



merlin

promoting supply chain excellence

Assessment Report

For

Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership

By Ruth Regan

On behalf of emqc Ltd

Assessment Date: 2nd to 4th September 2014

Contents

About the Organisation	3
Assessment Methodology	3
Assessment Outcome	4
Strengths	4
Areas for Improvement	5
Areas Requiring Further Development	5
Assessment Findings:	
1. Supply Chain Design	6
2. Commitment.....	8
3. Conduct	13
4. Review	19
Conclusion.....	20

About the Organisation

Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership Ltd (GMCP) is a registered charity with a strong track record for delivering information, advice and guidance services to adults and young people.

GMCP secured two National Careers Service prime contracts, for Cheshire and Warrington, and Greater Merseyside and Cumbria and Lancashire. National Careers Service Northwest (excluding Greater Manchester) was launched by GMCP in April 2012. National Careers Service is the national brand name for England's careers service and consists of three integrated channels: a universal web, a telephone service for young people and adults and a face-to-face service for adults funded through the Skills Funding Agency.

National Careers Service Northwest is contract managed from the GMCP Head Office in Liverpool.

GMCP has its own direct delivery team that delivers 50% of the National Careers Service Northwest contract in Greater Merseyside, Cheshire & Warrington and Lancashire. Across the two regions GMCP procured advice services from 27 Supply Chain Partners in 2012/2013, reducing to 21 from 1st April 2013, exclusive of the GMCP direct delivery team.

In 2010 GMCP was recognised as one of the Sunday Times 75 Best Places to Work in the Public Sector (39th) and received the Best Company: One to Watch in 2010. In 2004 the National Careers Service element of GMCP achieved the **matrix** Standard and the whole company followed in 2012, and 2013 GMCP was awarded the Investors in People Silver Standard. GMCP is also a "Two Ticks" organisation. Any job applicant who indicates they have a disability and meets the minimum criteria is guaranteed an interview.

Assessment Methodology

A number of teleconferences took place between the Lead Assessor and the assessment coordinator for GMCP in the months preceding the assessment. During these teleconferences support and guidance was given, including information about how the assessment would take place. Following this, the selection of Supply Chain Partners who would be interviewed was made and agreed, and schedules for both Lead Assessor Ruth Regan and team Assessor Neil Potentier were devised by GMCP.

During the assessment 60% of all Supply Chain Partners were spoken to across the geographical stretch of National Careers Service Northwest. These interviews took place by telephone, or where possible face to face. During the assessment, a range of documentary evidence provided by GMCP was reviewed and staff were interviewed, including senior and operational managers, and staff supporting the supply chain network. All principles of the Merlin standard were fully assessed by the assessment team.

Assessment Outcome

Overall %	70%
Overall Outcome	Good
Supply Chain Design	Good
Commitment	Good
Conduct	Satisfactory
Review	Satisfactory

Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during this Merlin assessment and summaries of these are given below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element of the Standard to which the areas relate.

- ▲ GMCP makes effective use of a range of organisations, including public, private, and third sector Supply Chain Partners to meet the holistic needs of the customer. (1a)
- ▲ Relationships between GMCP and Supply Chain Partner staff are effective, with communication protocols being in place during procurement and throughout the lifetime of the contract. (2a)
- ▲ Learning opportunities provided by GMCP to staff of Supply Chain Partner organisations have been relevant and developmental. (2b)
- ▲ GMCP ensures that there are ongoing opportunities provided for Supply Chain Partners to understand volumes, fees, funding etc. (2c)
- ▲ Excellent support is given by GMCP to enable Supply Chain Partners to achieve the **matrix** standard and provide effective information, advice and guidance across the network. (3b)
- ▲ There is a robust approach taken to safeguarding across the network, supported by GMCP. (3b)
- ▲ Performance expectations are very clear across the supply chain. (3d)
- ▲ Robust methods are used to obtain feedback from customers, stakeholders, etc. GMCP then utilises the feedback to influence the make-up of the supply chain. (4a)
- ▲ GMCP provides an effective and inclusive self-assessment process. (4a)

Areas for Improvement

In order to support the organisation to further develop and improve its supply chain delivery strategy, the following suggestions for improvement are made. The numbers in brackets refer to the criteria of the Standard to which the areas relate.

