



merlin standard

2018

EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT TRUST

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1. KEY INFORMATION

Assessment Type	INITIAL ASSESSMENT
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Anniversary Date	08/06/2020
Assessment Dates	07/06/2018 – 08/06/2018
Lead Assessor's Name	LORNA BAINBRIDGE
Customer ID	C23235
Assessment Reference	PN103476

2. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

OVERALL OUTCOME	80% Good
1. Design	70% Good
2. Procure	93% Excellent
3. Contract	90% Excellent
4. Fund	73% Good
5. Develop	87% Excellent
6. Performance Manage	80% Good
7. Quality Assurance and Compliance	80% Good
8. Review and Close	68% Satisfactory

3. METHODOLOGY

Education Development Trust (referred to as EDT or the Organisation throughout the report) voluntarily opted to be assessed against the Merlin Standard. The purpose of the assessment was to gain objective feedback from a third party regarding their supply chain management practices; to clearly understand what is working well and establish areas for development / improvement.

Whilst EDT deliver a range of contracts on behalf of different commissioners, at the time of the assessment the National Careers Service was the only contract to be delivered in conjunction with a supply chain.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor) and Janette Russon (Team Assessor) supported by a coordinator from within EDT. The Lead Assessor started to work with the coordinator in February 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. The on-line survey was sent to the Supply Chain Partners prior to the evidence collection, which provided the opportunity for 100% participation in the assessment. 76% of the Supply Chain Partners returned the survey.

The Lead Assessor liaised with the coordinator prior to the evidence collection 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 1.5 days each reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews with EDT staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chain. In addition, 48% of the Supply Chain Partners were interviewed, which included present and past, delivering an end-to-end service (tier 2) or specialist service (tier 3).

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

4. ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

EDT is a non for profit, registered charity with a clear purpose of 'Transforming Lives by Improving Education around the World'. This is underpinned by its values; excellence, integrity, accountability and collaboration.

The Organisation started as the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) in 1968 with the objective of helping teachers working abroad. Over the years, whilst remaining within the education sector it has evolved and provides a range of services on an international level. In order to contribute to the purpose EDT work collaboratively with national and local Governments world-wide, schools and other partners to ensure that the education services are the best they can be, with a focus on designing and delivering sustainable solutions to improve education. The Organisation currently works with Government departments across Europe, United Arab Emirates, Brunei and Africa to mention a few, sharing their knowledge, specialist education expertise and project management experience to complex global problems.

EDT also offers specialist educational consultancy and works directly with schools and other establishments to contribute to their overarching vision and purpose. Since 2004 EDT have been delivering the National Careers Service to bridge the gap between education, training and employment. Currently, the service is commissioned by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), and EDT is a Prime provider in two regions; North-East covering Northumberland, County Durham, Tyne and Wear and Tees Valley, as well as South-Central encompassing Dorset, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Surrey, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex. It provides careers advice and guidance to more than 100,000 adults annually in a diverse range of community and community settings.

The service is provided through the use of a direct delivery model and a supply chain in both regions in order to meet the commissioner expectations in terms of targeting the Priority Groups (PGs) and meeting the diverse needs of the customers. Whilst EDT has knowledge and expertise in the provision of Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) it recognised the value of working with others (referred to as Sub-Contractors, due to the terminology used by EDT) to support and work with the specific groups of customers. The aim being to transform lives and provide lasting economic and social benefit to the communities in which they operate.

Currently, Sub-Contractors in the North-East deliver 16% of the National Careers Service contract, and 21% in South Central, the balance is delivered via a direct delivery model using EDT staff across the areas.

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:

EDT have designed a process for potential Sub-Contractors to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to work within the network. Sub-Contractors explained that they were provided with extensive information prior to preparing the EOI and in some cases proactively negotiated profiles and market share, which enabled them to make an informed decision as to whether to submit an EOI. They confirmed that the process undertaken whilst submitting a bid was appropriate to the contract, straight-forward and support readily available, if requested. The process was open and transparent, and communication was effective throughout the process. (2.1, 2.4)

