



merlin standard

2018

**PEOPLEPLUS GROUP LIMITED**

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## 1. KEY INFORMATION

Assessment Type	ACCREDITATION REVIEW
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Anniversary Date	28/03/2020
Assessment Dates	26/03/2018 – 28/03/2018
Lead Assessor's Name	LORNA BAINBRIDGE
Customer ID	C18591
Assessment Reference	PN103355

## 2. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

<b>OVERALL OUTCOME</b>	<b>83% Good</b>
1. Design	80% Good
2. Procure	93% Excellent
3. Contract	90% Excellent
4. Fund	80% Good
5. Develop	87% Excellent
6. Performance Manage	91% Excellent
7. Quality Assurance and Compliance	80% Good
8. Review and Close	64% Satisfactory

### 3. METHODOLOGY

PeoplePlus Group Limited (referred to as PeoplePlus throughout the report) incorporating A4e Limited trading as PeoplePlus 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 Programme and New Enterprise Allowance (NEA). Primes are required to be re-accredited every two-years and consequently the organisation came forward for re-accreditation in line with the anniversary date.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor) and Tracey Pepper (Team Assessor) supported by a coordinator from within PeoplePlus. The Lead Assessor started to work with the coordinator in January 2018 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 Partners; past, present and potential delivering an end-to-end service or specialist intervention activity.

In advance of the Assessment a survey was carried out of the Partners, all 141 were invited to participate. Responses were received from past, present and potential Partners, which represented 36% of the total. The results of the survey informed the focus of interviews for the assessment team and contributed to the overall scoring.

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 in line with the agreed timescales to enable the assessment to take place as planned.

The assessment team spent a total of 2.5 days each reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews with PeoplePlus staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chains. 24% of the Partners were interviewed with consideration made to all Partners irrespective of whether the contract was commissioned by DWP. Interviews were conducted with a wide range of Partners; end-to-end, specialist intervention, as well as past, present and potential across all contracts.

The following report provides an indication of the findings against all the criteria within the Merlin Standard, which was evidenced across all the supply chains referenced below, as well as areas of strength and areas to consider for development over the forthcoming two-years.

## 4. ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

PeoplePlus; a Private Limited Company aims to '*make a direct difference to the lives of a million people by 2022*'. Its vision is to '*build and develop the most reliable integrated workforce in the country and be the leading creator of opportunities, jobs and new ideas in the employability, skills and justice sectors*'. This is underpinned by a set of core values; '*teamwork, respect, commitment, reliability, integrity and creativity*'.

In order to perform in line with the mission and contribute to its vision PeoplePlus deliver a range of national and local procured employment and skills programmes on behalf of different commissioners; DWP, Education and Skills Funding Agency, Local Authorities (LAs), etc.

The organisation recognises the value of working with Partners to deliver programmes to meet the needs of the customers and those of the commissioner. The following provides an indication of the current contracts and the breakdown between direct delivery and supply chain:

### **Employability Programmes**

Work Programme in nine Contract Package Areas (CPAs) - Direct Delivery 73%, Supply Chain 27%

Access to Work Nationally - Supply Chain 100%

New Enterprise Allowance (NEA) in three CPAs - Direct Delivery 82%, Supply Chain 18%

First Start Scotland (FSS) in two CPAs - Direct Delivery 8.5%, Supply Chain 91.5%

Youth Promise Plus (YPP) in Birmingham - Direct Delivery 50%, Supply Chain 50%

### **Skills Programmes**

Apprenticeships in England and Wales - Direct Delivery 59.3%, Supply Chain 40.7%

Skills Support for the Unemployed (SSU) - Direct Delivery 39.8%, Supply Chain 60.2%

Adult Education Budget (AEB) in England - Direct Delivery 44.5%, Supply Chain 55.5%

Traineeships in Wales - Direct Delivery 86%, Supply Chain 14%

The number of Partners that PeoplePlus work with has increased since 2016 due to their success with Access to Work, FSS, YPP, SSU, AEB, Apprenticeships and Traineeships. Across all these programmes the Supply Chain Management Framework (SCMF) continues to provide a structured approach to supply chain management and the ways of working have become embedded.

