

The



merlin standard

2018

ADVANCE (EMPLOYMENT)

COMPACT REPORT

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1. KEY INFORMATION

Assessment Type	TWO-YEAR REACCREDITATION
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Lead Assessor's Name	LORNA BAINBRIDGE
Visit Date	12/02/2018
Client ID	C18520
Assessment Reference	PN103359

2. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

OVERALL OUTCOME	71% GOOD
1. Design	70% (Good)
2. Procure	60% (Satisfactory)
3. Contract	80% (Good)
4. Funding	60% (Satisfactory)
5. Develop	67% (Satisfactory)
6. Performance Manage	83% (Good)
7. Quality Assurance and Compliance	80% (Good)
8. Review and Close	68% (Satisfactory)

3. METHODOLOGY

Advance (Employment) continues to be mandated by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to be accredited against the Merlin Standard due to being a delivery partner (Prime) for the Work Choice Programme. Primes are required to be reaccredited every two-years and consequently the organisation opted to undertake the assessment prior to the expiry of accreditation.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor) and Ruth Regan (Team Assessor) supported by a coordinator from within Advance (Employment). The Lead Assessor started to work with the coordinator in December 2017 to establish the scope and discuss the logistics of the assessment. The dates for the on-site were identified and a plan of action agreed.

A booking form was submitted to Assessment Services Limited along with a spread-sheet indicating a full list of supply chain partners; past and present partners delivering an end-to-end service. Currently there are no potential partners.

The survey was not sent to the partners listed on the spreadsheet as 100% of the supply chain was to be interviewed. The Lead Assessor was in regular contact with the coordinator prior to the on-site activity to review the schedule and logistics. All documentation required for the assessment; Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ), Pre-Assessment Notes (PAN) and schedule were shared within the agreed time-scale.

The assessment team spent a total of 1.5 days (0.75day each) reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews with Advance staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chains. As previously stated, 100% of the end-to-end partners were interviewed to establish the extent and effectiveness of supply chain management. The past partner was also interviewed with a focus on the exit strategy.

The following compact report provides an overview of the findings against key criteria within the Merlin Standard, areas of strength and areas to consider for development over the forthcoming two-years.

4. ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

Advance Housing and Support Ltd (Trading as Advance) a Third-Sector, Not for Profit Organisation is based in Whitney, Oxfordshire. It puts people at the heart of everything they do; Advance support thousands of people, including those with a range of disabilities; physical and learning, and those with mental health issues. These may impact people at home, at work or in the community; the aim being to enable people to live the life they choose, however varied or complex that life may be. Advance makes a difference through a combination of specialist knowledge, experience working in local areas, and by supporting customers and their families to shape services.

Advance's vision is 'to transform the lives of people with disability or mental health condition by providing the best quality housing, support and employment services – to enable them to live the lives they choose, achieve their personal goals, feel valued and know their voices are heard'. This is underpinned by a set of core values; PRIDE – Partnership, Respect, Innovation, Drive and Efficiency.

Since 2010, Advance (Employment) a division within Advance have been delivering the Work Choice programme in Solihull, Birmingham and the Black Country (Contract Package Area 17) on behalf of the DWP. The aim of Work Choice is to provide a voluntary, tailored, coherent range of specialist employment services which can respond more flexibly to the individual needs of disabled people and their employers, and make better use of resources.

In October 2015 a contract extension was secured by Advance for an additional 18 months and DWP expected Advance to gain accreditation against the Merlin Standard within six months, which was achieved in February 2016. At that time Advance subcontracted 48% of the service delivery to a network of four Partners from the public and third sector.

In September 2017, a further extension was gained, which will take the organisation through to March 2019, however, from December 2017 no new referrals are to be gained. Currently, Advance the Prime deliver 62% of the contract and work with three Partners delivering 38%. (Landau 20%, Sandwell Metropolitan Council 15% and Autism West Midlands 3%)

5. AREAS OF SIGNIFICANT STRENGTH

A number of significant strengths were identified throughout the Merlin Reaccreditation Assessment and summaries of these are given below. The numbers in brackets refer to the criteria of the Standard to which the areas relate.