As indicated above, Sub-Contractors that had recently entered the current supply chain had negotiated profiles; performance expectations and funding arrangements to ensure it was a viable contract prior to submitting the EOI. Those already in the supply chain spoke of actively negotiating and reviewing profiles on an annual basis, as a minimum or more frequently if the need arose. Sub-Contractors had already negotiated profiles in preparation for the new National Careers Service contract, and were currently awaiting the outcome of the Prime's position. (2.4)

Performance expectations were discussed prior the submission of the EOI and explicitly outlined within the specification document, which supported the contract at the start of the relationship. Throughout the life of the contract there is a focus on performance; informally on a daily and weekly basis, and formally throughout the quarterly performance management review. Consequently, Sub-Contractors clearly understood what was expected of them and felt well supported by EDT. (3.2)

The process to make payment for the services / outcomes was discussed and agreed with Sub-Contractors throughout the contracting and set-up stages. Sub-Contractors had a clear understanding of what was required by them and confirmed that it was a straight-forward activity on a monthly basis, which consistently resulted in payments being made in a timely manner and accurately. (4.2)

Sub-Contractors are provided with access to EDTs' Continuous Professional Development (CPD) calendar, and as a result managers and staff are able to participate in any learning and development activity relevant to the delivery of the National Careers Service, and wider, if relevant. In addition, learning and development needs are identified at advisor level throughout a range of activities, for example, quarterly performance review, Skills Action Plan (SAP) Audits, observations of practice, etc. Subsequently, training activities are planned and executed, for example, Labour Market Intelligence (LMI), YETI (CRM) system, compliance requirements, etc. There was evidence of evaluating the impact of the learning and development through improvements in practice being observed. (5.3)

All Sub-Contractors spoke highly regarding the relationship with staff within EDT, there is an understanding of their roles and responsibilities, they are approachable, accessible and very responsive to their needs. Communications are consistently open and honest, positive and supportive, with *'nothing being too much trouble'*. They are confident to discuss challenges and issues with the contract, and on occasions their business, for example staff absence, and feel well supported. (6.1, 6.2)

A range of compliance and quality assurance practices, which include the customer experience have been designed and implemented to support Sub-Contractors to meet the commissioner's requirements and mitigate the risk of holding a Government contract. A high proportion of Sub-Contractors confirmed that the policies, systems and processes, whilst on occasions were onerous ensured they deliver the contract in line with the requirements and enabled them to identify improvements to influence the delivery of the service. (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:

Sub-Contractors signpost customers to organisations and agencies outside the formal supply chain, for example, further and higher education establishments, training providers and in some cases support groups. In addition, Sub-Contractors are supported to network at local level to increase awareness of the local issues, gaps in service provision and contribute to resolving these, as well as promoting the service. In the future, EDT is encouraged to design strategies to provide a consistent approach to working with wider networks to ensure organisations and agencies are recognised for their contribution. This may result in identifying some Sub-Contractors as a tier 3 or 4 whereby formal supply chain practices could be implemented. It may also contribute to ensuring organisations and agencies are of good standing, provide a high standard of service, as well as facilitate referrals at ease across the network (contribute to collaborative working). Consideration could also be made to creating an additional Sub-Contractor resource in terms of a directory listing the organisations and agencies used and the services provided which can be referred to when seeking specialist / ad-hoc services. (1.2)

Sub-Contractor involvement and engagement is viewed as critical by EDT and as a result throughout the recent bid activity for the National Careers Service some Sub-Contractors confirmed that there was consultation in relation to the delivery model and how to engage with specific PGs, however, to date the outcome could not be substantiated due to the stage of the tender. Similarly, consultation activities and feedback mechanisms are planned and executed with the aim of Sub-Contractors influencing changes / improvements being made, for example, access to management information, however, examples were limited. In the future, EDT may consider a more overt approach to advising Sub-Contractors of the action taken as a result of sharing their ideas and opinions, for example, *'you said, we did'*. (1.3)

EDT work collaboratively with the Sub-Contractors and there was evidence of sharing resources, including staff to cover absence. EDT provide opportunities for the Sub-Contractors to network and it is recognised that many Sub-Contractors are specialist providers which minimises the opportunity to work together. Sub-Contractors failed to recognise some opportunities for collaborative working across the supply chain, as a result, consideration could be made to creating further opportunities for collaborative working and capturing the outcome. For example, sharing wider networks, supporting others with bid writing, sharing local intelligence, etc. and ultimately working as an efficient and supportive network to achieve the overarching aim. (1.4)