## 5. AREAS OF SIGNIFICANT STRENGTH

A number of significant strengths were identified during the Assessment and these are described below. The numbers in brackets refer to the criteria of the Standard:

PeoplePlus has engaged with organisations from the different sectors including; public, private and third sector (charitable, social enterprise and community interest company) of varying sizes. PeoplePlus have engaged the services of a number of Specialist Intervention Partners (SIPs) (tier 3) to support the supply chain to deliver the Work Programme over the seven years. The SIPs have been representative of the different sectors, and currently work is being undertaken to identify SIPs to join the FSS supply chain to address the differing needs of customers. Partners confirmed that there was a good mix within the respective supply chain, which encouraged healthy competition and opportunities to work together. (1.1)

The Expression of Interest (EOI) and due diligence activities are underpinned by robust communications at every stage of the procurement process. Partners believe the process is clear and straight-forward, as well as supportive through the allocation of a Supply Chain Point of Contact (SCPOC). They confirmed that the selection of Partners was open and transparent and effective feedback was provided if unsuccessful. (2.1)

In the more recent contracts (FSS, Access to Work) PeoplePlus has engaged Partners in early discussions relating to the allocation of the market share and in some cases encouraged them to discuss and agree the allocation between themselves. Consequently, Partners are very clear of their market share and the rationale, which is predominantly based on geographical spread / location and / or expertise in a specific area. (2.3)

Partners gained a clear understanding of the commissioner's objectives prior to the bidding activities, and consequently had a clear understanding regarding the performance expectations. Performance expectations continue to be reviewed and discussed at subsequent meetings and as a result Partners felt that they were proactively involved in negotiating the volumes and performance expectations for key outcomes. (3.2)

Partners confirmed that the opportunities for additional funding / finance streams are promoted through SharePoint (a platform designed to provide a central portal for Partners to access key information and guidance), email prompts, the website and in some cases a directly from a PeoplePlus member of staff. A number of past Partners remain in contact with PeoplePlus representatives and as a result are advised of the opportunities available to bid. There were numerous examples of Partners joining one supply chain and subsequently due to their performance and / or area of expertise have started to deliver other services, for example, some Partners started with Work Programme, entered the SSU supply chain and now developed staff to deliver Apprenticeships. (5.2)

PeoplePlus have designed clear communication channels to ensure that at every stage throughout the life of the contract; pre, during and post that there is clarity in the business relationship. The appointment of key personnel at the different stages ensures Partners gain the support required. In addition, specific roles, for example, quality assurance and finance, Partners have named contact, which is accessible and responsive to their needs. (6.1)

Partners made reference to an array of reports and dashboards that were available daily, weekly and monthly, which provides them with extensive, current and accurate Management Information (MI) from the JMS platform, which is the MI system used across the supply chains to enable them to drive performance. In addition, Partners were complementary regarding the approach taken by PeoplePlus to meet their needs, for example, if additional MI is required an appropriate report will be designed. (6.4)

The inclusive approach PeoplePlus has undertaken to complete the annual Self-Assessment Review (SAR), culminating in the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) continues to be embedded across the supply chains and Partners confirmed their involvement and the sharing of the QIP at the end of the process. This has been found to drive performance improvements in the supply chains and direct delivery. It was also noted that the Partners involved in the recently established supply chains (Access to Work, FSS, YPP) clearly understood the SAR and QIP process and the importance of contributing to this activity. (6.5, 6.7)

Partners access SharePoint for current and accurate information; it is used as a repository for new information, for example, changes to regulatory and legislative requirements, contract guidance, etc. A high proportion of Partners believe this is an effective way of communicating and subsequently storing current information for future access. The requirements to address changes to regulatory and legislative requirements and contract guidance are followed up by the Supply Chain Manager (SCM) in a timely manner. (7.1)

## 6. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

A number of areas where further development would be beneficial were identified during the Assessment. These are for the Organisation to consider as a contribution to continuous improvement. The numbers in brackets refer to the criteria of the Standard:

Partners reflected upon the core values and made reference to the alignment between the two organisations (Partner and Prime), which was recognised throughout the procurement activities. They also made reference to working well together and having a common purpose. This continued to be evident, however, a number of Partners (predominantly Work Programme) made reference to a change in culture, working practices and a move to being far more target driven. In the future, PeoplePlus may consider communicating any change in focus proactively to enable Partners to adjust far quicker. (1.5)