The Advance values were discussed with the Partners once they had been released, and the behaviours defined in terms of how the supply chain would operate. Subsequently Partners believe that these govern the way the supply chain operates and that the customer is at the heart of the service delivery with equality and diversity been valued and embedded in its operational practices. (1.5)

Despite a number of staff changes over the past six months, Partners confirmed that there were clear communication channels to ensure that there is clarity in the business relationship. They had a main point of contact and were also aware of other staff whereby they could gain appropriate support. The staff were responsive to their needs and created a culture whereby communication is open, honest and without unreasonable constraint. Partners also confirmed that interactions between them and Advance have remained positive and supportive throughout the life of the contract. (6.1, 6.2)

Partners confirmed that the management information system – Maytas, produces a range of reports which meet their needs, are accurate and contribute to driving performance. Performance was being managed effectively through clear, two-way channels, which included weekly tele-kits and monthly one-to-one meetings. These provided Partners with the opportunity to review progress against targets, as well as raise issues and concerns, and gain recognition for their achievements, good practices and innovative ideas. (6.3, 6.4)

Advance implement an inclusive process for generating an annual Self-Assessment Report (SAR) which is resultant in a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). Partners recognised their contribution to the process and confirmed this provided a formal mechanism to review performance, compliance and quality assurance practices. Partner's QIP is subsequently reviewed throughout the audit cycle, which ensures this is a working document. (6.7)

Policies, processes and activities are implemented by Advance to ensure compliance and quality of service delivery and, where appropriate, this includes the customer experience. Whilst a robust approach this is valued by the Partners as findings are used to inform improvements to the service delivery and to ensure they are compliant throughout the life of the contract. (7.2)

Advance have adopted effective methods of providing impartial, effective and timely Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) throughout the supply chain and assure the IAG being provided by Partners' delivery staff. These practices included frequent observations and a review of diary notes throughout file checks. In addition, clear and robust strategies, policies and processes are in place to maintain effective information security, health and safety and safeguarding. This ranges from annual due diligence through to observation of premises and working environment when visits are made by different personnel. (7.3, 7.4)

6. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Advance achieved a 'good' rating against the Merlin Standard and there were a number of strengths identified throughout the Reaccreditation Assessment. However, there were some areas to consider for development to contribute to continuous improvement and summaries of these are given below. The numbers in brackets cross-reference the findings to the relevant element and criteria of the Merlin Standard.

Advance have encouraged the use of wider networks and have recently invested in a Partnership Lead to identify appropriate organisations and agencies to support the delivery of the service. Currently, Partners tended to cite their own arrangements as opposed to those provided centrally. In the future, consideration could be made to proactively promoting the use of these organisations and agencies to meet the changing needs of customers. (1.2)

In the past two years the organisation has had limited opportunities to design a supply chain and procure Partners. As a result, in the event of successfully gaining a contract as a Prime provider it will be necessary to implement the strategy, systems and processes to design and procure a supply chain in a proactive, open and transparent manner. Subsequently consideration could be made to reviewing the approach to supply chain design and procurement inform future practices and improvements. (1.3, 2.1, 2.3)

Whilst Advance made every effort to communicate their approach to fees charged for managing the contract following the assessment in 2016, Partners continue to lack a clear understanding of the range of services gained. Consequently, consideration could be made to alternative methods of communicating their approach and explain the full suite of services provided by Advance together with an explanation of what fees Advance have received over the lifetime of the contract, including the fact that Advance are currently not in receipt of any payments. (4.3)

A range of learning and development needs have been identified and provided throughout the life of the contract; from mobilisation to present. Whilst the activities have been relevant and supported the development of staff to deliver the service, in the future, consideration could be made to being far more proactive and undertake a training needs analysis. This could be at the start of a contract and at various stages to address the changing needs of staff. Subsequently, it may be beneficial to evaluate the impact of the learning and development on the performance of individuals and the contract. (5.1, 5.3)