A positive and supportive ethos has been adopted by EDT when working with Sub-Contractors and every opportunity is made to actively coach and work with the advisors delivering the service to address any performance issues. There was evidence of a 'capability process' been used when a Sub-Contractor was under-performing. Whilst it is admirable that EDT consistently work with Sub-Contractors to address issues in a supportive and positive manner, consideration could be made to formalising the 'capability process'. This would demonstrate that EDT has a consistent approach to addressing performance issues, provide the Project co-ordinators with a clear structure and provide Sub-Contractors with a clear indication of what they might expect if performance falls below that discussed and agreed. (6.5)

Robust practices are in place to ensure Sub-Contractors have strategies, policies and procedures to address data security, health and safety and safeguarding. Whilst the strategy relating to environmental sustainability is submitted throughout due diligence Sub-Contractors failed to recollect any further action taken to ensure policies are being implemented. In the future, consideration could be made to supporting Sub-Contractors to identify appropriate targets to contribute to environmental sustainability which are subsequently monitored and reviewed periodically, for example throughout the quarterly performance review. (7.4)

EDT have designed their policy statement to address the requirements of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and have established plans which are in the early stages of implementation to ensure that Sub-Contractors adhere to the principles of the Act. The policy statement is to be collected at due diligence and subsequently reviewed annually. In the future, EDT is encouraged to provide Sub-Contractors with access to appropriate information, learning and development to raise awareness of the principles relating to the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and if appropriate, undertake greater scrutiny of the approaches adopted by Sub-Contractors. (7.5)

Currently, EDT assess the activities of the supply chain in terms of having a measurable impact on the wider social objectives, for example, the Fuller Working Life Agenda, Industrial Strategy, Worklessness, etc. and communicate these to the Sub-Contractors. However, some Sub-Contractors were unsure of the wider social objectives and as a result were unable to recognise the impact they were having on these. In the future, consideration could be made to reviewing the method of communication in relation to the impact on the wider social objectives; helping Sub-Contractors to make the link between the impact on stakeholders to the contribution towards local, regional and national priorities. Some Sub-Contractors evidently assess themselves in terms of the impact specific contracts have on wider objectives, however, this was not consistent practice. Consequently, consideration could be made to support Sub-Contractors to measure the impact of the service on wider social objectives. (8.2)

There is a strong commitment to equality and diversity across the supply chains and practices are clearly embedded, the quarterly performance review provides the opportunity to review of the policy and ways of working with different customer groups; monitor and promote equality and diversity. Data is collected by the Sub-Contractors using YETI and a Sub-Contractors Priority Group Monitoring Report is available for analysis, which is used by EDT. However, there was little evidence of Sub-Contractors actually using the data to inform improvements, consequently consideration could be made to supporting them to analyse the information available at Sub-Contractor and supply chain level, and using this to make improvements to the promotion of the service, customer journeys, etc. (8.4)

Sub-Contractors have left the supply chain for different reasons and a process for exiting the contract has been discussed, agreed and successfully executed. In the future, consideration could be made to designing an exit strategy to be used in the event of a contract being terminated, either voluntarily, due to performance issues or the end of the contract. This could provide Sub-Contractors with an indication of the minimum expectations when leaving a supply chain, including the requirements of the commissioner and EDT. (8.5)

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:

Sub-Contractors pay a management fee, and whilst this was discussed and agreed with them prior to contracting and a presentation provided to the networks, those interviewed were either unaware of a management fee or recognised that there was a fee, but failed to be able to cite the percentage (even approximate). However, it was noted that Sub-Contractors recognised the support gained from EDT, for example, learning and development, performance management, quality assurance and compliance activities, management information, network meetings, etc. In the future, consideration could be made to changing the approach to communicating the management fee and periodically reflect with Sub-Contractors the range of support provided to enable them to deliver a quality service to meet the needs of customers and the commissioners. (4.3)