PeoplePlus has addressed the minimum requirements to comply with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. It has adopted a clear approach, which includes a statement, education / training for relevant employees and communication to Partners. Where appropriate, Partners have been provided with support to develop a statement which is fit for purpose and subsequently encouraged to provide education / training to staff. Future due diligence activities are to include a review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the relevant requirements for each Partner. Consequently, PeoplePlus are encouraged to develop and embed these activities to ensure both the Prime and Partners comply with the requirements. (7.5)

Partners recollected the wider social objectives of the commissioners and subsequently were able to provide anecdotal evidence of the impact they had in this area, for example, reduced employment, crime, homelessness, etc. Similarly, they were able to provide examples of the positive impact on the staff and customer groups, for example, staff developing new knowledge and skills, experiencing work stability through to customers improving their general well-being, self-worth and motivation. PeoplePlus has undertaken a range of analysis across the contracts / supply chains and as a result able to demonstrate the positive impact on the wider social objectives and the different stakeholders. Whilst this information has been shared through SharePoint, in the future, consideration could be made to promoting the impact far wider to ensure Partners have a clear understanding of how the respective supply chain (as a whole) has had a positive impact on communities, people, etc. (8.2, 8.3)

Data relating to equality and diversity is collected and subsequently, the JMS (MI platform) provides a range of reports for analysis to inform improvements. A number of PeoplePlus staff and Partners made reference to this resource and the fact that improvements / changes had been made, for example, promotional activities and support to different customer groups. However, there were inconsistencies, some Supply Chain Managers (SCMs) and Partners failed recognise and utilise this information. In the future, consideration could be made to formally including this in all performance management discussions and subsequently findings shared across the supply chain to improve performance. (8.4)



Partners voluntarily exiting a contract spoke of discussions undertaken to agree the closure process, and subsequently they generally felt well supported throughout the process to ensure a smooth transition / continuous service was provided to customers. In addition, all documentation completed and filed in line with the commissioner's requirements and final payments made in a timely manner and accurately. Currently, a number of contracts are coming to an end and as a result it may be timely to consider designing a clear path outlining the expectations of Partners to ensure they continue to be compliant and provide a quality service at the same time as celebrating the successes and winding down the contract to meet all stakeholder requirements. (8.5)

## 7. FINDINGS

### PRINCIPLE 1: Design

PeoplePlus recognise the importance of working with a supply chain which is made up of different types of organisations from the public, private and third sector to ensure the commissioner's objectives are met and the wide range of customer needs addressed. These include organisations that provide specific training opportunities including bespoke courses, through to those with specific knowledge and experience in public health, mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, etc. Some Partner comments included:

*"The current supply chain is a good mix and we're all different."*

*"We need a variety to address customer and stakeholder needs."*

Partners are actively encouraged to work with wider networks, which comprise of a range of organisations and agencies to deliver services to meet the needs of customers. These are varied; national, regional and local, and provide access to the relevant service either with a charge, through alternative funding or free. Partners spoke of working with different organisations and agencies, including but not limited to LAs, Housing Associations (HAs), local employers, small specialist providers to support the delivery of ESOL, Fork Lift Truck Training through to the performing arts sector and specialists in mental health, alcohol and drug abuse, etc. One Partner made reference to working with Business Gateway in order to promote the service and provide customers with options and choices.

Partners delivering Access to Work, FSS and YPP explained that prior to PeoplePlus submitting the bid for the respective contract they were involved in a range of meetings to review and discuss the proposed delivery model and subsequently influence the final design. Similarly, throughout the early stages of delivery Partners were encouraged to share successes and challenges as well as their ideas and opinions to improve the delivery of the service and to support them, and as a result had recommended different reporting options. One Partner spoke of being involved in reviewing and updating of a set of presentation slides whilst another explained how they had been consulted over the provision of a service being run in the local area and were encouraged to design the approach.

Collaborative working is encouraged within the supply chains whereby Partners are encouraged to work together to achieve a common purpose and contribute to the overarching objectives of the commissioner. Partners made reference to 'Trackathon'; an opportunity for Partners and direct delivery staff to work together and share good practice for tracking learners. Others spoke of sharing knowledge and information with other Partners and direct delivery. In addition, a number of Partners made reference to the supply chain meetings, which provided the opportunity for them to come together and identify opportunities for working together, as well as sharing resources and vacancies, referring customers, planning shadowing opportunities, etc. Some Partner comments included:

*"We cross refer across the network."*

*"We know the other Partners as we've worked with them before."*

*"It's better to work together and refer customers within the network."*

*"Direct delivery provides the SIA badge so its beneficial to signpost to them."*