- ▲ Continue to engage with partner organisations so that relationships are maintained in readiness for future tender opportunities. (1a)
- ▲ Review the communication strategy and protocols and consider how face-to-face dialogue can take place post-contract award – including the potential benefits of utilising Skype or GoToMeeting type communications. (2a)
- ▲ Ensure that through the design of any future supply chain, opportunities for consultation are clearly offered. (2a)
- ▲ Pre-contract, consider how GMCP can support smaller providers to undertake cash-flow type activities, to ensure that they can cope with the payment structures on offer. (2c)
- ▲ Define core principles and do more to promote and share them so potential Supply Chain Partners understand the GMCP values and principles by which they operate. (3a)
- ▲ Consider how to further develop the approach to quality assurance – in particular the scoring and associated gradings given. (3b)
- ▲ Revisit the approach to setting and monitoring environmental sustainability within future supply chains. (3b)
- ▲ Consider how excellent practice is defined, identified and shared. (3b)
- ▲ Review processes for performance reviews. (3d)
- ▲ The activities taken to promote Diversity and Equality as required by the Merlin Standard need further development. (3e)
- ▲ Consider how to ensure the Merlin self-assessment questionnaire process is inclusive of Supply Chain Partners. (4a)
- ▲ Ensure impact on environmental sustainability strategies – underpinned by measurable targets – is part of the procurement process. (4a)
- ▲ Ensure Supply Chain Partners develop their own impact measures over and above those included within the contracts, to support the contracts they are delivering. (4a)

Areas Requiring Further Development

Because GMCP has met the Merlin Standard, as described in the assessment outcome above, there are no areas for development identified as requiring immediate action in order to gain accreditation.

Assessment Findings

1 Supply Chain Design

1a) Supply Chain Design

After the initial procurement process GMCP undertakes a mini annual procurement process and subsequent contract offer, in order to ensure that the scope, variety, and design of the supply chain continues to meet the objectives of the contract.

Geography and delivery capability were important factors when deciding what and where GMCP might deliver, and where Supply Chain Partners would need to be sourced. Geo-mapping software was used to research and analyse delivery requirements – where customers are coming from and the impact of the outcomes by region. This process identified gaps in activities, which has resulted in bringing in new Supply Chain Partners to deliver in a specific geographic area.

Supply Chain Partners confirmed that they believe the scope and variety is around 90% correct, with some needs not accommodated for as they are not financed, e.g. adults in employment needing careers advice. Otherwise, scope is varied to meet low skills, deprived, disabled, community and BME groups.

- ▲ *"...geography had a major impact on the delivery model – for example we had no footprint but xxx had."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...demographics, geographical spread and information from existing supply chain is under constant review to ensure we have the right deliverables."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...we were happy to support GMCP in their recent tender."* – Supply Chain Partner

The supply chain consists of a wide variety of organisations, including training providers, charities, colleges, specialists in information and advice, and local authorities. These are supported by specialist interest providers who have the specialist skill sets necessary to address specific needs, e.g. working with those recently released from prison, probation, people with mental health problems, the long term unemployed, and those recently made or at risk of being made redundant.

- ▲ *"...SFA wanted organisations who were already on their approved list."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...we liked the fact they valued our community approach."* – Supply Chain Partner

Supply Chain Partners engage at an operational level with learning providers, Jobcentre Plus, FE colleges, and voluntary organisations, to keep up to date with local provision and opportunities that meet local market needs. Partners also link with non-sector-specific support agencies such as drug and alcohol support, housing provision, and finance support, which address the issues customers face before they can become work ready.

Whilst GMCP engages with a range of key partners and support organisations at a strategic level, this appears to go unnoticed by partners who described being left to develop their own wider networks, e.g. other Colleges and Community networks.

A number of Supply Chain Partners commented that GMCP could have been more proactive in encouraging networking and collaborative working outside of fulfilling their contractual remit.

- ▲ *"...initially we needed to develop relationships with organisations who could deliver the contract, and specialist provision."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...with 21 Supply Chain Partners we can get the service down to community groups."* - GMCP
- ▲ *"...I think they could have done more – they did enough to deliver the contract but I am not aware of them encouraging wider participation."* – Supply Chain Partner

2 Commitment

2a) Collaboration, Cooperation and Communication

Supply Chain Partners validated that GMCP communicated proactively and effectively during the procurement process and that GMCP staff demonstrated an enthusiasm to build relationships through being proactive and accommodating. All partners were aware of the procurement timescales, what would be communicated, when, and how, starting with an initial briefing session at which the contract requirements and GMCP's approach to supply chain management were explained.

