



merlin

promoting supply chain excellence

**THE EDUCATION BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP
(LINCOLNSHIRE & RUTLAND)**

Assessment Dates: 02/10/2017 to 03/10/2017

ASSESSMENT SERVICES
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1. About the Organisation

Lincolnshire and Rutland Education Business Partnership (referred to as The EBP throughout the reports) is a Social Enterprise based in the city of Lincoln. It provides a range of student-centred enrichment and employability programmes to prepare young people for the world of work, better equipped and prepared for what lies ahead, in line with employer's needs. All programmes are aligned to the overarching aim, which includes the National Citizenship Service (NCS).

The National Citizen Service (NCS) is a voluntary government programme aimed to promote a more cohesive, responsible and engaged society by bringing young people together to make a positive difference. NCS is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that helps young people build skills for work and life, while taking on new challenges and meeting new friends. Year 11 and 12 students and 15 to 17 year olds not in education can develop the tools and belief to unlock their potential and make a positive impact in their communities. It takes place over several weeks in the summer or autumn and features a short time away from home and a project in the local community. A focus on social mixing, regular guided reflection and social action projects led by young people makes NCS a unique and fulfilling experience.

The programme has been delivered by The EBP since the launch and due to its successes was formally awarded a new three-year contract to deliver in Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Rutland and Northamptonshire, known as NCS EM1 Region from September 2015. It opted to deliver the programme directly, using the internal knowledge and skills and through the use of a range of partners to bring expertise and diversity to the delivery. Currently, the EBP deliver 33% of the programme, whilst a supply chain delivers 67%. 100% of partners are from the third sector / social enterprise sector; and been working in partnership with the EBP for over eighteen months.

2. Assessment Methodology

The EPB volunteered to undertake an initial assessment against the Merlin Standard in October 2015, and a health check in October 2016 to prepare and position the business for the future, and to contribute to continuous improvement. The organisation opted to undertake a further assessment to retain the accreditation against the Standard, identify areas of strength and those to consider for further improvement.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor) and one Assessor: Janette Russon, supported by a coordinator within the EBP. The Lead Assessor and coordinator started planning the assessment in May 2017 whereby the logistics of the assessment were identified, the on-site dates agreed and a schedule of activities agreed to ensure specific timescales were achieved.

The Lead Assessor was in regular contact with the coordinator prior to the on-site to review the scope, schedule and logistics. Prior to the on-site activity all documentation required for the assessment; Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ), Pre-Assessment Notes (PAN) and interview schedules were shared within the agreed timescale.

The assessment team spent 1.5 days on-site reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews with 100% of the Partners and one past organisation. Interviews also included the EBP's staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chain to enable the assessment team to gain a full understanding of the delivery model, including the systems and processes implemented.

Following the interviews verbal feedback was provided to the Chief Executive, coordinator of the assessment and Finance Director, this indicated the findings against the principles and elements of the Merlin Standard, areas of strength and those to consider for further improvement.

3. Assessment Outcome

Overall	%
Overall Outcome	64% Satisfactory
Supply Chain Design	60% Satisfactory
Commitment	67% Satisfactory
Conduct	73% Good
Review	57% Satisfactory

4. Areas of Significant Strength

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

- A high proportion of Partners spoke of the support gained in the early stages to develop their organisation to ensure robust strategies, policies and processes to deliver the contract, which has subsequently continued throughout the life of the contract. In addition, there was evidence of Partners being encouraged to build a sustainable business through the allocation of additional volumes (when requested). (2b.1, 2b.2)
- The development of processes, policies and activities to monitor the quality of delivery, including the experience of the young people has been a key focus of the EBP over the past two years. These are now embedded in the service delivery to contribute to the commissioner's requirements. In particular the processes and activities to assure the health and safety and safeguarding of the young people were found to be robust at the time of the assessment. (3b.1, 3b.5, 3b.6)
- The performance expectations are clearly defined for each stage of the contract; recruitment, phases and review, and subsequently Partners understand what is expected of them throughout the year. (3d.3)
- The Sales Force CRM system had just been introduced in 2015, which replaced an archaic approach to providing data relating to performance. Over the past two-years the generation of consistently accurate and appropriate management information (MI), which is instantaneous has contributed to managing the performance of the contract far more effectively. (3d.4)
- The promotion and monitoring of equality and diversity is embedded across the supply chain, as a social mix target is in place for the contract and forms part of the payment. The Sales Force CRM system provides a platform to collect the data relating to equal opportunities, which is analysed and used by Partners (and across the supply chain) to gain an understanding of the social mix, and subsequently target specific groups. (3e.2, 3e.3)

5. Areas for Improvement

The following areas for improvement-could be considered for review and improvement. The numbers in brackets cross-reference the findings to the relevant element and criteria of the Merlin Standard.