Partners are aware of PeoplePlus' core values and what these mean in practice, and reference was made to being aligned to them at the start of the contract. A number of Partners spoke of how the values determine the way the supply chain operates and confirmed that PeoplePlus staff work in line with the expectations. Some Partner comments included:

*"It is important that we share the same values and principles of working so that we are collaborative and share advice for tendering."*

*"They have a commercial element and we have the community / neighbourhood focus – together we have the ability to progress young people into an outcome."*

The make-up of the supply chains is formally reviewed, and gaps identified, which have subsequently been addressed through procuring new Partners to join the supply chains in order to meet the changing needs of customers. Some examples included, identifying a gap in the SSU provision in an area within the top 5% of deprivation in the country and top 1% of health deprivation, whereby two distinct programmes were required; 'getting into catering' and 'getting into construction' and as a result a new Partner was brought into the supply chain. Another example identified was the lack of Traineeship provision in an area, and consequently a new Partner was sourced and brought into the supply chain.

## PRINCIPLE 2: Procure

Partners explained the different communications adopted to advise them of the bid opportunity and confirmed that the EOI was straight-forward and a SCPOC was assigned to them to provide support throughout the process, if required. Consequently, Partners confirmed that communication was effective throughout the initial stages of procurement.

Partners, including the SIPs confirmed that procurement was fair and transparent, even if they were unsuccessful in joining the supply chain. Unsuccessful Partners explained that they were advised of the outcome and offered the opportunity to gain verbal feedback within a specific time period. This provided them with an indication of the areas for improvement in subsequent bids, which had proved beneficial as some Partners that were initially unsuccessful had subsequently joined a supply chain.

Partners described the key requirements for due diligence and once again felt well supported by the SCPOC, if requested. Some Partner comments included:

*"EOI and due diligence was as expected, but straight-forward and had a SCPOC to support."*

*"EOI was clear and self-explanatory, and provided all the information required."*

*"Extensive support throughout the due diligence."*

PeoplePlus have a clear strategy to manage the TUPE process, and historically this has been implemented to support the transfer of staff from and into Partner organisations based on the requirements of a contract and legislative requirements. Over the past two years there had been no TUPE activity, however, the assessment team gained an understanding of the process that would be adopted, including consultation and communication with the Partner and employee to ensure a smooth transition was experienced.

Partners were very clear regarding the allocation of the market share due to the initial discussions prior to the contract being agreed. A number made reference to geographical spread / location and expertise in a specific area. Some Partner comments included:

*"The market share was negotiated throughout the pre-meetings."*

*"Profiles and market share were discussed at an early stage."*

*"8.5% market share, very clear rationale."*

*"We got a larger percentage of the market share than anticipated, but very happy."*

Similarly, Partners confirmed that PeoplePlus engaged them in open dialogue throughout the initial stages of forming a supply chain whereby they gained a clear understanding of funding / finance, which replicated that of the commissioner and Prime contract arrangements. Subsequently, they were proactively involved in negotiating the volumes and performance expectations for key outcomes, for example, engagement, jobs and training. Some Partner comments included:

*"We negotiated the volumes before we got a contract."*

*"The targets were discussed and agreed, and realistic."*

*"The volumes are realistic, we didn't appreciate what was required."*

### PRINCIPLE 3: Contract

The contracts designed by PeoplePlus clearly define the obligations and expectations of the two parties; the Partner and the Prime. Partners recently engaged in the FSS contract explained that a number of meetings had been undertaken whereby the contract had been openly reviewed prior to the final version to ensure there was a clear understanding of obligations, expectations, funding / finance, market share, volumes, outcomes, etc. A high percentage of Partners felt that the contract was straight-forward and easy to understand. Subsequently, any variations in contract have been openly discussed and agreed, and appropriate documentation drawn up to confirm the outcome. Some Partner comments included:

*"It's been really easy to work with."*

*"Very good and transparent."*

*"Straightforward."*

*"We are on the 21<sup>st</sup> version of the contract but this is ESFA changes."*

*"We had a contract variation when there was a change in market share."*

A high proportion of SIPs confirmed that they had a Service Level Agreement (SLA), which outlined their responsibilities and expectations, as well as payment terms and conditions, if relevant.