- ▲ *"...they didn't do the big sell and they helped us do a pros and cons analysis to enable us to make the decision to work with them."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...communication was and has remained positive – informal and formal discussions – we talk around issues and problems together during procurement and ongoing."* – Supply Chain Partner

Matters requiring consultation have been discussed at the quarterly supply chain network meetings known as SCAN meetings, with input from both front line staff and managers of Supply Chain Partner organisations. Examples of where consultation has influenced decisions include changes to Customer Feedback systems, preferred methods of receiving updates – that resulted in the introduction of a weekly communications brief – and how best to evaluate learning events. However, most Supply Chain Partners believe that they have not influenced major change, with some partners describing how they would challenge points at inaugural meetings but quickly lost the desire to do so as ideas and changes seemed to be presented as *fait accompli*. This was described as being due mainly to the commissioner's requirements rather than GMCP.

- ▲ *"...we have a mature supply chain who we know well, so are always asking for their views."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...there were things I wanted to challenge but thought 'what's the point?'"* – Supply Chain Partner

Collaboration to ensure comprehensive services are delivered to customers includes Supply Chain Partners working both with each other and organisations external to the supply chain, for instance through delivery from venues such as Jobcentre Plus, community locations, high street shops, prisons, FE provision, and probation centres. Other examples included GMCP linking organisations, for example to enable them to share experiences of delivering group work.

Supply Chain Partners shared mixed perceptions of how proactive GMCP has been in encouraging collaborative working. All confirmed that they have worked with other members of the GMCP supply chain to provide a comprehensive service to customers, but some believe that GMCP could have been more proactive in facilitating this.

- ▲ *"...we haven't really got the time to do the softer unpaid stuff such as collaborative working."* – Supply Chain Partner

Strategic planning, performance and quality are standard agenda items at the quarterly SCAN meetings, and it is through these meetings that clear business relationships between Supply Chain Partners and GMCP emerged and were consolidated. Offers and allocations were openly shared on an ongoing basis through these meetings, ensuring that any ambiguity or misunderstandings could be dealt with.

- ▲ *"...we decided to bring all providers together for SCAN meetings so that everyone hears the same message and there is consistency of understanding."* – GMCP

In support of the face-to-face SCAN meetings, GMCP communicates with Supply Chain Partners through email, phone, and a weekly Information Brief that is used to communicate matters relating to the National Careers Service Contract. GMCP makes every effort to ensure that all contract-related communication is consistent, clear, equitable and where possible, timely. All Supply Chain Partners were positive on this aspect and gave the examples of the open sharing of performance figures (including GMCP's own performance statistics) as proof of this.

- ▲ *"...Supply Chain Partners like our culture and the way we work."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...SCAN meetings allow for networking and open and honest discussions."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...weekly phone calls and email contact."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...xx (GMCP senior leader) is a role model of honesty and integrity."* – Supply Chain Partner

2b) Developing Supply Chain Partners

The supply chain contains a high proportion of organisations that have well-established and effective organisational development processes in place. Where this is not the case, GMCP has adopted a coaching/mentoring approach to try and grow and develop the organisation. One Supply Chain Partner described how a senior leader within GMCP had showed a caring, philanthropic approach to supporting and encouraging their development and that the *"...he couldn't do enough for us – very supportive."*

- ▲ *"...guest speakers attend SCAN meeting – a budget is in place and GMCP have shared it around."* – Supply Chain Partner

Over the lifetime of the contract GMCP has been able to access additional funding to test out new and innovative advice and guidance approaches. These have included a range of funding opportunities, including Pathways and Guidance Projects, and GMCP has worked alongside partners enabling them to access the funding to support their contribution. Supply Chain Partners validated that they had received emails from GMCP highlighting possible funding opportunities, e.g. student finance and learner grants, and some smaller, third sector Supply Chain Partners confirmed they had received funding towards **matrix** accreditation.