A strength of the partnership is the open, honest and transparent communications, which takes place formally and informally. Due to staff changes the type and frequency of meetings has changed / varied over recent months, and as a result, it may be timely to review in consultation with Partners future opportunities (formal and informal) to meet, both on a one-to-one and group basis. This may contribute to ensuring two-way communications continue to be encouraged and Partners to feel well supported throughout the final stages of the contract. (6.3, 8.5)

As previously stated Advance have clear and robust strategies, policies and processes in place to maintain effective IAG, information security, health and safety and safeguarding. In the future, a similar approach could be adopted to ensure environmental sustainability is addressed with Partners, including the setting and monitoring of performance against measurable objectives and targets. (7.4)

Positive steps have been taken to address the requirements of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 by both Advance and its Partners. Subsequently, Advance is encouraged to implement its plans regarding future procurement activities and ongoing due diligence to ensure that both parties fully comply with the requirements. In addition, consideration could be made to providing learning and development activities to staff; direct and supply chain, to ensure a full understanding of the requirements and their role throughout due diligence and compliance activities. (7.5)

There were many examples of Partners having a measurable impact on the wider social objectives and / or policy intent of the commissioner, however, these tended to be anecdotal and at Partner level, as opposed to supply chain. In the future, consideration could be made to formalising the approach to monitoring and evaluating the impact Partners and the supply chain has on the wider social objectives and / or policy intent of the commissioner and subsequently share these across the supply chain. (8.2)

Advance and its Partners promote equality and diversity at every opportunity due to the customer group they seek to engage with. The data relating to equality and diversity is collected and reported in line with the commissioner's requirements. The data has subsequently been analysed and used to inform improvements throughout the life of the relationship, for example, delivery has changed to address the needs of customers with mental health issues. However, a far more robust approach could be considered in terms of frequency of analysing and using the data, and engaging Partners in that exercise with the aim of identifying trends and areas for improvement at local and regional levels. (8.4)

A process to handle the end of the relationship with a Partner has been prepared and agreed on a case-by-case basis, including timely communication and documentation sharing. In the future, as the Work Choice programme comes to a close, consideration could be made to establishing the approach and a timescale to be adopted to ensure the relationship comes to a mutual close and compliance and quality expectations met throughout that period of time. (8.5)

7. FINDINGS

Advance opted to have a compact report which provides feedback against key criteria within the Merlin Standard. This is aligned to the Plan, Do, Review business cycle.

PLAN
<p>Through planning an effective supply chain, the range of partners and how they are engaged ensures there is a group of organisations that cover a diverse range of providers that all understand the requirements of the contract and their contributions to achieving the desired outcomes.</p>
<p>Advance clearly understood the commissioner's objectives for Work Choice and recognised the importance of working with a range of organisations to support the delivery of the programme. At the start of the contract Advance engaged with a mix of organisations, which included, local authorities, specialist provision, 3rd sector and a college. There was also a focus on working with organisations that had delivered the Work Step programme. One Partner commented: "...original mix of Supply Chain Partner's worked well."</p> <p>Over the life of the contract a few changes have been made to the make-up of the supply chain, however, the focus continues to be '<i>putting the customer at the heart of the service</i>', and as a result Advance continue to work with different Partners; local authority, registered charity and public sector to ensure the objectives of the commissioner are achieved and customer's needs are addressed.</p> <p>The effectiveness of the supply chain has been reviewed throughout the life of the contract and subsequently Partners have opted to leave, which has predominantly been due to performance issues. However, on every occasion an exit strategy has been designed to ensure customers have continued to experience a positive journey.</p> <p>Advance have a clear strategy, systems and processes to procure Partners, which includes the completion of an Expression of Interest (EOI), a range of meetings, through to due diligence. Partners recollected the procurement process and confirmed that it was '<i>fit for purpose</i>'; communications were effective, and processes were fair and transparent from EOI through to due diligence. One Partner spoke of being invited to events whereby the contract details, funding model, training provision, dates etc. were shared to ensure they gained a clear understanding of what was expected of them from the start.</p> <p>As stated above, meetings were executed prior to the start of the contract to ensure Partners clearly understood what was expected of them. The written contractual documentation; initial Contract and Deed of Variation indicate the performance expectations and subsequently the weekly and monthly meetings are used to discuss performance expectations in more detail. As a result, Partners understood the performance expectations and believed they were achievable at the start, which have been reviewed throughout the life of the contract.</p>