As a result of the open communications prior to bidding whereby Partners gained a clear understanding of the objectives and outcomes of the respective commissioner and subsequent dialogue throughout numerous pre-meetings Partners confirmed that they had a clear understanding of the performance expectations. Following the contract going live performance expectations continue to be discussed; daily, weekly and / or monthly.

The complaints / appeals procedure as well as the third-party mediation service (DWP) continues to be promoted to Partners through the contract and SharePoint, and as a result, Partners confirmed where to access the document, if required. Those Partners interviewed had not had cause to raise a formal complaint / appeal due to the working relationship with PeoplePlus as they are confident to discuss issues and challenges as they arise, which are subsequently addressed and resolved promptly.

At the time of the assessment there was no evidence of any complaints / appeals against PeoplePlus. Members of the senior leadership team stated that they would fully respect the decisions made as a result of third party mediation services, if it were to be deemed to have not acted in accordance with the principles of the Merlin Standard.

## PRINCIPLE 4: Fund

Partners delivering the Work Programme described the DWP approach of Payment by Results which has not changed throughout the life of the contract and has always worked well. Subsequently, this approach has been adopted by other contracts commissioned by DWP, which a high number of Partners are familiar with. Partners delivering other services commissioned by the ESFA, LAs, etc. clearly understand the funding and financial arrangements due to communications with PeoplePlus prior to contract award and a schedule being agreed.

Partners recognise and accept that PeoplePlus adopt the same funding and financial arrangements as that of the commissioner, however, also confirmed that prior to signing the contract dialogue is undertaken to ensure that the Partner is not put at undue financial risk. Subsequently, throughout the life of the contract the door is open for the Partner to discuss the funding and financial arrangements, and evidence was found of terms and conditions being amended for individual Partners to minimise the financial risk. Some Partner comments included:

*"We are paid monthly for job outcomes and sustainability payments."*

*"Never had any issues."*

*"We have had incentive payments paid at the beginning of the year based on stretch targets achieved in previous year."*

*"We know what we need to present."*

A high proportion of Partners confirmed that payments have been made accurately and timely throughout the life of the contract. A few explained that at the start of the respective contract issues had arisen around the evidence requirements, however, these were quickly resolved. It was noted that a few Partners expressed some dissatisfaction relating to the communications of the extrapolation. Some Partner comments included:

*"Brilliant from day one."*

*"Self-billing has made it work well."*

*"We receive incentive payments for hitting and succeeding minimum targets."*

*"Extrapolation is every six months and is not individual but whole partner driven."*

*"Never had an issue and lots of MI to back it up."*

*"Two days before we get paid I receive the remittance."*

*"Payments at close down were made timely."*

*"Last payments were made accurately and timely – expect some extrapolation."*

Partners are aware of the management fee and what they gain in return, for example, administrative support, provision of the JMS MI platform, SharePoint, quality assurance activities, performance management, training activities, access to documentation, systems and processes, Partner meetings, etc. Some Partner comments included:

*"Always found the management fee competitive."*

*"We pay a management fee, it's in line with other Primes."*

*"We get the support we need for the management fee paid."*

*"I did query the management fee and if it could go down when the service went down but it didn't get changed."*

## PRINCIPLE 5: Develop

Partners spoke positively regarding the support and development provided by PeoplePlus at the start of the relevant contract, or as they were brought on-board to deliver a contract, in order to ensure they met the contractual requirements. Reference was made to providing access to policies and procedures to enable Partners to design their own that were fit for purpose. The primary activities cited by Partners were the on-boarding for new contracts, for example, a number of FSS and NEA Partners explained the support provided to ensure delivery staff clearly understood the delivery model, documentation, systems and processes, etc. In addition, support was provided to ensure managers could use the MI in order to drive performance. Subsequently, throughout the life of the contracts PeoplePlus continue to provide Partners with support to ensure effective delivery of the service, for example, development of job coaching skills, which was achieved by an individual spending the day at a direct delivery centre, providing shadowing opportunities to share practices and learn from others, etc. Some Partner comments included:

*"There has always been an invitation to shadow and visit centres."*

*"The support from PeoplePlus was great."*

*"We had support to develop our policies and procedures to ensure they were fit for DWP."*

*"SharePoint, the SCMF and policies and procedures are all accessible to support us deliver the contract."*