- ▲ *"...we gave funding out to develop community links – we left it to the Supply Chain Partners how they spent it."* – GMCP

A training and development plan has been produced annually, driven by information provided by Supply Chain Partners about their staff training needs; the outcome of Quality and Compliance Reviews when common areas for development emerge; the need for staff to be competent in using particular resources, assessment tools, and equipment; and the required Professional Standards for delivering independent careers advice. Supply Chain Partners confirmed that from the onset of the contract GMCP has provided a wide range of learning and development interventions such as observation training, safeguarding, action planning, IT systems, management development, coaching and neuro-linguistic programming. They also described how key speakers were invited to attend the SCAN meetings, to inform the network on topics such as funding available to support service users and adding value to the customer journey.

- ▲ *"...we are an accredited centre so offer training to Supply Chain Partners, such as the level 6 qualification."* - GMCP
- ▲ *"...there have been practical difficulties with training due to the geography of the GMCP patch – we would have liked to attend more but travel was problematic – we could not justify the travel expenses or the time away."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...IT manager has come to us to give instruction."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...the management coaching course was the best I have been on."* – Supply Chain Partner

2c) Contracting and Funding

In February 2012 existing and potential Supply Chain Partners were invited to tender for a National Careers Service contract; this resulted in three new providers joining and four organisations leaving the GMCP supply chain network. Following research activities (as described in 1 above), an open invitation was offered to key providers across each geographical area. Those interested in delivering the service expressed their interest and attended an initial briefing session. Proposals were then submitted and scored in accordance with the agreed scoring criteria which included:

1. Geography / delivery locations
2. Quality of provision
3. Proposed volumes to deliver compared with the resource available
4. Added value.

The briefing sessions carried out at the start of procurement highlight the potential financial and other risks to GMCP and the supply chain. Most Supply Chain Partners validated that the procurement process was fair and transparent, and described how the approach evolved through SCAN meetings where all partners gained a very clear picture of market share and performance expectations.

- ▲ *"...all will receive feedback – positive or negative."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...Q&A sessions are held at the initial briefing sessions – any one-to-one questions will be answered to clarify issues but will also be shared when relevant with others, so everyone is equal."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...you could see from the very first SCAN meeting how we were all doing."* – Supply Chain Partner

Due to the structure of the contract funding allocations are based on standard fees for each deliverable, and GMCP has no ability to 'flex' these terms as they are set nationally and adhered to by every Prime. In order to ensure that this funding arrangement has not caused undue financial risk for Supply Chain Partners, GMCP has reviewed funding with partners on a yearly basis. A number of the smaller, third sector Supply Chain Partners confirmed that during these discussions dialogue around cash flow implications took place. This was not the case with the majority of organisations however, who described being "...left to assess our own risk of accepting the funding method proposed."

- ▲ "...funding is on a unit cost basis." – GMCP
- ▲ "...we have had organisations come back asking for additional ways of funding but the contract is set." – GMCP
- ▲ "...they asked if the contract was sustainable for us." – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ "...they came to us with clear financial offers and seemed keen to work with us but stressed that there was no flexibility in the arrangements – we had to decide if we wanted to work on that basis." – Supply Chain Partner

GMCP have provided partners with detailed contracts providing clear information on the exact expectations for delivering the NCS Contract. The contracting documentation is formal and is broken into three key parts: the proposal submitted by the Supply Chain Partner, the specification that focuses on operational elements of the contract, and the contract agreement which focuses on the terms and conditions. Operating Instructions and a detailed Quality Handbook are also provided. All Supply Chain Partners confirmed they were clear on precise documentation but the Quality Manual was described as 'confusing' by some.

The allocation of market share is based on a robust approach by determining the socioeconomic information for the sub regions in which the contract is being delivered and then the partner's abilities to meet these needs. There are a number of key Supply Chain Partners that make a significant contribution to meeting the needs of people within their particular sub region, and negotiation with them has been extensive in order to seek assurances that they can deliver and that they understand the impact of their market share on the overall contract deliverables. Partner-wide understanding of the impact of the breakdown of market share emerged through the open discussions about performance during SCAN meetings. However, the rationale behind the split between GMCP and Supply Chain Partner delivery was not fully understood by a number of partners.

- ▲ "...indication of areas and venues asked for in the EOI." – GMCP
- ▲ "...if we have 10% underperformance we lose 10% of our management fee." – GMCP
- ▲ "...not sure why GMCP – not really clear or explained." – Supply Chain Partner

Supply Chain Partners validated that discussions took place around volumes and that they had received the volume levels asked for.