- Partners have been consulted in the design of systems and processes, and as the contract has evolved these have been changed and some approaches streamlined. However, over the past year Partners believe more consultation could have taken place to inform decisions regarding the design of the supply chain. As a result, in the future, consideration could be made to consulting Partners on wider issues to inform decisions, including the delivery model, systems and processes. (1a.1, 2a.2)
- Partners have been encouraged to work collaboratively and evidence was found that some work together effectively, however, this continues to be limited. A culture of collaborative working should be embraced by all Partners, and all Partners to believe that the entire supply chain is working towards a common purpose, including direct delivery, and has a level of trust and confidence in each other. (2a.3, 3d.1)
- Partners spoke highly of the relationship with the Regional Coordinators and the fact that they are open, honest and able to discuss anything relating to the delivery of the contract, as well as being positive and supportive. However, this failed to be the case throughout the contracting stage, and as a result, the EBP are actively encouraged to review this aspect of working with Partners in the future. (2a.5)
- At a recent Partner meeting the principles that govern the way the supply chain operates were reviewed and agreed. Subsequently, in the future consideration could be made to monitoring these behaviours of both the Partners and the Prime. (3a.1)
- The EBP monitors performance at regular intervals; weekly, monthly, end of programme and annually, and this is used as a basis for re-contracting every year. In the future, the EBP may consider adopting an alternative approach and actively using Performance Improvement Notices (PINs) to provide a collaborative and supportive approach to performance management. (3d.2)
- The EBP, in conjunction with the Partners review each phase of each programme delivery, and takes into consideration feedback from all stakeholders; young people, parents, the Trust and Partners, which subsequently informs improvements to the delivery of the service. In the future, the supply chain may benefit from formalising this approach and developing an overarching Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), which becomes a log for the supply chain indicating how the service delivery has evolved and improved over a period of time. (4a.2, 3d.6)
- Partners provided anecdotal evidence which indicated the impact of the service on the commissioner's wider social objectives and the positive impact on external stakeholders, including the young people and employee well-being. In the future, this could be formalised through undertaking a full social impact evaluation, and sharing the findings

with the different stakeholders to demonstrate the difference being made as a result of the supply chain (as a whole) delivering the service. (4a.4, 4a.6)

Areas Requiring Significant Development

Although the Merlin Standard overall has been achieved with a Satisfactory outcome, there are a number of criterion within the requirements of the Standard where limited evidence was presented and require significant development in order to support the organisation to achieve excellence in supply chain partnership working. The numbers in brackets cross-reference the findings to the relevant element and criteria of the Merlin Standard.

- The EBP was awarded a three-year contract with the Trust (2015 – 2018), and subsequently opted to contract annually with its Partners. This approach has created many challenges for the Partners over the past two-years including the planning and resourcing of the service delivery, and due to the investment made and uncertainty this has created undue financial risk. In the future, consideration could be made to adopting the same contracting arrangements to that of the Prime and commissioner, and use a different approach to performance management to ensure expectations are met by the Partners. (2c.2)
- In the early stages of the contract Partners were aware of the market share, which was viable. Throughout the life of the contract the transparency and viability of the market share has not been as explicit for some Partners. Consequently, consideration could be made to being far more open and transparent regarding the market share allocated across the supply chain, including the direct delivery. (2c.4)
- The Trust expects growth year-on-year, which is imposed on the Prime. Subsequently, the Prime has passed this expectation onto the Partners despite concern expressed in relation to their capacity. Partners spoke of no negotiations for 2017 – 2018, and subsequently fail to believe that the EBP took their requirements into consideration pre-contract award. In the future, consideration could be made to being far more open and acknowledge and take into consideration Partner's requirements, and negotiate volumes, funding / finance and performance expectations. (2c.5, 2c.6)
- A management fee is charged by the EBP, however, due to 'commercial sensitivity' it has decided not to share this fee with its Partners. Consequently, whilst Partners are aware that the unit price is 'top sliced' which forms the management fee they are unsure of this value. However, they could cite services they perceived to receive from the Prime. In the future, consideration could be made to being open and transparent regarding the management fee and providing an indication of what is provided in return. (2c.8)
- Previously, Partners were confident to raise issues and concerns with EBP staff and felt their voice was heard and resolutions identified. However, due to the approach taken throughout the contracting for 2017 - 2018, they fail to believe their voice is being heard. At the time of the assessment the EPB failed to have a written dispute resolution / complaints process whereby Partners could escalate issues and concerns. Consequently, consideration could be made to developing and communicating a dispute resolution process, which clearly indicates how they can escalate their issues, concerns and frustrations. (3c.2)