*"Support with JMS is on-going."*

Partners confirmed that the opportunities for additional funding / finance streams are promoted with reference made to the recent promotion of the prison service tender. Partners spoke of being encouraged to complete an EOI for other contracts and have subsequently been successful in gaining a new contract, which has contributed to diversifying their business. One Partner explained that they were in the process of discussing future business opportunities with PeoplePlus regarding a new specialised qualification. Some Partner comments included:

*"PeoplePlus believed in us."*

*"We have been helped to capacity build."*

*"We started on Work Programme and now delivering two other programmes due to the support from PeoplePlus."*

Partners made reference to training needs for delivery staff being identified throughout the six-monthly quality review and observations, which has resulted in specific activities being identified, planned and implemented, for example, quality assurance practices, JMS, working practices, etc. A range of opportunities are provided using different mechanisms, for example, workshops, shadowing, webinars, etc. Some Partner comments included:

*"We had new system training for the MIS."*

*"Some of the staff had web-based training on compliance and others went over to Sheffield to attend training."*

*"Our contract manager has sent us a Prevent PowerPoint presentation to evaluate and potentially use with our staff."*

*"Staff can shadow the direct delivery."*

## PRINCIPLE 6: Performance Manage

PeoplePlus have adopted a range of communication methods, which were referenced by Partners, for example, emails, conference calls, Partner meetings, one-to-one face-to-face meetings, SharePoint, etc. Each Partner has a SCPOC in the early stages of the relationship, and subsequently when the contract goes live a SCM is appointed, providing 'a go to person'. In addition, others within PeoplePlus that undertake a specific role, for example, quality assurance, finance, etc. are named and accessible to Partners. Partners confirmed that PeoplePlus staff are generally accessible, approachable and responsive to their needs. Over recent months there have been a few changes in SCMs, however, through effective handover and communications this has been a relatively smooth transition in most cases. Some Partner comments included:

*"There is feedback on such a regular basis."*

*"We have daily emails on performance."*

*"The previous SCM has left and so the Director is keeping in touch twice a week."*

*"We had an initial meeting with the Director who explained how the relationship would work – it was a really productive meeting."*

*"Our contact (name) or anyone at PeoplePlus are responsive and supportive."*

*"We've had a good start, no complaints yet."*

*"The team have been great and prepared to work with us; communication is key."*

*"Updates are sent by email and someone always comes back to you by phone within 24 hrs."*

*"I am the go to person"* Supply Chain Manager

A high proportion of Partners believe that communication is open, honest and without unreasonable constraint. They are confident to address issues, challenge the working practices and share their frustrations, as well as their successes. Reference was made to PeoplePlus being a supportive Prime at each stage of the relationship. Some Partner comments included:

*"It's a well formed and stable supply chain."*

*"We have a strong collective voice."*

*"No major concerns, it has been dependent on SCM."*

*"Always positive and very supportive."*

*"I like the partnership meetings where you get to speak to others and share best practice."*

*"Communications are really good and supportive and helps to resolve any issues."*

*"Good relationship, open and honest discussions."*

*"Positive working relationships, supportive with good teamwork."*

The SCMF outlines the approach to performance management, which as a minimum requires the SCM to undertake a monthly review of the Partner's performance against the objectives, targets and outcomes. However, it continues to be evident that performance is a daily topic of conversation between the SCM and Partner. Partners also spoke of reviewing the performance of the entire supply chain at the Partner meetings, which facilitates the sharing of successes and areas for improvement. Some Partner comments included:

*"It is a collaborative conversation."*

*"Always been able to challenge and query."*

*"We have a good partnership manager who communicates weekly, helps push performance and if we have technical issues - he's the one!"*

*"Weekly tele-kit to review performance, and a monthly progress review."*



It was noted that some Work Programme Partners had experienced a less formal approach to communications and performance reviews in the previous months, however, this had been addressed and consistency was being re-established. PeoplePlus may be mindful of these practices re-occurring as Work Programme comes to a close, or other contracts in the future, and as a result take every effort to avoid this happening. Some Partner comments included:

*"The SCM changed and now less structured."*

*"Not been too great – sporadic."*

*"Monthly Partner meetings have continued – they did stop – but we requested that they be put back in place."*

*"Communications seems to be tapering off because of Work Programme reducing."*

Partners confirmed that the MI available through JMS is produced consistently, accurately and appropriate performance data is accessible and shared across the respective supply chain through the use of league tables. Some Partner comments included:

