



merlin standard

2018

WORKING LINKS (EMPLOYMENT) LTD

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1. KEY INFORMATION

Assessment Type	ACCREDITATION REVIEW
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Anniversary Date	19/04/2020
Assessment Dates	16/04/2018 – 19/04/2018
Lead Assessor's Name	LORNA BAINBRIDGE
Customer ID	C10492
Assessment Reference	PN103361

2. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

OVERALL OUTCOME	78% Good
1. Design	90% Excellent
2. Procure	80% Good
3. Contract	70% Good
4. Fund	73% Good
5. Develop	93% Excellent
6. Performance Manage	71% Good
7. Quality Assurance and Compliance	80% Good
8. Review and Close	64% Satisfactory

3. METHODOLOGY

Working Links (Employment) Ltd (referred to as Working Links or Organisation throughout the report) 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, Work Choice and DWP/ESF programmes. All accredited organisations are required to be re-accredited every two-years and consequently Working Links came forward for re-accreditation in line with the anniversary date.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor) and Sally-Ann Harding (Team Assessor) supported by a coordinator from within Working Links. 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 (tier2) service, specialist (tier 3) or ad-hoc (tier 4) services.

In advance of the Assessment a survey was carried out of the Partners, all 183 were invited to participate. Responses were received from past, present and potential Partners, which represented 26% 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 three days each reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews with Working Links staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chains. 22% of the Partners were interviewed with consideration made to all Partners irrespective of whether the contract was commissioned by DWP or other funders. Interviews were conducted with a wide range of Partners; end-to-end, specialist providers and those providing an ad-hoc service, 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 and significant improvement over the forthcoming two-years.

4. ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

Working Links is owned by an Investment company; Aurelius Sigma Ltd. Its vision is '*to be a diversified business with a balanced portfolio*'. In order to achieve this over the next three-years the key goals are to:

- Grow our business – through organic growth, diversification and acquisition,
- Deliver outstanding service – improving our reputation by exceeding contractual performance and inspection targets,
- Financial health – control costs, maximise efficiency to enable investment in front line services.

This is underpinned by a set of core values; '*customer*', '*people*' and '*innovation*'.

- We know our *customers* and understand how our role impacts on their needs,
- We deliver excellence through our *people* and value their contribution,
- We always seek to *innovate* and to find improved ways of helping our customers.

Working Links deliver a range of programmes on behalf of different commissioners; DWP, European Social Fund (ESF), Ministry of Justice (MOJ), etc. to contribute to its goals. In order to meet the customer's needs and those of the commissioner it recognises the value of working in partnership with other organisations and agencies and as a result has designed supply chains to deliver the services. The following provides an indication of the current contracts and the breakdown between direct delivery and supply chain:

Work Programme - Direct Delivery 71%, Supply Chain 29%

Work Choice - Direct Delivery 37%, Supply Chain 63%

Fair Start Scotland (FSS) - Direct Delivery 58%, Supply Chain 42%

Links to Work - Direct Delivery 55%, Supply Chain 45%

The Transforming Rehabilitation (Justice) Programme is delivered through three Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs): Wales; Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire; as well as Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, and 9% of the cost base is represented by the supply chain.

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:

Working Links has engaged with organisations and agencies from the different sectors including; public, private and third. These organisations and agencies are of varying sizes from local sole traders and small training providers through to regional and national companies. Tier 2 Partners were aware of the tier 3 and 4 services commissioned by Working Links and how to access these. Partners confirmed that there was a good mix within the respective supply chain, which contributed to the customer needs and commissioner's requirements and in some cases provided opportunities to work together. (1.1)

Partners spoke of having strong links with wider networks at national, regional and local levels, which they were encouraged to use in order to meet the changing needs of customers and identify gaps in service provision. Working Links actively promotes joint working with Local Authorities (LAs), Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and other working bodies to identify the priorities and to address key issues facing potential and current customers. (1.2)

Throughout recent bidding opportunities Working Links has engaged with Partners regarding the design of the supply chain and delivery model to gain a good understanding of local needs and their potential offer, as well as contributing to the commissioner's requirements. The organisation is considering different approaches to designing a supply chain, for example, a Joint Venture (JV). Throughout the life of the contract Working Links continues to consult Partners on systems and processes to support the effective delivery of the service, for example, streamlining processes and removing repetitive paperwork through to developing reporting requirements. (1.3)

Working Links reviews the supply chain design to ensure it meets the changing needs of both customers and the commissioners throughout the life of the contracts. This is achieved by reviewing the performance of Partners on a weekly basis, as well as being present in the local communities and identifying gaps in the delivery of the service. Contingency plans have been implemented when a Partner has opted to leave the supply chain to ensure customer needs continue to be met, and this has been achieved by introducing new Partners to the supply chain and / or increasing the market share of Partners or direct delivery. (1.6)