- ▲ "...limited opportunities to negotiate as it's funded on a unit cost basis – all we can negotiate on is volume." – GMCP
- ▲ "...there have been a couple of re-profiling exercises across the providers and discussions were open and then confirmed in writing." – Supply Chain Partner

Some adjustments have been made to individual Supply Chain Partners' contracts to ensure that the overall contract has been delivered. Some Supply Chain Partners confirmed they were offered extra profile volumes, while others had volumes reduced based on performance levels. All confirmed that they fully understood the requirements of the contract and that GMCP had to ensure the overall contract was achieved through the mobilisation of contract volumes.

- ▲ *"...this is not a rich contract – Supply Chain Partners are not in it to make money – but it does open other doors for them."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...we have struggled – we took a risk and over-performed against the contract – GMCP said it was our risk so we had to decide whether or not to continue or stop."* – Supply Chain Partner

The strategy to transfer funds is understood by all Supply Chain Partners, with re-profiling taking place every quarter to ensure that the overall contract deliverables are achieved. The move to split payments in October 2013 caused some problems for smaller Supply Chain Partners who, through insufficient resource, were not able to reconcile their own records with CRM data to disprove penalties. However, partners did confirm that they had been paid as expected and that any anomalies were fully explained by GMCP.

- ▲ *"...we ask for an invoice on the 10th working day then we pay 30 days following the receipt of the invoice."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...up to April we had a massive overachievement and we secured additional funding which we shared across the performing partners."* – GMCP

There are no management fees that impact on the delivery funding as this is issued as a separate budget line by the funding body. Partners are however aware of the fact that if underperformance is confirmed across the contract, at 10% for example, this means that GMCP will also lose 10% of its Management Budget. Supply Chain Partners were able to confirm what they receive from GMCP, citing guidance, management information, quality assurance and learning and development opportunities/qualifications.

3 Conduct

3a) Demonstrating Commercial and Business Integrity

GMCP uses the core principles defined by the **matrix** Standard as its benchmark and there is an expectation that all Supply Chain Partners will be accredited with the Standard. In the main, the supply chain is built on long established relationships with organisations that have effective and impartial information, advice and guidance at the heart of what they do. One organisation new to the network described how GMCP entered into specific dialogue with it around values and the importance GMCP placed on working with organisations with similar core values. Another described how there was discussion or alignment of values during the procurement phase or since.

- ▲ *"...all our Supply Chain Partners are genuinely and ethically in it for the right reasons."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...ethics, drive and passion are the key – it's not about making money."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...they are an organisation we can do business with – there is a match."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...very happy to work with them and sad we won't be anymore."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...they just made us an offer and we didn't talk about this sort of stuff. It was very much down to business."* – Supply Chain Partner

It is made clear to every Supply Chain Partner that there is a requirement to commit to TUPE if they are taking over the work of another provider. A number of examples of where a successful TUPE transfer had taken place were shared by Supply Chain Partners, confirming that GMCP had given help and guidance as needed.

- ▲ *"...we split up one contract 5 ways – tried to help as much as possible – strategy is to do the best for the employee."* – GMCP

All Supply Chain Partners report positive interactions at all contact points within GMCP, and that all requests for help/guidance were responded to in a positive and supportive manner.

- ▲ *"...I have enjoyed great relationships with every member of GMCP staff I have come into contact with."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...they are really nice, lovely supportive people and it is a shame to see them go."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...we have established an excellent working relationship with staff at GMCP."* – Supply Chain Partner

Supply Chain Partners are required to have their own policies in relation to Equality and Diversity, Data Protection, Health and Safety, Safeguarding, etc., and how effectively they are implemented is judged when Quality and Compliance Reviews are carried out. Although policies are reviewed during the annual procurement review, there was little evidence to confirm that GMCP had been proactive in updating the supply chain with changes in legislation.

3b) Quality Assurance and Compliance

A detailed Quality Framework document has been shared with Supply Chain Partners and this forms the basis of GMCP's approach to monitoring and maintaining quality of provision across the network, which is graded in line with the Ofsted grading structure and methodology. Supply Chain Partners described the key aspects of the quality review process as documentation review, observed practice, professional discussion, compliance and customer feedback. After the Quality and Compliance Review, Partners are required to submit a Quality Improvement Plan that determines how they are addressing any areas for development. This is the focus for subsequent visits. Supply Chain Partners gave mixed views about the Ofsted approach to quality assurance and for some, the level of feedback received was insufficient and did not correlate to the Ofsted grade given by GMCP.