*"If there is any report they need I will happily run it off e.g. The FQL report that I can access but some providers can't."*

*"MI is great, in terms of detail, transparency and sharing internal delivery."*

*"Data and MI is fantastic."*

*"Access to monthly dashboard."*

*"I really like it, it's easy to navigate."*

Whilst the MI provided drives and improves performance, other approaches contribute, for example, some Partners have experienced a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) over the past two-years, which has subsequently addressed an issue and improved performance. The Partner meetings, which are undertaken at CPA supply chain level, and vary dependent upon the maturity of the contract provide the opportunity for performance data to be shared, along with successes and good practice equally drives the performance of Partners and the supply chain. In addition, the approach to undertaking and reviewing the SAR and QIP contributes to continuous improvement. One Partner comment included:

*"Continuous improvement appears to be the driver."*

Whilst performance reviews and QIP activities provide the platform for sharing good practice across the supply chain, Partners consistently referenced the Partner meetings and opportunities whereby they meet with direct delivery staff. They provided a range of examples of practices that had been shared through this approach, for example, different approaches to working with community groups, referral techniques, use of promotional leaflets, development of the advisors into job coaches, hosting afternoon tea for customers that have completed the programme to meet with new participants to explain the journey, their experience and outcome / success, to mention a few. Some Partner comments included:

*"The monthly dashboard provides benchmarking for all deliverers and direct delivery and helps interrogation and emerging risks to be identified."*

*"I share conversion rates for super priority customers and hold focus groups to share good practice."*

*"They have shared a performance tracker that helps us to feel like part of the delivery and we have used in other programmes."*

The approach to undertaking a SAR which results in a QIP is well embedded within each supply chain and has enabled Partners to identify strengths and those to improve, including performance and quality assurance practices. The process also supports the sharing of good practice across the respective supply chain, along with a review of the QIP on a six-monthly basis to establish progress and outstanding actions. It was noted that the SAR and QIP are seen to be periodical and structured and have become 'business as usual'. Some Partner comments included:

*"The SAR is embedded."*

*"We give each other feedback and share SARs."*

*"The QIP is reviewed every six-months to see what action we've taken and still need to take."*

## PRINCIPLE 7: Quality Assurance and Compliance

PeoplePlus actively communicate and promote updates to legislative and regulatory requirements, for example, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 were both cited by Partners. A range of approaches are used including email alerts, SharePoint, communications and follow up from the SCM and / or quality / compliance manager. Partners believe the communications are effective and appropriate support provided to ensure they meet the requirements.

Similarly, the changes to policy and strategy are communicated through the same approaches and followed up by the SCM or appropriate personnel. Once again, Partners confirmed that this was effective, and they clearly understood the requirements, if appropriate.

The SCMF clearly outlines the range of practices to be adopted to ensure Partners are compliant and delivering a quality service to meet the different stakeholder's requirements. Partners understood the different approaches which ranged from file audits, specific activities throughout performance management discussions, six-monthly quality assurance activities through to feedback from customers and monitoring of complaints.

Findings as a result of the different practices are documented and communicated to Partners, and subsequently followed up by the SCM and / or quality / compliance manager to ensure appropriate action has been taken. Partners made reference to improvements made as a result of quality assurance practices, for example, development of more in-depth action plans, ensuring regular contact maintained with customers, etc.

PeoplePlus provide Partners with different information, advice and guidance (IAG) relating to the contracts and services being delivered through to policies, legislative and regulatory requirements, for example, GDPR and Modern Slavery Act 2015. Partners explained that IAG is provided through many methods, for example, email, partner meetings, performance reviews, quality assurance activities, SharePoint, etc. and they believe it to be current and accurate as it originates from a reliable source. Some Partner comments included:

*"Any IAG is provided through monthly meetings."*

*"SharePoint is a great information resource."*

*"They've provided advice and guidance on policies and procedures to ensure they're fit for purpose."*

In terms of Partners providing current and accurate IAG to customers this is addressed through observation of practice by either PeoplePlus and / or the Partner, as well as reviewing action plans and other documentation. Some Partners made reference to feedback from customers and being **matrix** accredited, which quality assures the IAG service being provided.