- Throughout due diligence activity and throughout the annual document review, the EPB collects a range of policies and procedures including that relating to environmental sustainability. The EBP has a strategy to embed environmental sustainability throughout the supply chain, however, to date this has failed to be a focus. In the future, consideration could be made to discussing and agreeing environmental sustainability targets for the supply chain, which are subsequently monitored throughout the life of the contract. (3b.7, 4a.6)

6. Findings Against the Merlin Standard

1) Supply Chain Design

1a) Supply Chain Design

The EBP successfully gained the NCS contract for a three-year period starting 2015 and as a result has not had to tender for the programme since the initial Merlin assessment in October 2015. However, the organisation continues to bid for additional funding to deliver services which contribute to its vision and purpose. This is fundamentally to provide young people with additional support and opportunities to develop them holistically; social skills and those required to prepare them for the workplace.

When bidding for additional funding, the EBP gains a full understanding of the commissioners' objectives for the service to be provided to ensure it is aligned to its overarching aim. It subsequently undertakes extensive research to establish key factors and collect relevant data, for example, potential type customers in scope, demographics, an understanding of the region, indicative numbers, outcomes required, etc. In addition, information is gathered in relation to other stakeholder's aims, objectives, needs and potential involvement, for example, schools, employers, Local Authorities (LAs), Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), etc. This provides information that informs a delivery model, and consideration is made to both direct delivery and the use of a supply chain. Since 2015 the organisation has opted to use a direct delivery approach for the contracts tendered, which utilises the knowledge, skills and experience of the staff.

The EBP continues to work with organisations from the public, private and community based sectors in order to deliver services to meet the needs of the customer groups and the requirements of the commissioner. It is recognised that having positive working relationships with local, regional and national organisations and agencies contribute to providing customers (young people) with the holistic support.

Currently, those Partners within the NCS supply chain are social enterprises / third sector organisations. The reason for using Partners of this nature was due to the alignment to the vision and purpose, as well as the core values of the EBP; a genuine desire to contribute to developing the skills of young people and preparing them for the future. The approach taken by the EBP does not preclude those organisations from the private or public sector, however, past experience and performance with the customer group, and alignment to its aims and core values would be taken into consideration, which is evidenced within the Expression of Interest (EOI).

The EBP use a range of wider networks to influence the design and delivery of the services, for example, as previously stated, schools, colleges, employers, LAs, LEPs, as well as Youth Boards and the commissioner. Within the NCS contract Partners actively work with schools and colleges in their area to recruit the young people onto the programme. In addition, a number of charities and voluntary organisations at local level are sought and utilised to support the delivery of the community based activity.

Partners are encouraged to identify local organisations and agencies to provide appropriate ad-hoc support to the young people with differing needs, for example, mental health, special education support needs, etc. The aim being to deal with numerous barriers often faced by young people in today's society in order for them to achieve their ambitions, and to have a positive experience.

2) Commitment

2a) Collaboration, Cooperation and Communication

The EBP undertook the procurement process in 2015 to develop the supply chain to deliver the NCS programme and subsequently has had no requirement to complete a full procurement of this nature since. However, in 2016 opened up a tender period with the aim of gaining additional Partners, which was promoted through the website and emails. An EOI was issued to all interested parties, which provided an indication of the contractual requirements and measures to enable them to make an informed decision to tender. Throughout the process support was available to respond to queries either verbally or via the telephone.

The EBP host monthly Partner meetings with the aim of providing updates, sharing good practice and successes, as well as the challenges, and this often provides a platform whereby Partners are consulted to review the systems and processes. Some Partners made reference to the lengthy process of reporting incidents, which was reviewed and updated as well as changes to the payment process, which was historically complicated. Two-years ago (at the time of the initial assessment) consultation was taking place relating to booking accommodation for young people. Originally this was undertaken centrally, however, following consultation Partners started and continue to book their own accommodation. More recently, some Partners had been invited to express their opinions regarding potential improvements to the Sales Force CRM.

The EBP actively encourages collaborative working and as a result, the direct delivery team is involved in Partner meetings and encouraged to work with others on a day-to-day basis. In addition, there was evidence of some Partners working well together; supporting recruitment activities and sharing practices. However, there continued to be evidence of some Partners failing to have trust in others, and consequently consideration could be made to addressing this issue.