Partners have a clear understanding regarding the allocation of the market share, which is predominantly based on location and the service offer. Consequently, they believe that this is viable and transparent. In recent times, a number of Partners have been engaged in discussions to agree the market share amongst themselves, both prior to contract mobilisation and when a Partner has left the supply chain. (2.3)

Working Links invests in the development of its Partners from contract award and throughout the life of the contract. The on-boarding of Partners and their staff is thorough and ensures all parties are aware of their roles and responsibilities, and the systems and processes to be adopted. A monthly Contract Performance Review (CPR) provides the opportunity to review the delivery of the service and the performance of the staff, which results in additional learning and development needs being identified, as required. Working Links works closely with its Partners to ensure they are viable and sustainable organisations; seeking to build capacity and supporting them to deliver a range of services to ensure they are not reliant on one income stream. (5.1, 5.2, 5.3)

The Customer First Standard provides tier 2 Partners with a structure by which performance is consistently measured and the quality of service is scrutinised. A schedule of activity is designed and reviewed with Partners to ensure it is fit for purpose and measures the right things in a timely manner without being overburdensome. (6.3, 7.2)

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 spoke of reviewing the core values of Working Links prior to entering the procurement activities to ensure they were aligned and that they were working towards the same purpose. Similarly, consideration was made to the commitment towards equality and diversity to ensure this featured due to the customer groups they would be working with. Whilst most Partners could reference the core values and they believe these govern the way in which Working Links operates, and in turn relates to the way the supply chains operate, in the future, consideration could be made to encouraging Partners to determine the core values / principles which will form the basis of working together within the respective supply chain. It was also noted that some Partners; Work Programme and Work Choice, felt that the way that Working Links operates has changed overtime. As a result, in the future, Working Links may consider more timely communications regarding their focus areas and changes in behaviours. (1.5)

Tier 2 Partners confirmed that they had a contract which outlined the obligations and performance expectations. Whilst some tier 3 Partners made reference to a contract / service level agreement (SLA) which outlined the obligations and expectations, this was not a consistent message. Consideration could be made to formalising the contract / SLA with these Partners and subsequently reviewing the expectations on a regular basis. (3.1, 3.2, 6.3)

Whilst a number of Partners confirmed that the strategy for transferring funds / finance within the network was effective and they consistently received accurate and timely payments, this was not consistently evidenced. Some Partners made reference to the strategy for transferring funds / finances being discussed and agreed throughout onboarding, however, the process failed to be effective in the first instance. Subsequently, some Partners made reference to differing figures and late payments. Consequently, in the future, consideration could be made to investing additional time in ensuring Partners have a clear understanding of what is expected of them in order to gain funds / finances accurately and timely at the first point of payment. (4.2)

A key strength of Working Links is the robust approach to performance management and monitoring of the quality of service through the Customer First Standard. Whilst this provides a structure for Partners, there was evidence of inconsistencies in approach by some Partnership Managers, and the frequency and formality being less robust as a contract starts to come to a close. Consequently, consideration could be made to discussing and agreeing the approach to be taken in these cases and when feasible consult Partners to establish their preferred method of performance management. (6.3, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4)

The Customer First Standard is widely used for tier 2 Partners, and as a result they have a clear understanding of performance expectations and quality assurance practices. However, some tier 3 and 4 Partners had less clarity regarding the monitoring of performance expectations and quality assurance practices, as a result consideration could be made to using the Customer First Standard framework with these Partners. This may result in tier 3 and 4 Partners having a clear understanding of performance expectations and how they are being monitored and evaluated. (6.3, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4)

The Customer First Standard includes the Self-Assessment Reporting (SAR) process, which is resultant in a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). The engagement tends to be at individual Partner level, whilst a Regional SAR is developed, and trends communicated to the Partners, there was very little of evidence of Partners understanding how they contributed to that SAR. Consideration could be made to actively engaging Partners in the collation of the Regional SAR to enable them to explain how they contribute to the continuous improvement themes of the supply chain. (6.7)

Partners clearly understood and were able to provide examples of the number of customers on a programme, number that had moved into employment and subsequently sustained employment for a given number of weeks. Whilst some Partners recollected the wider social objectives of the commissioners and provided some anecdotal evidence of the impact they had in this area, this was not quantifiable, or across the respective supply chain. Similarly, Partners cited examples of the positive impact on the staff and customer groups, but less confident on the positive impact on community sustainability. Working Links in conjunction with other stakeholders, for example, LEPs, LAs, etc. has undertaken some analysis across the contracts / supply chains and as a result there was evidence of the positive impact on the wider social objectives and the different stakeholders. In the future, consideration could be made to engaging Partners in a level of analysis to enable them to have a clear understanding of the impact the wider social objectives, as well as the benefits to the different stakeholders; customers, staff, commissioners, communities, etc. (8.2, 8.3)