- ▲ *"...grading is linked to Ofsted – we looked at how to moderate our judgements to ensure we were being consistent."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...we don't share the scores of individual observations with providers as we are making a judgment about the quality of delivery across the organisation."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...quality handbook in place which is revisited as the contracts change."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...it was intense and rigorous and taught us a lot."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...I wrote to them with my concerns about how the process was handled and am still awaiting a response."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...the feedback we got did not match the grade."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...QA process is in place – plans are checked, an observation schedule is chased by GMCP if not updated."* – Supply Chain Partner

Findings from the quality assurance process have informed and improved delivery. For example improved procedures such as joint observations have been introduced for the observation of key processes and interventions, and work has been undertaken to improve the standards of action plans. Supply Chain Partners described a cycle of review, action plan and follow-up.

- ▲ *"...initially 25% of records had errors, now below 3%."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...we developed a model action plan with check list as a result of QA finding."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...it's mainly about compliance. They are very document focused and like to tick the boxes."* – Supply Chain Partner

The approach taken by GMCP to ensure that its Supply Chain Partners are able to provide effective Information, Advice and Guidance to their customers is robust, with the achievement of the **matrix** Standard being a core requirement of an organisation joining the supply chain.

- ▲ *"...we expect the culture described within the **matrix** Standard to be in place and that providers' practice reflects **matrix**."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...**matrix** checked up on by GMCP and they offered funding to support achievement."* – Supply Chain Partner

Supply Chain Partners confirmed that policies pertaining to the security of data, a healthy and safe working environment, and the safeguarding of people at risk were all submitted to and scrutinised by GMCP as part of the initial procurement process, and then annually throughout the lifetime of the contract. The Quality and Compliance Review process confirms that the relevant policies are communicated to and understood by staff and implemented at an operational level.

- ▲ *"...all covered by GMCP at procurement and then updated annually."* – Supply Chain Partner

There is a requirement that GMCP and its Supply Chain Partners comply with all aspects of the Data Protection Act 1998.

- ▲ *"...we had a discussion with the Supply Chain Partners about sharing of action plans and how we could remain compliant and legal."* – GMCP

In terms of health and safety all of the above applies but there is also a requirement for premises to be risk assessed prior to delivery taking place.

The safeguarding of customers and staff is extremely high profile with GMCP, and policies and procedures exist to ensure any matters of concern are effectively handled. In addition to this and with the 2012 changes to the Disclosure and Barring Service, all Supply Chain Partner staff are required to undergo a basic police check which is renewed 3 yearly. Where providers are working with young people or those in custody an Enhanced DBS Check is required.

- ▲ *"...we bring in 3rd party experts to update Supply Chain Partners on safeguarding and other legal requirements."* – GMCP

GMCP has an environmental policy which is applied internally and was last reviewed in 2013. While important to GMCP, as environmental sustainability is not a requirement of the commissioner it has not been a priority within the quality assurance and compliance framework. As a result Supply Chain Partners had little awareness of any requirement for policies and processes to be in place.

The methods used to share good practice include the outcome of Quality and Compliance Reviews identifying good practice being shared at SCAN meetings, and specialist providers with the ability to meet specific customer needs through experienced staff – i.e. a focus on disability, BME groups, mental health, etc. – sharing their expertise with the network.

- ▲ *"...we created some best practice ourselves and would have liked GMCP to take it and share it."* – Supply Chain Partner

3c) Honouring Commitments

Supply Chain Partners confirmed that contract negotiations were clear and open and that individual circumstances were acknowledged.

All believe they were given every opportunity to understand and discuss the National Career Service contract requirements prior to signing their own contract, and that post-contracting agreements and arrangements fully reflect the pre-contract negotiations. Any re-profiling that has taken place appears to have been in consultation and negotiated in an environment of openness, honesty and trust.

GMCP has a robust dispute resolution process in place which is shared and formally agreed with all NCS Supply Chain Partners. In addition a stakeholder communication protocol helps avoid and resolve potential delivery venue disputes. There were no examples shared of how the complaints procedure had been utilised, but Supply Chain Partners confirmed they were aware of process.