Many interventions take place to identify areas for improvement at Sub-Contractor level, for example, monthly SAP Audits, quarterly Customer Journey Checks and a three-year Best Practice and Improvement (BPI) visit. In addition, they are encouraged to undertake an annual self-assessment which results in a local action plan. As a result of Sub-Contractors' self-assessment activities key themes influence an Improvement Plan (supply chain level) to contribute to improving performance, compliance and quality assurance across the respective supply chains. However, Sub-Contractors failed to recognise how they contributed, and could not recall seeing the document. Consequently, in the future, consideration could be made to ensuring Sub-Contractors are aware of how they contribute to the Improvement Plan, as well as providing easy access to it to enable them to recognise and contribute to future improvements across the supply chains. (6.7)

8. FINDINGS

PRINCIPLE 1: Design

EDT have been a Prime provider of the National Careers Service for an extended period of time, and as a result, when the commissioner re-procures the service the Organisation prepares and submits a bid to meet the requirements of the commissioner. It undertakes extensive research using a range of methods, for example, scrutiny of a wide range of statistical information including the Office for National Statistics (ONS) data, establishing the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Local Authorities (LAs) priorities, as well as gaining a comprehensive understanding of the demographics and indicative numbers.

In previous National Careers Service bidding activities organisations from the public, private and charitable / voluntary sectors were invited to participate. As a result, the current supply chain is made up of organisations from the different sectors; 24% public, 24% private and 52% third sector. In addition, it was noted that Sub-Contractors are of differing legal status and varying sizes, as well as some having expertise / specialism to engage with different groups and address a range of customer needs.

When the most recent tender information was released by the commissioner, EDT gained a full understanding of the aims and objectives of the service and recognised the changes to the regions and PGs. Once again EDT have undertaken extensive research to gain insight into the regions, demographics, potential customers groups, indicative numbers, etc. At the time of the Merlin assessment EDT were awaiting to be notified as to whether it had successfully gained the contract, and would subsequently review the supply chain and award appropriate contracts to Sub-Contractors. Once again, the opportunity was open to public, private and third sector organisations, as well as those of differing legal status and size, but fundamentally the aim is to address the commissioner's objectives and contractual requirements. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"I feel the supply chain is made up of a good mix of partners."

"Definitely the right mix of partners – 100%."

"A number of specialist providers, which is good, we're different and all have our place."

Sub-Contractors are encouraged to signpost to other, local organisations and agencies, including schools, training providers, support groups, etc. in order to meet the needs of customers. In addition, they are supported to create positive relationships with LEPs, LAs and appropriate community groups in order to keep abreast of local priorities. Whilst wider networks are utilised by Sub-Contractors the arrangements are informal and as a result EDT may benefit from creating a strategy to provide a structure and a consistent approach to ensure organisations and agencies are of good standing and provide a quality service to customers to enable them to progress.

Throughout the recent bidding activity there was evidence of potential Sub-Contractors being consulted in relation to a delivery model, methods of engaging customers from different PGs, for example, single parents, how to achieve the targets, for example, job entries, etc. If EDT are successful in the recent submission, a number of Sub-Contractors were confident that further consultation would take place to inform the delivery of the service.

Some Sub-Contractors spoke of been consulted regarding the set-up training with the aim of improving the provision for delivery staff at the start of the relationship. Whilst others referenced the on-going dialogue and annual survey whereby they were encouraged to provide feedback and contribute to improving communications and ways of working.

There was strong evidence of EDT working collaboratively with the Sub-Contractors for example sharing resources and practices, coaching to improve performance, etc. EDT recognise the value of Sub-Contractors working together and as a result provide opportunities for them to network and gain an understanding of others' service offers in an effort to benefit all parties. Whilst Sub-Contractors inferred an open and trusting relationship amongst them, there were limited findings whereby collaborative working was cited, and as a result, EDT are encouraged to review its approach in this area.

EDTs' mission and values strongly influence the way it operates, and as a result, opts to work with Sub-Contractors whose values and principles are aligned to their own. Sub-Contractors consistently made reference to excellence and collaboration, and believe them to be embedded in everything EDT undertakes. Similarly, Sub-Contractors believe there is a high level of commitment to equality and diversity, and as a result EDT recognise the value of working with organisations with an area of expertise / specialism to support different customers with a range of needs. In turn due to the approach to equality and diversity Sub-Contractors opt to partner with EDT in an effort to '*make a difference*'. Sub-Contractors spoke of due diligence addressing policies and procedures to ensure equality and diversity, as well as discussions throughout the quarterly performance review whereby checks were undertaken to ensure procedures were implemented and staff continued to be in receipt of regular learning and development opportunities to promote equality and diversity. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"Very transparent."