7. AREAS REQUIRING SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT

The following areas were identified as needing improvement as there was limited or insufficient evidence found during the assessment (a score of less than 3). The numbers in brackets refer to the criteria of the Standard:

Partners are provided with Management Information (MI) to enable them to monitor and evaluate performance on a weekly and monthly basis, and more frequently, if requested. The flexibility of the MI systems varies, and currently there is a reliance on the Partnership Manager to provide the reports. Working Links is migrating all the contracts onto the PICs Learner Management System ((LMS), and as a result is encouraged to continue its consultation with Partners regarding the reporting requirements and subsequently provide current and accurate data consistently, which Partners can readily access. (6.4)

Data relating to equality of opportunity is collected in line with the commissioner's requirements, and subsequently there was evidence of Working Links analysing the data and using the information to influence changes, for example, the widening eligibility of Links for Work. However, the evidence presented was limited; Partners failed to have access to reports relating to equality of opportunity (links to 6.4) and Working Links often failed to engage Partners in reviewing and analysing the information. Once the reporting mechanism has been implemented, Working Links is encouraged to generate reports for equality of opportunity, which are accessible to Partners, and support Partners to analyse and use the data to influence changes. (8.4)

8. FINDINGS

PRINCIPLE 1: Design

Working Links has consistently taken into consideration the use of organisations and agencies from the different sectors; public, private and third / voluntary, and of varying sizes and legal status. This was evidenced within the Work Programme supply chain, which was commissioned seven years ago through to the more recent design of supply chains for FSS and Links to Work. In addition, the design of supply chains for current bidding activities includes Partners of varying types. Partners recognised the importance of having a good mix within the respective supply chain and confirmed that this was the case, and that it contributed to meeting the customer needs and the commissioner's requirements.

The use of tier 3 and 4 Partners provides access to different services, which can be utilised by the Partners. In addition, there is a clear strategy to encourage Partners to engage with wider networks including but not limited to LEPs, LAs and other working parties to identify and address the current and changing needs of customers, meet the commissioner's needs, as well as identify gaps in service provision. Working Links also engages with wider networks to champion the design of current and future services, as well as the industry. There was evidence of working with its commissioners, Employment Related Services Association (ERSA), Merlin Advisory Board (MAB), etc. to lead the way.

When time allows consultation with potential Partners informs the design of the supply chain and contributes to the planned delivery model. Working Links recognise and value the expertise of the Partners, as very often they have local intelligence. As previously stated, Working Links are considering a JV, which is actively engaging Partners in a range of discussions relating to a current bidding opportunity, and as a result, their expertise and local knowledge is being drawn upon.

Throughout the life of the contract Working Links continues to consult Partners on systems and processes to support the effective delivery of the service, and many examples were found; FSS Partners were consulted on the implementation plan and explained that at the end of April they were to be involved in discussing and agreeing the practices and frequency of activities to contribute to the Customer First Standard, the latter was echoed by Justice Partners. Other examples included, consultation regarding documentation to streamline processes for the customer, reporting requirements, as well as Justice Partners being able to contribute their ideas regarding the spend of additional funding and the services that could be offered. Some Partner comments included:

"We looked at shaping how the customer journey would look. They gave us suggestions of how they felt it would work and we were able to input our thoughts."

"Had a visit from Working Links and then attended an event in North East."

"Got involved a little bit in design – more giving information to them on our past delivery performance."

"Excellent meeting – put their cards on the table – well-structured and two-way questions and answers – we will have a say in the shape and design."

"Working with Working Links on the Working Wales bid is more like a consortium approach."

"They take time out to consult on any changes."

Over the life of the Work Programme and Work Choice Partners have developed a level of trust and confidence in others and subsequently shared resources and vacancies to contribute to the overall performance of the respective supply chain. This was achieved by providing Partners with the opportunity to network and get to know each other within in the respective supply chain. Partners within the FSS supply chain spoke of knowing others as they had worked together previously, and consequently would actively work together to ensure customer needs were met, as well as the requirements of the commissioner.

Partners spoke of partnership meetings, which provided the opportunity to learn from others, and gain an understanding of the service available and accessible within the network, as well as sharing ideas and practices to inform future delivery activities.

Partners took into consideration Working Links' core values prior to starting any form of relationship and confirmed that these were aligned to that of their own practices, as well as the overarching purpose being similar. Throughout due diligence Working Links ensured that there was a commitment to equality and diversity as the policy was reviewed along with the practices adopted to ensure staff understood their roles and responsibilities.