Partners confirmed that the communication channels with the Regional Coordinators are clear and there is no ambiguity regarding the business relationships, despite some personnel changes over the past two years. They confirmed that these individuals are readily available and accessible, and subsequently responsive to their needs. They also referred to the Regional Coordinators being open and honest, and they felt they could talk about a wide range of topics without feeling constrained or judged. They confirmed that a high proportion of EBP's staff are professional, friendly and approachable when interacting with them.

A number of Partners referred to the contracting activities that took place for the delivery in 2017 - 2018 whereby they felt the process was closed, as opposed to being open and transparent. In addition, some spoke about being contacted by different people for varying information, as opposed to going through the Regional Coordinator, which was frustrating at times. Consequently, the EBP may wish to review these aspects of working with Partners in the future, and ensure communication is via one channel, open, honest and without unreasonable constraint.

2b) Developing Supply Chain Partners

The EBP actively support Partners to deliver the NCS programme and work closely with them to monitor performance, especially throughout the recruitment stage. As a result, a Guidance for Recruitment Plan has been designed with the aim of sharing best practice and providing a typical sales journey. In addition, a number of Partners have undertaken training for Safer Recruitment and subsequently a checklist was designed and distributed to all Partners to support in this area.

Partners referred to the EBP being an additional resource to support with varying functions, for example, Human Resources, marketing, MI, quality and compliance, etc. Whilst others reflected upon the support gained in the early stages to develop their organisation and ensure robust strategies, policies and processes to deliver the contract, and this has subsequently continued throughout the life of the contract. Access to a range of learning and development activities is provided to all Partners to ensure policies and procedures for equality and diversity, health and safety, safeguarding, etc. are fully embedded across the supply chain.

The EBP identify and promote local and regional opportunities to Partners to obtain additional funding / finance streams to enable them to build capacity. This contributes to delivering comprehensive services, diversification and reduces the reliance on the NCS programme. A number of Partners also made reference to being allocated additional volumes over the past two-years, which had contributed to building a sustainable business.

A range of learning and development opportunities are provided for all staff throughout the supply chain, which is inclusive of the direct delivery teams. A full induction and mentor programme is available at the start of an individual's employment, as well as additional support, for example, recruitment methods, marketing approaches, etc. In addition, the EBP provided specific support to address the recruitment of young people with special education needs. The rationale for this approach is to equip delivery staff with the knowledge and skills to undertake the role expected and to enable them to work with the young people to gain the outcome, as well as providing a consistent service to all customers.

Partners also made reference to a range of opportunities to support their people, for example, co-locating in the EBP offices to work with staff on the recruitment of young people, support with Sales Force CRM system, compliance requirements, managing behaviour, etc. In addition, specific activities had been identified and provided, for example, autism awareness, social media, body talk, to mention a few.

2c) Contracting and Funding

Partners confirmed that in 2015, at the start of their working relationship the procurement activities, including communications from the EBP was a fair and transparent process. They were aware that all applications were scored at each stage and feedback was provided indicating successful / unsuccessful application. Successful partners explained that due diligence was thorough and felt well supported throughout the process. A range of meetings with representatives of the EBP were undertaken to ensure all Partners clearly understood the requirements of the contract, including roles and responsibilities, personnel involved, performance expectations, market share, volumes, financial reward, etc. Partner comments included: *"Procurement was open honest and transparent."* *"EBP pride themselves on good communications – we know where we stand."*

At the start of the contract the funding / payment model was reflective of that of the Trust's model, which Partners felt was fair and proportionate. However, throughout the life of the contract the contracting arrangements have become more difficult; the EBP were successful in gaining a three-year contract with the Trust, but opted to issue annual contracts to Partners. The rationale being to focus on performance and re-contract with those Partners performing in line with expectations in subsequent years. Partners have accepted this in order to remain in the supply chain and offer the programme as part of their portfolio as it contributes to their purpose. However, it hinders their investment and ability to recruit and train high calibre staff, due to the need to issue annual contracts to staff, and in some cases, this puts them at financial risk.

Each Partner underwent a comprehensive pre-contract meeting to review the detail of the written contract, which Partners valued as they clearly understood the contractual requirements and performance expectations, as well as volumes and finance arrangements. Subsequently, written contracts are issued on an annual basis, and Partners referred to these as being; *"Very 'black and white' everything is covered in a document – no innovation – totally driven by the Trust."* *"The contract is a flow down, it's complicated but clear."* *"Everything is in there, nothing is missed."*

As previously stated, in the early stages of the contract the market share was perceived to be viable and transparent, and Partners understood the rationale. Historically, negotiations took place regarding volumes and performance expectations, however, this is currently perceived as dictatorial by a number of Partners. Whilst the Partners understand the requirements of the Trust in terms of growth they fail to understand why the EBP subsequently impose that growth on its current supply chain. Some Partners made reference to the EBP 'leaving the door open' for re-negotiation in January, but believe this is too late. As a result, a number of Partners fail to believe their requirements were taken into consideration throughout the past contracting period, which the EBP may like to address in the short term.

