Alloway's *Smoothing the Path* (2009), and the full case study ('Careers guidance for disadvantaged adults case study: Suffolk County Council, Community Learning and Skills Development IAG service') is available with the others online at <http://www.skillsdevelopment.org/pdf/Suffolk%20County%20Council%20Community%20and%20Learning%20and%20Skills%20Development.pdf>.

At the time of the fieldwork, the 2008 two-year contract for *nextstep* provision had only just started. SCC had been given the overall contract for not just its own county but the other five eastern counties (Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire and Norfolk) as well. The case study looks in particular at the Suffolk arrangements for partnership working and outreach, especially co-location with other services and efforts to reach service users in rural areas, all practice which could be of interest to other providers whether or not they are funded through *nextstep*. It will be relevant to those that are, suggesting possible areas into which to develop, but also to those that are not, as under arrangements for the new adult advancement and careers service the successor to the current *nextstep* service will certainly be at the heart of any guidance network arrangements.

From the delivery of a public service, and the way it is experienced by its users, it is not always obvious what efforts have to be made behind the scenes and at management level to achieve that provision. Some of these, especially relating to network building and managing short-term funding (often from a variety of sources) are described in *Smoothing the Path*. What factors were influencing *nextstep* provision at the time of that fieldwork (early autumn, 2008), what has been happening since, and what are the prospects for the next stage after August 2010 when the new service will be in place?

The *nextstep* service

The *nextstep* service in England is funded through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and managed on a regional basis by lead (prime) contractors. It offers free, impartial 'face-to-face' career information and advice to adults aged 20 plus, including help and support in identifying skills development *needs* as well as training, learning and work *options*. The 'new' contract was introduced in the summer of 2008 and then amended at the end of 2008 to further help 'customers' accessing the service during the economic downturn. The service is now available to adults aged 18 and 19 who have been referred by Jobcentre Plus.

At the same time as those changes, the *nextstep* service in some areas also joined in pilots of a new DWP/LSC initiative to offer a more comprehensive service to its customers under the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) service. A selection of trials were introduced nationally in response to the Leitch Review of 2007, which called for a fully integrated employment and skills service by 2010/11 to enable individuals more easily to increase their skills and progress into, and within, work. There are IES trials in three of the eastern region counties, so useful information is emerging from the region on how the new adult advancement and careers service (aacs) and Jobcentre Plus may work together in future.

The *nextstep* role in the IES trials involves a *nextstep* adviser providing a Skills Health Check service for Jobcentre Plus (JCP) customers. JCP advisers are trained (with help from *nextstep*) to judge which customers would benefit from the Skills Health Check, a diagnostic process that includes face-to-face careers information and advice services as *per* the *nextstep* offer. Some customers are supported in addition to use an on-line, more in-depth, skills diagnostic tool. The trialling of this tool is part of work to design the components of the aacs to start in August 2010. The tool is currently still evolving but is proving helpful to the full range of *nextstep* users including those who already have a high qualification level. If available through open access from 2010 it will be an important element of the universal service.

The changing context

The Suffolk service described in the *Smoothing the Path* case study was emerging against a background of intense activity. The contracting body had to subcontract urgently

across six counties with a wide range of delivery bodies. To meet the aims of the service it was seeking a spread between larger agencies whose staff was primarily concerned with advice about learning and employment, and a longer list of smaller agencies, drawn from the private, voluntary and community sectors, which might only have one or two staff members employed in such work. All this had to be set up quickly, but also comply with formal procurement procedures. Providers were familiar with one-to-one interventions, but the challenge was to provide the new offer of group work for some users on the very limited budget available. The solution was to work through organisations that already saw potential *nextstep* clients in groups, and where more in-depth coverage of vocational issues by *nextstep* staff would be welcome. This way accommodation and other costs were covered by other funds.

This use of groups had advantages of building on familiarity and trust, permitting those who wanted, and were eligible, to follow the group session with a one-to-one session under *nextstep* funding. At first the disadvantage was that group sessions were not so good at reaching their intended target group, for example those not eligible for *nextstep* one-to-ones because they were already well qualified. However, over the course of the year the economic climate changed, and group work is now reaching that target through, for example, pre-redundancy group activity offered in conjunction with employers. In addition, changes in the IES offer in response to the economic down-turn have altered the picture: people with higher qualifications can now seek individual sessions, JCP itself is now offering group work to which *nextstep* staff are contributing and in areas that are not part of the IES trials, JCP customers unemployed for six months are now being signposted to *nextstep* and a Skills Health Check.

This flexible response to the recession on the part of the IES programme has brought problems as well. Co-location of *nextstep* and JCP was one of the highlights of the case study in the *Smoothing the Path* project. Now, as JCP increases its own staff numbers to deal with extra work, there is less room for *nextstep* staff, and no *nextstep* budget to seek accommodation nearby. In some cases the previously co-located *nextstep* staff are being re-housed in local further education colleges, but this means having to send service users off to a different venue, and one that some may find off-putting.