Some Partners; Work Programme and Work Choice, explained that Working Links' ways of working had changed over the time of the contract and they had become far more target and performance driven, as opposed to a softer approach to managing performance which was evident at the start of the respective contracts. The commitment to equality and diversity continues to be tested annually through the resubmission of the policy, and in a few cases, Partners made reference to the on-going promotion of equality and diversity throughout the monthly CPR, which historically has resulted in the identification and provision of MAPPA training. Some Partner comments included:

"At early meetings equality and diversity was discussed not just practical stuff. Looked at softer stuff – talked about company history."

"Every month we talk about equality and diversity, check staff training needs, and sometimes look at the demographics of the staff."

The weekly review of Partners' performance identifies any dips, trends and / or areas of concern and subsequently this is monitored and evaluated, and where required specific action taken. On occasions the allocation of the market share has been adjusted to address poor performance and plans have been implemented when a Partner has opted to leave the supply chain. The Approved Partner Framework (APF) has been used to identify new Partners to bring into the supply chain and / or once again the allocation of the market share has been reviewed and Partners or direct delivery have experienced an increase. One Partner comment included:

"We wanted to diversify so decreased our market share and volumes, and reallocated to other Partners."

The design of the supply chains is under constant review by Working Links to ensure the current and changing needs of both customers and the commissioners are addressed at local level throughout the life of the contracts. This has resulted in tier 3 or 4 Partners entering the supply chain to provide specific services, or the use of wider networks to access different organisations or agencies to deliver bespoke services to individual customers.

PRINCIPLE 2: Procure

Partners spoke of the different communications adopted to advise them of the opportunities to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI), Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) and / or Invitation to Tender (ITT), for example, email, verbally, via ERSA, Carley Consult, etc. They confirmed that they received information regarding the tender opportunity and an outline of the commissioner's aims and objectives. Whilst Partners felt the process was straight-forward, there was a general feeling that a lot of information was required in order to submit the bid, which some were advised was due to extensive information required by the commissioner.

Partners confirmed that appropriate support was available throughout the process, if required, and communication was timely and effective. Partners; successful and unsuccessful, felt that procurement was robust, fair and transparent. Unsuccessful Partners were advised of the outcome and verbal feedback was available and provided. Some Partner comments included:

"A contact person meant communications were timely."

"What we expected, we had some initial IT problems, but this was dealt with really well."

"It was straight-forward, but a lot of information required."

Subsequently, Partners explained the due diligence activities, and once again found this to be straight-forward with advice and guidance being available, if required. Some Partner comments included:

"Very good, X directed us through due diligence as we had recently submitted a lot off information and didn't want to repeat the exercise."

"Straight-forward, no different to other Primes, and support was available."

Working Links have a clear strategy to manage the TUPE process, and consideration is made to the implications if any changes are being made to a contract, which may require staff to be transferred in or out of the Organisation. Every effort is made to ensure consultation and communication with the staff members are timely and effective, and results in a smooth transition for those affected. Working Links have mobilised the TUPE strategy over the past two years as staff have transferred in and out of Partner organisations due to changes to the ownership of contracts. One Partner comment included:

"In pre-contract design meetings TUPE was mentioned as a possibility and we were told support would be offered if it applied."

Whilst Working Links has always had a viable and transparent approach to allocating the market share, which was evidenced in Work Programme and Work Choice, over the past year, a more inclusive approach has been adopted. Some Partners made reference to an indicative market share being submitted as part of their tender, which was subsequently discussed and agreed. Partners have also been engaged in discussions to determine the allocation of the market share amongst themselves, which is predominantly based on location and the service offer. Partners spoke of the allocation of JobCentre Plus (JCP) offices based on their catchment area, whilst others made reference to working with a specific cohort of customers, for example, women offenders. Consequently, they believe that the allocation of the market share is viable and transparent.

Working Links has also adopted an open approach to negotiating volumes, and Partners once again confirmed that this was the case. Some Partners made reference to providing indicative numbers throughout the tendering activities, which have subsequently been discussed and agreed. In addition, throughout the life of the contracts there is the opportunity for Partners to re-negotiate volumes based on performance.

Some Partners also made reference to negotiating funding / finance payments, which resulted in a different model to that recognised by the commissioner, for example, a tier 3 Partner explained that they received a higher core fee and lower payment by results (PBR) than initially was proposed. A tier 2 had negotiated a higher fee for job outcome, and accepted lower payments for the sustainability outcomes, whilst another explained the management fee and how this was negotiated based on the services / support provided by Working Links, and two models had been designed. A number of Partners concurred that Working Links was open to negotiation at any stage throughout the life of the contract.