Partners confirmed that the invoice / claims process is straight-forward following improvements over the past two-years, and all payments had been made according to pre-contract agreement. Whilst one Partner had experienced a late payment, confirmation was gained that this was managed well with good communications providing appropriate updates took place.

Partners are aware of the unit price paid throughout the current year, and whilst the EBP fail to be transparent regarding the management fee they are aware there will be a charge for the resources and support provided throughout the life of the contract, for example, training, performance management, quality and compliance, etc.

3) Conduct

3a) Demonstrating Commercial and Business Integrity

In 2015 the core values of the EBP, which had been adopted by the supply chain were Passionate, Proud, Principled, Share Best Practice and Focus on the Young. At that time Partners explained their purpose and values were aligned and complementary to those of the EBP and as a result one of the reasons for opting to enter the supply chain. Partners made reference to the values being reviewed at the last monthly meeting and feedback was provided to representatives of EBP, which may influence future ways of working within the supply chain. Consequently, once these have been agreed and communicated those core values should govern the way the supply chain operates in the future.

The EBP has a strategy to manage TUPE, it has internal expertise and would seek legal advice, if required. To date there has been no requirement to implement the strategy for the NCS programme, and consequently, as in 2015 the effectiveness of the strategy was not assessed throughout this assessment. However, confirmation was provided that the TUPE strategy would be mobilised, where appropriate, in the future.

Partners made reference to the professional relationship with the Regional Coordinators and the fact that these individuals are positive and supportive on a day-to-day basis and there had been a move away from the micro-management that was previously in place. Whilst often there are a number of pressures Partners believe that it is a trusted partnership, which has evolved over the past two-years.

The policies and procedures required to ensure Partners are working in line with the legislative and regulatory requirements are reviewed on an annual basis to ensure they are fit for purpose. Appropriate updates / changes relating to legislative and regulatory requirements are communicated via email, newsletter and / or weekly and monthly meetings. Subsequently, the Regional Coordinators are responsible for checking the understanding and implementation of the requirements, for example, some Partners made reference to the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which becomes effective in 2018 and as a result has to be addressed in preparation.

Similarly, any updates / changes to the contractual requirements are communicated via email or the monthly Trust newsletter and later discussed with the Regional Coordinators to ensure a level of understanding and the requirements are addressed.

3b) Quality Assurance and Compliance

The quality assurance policies and processes have become far more embedded over the past two-years. The full pre-programme audit ensures that policies and procedures, including critical incident plan and contingency planning are clearly defined to assure the health, safety, welfare and safeguarding of the young people, which are part of the contractual requirements. An audit of each phase of the delivery continues to be completed, which provides the opportunity to review the health and safety of the premises and activities being delivered and observe staff interacting with the young people. In addition, EBP staff observe the behaviours of the delivery staff with the young people and interview / chat with the young people and delivery staff to check understanding of key policies and procedures, for example, health and safety, safeguarding etc. and to gain feedback on their experience.

Partners confirmed their understanding of quality assurance activities and compliance requirements. Some Partners inferred that they felt the policies and processes were not proportionate and over the top, whilst others recognised the importance due to the nature of the service being delivered.

The findings of each audit are shared with Partners, either instantaneously due to the potential risk to young people and / or at the end of the programme to influence improvements to future programmes. Some examples gained throughout the assessment included, the need to update the critical incident plan, implementation of Safer Recruitment, as well as action to be taken to ensure paperwork is compliant and meets the contractual requirements of the commissioner.

As indicated previously, an audit of different policies and procedures is undertaken at the start of each programme, and some findings following the observations of the information, advice and guidance provided at the recruitment stage resulted in changes to the slides been used for a school assembly, as well as the need to address the sound system. A review of the NCS Activity Timetable also resulted in a number of Partners receiving feedback from the EBP and the Trust to ensure these were fit for purpose. It was also identified that some team leaders were experiencing an issue with planning and as a result project planners were introduced.

Partners believe the information, advice and guidance received from the EBP is appropriate and accurate as it is cascaded from reliable sources, for example, the Trust. Partners also made reference to the advice and guidance provided in order to develop policies and procedures that are fit for purpose, for example, critical incident plan. Some Partners also made reference to support gained to complete the cost component report to ensure the correct information was provided, which could be used by the EBP.