Change is stressful for those trying to reduce its impact on service users. Scarcely a month has gone by since the start of this current *nextstep* contract without the sub-contractors being told they have to do something differently. This is particularly problematic for the smaller, third sector providers. In spite of this, across the whole *nextstep* East of England region some remarkable partnerships have emerged, including the innovative decision by housing associations to take on their own employment advisers under the *nextstep* banner. But change is ongoing. Already a year into, and a year in

advance of the end of this contract, the selection process for the new service has begun, at first establishing which prime (regional) contractors will be asked to lead. Changes to lead agencies and to size of area are possible. And subcontractors have all the uncertainties described in *Smoothing the Path* that result from short-term funding arrangements. The new advancement service must seek ways to establish provision on a firmer footing.

What do customers and advisers think of nextstep?

An evaluation based on data collected between April and August 2009 across the East of England from *nextstep* customers and advisers found users very positive about their advisers. Scores were high for how friendly, helpful, professional and knowledgeable they were, and overall 95 per cent of customers described the service they had received as either 'very good' or 'good'.

'Adviser put me at ease very quickly and was able to tell me almost all the information I asked for. Anything she didn't know she found out, and got straight back to me.'

'Allows people to better themselves and gain confidence in achieving more.'
SBA, forthcoming

As the majority of the sample was unemployed, unsurprisingly the help most appreciated was in respect to job search. Many indicated Jobcentre Plus had referred them so that they could develop a CV and a number indicated how valuable they found this was. However, crucially, this was particularly the case where skilled advisers were using the opportunity to complete a CV to undertake a much more in-depth review of career goals, skills and interests, which customers found empowering. There was a strong consensus that, as one individual put it: 'this is a good service - but more advertising/publicity is needed to make people aware of it'.

Several respondents would have liked more time, and a service provider nearer to them. One or two with higher-level qualifications commented on the need for more specialised information and advice relevant to their professional background. But the study provides further evidence about how much unemployed - and other - customers value the extent to which skilled careers advisers can boost their confidence and self-esteem, and enhance their ability to develop and implement plans of action. Any analysis of the effectiveness and value of careers advice needs to recognise the importance of such customer empowerment (and associated career learning) as well as the 'hard' outcomes of a job or training place.

nextstep advisers were found to be very interested in, and frequently passionate, about meeting the needs of their clients. In turn their managers frequently emphasised staffs' commitment and stressed their resilience in the face

of frequent changes in policy and direction. Most advisers (62.8 per cent) felt that *nextstep* was meeting the needs of its users (though a third of these said only 'quite well').

But the evaluation also highlighted concerns, including a lack of capacity. As the service achieves better customer recognition, and the planned implementation of aacs leads to greater demand, there will be a need for more new entrants to the profession and for a further up-skilling of the existing workforce. Crucially those drawn into the work will need to be attracted by better, and sustainable, pre-, and post-entry training and career development opportunities. (It is a sad irony that one of the more challenging questions posed to an adult adviser is how to become, and make a career as, an adult adviser). This will be one measure of success of Lifelong Learning UK's current review of the careers guidance sector which comes at an opportune time. However, in order to be completely successful, any review and subsequent improvement in qualifications and training will need to be accompanied by more stability in terms of funding for services and a funding methodology that allows for adequate continuous professional development.

Also, it is simply not possible to provide the face-to-face *nextstep* service within easy reach of every customer. The evaluation report says that after an initial face-to-face meeting, advisers and customers should then be able to work together over the phone. Separately, *nextstep* East of England has found that referrals to and from the national telephone and web-based Careers Advice Service have been increasing, but this process involves picking up with a different adviser. This need to provide face-to-face and distance within the same series of interventions with a specific adviser is a different matter.

To help improve delivery capacity, the region's prime contractor for *nextstep*, SCCI has, with LSC funding, supported their sub-contractors in the up-skilling of advisers to NVQ level 4 in advice and guidance, thus enabling the advisers to take on the full range of *nextstep* work. They have also launched an innovative training scheme through which SCC has appointed 13 people from a diverse range of backgrounds as trainee advisers on fixed-term contracts. Trainees are placed with *nextstep* sub-contractors across the region and will undertake an NVQ in advice and guidance.

Although CAS and *nextstep* are both funded by the LSC the separate procurement arrangements for the face-to-face, on-line and telephone strands of the new aacs means there will be plenty more work to be done in harmonising the two services. But the growing achievement of both services, particularly during this period of speedy change in the face of severe economic challenges, is impressive. It will be essential to build on this, and learn the lesson from previous initiatives in this field where skills of management and provision from previous programmes were lost. Working partnerships and wider guidance networks are complex, and take resources and time to grow.

References

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