Partners spoke generally of the performance expectations; *"Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) are discussed and split into weekly targets covering starts, leavers, application forms completed, job entry, 13 weeks sustained, long-term sustained, interviews attended etc."*

All Partners confirmed that whilst the contract is 'payment by results', the funding and payment arrangements are fair, proportionate and do not cause undue financial risk. Throughout the life of the contract this has not been revisited, however, Advance would be prepared to discuss any challenges being faced by Partners if it was causing a financial burden.

DO

Supply chain partners are supported to develop their services that meet expected performance and quality assurance requirements.

At the start of the Work Choice programme Advance worked closely with its Partners to ensure they had a clear understanding of the systems and processes, and the requirements in terms of compliance and quality of service delivery. Partners were also supported with the Management Information System on a one-to-one basis as well as flow charts and supporting guides, which are subsequently stored on the extra-net and available for reference.

In 2017, a refresher training was provided to ensure all staff clearly understood the requirements of the contract and were able to follow the customer journey consistently. As new staff are employed appropriate support is provided on a one-to-one basis to ensure they understand the systems and processes, and also have the necessary knowledge and skills.

Subsequently throughout the life of the contract additional learning and development needs have been identified and provided, for example, communications and conflict management, Maytas through to one-to-one on-the-job coaching, which is aimed at supporting staff to develop working practices to meet the performance expectations.

A key strength of Advance, despite the recent changes in staffing is the communications between the Partners and themselves. Over the past two-years staff have worked with Partners and ensured that the interactions have been positive and supportive, as well as being open, honest and without unreasonable constraint. Partners confirmed that they can talk about a wide range of issues and challenges and feel that Advance staff are responsive. Some Partner comments included:

"Personal interactions are great – he is supportive and has come up with some ideas on how we can do things differently."

"We talk openly – always have."

The regular performance reviews; weekly and monthly provide Partners with the opportunity to review progress against key targets, and subsequently discuss and agree a plan for the forthcoming period. The formalisation of the Performance Improvement Planning (PIP) has been welcomed by both parties as it sets out smart objectives and actions and facilitates better working relationships. Partners confirmed that they are able to raise issues and concerns, as well as share their working practices and ideas for improvement. Some Partner comments included:

"We reviewed the last 12 months performance – it was very helpful and open – we looked at patterns in performance, looked for trends – all very honest – we also came up with a plan on what we might do to look for outcomes on claimed."

"Performance was discussed at supply chain meetings – now implemented a weekly call to discuss performance."

Partners made reference to the improvements in the reporting mechanisms over the past two-year; accurate reports from Maytas can be produced as and when required, and subsequently these are used to review and drive performance. One Partner comment included:

"We get what we need from Maytas – it works well."

Partners clearly understand the practices in place to quality assure the delivery of the service, as well as the range of audits to ensure they are been compliant and meeting the commissioner's requirements. They spoke of file audits, security audits, observations, reviews of meetings with staff and meeting notes, checking training undertaken, review of policies and procedures on an annual basis, review of customer feedback, etc. They understood the audit outcomes were RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rated, which determined the frequency of future activities, this approach is valued by Partners as it was proportionate to the requirements. Findings from these activities are shared with Partners, and subsequently followed up to ensure appropriate action taken. Some examples cited included addressing a health and safety issues, as well as those relating to the security of information.

Partners confirmed that the approach to quality and compliance *"sensible, undertaken in a positive tone and attitude and takes into account the situation before giving negative feedback"*. They spoke positively regarding the *"thoroughness, openness to discussion and ongoing support"* from individuals implementing the requirements. Other Partner comments included:

"Audits give us an objective view of how we are doing."