The policies and procedures to address data and asset security, health and safety, safeguarding and environmental sustainability were collected throughout due diligence, and subsequently collected annually with visits undertaken to the different sites. In the case of data and asset security the EBP is working towards ISO27001 accreditation and as a result encourages its Partners to adopt a robust approach. The Sales Force CRM is the system adopted by the Trust, which sets out the guidelines for usage, in addition, Partners are expected to ensure encryption of information, adopt a clear process for the storage of documentation within an agreed timescale, adopt a clear desk philosophy as well as ensure all cabinets are locked and penetration tests undertaken.

There is equally a robust approach adopted to ensure health and safety and safeguarding policies and procedures are implemented, which is of utmost importance to the Trust as the NCS programme attracts many young people who may be subject to such issues. The annual visits to the premises include a risk assessment of the health and safety requirements for delivery staff, whilst the visits to each phase of each programme reviews the environment which is used by the young people. Once again, findings are documented and fed back to the Partner, immediately and / or throughout the end of programme review. One example gained throughout the assessment was an issue with the risk assessment for the social action project, as a result, guidance was provided to enable Partners to complete risk assessments for this phase of the programme which was fit for purpose. Whilst another Partner referred to support provided to improve the entry and exit signage to the premises being used for an event.

The EBP requires all Partners to conduct Safer Recruitment practices and to carry out a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check for all delivery staff. In addition, it is expected that all staff are in receipt of appropriate training to ensure they understand the policies and procedures, including the reporting requirements for safeguarding, which is documented on the Sales Force CRM along with other details relating to them. The observations whilst undertaking the site visits and discussions with the young people identify any initial concerns relating to safeguarding, and subsequently the incident reporting is closely monitored and if necessary the EBP get involved. The services of a health and safety and safeguarding professional are fully utilised throughout the delivery of the programme to provide the EBP and Partners with appropriate advice and guidance when required.

EBP confirmed that it has an environmental sustainability policy, which is implemented throughout the business, and includes key targets for the NCS programme, for example, move towards centralised website and a paperless office; working towards 100% of sign-ups being completed on line, which is currently 30%-40%. The EBP collects Partner's environmental policies throughout due diligence and the annual document review, however, to date has failed to embed and monitor environmental sustainability throughout the supply chain. Consequently, consideration could be made to promoting the move towards on line sign-ups and monitor Partner's performance against the overarching target.

The monthly partner meetings provide the platform for the sharing of best practice between the EBP delivery staff and the Partners. Partners made reference to a number of ideas that have been gained as a result, for example, 'keeping warm' tips, development of a presentation, etc. The sharing of good practice also influenced the change in the critical incident forms and process, and through the identification of trends throughout 2017 consideration is being made to requirement plans, guidance notes, etc. The Regional Coordinators will identify good practice throughout the weekly Partner calls, and subsequently relays those to other Partners, with permission.

3c) Honouring Commitments

Whilst Partners expressed concern over the recent contracting negotiations they confirmed that the EBP was very clear and open in its approach, and explained the rationale; the expectations of growth from the Trust. Subsequently, the volumes, finance / funding arrangements and performance expectations that were agreed are accurately reflected in the contract.

Any variations / changes to the contract are discussed with Partners, and on occasions some negotiations have taken place. As a result, these have been verbally agreed and documented to ensure all parties clearly understand the future expectations.

Partners were not currently aware of a complaints procedure, previously they were confident to discuss issues with the Regional Coordinator in the first instance, including grievances, and believed that these would be resolved. Whilst the working relationship with the Regional Coordinators continues to be good, Partners fail to believe their issues are being addressed effectively and the lack of a formal complaint process is frustrating. Consequently, the EBP should consider designing a dispute resolution / complaints process for Partners to formally escalate issues and concerns.

The EBP confirmed that if it was found not to be operating in line with the Trust's code of conduct or behaved inappropriately it would respect any decisions made by enforcing bodies, for example, the Independent Case Examiner, Merlin Mediation Service, etc.

The pre-contract meeting, the communications prior and post contract live and supporting contractual documentation provide Partners with a clear indication of each other's expectations (Partner and the EBP) before, during and after contract award. In addition, the performance related discussions focus both parties on the expectations for the forthcoming period of time.

3d) Performance

The EBP direct delivery team is managed in exactly the same way as Partners, and as a result they are encouraged to work collaboratively across the supply chain to improve performance. The league tables indicate the performance of each Partner, including direct delivery and as a result this encourages the sharing of successes across the network to contribute to the overarching targets. The Partner meetings provide the opportunity for Partners to identify ways of working together to further improve performance, for example, marketing campaigns, recruitment activities, etc.