PRINCIPLE 3: Contract

Working Links have designed contracts to reflect those of the commissioner, and as a result, tier 2 Partners clearly understand their obligations and expectations and those of the Prime. In the event of a new contract being awarded, for example, FSS, Partners were able to review the contract and subsequently discuss and challenge the requirements with confidence and recommend any changes. Partners delivering a contract funded by the MOJ referred to the Industry Standard Partnering Agreement (ISPA), which clearly outlines obligations and expectations, and provides a schedule of activities.

Partners confirmed that any changes / variations in contracting are openly discussed and agreed, and appropriate documentation drawn up to confirm the outcome to ensure both parties gained clarity of the expectations.

The contract and ISPA provide tier 2 Partners with a clear indication of the performance expectations, which are subsequently reviewed through the weekly discussions and monthly CPR with the Partnership Manager. Consequently, there is an ongoing understanding of the performance expectations at each stage of the contract.

There is a complaints / appeals procedure, which is provided and accessible to Partners, and where appropriate they are advised of the third-party mediation service (DWP). Partners confirmed their awareness of the procedure however a high proportion had no cause to raise a formal complaint / appeal due to the working relationship with Working Links. However, at the time of the assessment two Partners inferred that they were actively considering / formalising a complaint.

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

Working Links make every effort to ensure the funding and payment arrangements are fair, proportionate and do not cause undue financial risk to the Partners. Partners recently joining supply chains spoke of undertaking financial modelling activities to ensure they could manage the payment by results model.

On occasions Working Links have been flexible in their approach and made changes to the payment model to support the Partner, for example, a higher payment for job outcome with a lower payment for sustainment. One Partner made reference to moving away from service fee payments to payment by results and the support given by the Prime, whilst another Partner (third sector) explained how Working Links had offered to make an upfront payment to support cash flow, if required. Another spoke of been offered an upfront fee at the start and a reduced monthly core fee for the remainder of the contract.

Recently, a change to the Work Programme payments had been introduced, and subsequently explained to the Partners, the options were discussed and agreed to ensure there was no financial risk experienced. A Partner that had exited the supply chain explained that they had withdrawn from the contract early and had not experienced any financial impact; as the fees were waived through mutual agreement. One Partner comment included:

"A lovely exit."

In line with the commissioner's requirements, Working Links design systems and processes for each contract to enable Partners to draw down funds they are due. Partners clearly understood the requirements to submit a complete, accurate monthly invoice accompanied with relevant evidence, if required.

The terms and conditions for payment is typically within a 30day period, which Working Links work towards. Whilst a number of Partners confirmed that payments were made accurately and in a timely manner, there were similar numbers that cited inaccuracies and delayed payments for a range of reasons.

A management fee of between 15 – 30% is charged by Working Links, which covers the resources required to deliver the contract. Partners delivering the Work Programme spoke of different models to choose from; model 1 and model 2, the latter could be selected if the Partner Organisation had robust systems and processes for quality and compliance, customer tracking, etc. whilst model 1 was designed for those requiring extensive support. Some Partners made reference to renegotiating the management fee as the contract progressed and there was less reliance on the resources provided.

Partners paying a management fee understood what they gained in receipt, for example, contract set-up, access to systems, processes and documentation, performance management, quality assurance activities through to a range of learning and development, offers to build capacity, etc.

PRINCIPLE 5: Develop

Partners are supported at every stage of the contract, from due diligence to exiting. Reference was made to advice and guidance in the development and updates of relevant policies and procedures and been able to seek information from leads within the business to ensure their understanding of regulatory and legislative requirements. One Partner comment included:

"Very supportive – as a new organisation in this sector they have helped get ourselves launched – shared policies etc."

As new contracts are commissioned an implementation plan is designed in conjunction with Partners and appropriate support; learning and development activities provided. For example, an academy was designed to support the set-up of the FSS contract, which addressed key themes; roles and responsibilities of different delivery staff, systems and processes, paperwork requirements, quality assurance practices, etc. which was provided through a blended learning approach; 60% e-learning and 40% virtual classroom.

FSS Partners spoke positively about the approach taken and explained that they were supported by telephone calls on a Monday and Friday to establish their progress in preparing for the delivery and any additional support required was identified. Subsequently, Partners made reference to the support provided following a contract going live. Some Partner comments included:

"Continued to be supportive even three months later."

"We had compliance issues – and Working Links allocated resources and gave compliance coaching."

Other examples cited by Partners included the support gained when entering a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), which was viewed as a positive experience, as well as, the support provided in the event of contract changes, for example, widening the eligibility criteria to mention a few.

Working Links recognises the importance of Partners delivering a range of contracts and not been reliant on themselves, and as a result actively promote other funding / finance streams at local, regional and national levels. A number of Partners verified this, as they had been encouraged to bid for additional ESF monies. Some Partners went onto state that Working Links have been known to support them in the bid writing and attend a presentation with them.