"...over the years we have had disputes and have developed protocols to help us deal with common problems, such as where Supply Chain Partners can deliver." – GMCP

GMCP has confirmed both orally and in writing that it intends to build into its dispute resolution process the agreement to accept the decision of the Merlin Mediation service in the event of complaints that have been referred.

The delivery requirements for the service and the contract are very clear to all partners, and GMCP has worked hard to ensure this is the case and that there is a clear understanding that the network operates as one service and that any failure within the supply chain impacts on all the provision. Through the open communication protocols established through the SCAN meetings, the supply chain has a clear understanding of what each partner is delivering to support the achievement of the whole contract.

- ▲ *"...all performance is shared at SCAN meetings so providers know how the others are performing."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...clear expectations set – but it was done in a nice way."* – Supply Chain Partner

3d) Performance

There are a number of examples shared of collaborative working. For example: new organisations to the network are linked with existing Supply Chain Partners as part of their induction process. Also, an adviser – graded 'outstanding' when observed – delivered training to share their approach. Supply Chain Partners also described how SCAN meetings were used to encourage collaboration.

- ▲ *"...all providers are mandated to attend SCAN meetings as they are so important to the delivery of the contract."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...SCAN meetings on a quarterly basis to review collectively the KPIs and performance of the contract – there is good collaboration between providers at these meetings."* – Supply Chain Partner

Quarterly performance reviews are carried out, with formal face-to-face meetings taking place with those Supply Chain Partners generating a higher risk to GMCP.

Strategies for addressing underperformance are discussed and actions for improvement are negotiated and agreed. Supply Chain Partners receive individual performance updates and are able to raise any issues or concerns they have individually or through the SCAN meeting.

- ▲ *"...we undertake a robust performance review every quarter and then focus our efforts on those Supply Chain Partners who give us cause for concern."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...regular performance reports and updates."* – Supply Chain Partner
- ▲ *"...can pick up the phone and talk about under- or over-performance – honest discussion always."* – Supply Chain Partner

Supply Chain Partners described performance expectations as being *"...crystal clear from the onset and reinforced via SCAN process."* Advisers are targeted individually to achieve results and line managers review their progress on a monthly basis. These individual targets contribute to a Supply Chain Partner's overall target which in turn feeds into the GMCP overall targets at a national level. Despite excellent clarity in terms of the contractual performance, some Supply Chain Partners did comment that at times they were unclear if they would receive payment for over-performance and that the criteria for payment or non-payment was not always clear.

- ▲ *"...we provide weekly data to show actual performance vs. profile."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...if we over-performed then we might get paid or capped – GMCP needed to clarify this as it's been difficult on occasion for us to manage our business."* – Supply Chain Partner

Since the launch of the new National Careers Service in April 2012, GMCP has continued to face the significant challenge of embedding a national information system (CRM) which is limited in scope for development and improvement. This has significantly limited the ability to extract and provide the robust data necessary for effective development and delivery of the contract. Additional staffing resource has been in place to ensure that the Management Performance Information extracted at each month end – when the MI system is locked down – is as accurate and up to date as possible. Supply Chain Partners acknowledge that the CRM has been an issue, describing how it constantly crashes and is unable to generate relevant data to support financial information. However, all acknowledge that GMCP has worked hard to overcome these shortfalls, with some being able to create value-added reports with help from GMCP.

- ▲ *"...Supply Chain Partners should input data live as they are with clients, but some don't due to data access issues which we are fully aware of."* – GMCP
- ▲ *"...monthly figures shared – we tell the providers what they can claim based on the MI provided."* – GMCP

Value for money is linked to delivery and quality and the added value Supply Chain Partners can provide to customers. GMCP assesses value for money through quality reviews to ensure that the service is not duplicated and is providing additional relevant support to customers.

There is a very clear expectation that customers will not receive funded services from two sources for the same activity, and the contracting process adequately explores any potential double funding.

Supply Chain Partners are very aware of the need to deliver the contract as per the agreed profile, to the required quality, etc., with some describing social impact measures and individual customer success stories to support value for money outcomes.

- ▲ "...2013/14 we performed so well that we put requests for additional funding and got them."
– GMCP
- ▲ "...we feel we gave value for money." – Supply Chain Partner

To counter the issues with the CRM a specific function for tracking the customer journey/distance travelled has been developed by GMCP which has had a positive impact on tracking outcomes. In 2011/2012 7850 entered positive outcomes and in 2012/2013 9693 customers entered positive outcomes.