A weekly telephone call is hosted with Partners to review performance of the previous week and establish the plans / activities for the forthcoming. These discussions also include a review of the MI, audits and training requirements and forthcoming events. The monthly Partner meetings provide the opportunity for the Partners to review the league table; over and under performance, the performance of the supply chain in its entirety and establish plans for the month ahead.

At the end of each programme, for example, summer, a full review of the delivery provides the opportunity for the Regional Coordinators to meet with Partners to establish what went well and areas for improvement, which influences the plans for the next programme. In addition, an annual contract meeting provides the time to review areas of over and under performance, and reflect upon the challenges and issues faced throughout the year, and subsequently agree the contract for the forthcoming year.

It is evident that performance is closely monitored at regular intervals, and time is allocated to raise issues and concerns, as well as recognising and supporting innovation, which Partners valued. However, more recently a number of Partners believe the EBP has become too performance orientated, and as a result focus on the negative as opposed to what is going well. It may be timely for the EBP to adopt formal Performance Improvement Plans (PINs), which promotes collaborative, supportive and positive working relationships.

The annual contracting meeting, contractual documentation, Partner meetings and performance reviews on a weekly and monthly basis provide Partners with clearly defined performance expectations and measurements. One Partner comment included: *"EPB are understanding but very clear about expectations."*

The Sales Force CRM system provides Partners with access to daily MI as well as a host of monthly reports, which contributes to managing the performance of the contract. Partners have become familiar with the system over the past two-years and believe that the information provided is consistently accurate and reports against the key targets by which they are measured.

Partners also made reference to other information that was readily available, for example, school timetables, geographical pick-up points, as well as report on the number of events, sign up and success rates, etc. The league table is generated on a monthly basis, and provides Partners with an indication of how they are performing against others in the supply chain, including the performance of the direct delivery team.

A few of the Partners defined value for money as 'cost effective delivery model that supports the customers' and others spoke of the booking of their own accommodation, which provides greater flexibility on location and it is perceived that better rates are gained; delivering value for money. Whilst all Partners prepare a cost component report at the end of each programme there continues to be a lack of consistent understanding regarding the value for money provided across the contract.

The robust approach to performance management highlights trends and any improvements in performance especially after key activities, for example, marketing campaigns and recruitment activities. The monthly Partner meetings subsequently provide the opportunity to review performance; peaks and troughs and identify further actions to be undertaken.

The Sales Force CRM provides the platform to establish the progress / journey of young people from a warm lead, sign-up through to participation and graduation. This is also monitored by the Partners, and satisfaction levels are analysed at the close of each programme, which informs future improvements.

3e) Promoting Diversity and Equality

Equality and diversity is embedded within the EBP, and it promotes social inclusion when delivering services. Consequently, it is of high importance to the EBP that the Partner's policies and procedures relating to equality and diversity are aligned, which is reviewed throughout due diligence.

The Trust has set a key target relating to the social mix of young people participating in the NCS programme and links a 5% payment of the contract value to that mix. The aim being to gain social integration, which encourages young people to develop an understanding of the different cultures, religions, starting point, etc. As a result, whilst promotion of the programme tends to be within schools and colleges and open to every young person, consideration is also made to ensuring gender, ethnicity, special education needs, etc. are appropriately recognised and recruited. Consequently, the recruitment of young people is constantly monitored to ensure the programme attracts a diverse range of individuals, which are also representative of the demographics of the delivery areas.

Data relating to Equal Opportunities is collected via Sales Force, which is subsequently analysed and used, and often influences promotion of the service, for example, there are currently a higher number of female participants, and as a result, the EBP and Partners are seeking to work with specific clubs, for example, football with the aim of attracting male participation. Other examples gained throughout the assessment was the need to increase participation of Eastern European young people, and as a result a leaflet has been changed to incorporate this group with the aim of attracting these individuals, and another Partner is seeking to increase the number of participants with learning and physical challenges and as a result working with special education schools.

4. Review

4a) Supply Chain Review

The EBP has identified the various stakeholders involved in the delivery of the NCS programme, which includes the Trust, young people, parents / carers, and schools and colleges. As a result, feedback is gained through a variety of methods from the different stakeholders. The Trust initiates a 'rant and rave' text facility to gain instantaneous feedback from young people and parents / carers, which provides an indication of thoughts and feelings and an overall score. In addition, a satisfaction survey is sent to all young people whereby in-depth feedback is gained, as well as a net promoter and sentiment score. The in-depth feedback gained through the survey has influenced improvements to different phases of the programme over the life of the NCS programme.