Some Partners spoke of one-to-one meetings with members of the senior leadership team to establish the current position and discuss future opportunities, for example, moving the services into another region, bidding to enter the Apprenticeship supply chain, etc. Some Partner comments included:

"When the contract was awarded we were asked to cover a bigger area as another Partner had dropped out."

"I have a good relationship with my Partnership Manager. She has made me aware of a new funding pot."

"We've been approached to move our services into a new region."

"We have had the opportunity enter other supply chains whilst working with Working Links."

An extensive range of learning and development is readily available and accessible for Partner's staff to benefit from, for example, on line training to address equality and diversity, data protection, safeguarding and prevent, to mention a few. A catalogue of training programmes is provided to Partners at the start of the relationship, and they are encouraged to utilise it.

Throughout the CPR a review of staff's learning and development needs is undertaken, and appropriate plans implemented, for example, additional support with the CRM, quality and compliance practices, through to one-to-one coaching and support to re-motivate and inspire individuals.

Learning and development is provided in many ways, for example, workshops, e-learning, webinars, virtual classrooms, etc. to address different learning styles and minimise travel. Whilst the provision tends not to be accredited, Working Links have supported the delivery of the Information, Advice and Guidance Level 3 qualification in the past, and is currently offering access to a Vocational Rehabilitation programme. Some Partner comments included:

"Standard annual training is available to all staff – such as Prevent."

"Lots of training for staff."

"They're good at this and its provided in different ways; on line, webinar and some face-to-face."

PRINCIPLE 6: Performance Manage

A Partnership Manager is assigned to each Partner who is responsible for the day-to-day requirements of the contract. A high proportion of Partners confirmed that their Partnership Manager was accessible and responsive to their needs. In addition, Partners were made aware of other key personnel who were available to support in other areas, for example, quality assurance, claims, etc. and equally felt these individuals were accessible and responsive.

Partners made reference to Working Links' staff being friendly, honest and professional, and confirmed that they were consistently positive and supportive in their approach. A few Partners explained that the Partnership Manager had changed, and as a result they were just starting to develop a relationship and get accustomed to different management styles. Some Partner comments included:

"(PM) is amazing – patient and very helpful with the contractual stuff."

"Relationship very healthy – balance of power is very good, very responsive – they challenge us and vice versa."

"Feel like we are working together."

"We have had our differences, but the dynamics are healthy."

"Really nice organisation; supportive and positive."

"Very, very supportive and helpful, and responsive."

"Communications are very good."

A robust approach is adopted to performance management through the weekly tele-kit and monthly CPR, and as a result a high proportion of Partners confirmed that the approach was effective. They believe the process is two-way, their views and opinions valued, and that they are able to discuss issues and challenges with confidence, and subsequently they confirmed they were listened to. Similarly, Partners also spoke about been encouraged to think differently to achieve the targets, for example, new approaches to engaging and retaining customers through to identifying specific support requirements to design a tailored / bespoke service for customers, etc. Some Partner comments included:

"We attend the CPR with Working Links and DWP."

"Although the contract is coming to an end, all the good stuff is still happening."

"(PM) listens and supports our ideas."

The aim is to provide MI to Partners to enable them to monitor and evaluate performance on a weekly and monthly basis, and more frequently, if requested. Working Links have utilised a range of systems over the past seven years in an effort to meet this aim, with varying degrees of success. The findings throughout the assessment indicated that this was an area of frustration for a number of Partners, however, there were aware that this was being addressed by Working Links.

The weekly performance reviews provide the opportunity to track progress against the targets at different stages of a contract, and as a result, Partners are aware of improvements made week-on-week, as well as areas for further improvement. Partners spoke of improvements made to their systems and processes, which had contributed to their quality assurance practices and rating over the life of the contract.

Those Partners who had experienced a PIP throughout the life of a contract explained that the process had been supportive, a number of interventions had been implemented, for example, refresher training, one-to-one coaching, etc. and as a result performance had improved. In one case, there was evidence of a Partner exceeding the targets for a period of time due to the intensive support from the Partnership Manager. Some Partner comments included:

"We are on a PIP due to low referrals and Working Links have been very supportive."

"On a PIP, and they did what they needed, feel supported."

"On a PIP; didn't know what to expect, but it's been very positive, not made to feel like a naughty child."

Partnership forums are hosted in order to bring Partners together within the respective supply chain to facilitate networking. The aim is to ensure key messages are communicated to all Partners, including changes to the contract, and provide them with the opportunity to share practices and learn from each other. Some Partner comments included:

"The rapid response model was shared at a partnership meeting to look at second and subsequent jobs and we introduced it."

"We looked at the PICs and how to use it, and then arranged for peer-to-peer support."

"At a Partner meeting we shared employer engagement techniques."