"Absolute pleasure working with EDT."

"We consider very carefully who we work with."

"We have recently reviewed our own core values and spoken to EDT about these."

The make-up of the supply chain is reviewed to ensure the changing customer needs can be accommodated, and this has resulted in additional Sub-Contractors being sought and procured to complement the existing delivery. Some Sub-Contractors made reference to evolving, developing capacity and diversifying in order to meet address the changing needs of customers and subsequently contribute to the targets.

In the event of a Sub-Contractor exiting the supply chain EDT have contingency plans, which include increasing the direct delivery and / or re-allocating to an appropriate Sub-Contractor. If required alternative providers would be identified and encouraged to join the supply chain through the formal procurement route.

PRINCIPLE 2: Procure

EDT developed the EOI process in 2014 and over the past four years have learnt from the implementation which has resulted in improvements being made. Sub-Contractors recently involved in the EOI activities spoke of a process that was fit for purpose, straight-forward and not too onerous. A number referenced the support, including guidance from EDT to navigate Bravo (tendering portal used by the commissioner) and the on-going communications throughout the EOI process. Sub-Contractors confirmed that the process was open and transparent.

Some Sub-Contractors had recently undertaken the due diligence process and once again confirmed that it was what was expected, straight-forward and support was available to ensure the policies and procedures met the minimum requirements. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"Due diligence process is excellent – EDT are ahead of the game on everything."

"Clear transparent process."

"X supported us with Bravo and was available as we completed the expression of interest."

A strategy for the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) is in place which is underpinned by processes to ensure effective consultation and communication with staff that may be transferring in or out of EDT. The assessment team was advised that there had been no TUPE activity in the past year, and as a result the strategy was not tested; assurance was provided, that if applicable in the future the TUPE strategy would be mobilised.

At the start of the contract Sub-Contractors were aware that market share was allocated based predominantly on geography and specialism / expertise, as well as previous performance. Throughout the life of the relationship the market share has been reviewed, and in some cases reduced, or split differently between direct delivery and that of Sub-Contractor. A high proportion of Sub-Contractors were aware of the allocation of the market share and clearly understood the rationale.

Sub-Contractors spoke positively about being able to discuss and agree profiles; performance expectations and funding arrangements prior to submitting the EOI throughout the initial contracting activities and at any stage of the relationship. Some Sub-Contractors explained that they had successfully negotiated a higher contract value due to their performance, whilst others referenced a reduction to ensure the contract was viable and the performance expectations were realistic. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"Definitely a negotiation around profiles."

"Before we did the EOI we negotiated profiles; numbers and payment to ensure we could make it work."

"There's opportunity to re-negotiate, its two-way."

"We're a self-financing team and needed specific numbers, so negotiated the final figure."

PRINCIPLE 3: Contract

A draft contract was issued to Sub-Contractors prior to entering the formal contracting stage and every opportunity was provided for them to review the agreement with EDT. In addition, the contract has a specification document which details the performance expectations and schedule of activities. Sub-Contractors consistently indicated; *'all the information was made available at the start'* and *'it was easy to read along with lots of other documents; the specification document'*.

Sub-Contractors explained that performance expectations were discussed prior to the submission of the EOI to ensure that they were in a position to meet the requirements. These were reviewed throughout the contracting discussions and as a result Sub-Contractors clearly understood what was expected of them from the start of the relationship. Performance is reviewed at every opportunity, for example, informally on a daily and weekly basis and formally throughout the quarterly performance reviews. This ensures that Sub-Contractors clearly understand what is expected of them at every stage; pre-contracting and throughout the life of the contract.

A complaints procedure is outlined to Sub-Contractors within the contract, which clearly indicates the process for escalating issues and complaints. Sub-Contractors confirmed their awareness of the process and if the need arose felt that they would be confident to escalate an issue or complaint using this approach. However, Sub-Contractors quickly stated that the formal process would not be required as staff were very responsive and dealt with issues as they arose, or sought advice and guidance from a line manager in order to resolve issues.

At the time of the assessment there was no evidence of any formal complaints against EDT from its Sub-Contractors, as a result this process was not fully tested. Whilst the current contract held is not commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), if in the future this was the case, EDT confirmed that it 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. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"Never had cause to use the disputes resolution process, however, it is in the contract."