Feedback is gained from the regional Youth Board, as well as schools and colleges to establish what young people need from the programme to ensure they gain the necessary skills to prepare them for further education and / or employment. A monthly meeting with a Trust Contract Manager provides the opportunity to review performance of the supply chain and discuss and agree appropriate improvements, for example, developing a centralised sales function, providing more structure to phase two of the programme, etc.

Continuous improvement is at the heart of the EBP and as a result, it undertook a health check against the Merlin Standard in October 2016 and continues to be assessed on a voluntary basis against the Standard. In addition, the organisation is assessed against the Investors in People Standard every three years, which influences improvements to people management and learning and development practices. The organisation is also working with the principles of the ISO27001 Standard.

A NCS Handbook was provided to all Partners at the start of the contract, which outlined the wider social objectives of the Trust. Over the past two-years the Partner meetings have been used to reaffirm the wider policy and appropriate information, and provide relevant updates. Subsequently, activities have been planned and executed to align the supply chain to the expectations, for example, ensuring the social impact project meets specific criteria to achieve the outcomes for the young people.

The NCS programme aims to encourage young people to develop into responsible citizens, acquiring the knowledge and skills to prepare them for the future and who are engaged in their local community. Partners were able to provide extensive anecdotal outcomes and explained that there were a number of case studies regarding the impact on young people. Some Partner comments included:

"It's a real confidence builder, you see a change in so many young people."

"We've had a number of young people start as introverts, and leave full of confidence."

"The skills some of these young people have gained, including marketing and campaigning."

"The young people know about social media, but this took it to the next level."

"The Youth Board provides young people with an extension of the programme and they become ambassadors."

In addition, reference was made to the contribution of the social action project, for example, x hours spent giving back to the community, £x raised by specific groups of young people, raising awareness of specific issues through campaigning, for example, hate crime. Also, the impact on the recipients of the social action projects, for example, brighter and cleaner environments, safer place to live, etc. Some Partner comments included:

"There is an appetite to give back and get involved in local projects."

"One group designed a sensory garden for young people with disabilities, it was great."

"Young people being so much aware of the local area and charities, and then gone onto volunteering."

"I think 30% have gone onto doing volunteering, which was the target."

Partners and the EBP made reference to the impact on employees, for example, transferring to the programme, utilising their knowledge, skills and experience, as well as undertaking further development and in some cases advancing their career. Within the EBP, the number of staff involved in managing and providing administrative support to the supply chain has increased over the past two-years, and additional offices have been opened to raise the profile of the organisation in the two locations outside of Lincolnshire; Northamptonshire and Leicestershire, hence providing employment opportunities to individuals.

Whilst there was evidence of an impact on the wider social objectives and the different stakeholders, a far more robust and formal approach to measuring the social impact could be undertaken to establish the difference the programme makes to the different stakeholders and local communities.

In the event of a Partner leaving the supply chain a contingency plan is in place; currently the EBP has capacity internally to deliver the programme directly due to other contracts coming to a close. Alternatively, the key Partners would be approached with a view to increasing their market share within the respective area of delivery.

In 2016 a mini tender was undertaken with the aim of attracting additional Partners to the NCS supply chain to meet the contractual requirements. Two potential Partners were identified and subsequently plans are progressing to bring one into the Supply Chain in preparation for summer 2018.

7. Conclusion

The Education Business Partnership (Leicestershire and Rutland) continue to meet the requirements of the Merlin Standard. The key areas of strength were found to be within elements 'Developing Supply Chain Partners', 'Quality Assurance and Compliance' and 'Promoting Diversity and Equality'. Whilst a number of areas for improvement were found the main aspects to be addressed over the forthcoming years are within the 'Contracting' and 'Honouring Commitments' elements.

In September 2019, the Education Business Partnership, in line with the Merlin requirements will be expected to undertake a further review in order to retain the accreditation against the Standard. Consequently, consideration could be made to building upon its current strengths identified throughout this assessment and make improvements as recommended. Whilst the Education Business Partnership may benefit from undertaking a health check in September 2018 (as undertaken in 2016) it may be worth working with a registered Advisor in preparation for the re-accreditation to gain guidance in preparing the Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ). This approach would provide an indication of how to develop an effective SAQ, which is supported with a range of examples to demonstrate the effectiveness of supply chain design, management and review.

Whilst the accreditation is for a two-year period, if additional contracts are awarded (by any commissioner) to the Education Business Partnership whereby a substantial supply chain is required and subsequently used to deliver the service it may be deemed necessary to undertake a strategic review, or a full assessment to ensure the organisation continues to behave in line with the principles of the Standard.

Assessment Type	ASSESSMENT REVIEW
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Lead Assessor's Name	LORNA BAINRBIDGE
Visit Date	02/10/2017 – 03/10/2017
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