"Approach has changed – now more proportional and frequency of visits based on outcome of last audit."

REVIEW

Review and evaluation is used to demonstrate the impact of the services delivered and continuously improve service delivery.

There was extensive analysis of the number of customers on programme, which was benchmarked against previous years, along with numbers progressing and moving into employment, which has been sustained for 13 weeks and longer. Consequently, there was a recognition that throughout the life of the contract over 1500 customers had moved into employment, which contributed to reducing unemployment in the areas. Some examples included:

In 2015/16 207 customers moved into employment, and in 2016/17 a total of 151, whilst in 2015/16 53% sustained 13weeks employment and 38% sustained for 26weeks. In 2016/17 33% sustained 13weeks employment and 25% sustained for 26weeks

Whilst this was a requirement of the contract it was recognised that customers came from the hard-to-reach / disadvantaged groups and were provided with the opportunity to change their life. Customers gained a level of independence and were less reliant on benefits, they gained confidence, self-worth and social skills, and were included in local communities.

There were many examples provided of Partners having a positive impact on the customer groups, for example (as stated above) gaining / increasing in confidence, self-esteem, independence, travelling, well-being, living better lives. There was evidence of customers feeling healthier due to getting out and about and taking better care of themselves. A recent survey undertaken by Advance indicated that 77% of customers participating in the programme felt physically healthy.

Similarly, there was an awareness of the impact on different stakeholders, for example encouraging parents to 'let go' and promote independence through to staff having the opportunity to work with different customers, gain new knowledge and skills, and job satisfaction for moving customers with a range of complex barriers into employment. A member of Advance staff spoke of gaining a local business award, which raised their spirits and recognised their contribution to local communities.

Employers have also gained from the Partners and their staff by realising the benefits of taking on a disabled person, for example, a customer with a profound disability was employed and able to focus on the job and did not get distracted, employees working with the deaf now doing a 'sign a day' and learning sign language.

Some Partner comments included

"We change people's lives for the better."

"We create case studies giving individual examples of how people have benefited – giving them encouragement to apply for jobs etc."

"I wrote an article for the best practice magazine on the support we give to customers once they are in a job."

8. CONCLUSION

Advance have met the requirements of the Merlin Standard through demonstrating that they have created good working relationships with their Partners and adopted some excellent practices to manage and quality assure the activities of the supply chain effectively.

This assessment provided the opportunity to review the approach adopted by Advance in the way it manages its supply chain. The findings against the principles of the Merlin Standard clearly indicate that the key strengths are in relation to the Design, Performance Manage and Quality Assurance and Compliance Principles. It was evident that Advance responded positively to the feedback from the assessment undertaken in 2016 in terms of formalising the approach to Performance Improvement Planning (PIP), providing robust Management Information and a consistent approach to collecting feedback.

In the future, the key area for improvement is Review and Close, whilst there was evidence of monitoring and evaluating the impact on the wider social objectives, and analysing and using data relating to equality and diversity this could be formalised and the impact measured far more robustly.

In February 2020 Advance will be expected to undertake a further assessment against the Merlin Standard in order to retain the accreditation. In the meantime, please refer to the Conditions of Accreditation for guidance in the event of Advance experiencing substantial change over the forthcoming two years.

9. CONDITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

Holders of the Merlin Standard Accreditation must:

- Maintain and continually improve upon their approach to Supply Chain Management.
- Cooperate with annual Reviews as required by Assessment Services Ltd
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd (merlin@assessmentservices.com) or their Lead Assessor if the key contact name or contact details change.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email:
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd immediately if they gain additional contracts.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received from Supply Chain Partners.
- Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause Assessment Services Ltd and/or the Merlin Standard to be brought into disrepute.
- Only use the Merlin Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines.
- Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for Accreditation Review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by Assessment Services Ltd and do not display the Merlin Standard Quality Mark, nor refer to being a former holder of the Merlin Standard.
- Be aware that Assessment Services Ltd reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.
- Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the Merlin Standard at least 4 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment, completion of the Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ), Pre-Assessment Notes (PAN) and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 2 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.

	
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