"Not used the dispute resolution process – if I had an issue I would call X."

PRINCIPLE 4: Fund

The funding and payment arrangements were openly discussed with Sub-Contractors prior to completing and submitting the EOI and subsequently further discussions took place throughout the formal contracting stage. As previously stated, some Sub-Contractors successfully negotiated an increase in volumes to ensure the team was self-financing, which made the contract viable.

EDT make every effort to ensure Sub-Contractors are not put at undue risk and as a result implement stringent compliance practices, which is understood and valued by the supply chain. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"I feel the funding is fair for the provision."

"It is self-financing, as a charity that's what we aim to do, cover costs."

"Funding has been fair against performance achievement."

"Risk is mitigated through the compliance visits."

Sub-Contractors described the process in place to enable them to raise accurate invoices to draw funds for the services provided, and confirmed this was straight-forward. Subsequently, payments are consistently made on time and accurately in line with the payment schedule agreed. One Sub-Contractor spoke of an inaccurate payment at the start of the relationship which was quickly addressed with payment made the following day, and a profuse apology made. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"Payments are never late and always correct."

"Finance spot on – could not fault the payment process."

"The monthly process is straight-forward and payment is consistently made on time."

EDT provided Sub-Contractors with information relating to the contract value and that paid to those delivering the service. This inferred that a management fee is charged, however, it failed to be explicit and as a result there were differing opinions amongst the Sub-Contractors as to whether a management fee was paid. Consequently, EDT is encouraged to be open and transparent when communicating the management fee, and in the future consideration could be made to negotiating the figure based on the services provided to Sub-Contractors.

Sub-Contractors explained the support provided by EDT to enable them to deliver the service included quality and compliance activities, performance management, YETI system, learning and development and access to information, advice and guidance.

PRINCIPLE 5: Develop

Sub-Contractors made reference to the support gained to ensure policies and procedures are designed to meet the requirements, for example, security of data and assets. The quarterly performance review incorporates a review of policies and procedures, and once again if changes are required support is readily available. EDT are aware that Sub-Contractors will require Cyber Essentials Plus to address the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and as a result will be providing advice and guidance, if successful in the recent bidding activity for the National Careers Service.

As a new Sub-Contractor joins the supply chain delivery staff are provided with a full induction whereby systems and processes, including the customer journey and relevant documentation are reviewed. In addition, training is delivered to enable staff to use YETI effectively from entering information through to generating reports for analysis. A number of the Sub-Contractors explained that extensive support was gained to ensure quality assurance activities were embedded and this continues to be an area that EDT provide advice and guidance to minimise the risk to them.

Reference was made to information being shared, for example, weekly updates shared on the Inspiration Portal (platform to deposit and store information), as well as LMI, job vacancies, external networking events, etc. to support the Sub-Contractors to deliver the service effectively and meet the targets.

Every three years EDT undertake a BPI visit to Sub-Contractors' premises and review the performance against thirteen critical success areas, some are aligned to the OFSTED requirements. Sub-Contractors explained that this visit identifies any areas for improvement, which contributes to the development of the business.

Sub-Contractors are kept informed of future bid opportunities at local and national levels, and support is provided, if requested to complete the EOI or other pre-entry requirements. Some Sub-Contractors also spoke of diversifying and being able to increase their service offer, which had resulted in additional volumes being allocated throughout the life of the current contract.

The quarterly performance review includes discussion relating to resources required to deliver the service, for example, promotional material, staff levels, learning and development needs, etc. As a result, staff training is identified and subsequently provided, for example, YETI refresher, quality assurance practices, as well as workshops to address action planning, how to use LMI effectively, coaching to address specific aspects of the service, etc.

The monthly SAP Quality Audit Checks and the observation schedule also contribute to identifying learning and development needs, and Sub-Contractors spoke of extensive support provided to staff to ensure the action plans met the requirements.

Sub-Contractors spoke of having access to EDT's CPD calendar and as a result being able to encourage their staff to attend a range of workshops / programmes. Mandatory training activities are provided to address data security, health and safety, safeguarding, prevent, equality and diversity, etc. and more recently EDT paid for the licences required for staff to undertake GDPR training.