"One-time, effective diagnosis tools to identify barriers in different customer groups were shared."

Partners confirmed that Partnership Managers shared practices throughout the monthly CPR, especially if they were struggling with a specific aspect of the contract and another Partner was performing well, for example, engagement techniques.

As previously stated, the Customer First Standard includes the annual SAR and QIP, which is a requirement of all Partners. As a result, Partners are aware of their own strengths and areas for improvement. Key themes and trends that have emerged across the supply chain are communicated to the Partners, and as a result they are encouraged to address these. Partners confirmed that the process encourages reflection and improvements to performance and quality assurance practices have been made in the past.

PRINCIPLE 7: Quality Assurance and Compliance

Changes to legislative and regulatory requirements are gained by Working Links through reliable sources, for example, Government websites, consultation papers, health and safety executive, etc. and communicated to Partners via email and / or the Partnership Manager. Subsequently, throughout the monthly CPR checks are made that the information has been received and the appropriate action, if any is planned / required within the agreed timescale.

The annual Partner Verification Questionnaire (PVO) includes a review of all the policies and procedures to ensure updates have taken place and these continue to be fit for purpose.

Similarly, changes to contractual requirements, wider policy and strategy information is shared by email and reviewed by the Partnership Manager, if there is a change to, and / or impact on the delivery of the contract.

The Customer First Standard was designed by Working Links, which has evolved over the time that the Organisation has been subject to Merlin assessments. Whilst it was originally an amalgamation of a number of standards to address performance management, compliance and quality of service requirements, the recommendations made as a result of Merlin assessments have also been incorporated.

Partners confirmed that the Customer First Standard is the umbrella for compliance and a framework for the quality of service, including the customer experience. It provides a schedule of monthly activities to ensure the Partner is compliant and meeting the contractual requirements, as well as review the service. This includes file checks, a review of systems and processes, and reviewing the feedback from customers through surveys, forums and evaluation of training. Recent findings include the need to document the customer journey in more detail, signpost customers to other services to support them to overcome barriers and to have a greater focus on employability as opposed to the need of the day, to mention a few. Partners confirmed that they received feedback as a result of compliance and quality of service activities and time was agreed to address the findings.

The design of the Customer First Standard is reviewed for each contract to ensure it is fit for purpose; Partners delivering the Transforming Rehabilitation Programme described their involvement in agreeing the type of activities to be undertaken, as well as the frequency, to ensure it was proportionate to the contract. Similarly, the FSS Partners confirmed they had a meeting planned with Working Links to undertake that same exercise. One Partner comment included:

"Working links checked with us that the newly designed quality assurance documentation was fit for purpose, in the correct order and made sense before implementing."

Working Links is **matrix** accredited, which provides a level of assurance regarding the information, advice and guidance (IAG) being provided to its customers and Partners. Partners are encouraged to work towards **matrix** accreditation, but it is not mandated. Information is stored on a central SharePoint, which ensures Partners are accessing and sharing current documents.

As previously stated, Working Links resource information from reliable sources, and share this with Partners. Advice and guidance is provided by those with knowledge and experience, to ensure it is appropriate and fit for purpose. Some Partner comments included:

"They've provided us with advice and guidance, which has been really good we've started to turn our start performance around."

"The SharePoint is a great central storage system that we use to make sure we use the right information."

The Customer First Standard monitors the customer journey from start to finish and is facilitated by a quality monitoring calendar. Specific aspects of the service delivery are reviewed on a rolling basis, for example, the observation of IAG activities being delivered. Observations are mainly undertaken by the Partner Organisation and findings reviewed throughout the monthly CPR, whereby additional learning and development needs may be identified for delivery staff.

Working Links continues to be accredited with a range of Standards, and subject to external audits, for example, ISO27001, Partner Assurance Testing (PAT), etc. which ensures robust policies and procedures to ensure and maintain the security of all data and assets, which in turn is cascaded to the Partners. Similarly, policies and procedures to address health and safety, safeguarding, prevent and environmental sustainability are designed to meet legislative and regulatory requirements and address the requirements of the commissioner. Consequently, Working Links undertake initial due diligence and review Partner's policies and procedures, supported by an annual exercise.

An annual PVQ is completed by Partners, which is complemented by site visits to review the policies and procedures in action and once again to ensure they are in line with those required by the commissioner and Working Links. Any findings are documented and reported back to the Partner and Partnership Manager, and a timescale agreed for the action to be implemented.

Working Links has addressed the requirements to comply with the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and shared its statement with Partners. In December 2017, current Partners were required to submit their statements (if required), which were reviewed to ensure it was fit for purpose. Working Links provided advice and guidance to those Partners requiring support to develop a statement.