3e) Promoting Diversity & Equality

All Supply Chain Partners are required to have a current Equality and Diversity Policy, and must demonstrate that they follow their policy in their recruitment of staff and engagement with customers. GMCP's Quality Review processes explore the application of the policy at an operational level and analysis of management information determines an organisation's success at meeting the needs of local diverse communities. Equality and diversity training has been made available to Supply Chain Partners who confirmed that they had received training to equip advisers with an understanding of the issues faced by people with mental health problems.

Management Information determines how successful the service is in meeting equality key performance indicators that feed into an overall company-wide Equality and Diversity Plan. Supply Chain Partners are responsible for promoting their provision and engaging with priority group customers, and work in local community settings in order to ensure sufficient capacity to engage with hard to reach customers and underrepresented groups as well as individuals who may not traditionally engage in learning and/or work opportunities. For example, specialist support for those with disabilities, supporting offenders into education and employment and customers for whom English is a second language are all supported through the network.

Evaluation of performance of different customer groups is however being further developed with recognition that GMCP currently underutilises the current equality and diversity data. Broad analysis of this data indicates that there is not a significant issue with the access and impact of service delivery for minority groups; however more in-depth analysis is required for GMCP to effectively plan service developments associated with this.

4 Review

4a) Supply Chain Review

Strategic partners include Jobcentre Plus, the National Probation Trusts, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Employer Forums. With close working relationships also being developed with organisations such as unionlearn, the TUC, FE colleges and redundancy task forces. GMCP's feedback process from customers, and strategic and operational stakeholders is proactive and robust and has, over the lifetime of the contract, been used to inform and evaluate service delivery. Despite close working relationships between GMCP and its supply chain, most were unsure if they had been asked for their feedback to help inform and improve practices.

- ▲ "...funders are obviously key stakeholders – SFA, DWP, Jobcentre Plus." – GMCP
- ▲ "...we worked with x and supported them through **matrix** but they cannot continue after October due to the changes in funding." – GMCP

The process for self-assessment and the generating of an annual continuous improvement plan is inclusive, drawing on results from internal and external inspections. The views of Supply Chain Partners are collected through a standardised mini self-assessment process and the information gathered, together with other sources of feedback from customers and stakeholders, used to inform the GMCP self-assessment and improvement plan.

- ▲ "...provider SAR and QIP is reviewed during the annual quality review." – GMCP
- ▲ "...we are very clear about standards – a SAR is produced every year – we spend a day together pulling it together." – GMCP

GMCP is proactive in its efforts to keep up to date with national, regional and local priorities. Strategic links with key partners ensure that current, accurate and relevant information is available to share with Supply Chain Partners. Information from Chambers of Commerce, Local Enterprise Partnerships, DWP, and the Skills Funding Agency is shared and Supply Chain Partners link with these same organisations at a local level to ensure joint priorities are addressed at an operational level.

Supply Chain Partners were able to share examples of how the work they are delivering supported by GMCP is having a measurable impact on the wider social objectives of the commissioner. These examples related to success stories of individuals who have benefited from the delivery of a holistic service. Examples of increased confidence and motivation which are fundamental to customer progression were common place.

The GMCP network of Supply Chain Partners has evolved over the lifetime of the contract, with new organisations coming on board year on year to plug identified gaps in provision and to add value to the overall contract.

- ▲ "...annual procurement process to ensure provision still meets contract requirements and performance." – GMCP
- ▲ "...we know our current network is exceptional and is meeting the grass roots needs of people." – GMCP

By building sound working relationships with key partners such as Jobcentre Plus, Probation Service, Prison Service and Adult Learner Services, GMCP continues to develop services which support the customer, and this is evidenced through the feedback collected. Customers are progressing, with skills and personal development outcomes being demonstrated robustly.

Conclusion

The Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership Ltd has demonstrated behaviours that fully meet the requirements of the Merlin Standard.

It is important to acknowledge that this assessment took place only weeks before GMCP ceased being a Prime contractor for the National Careers Service; yet it has maintained a high level of support, guidance and interaction with Supply Chain Partners to ensure they have everything they need to fulfill the requirements of the contract.

When asked about future working relationships after the end of the National Careers Service contract, the overwhelming view of Supply Chain Partners was that *"...given the opportunity we will work with GMCP again in the future."*