Robust strategies, systems and processes are in place to ensure effective information security, health and safety, safeguarding and environmental sustainability throughout the supply chains. Policies are reviewed as part of due diligence and subsequently refreshed on an annual basis. The monthly performance management meetings with Partners provides the SCM with the opportunity to review practices relating to such policies and identify areas for improvement, for example, approach to clear desk, accessibility to meeting space, confidential space, etc. In addition, the six-monthly quality assurance activities address key policies to ensure practices are adhered to, and any changes in requirements are fully implemented.

A questionnaire has been implemented to address environmental sustainability, which includes the setting of relevant targets, which is to be reviewed every six-months in the future.

PeoplePlus has addressed the minimum requirements to comply with the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and shared its statement with Partners in March 2018. Subsequently, education / training for relevant employees has been undertaken to raise awareness of the requirements to comply with the Act. Partners have access to appropriate support to develop a statement which is fit for purpose and this is to be addressed in future due diligence activities and quality assurance practices.

## PRINCIPLE 8: Review and Close

PeoplePlus continues to embrace feedback gained from other audit and inspection / assessment bodies, for example, **matrix**, OFSTED and C2E, CMO audits undertaken by DWP, and PAT testing, to mention a few. The feedback is utilised to inform and improve practices, as well as meeting the changing needs of the customers and commissioners. Feedback is also gained from external stakeholders, for example, Local Enterprise Partners (LEPs), LAs, Jobcentre Plus (JCP), Employment Related Services Association (ERSA), DWP, local community organisations and agencies, etc. with the aim of identifying gaps, improving the provision of the current service and influence future strategies.

Partners are actively encouraged to feedback their views and opinions relating to the management of the supply chain and delivery of the service at every opportunity, for example, Partner meetings, performance reviews, SAR, etc. In addition, as previously referenced feedback is gained from customers through survey monkey, evaluation sheets and in some cases customer forums with the aim of improving the delivery of the service. Some Partner comments included:

*"It is critical that we share feedback to get the best results."*

*"We need feedback to confirm we're doing the right thing and addressing their needs."*

Partners were able to provide anecdotal evidence of the positive impact in relation to the wider social objectives. This was achieved through sharing a range of case studies and citing specific outcomes, some of which related directly to the purpose of the programme. Some examples included using theatrical training for customer who were having problems with obtaining work, one Partner cited nine customers entering work as a result of running two courses involving 16 customers. Whilst another spoke of getting 1020 people into work throughout the life of the Work Programme, reducing unemployment and reliance on the benefit system. Some Partner comments included:

*"451 young people into education and employment."*

*"We have a high success rate of 95%."*

*"Certainly, we've reduced unemployment in the area."*

In relation to the positive impact on the different stakeholders; customers, staff and the commissioner, some examples included: staff have gained additional knowledge, skills and qualifications, as well as a high level of job satisfaction and in some cases gained promotion and / or moved onto different contracts / services. Other Partners spoke of staff having developed their softer skills and helped people change their lives; made good use of the 'better off calculation' to help people see the benefits of working and changing their lives. Reference was made to customers improving their general well-being, self-worth and motivation, gaining employment and independence and in the long term being better off. Some Partner comments included:

*"I'm assessing and reviewing with staff what they are good at and encouraging them into other projects to keep the talent in the company."*

*"We've been able to give customers options and choice to support them to become self-employed."*

*"Once customers have got over the mandated aspect they have had a positive experience."*

*"We've contributed positively as a supply chain to the commissioner's objectives as we have been amongst the top performers."*

Equality and diversity is actively promoted and monitored through the collection of the data in line with the commissioner's requirements. Reports are generated indicating the split between male / female customers, age, disabilities, etc. In some cases, the information is analysed by SCMs and Partners to identify and inform improvements, for example, increase the number of male customers, 50 plus, etc.

Partners exiting a contract described the process they experienced when closing down a contract on a voluntary basis, which was positive and supportive. They confirmed that they felt well supported throughout the process and that the contract was closed in line with the commissioner's requirements.

## 8. CONCLUSION AND CONDITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

In conclusion, this assessment provided the opportunity to review the practices of PeoplePlus for the current contracts against the Merlin Standard. The senior leadership team should be mindful that any significant organisational or senior staff changes, and / or being awarded additional contracts using a significantly different supply chain may require a strategic review. Similarly, any decisions reached by the Merlin Mediation Service / Independent Complaints Examiner may also result in a strategic review being required to ensure the organisation continues to operate in line with the Merlin principles.

### 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](mailto: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.

 <b>ASSESSMENT SERVICES</b>	
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