A review of the statement for the Modern Slavery Act 2015 has been included in the initial due diligence, and the annual PVQ.

Learning and development resources have been designed and Partners provided with access to ensure staff are in receipt of the information and clearly understand their roles and responsibilities. This is in the initial stages, and whilst Partners confirmed the availability of the training there had been minimal take-up. Consequently, Working Links may consider further promotion of the opportunity and monitoring the access of each Partner.

PRINCIPLE 8: Review and Close

The Customer First Standard seeks to focus Working Links on the quality of the service provided and actively seeks feedback from a range of stakeholders. It uses feedback from customers and employers through surveys and evaluation forms, customer listening groups, tracker facilities, etc. at various stages of the journey as well as welcomes Partner's feedback to inform the continuous improvement agenda. Partners made reference to a number of methods used by Working Links to gain their feedback, for example, the weekly tele-kit, monthly CPR, partnership meetings and informal discussions with senior leaders and Partnership Managers.

In addition, Working Links embraces the feedback opportunities which are provided as a result of external inspections and audits, for example, PAT, Investors in Diversity, **matrix**, Merlin, etc. Evidence indicates that the feedback is taken on board and responded to in a positive manner.

Feedback continues to be gained from others, for example, LEPs, LAs, community groups, other local and regional networks and DWP to mention a few. The aim is to review and improve the current service provision including to provide access to different customer groups that are disadvantaged / hard-to-reach and contribute to improving their life chances, as well as contributing to the design of future services.

Partners cited the impact of contracts in terms of numbers that have been in receipt of the service, and how many have entered the workplace and sustained employment for 13 and 26 weeks. A number of Partners were aware of the wider social objectives and made reference to reducing unemployment and reliance on benefits, addressing homelessness and creating independence, as well as reducing crime and supporting groups of customers hardest to reach / disadvantaged. Some Partner comments included:

"2000 people supported with 46% sustained employment."

"5000 people supported throughout the programme, 1800 job outcomes, 1000 into work."

"The opening up of the eligibility criteria has increased the number of people able to access the service."

"Definite impact on the economy and place we work."

"Breaking the cycle of generations out of work and developing social inclusion."

Partners cited examples of the positive impact on the staff and customer groups but were less confident on the positive impact on community sustainability. Reference was made to staff developing a new set of skills, and gaining additional knowledge relating to the welfare to work sector and support available to customers. Staff have developed a good understanding of customer's needs and as a result provided extensive support to customers. Partners are encouraged to design case studies indicating the impact of the service on customers and employers, which are subsequently shared with the commissioner. Some Partner comments included:

"Staff had access to some good training; Motivational Intervention Skills – to help them get to know a customer quickly as they only have five one-hour sessions with them."

"Staff knowledge and skills have certainly grown over the last seven years."

"Provided secure work for a number of years."

"We've employed Work Programme customers as has the Local Authority and provided opportunities to gain work-based learning to secure permanent jobs."

"It certainly has a positive impact on the women and breaks the cycle of children joining the industry!"

"We co-locate in JCPs or use safe zones – such as community centres, cafes, etc. to help with public transport issues in the community."

"We have many case studies that demonstrate the impact on customers, like increasing confidence, self-worth, motivation levels, through to being part of a community and living a fulfilled life."

Working Links promote equality and diversity and provide access to the learning and development programmes. On an annual basis, the PVQ reviews staff profiles; gender, age, ethnicity, languages, etc. and ensures that the training requirements are met.

As previously stated, the data relating to equality of opportunity is collected in line with the commissioner's requirements. Working Links analyse the data and use the information to influence changes to the delivery of the service. However, there was very little evidence of Partners accessing, reviewing and analysing the information to inform changes in approach and / or delivery of the service.

Working Links have designed and implemented processes to handle the end of a relationship with Partners, which has subsequently been successful. Past Partners (some voluntarily leaving a contract) confirmed that an exit strategy had been discussed and agreed, and as a result they clearly understood their obligations and action to take to ensure Working Links had access to the relevant documents and files, which would ensure the commissioner's requirements were addressed. In addition, reference was made to final payments been made in line with their expectations, in a timely manner.

Partners delivering Work Programme and Work Choice confirmed that they were in regular communication with Working Links and were confident that as information was released from DWP this would be cascaded to themselves. The CPR provides a formal opportunity for discussions to take place, however, if required, Partners can speak to their Partnership Manager at any stage. Partners confirmed that they were able to discuss challenges regarding the resources required as these contracts wound down, and again, felt supported by their Partnership Manager. Some Partners made reference to a flightpath, which had been discussed and agreed to provide them with focus, as well as understanding the expectations at different stages.

9. CONCLUSION AND CONDITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

In conclusion, this assessment provided the opportunity to review the practices of Working Links 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@assessmentsservices.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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