CPD hours completed by Sub-Contractors' staff is recorded and the impact is evaluated. For example, the SAP Quality Audit Checks indicate that improvements have been made to using the LMI. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"Network meetings are excellent."

"Feel very supported."

"If we need anything we can ask EDT."

"We discuss staff training needs quarterly, and EDT will arrange coaching or signpost me to the CPD calendar."

PRINCIPLE 6: Performance Manage

A key strength identified throughout the Merlin assessment was the clear communication channels that ensured there was clarity in the business relationships. All Sub-Contractors made reference to having a key contact from within EDT to support with day-to-day activities relating to the delivery of the service. In addition, others were readily accessible, including managers and administrators. They spoke highly of the staff and the support available as they were approachable, accessible and very responsive to their needs.

A culture has been created whereby EDT are open and honest, positive and supportive, and as a result there is a focus on working together to ensure all stakeholders are successful. Sub-Contractors spoke of effective communications with EDT and the confidence to discuss anything in relation to the contract, as well as their business. In the event of errors being made or performance issues arising Sub-Contractors confirmed that EDT was understanding and genuinely wanted to support them. Some Sub-Contractor comments included:

"Everything EDT do is clear."

"Communications are very clear and responsive."

"Can phone to anyone at any level within EDT."

"Very responsive communications."

"Couldn't ask for any more support from internal teams."

"In 30 years – one of the best organisations I have worked with."

"Perfect culture."

"Absolutely fantastic prime – definite ten."

"Really good relationship – never had any issues with EDT."

"The culture is constantly developing."

"Brilliant relationship."

"We have felt that we can have an open dialogue."

Whilst performance is formally discussed throughout the quarterly performance review; daily and weekly conversations take place with the project co-ordinators and administrators whereby performance is openly reviewed. As previously stated, Sub-Contractors are confident to discuss anything, including issues and challenges relating to performance, including those relating to quality assurance practices. Whilst innovation is supported a number of Sub-Contractors inferred *'the contract is as it is'*, which limited their opportunities for creativity and thinking outside of the box.

The YETI system generates a wide range of reports providing Sub-Contractors with access to consistently accurate and relevant management information. Sub-Contractors spoke of the support gained to ensure they are able to analyse the information provided and subsequently drive performance improvements. Reports can be generated on a self-help basis, and as a result performance can be monitored daily at different levels; organisation through to individual advisor.

Whilst individual Sub-Contractor performance data is not shared amongst the network the overall performance of direct delivery and the supply chain is reviewed throughout the network meetings. The information is analysed and evaluated against the targets and areas for improvement are identified, for example, increasing the Job/Learning Outcomes (JLOs).

Sub-Contractors explained the use YETI to measure the distance travelled by customers, which can also be used to establish the quality of the action plans which has contributed to identifying areas for improvement. The quarterly Customer Journey Checks formally reviews the progression of customers and once again informs improvements / changes to be made.

The quarterly performance review monitors and evaluates Sub-Contractors against the key targets, Client Satisfaction Outcome (CSO), Client Management Outcome (CMO) and JLO, and subsequently identifies areas for improvement. There was evidence of Sub-Contractors improving performance from one quarter to the next as a result of this level of focus in relation to JLOs.

In line with the culture of EDT; the Organisation has not implemented a formal Performance Improvement Process (PIP), an informal '*capability process*' has been designed. An initial informal discussion with an honest and open exchange of information, and subsequently the situation is managed predominantly through additional coaching and mentoring opportunities being identified and implemented, additional formal training and / or an adjustment to the contract. One Sub-Contractor explained;

"At the quarterly review meeting we have agreed to reduce the target, if we were failing to perform it's mutually agreed."

Sub-Contractors consistently made reference to the network meetings whereby they are encouraged to share practices, what is working well and aspects of the delivery failing to be effective. One Sub-Contractor has achieved a 100% score for completion of effective SAPs and as a result the approach was shared with others within the network. In addition, some made reference to the different approaches to engaging with customer groups; those that were successful and others that gained less positive outcomes.

As previously stated, different interventions; monthly SAP Quality Audit Checks, quarterly performance reviews and Customer Journey Checks as well as the three-year BPI visit and the annual self-assessment process contribute to local quality and performance improvement plans and a Regional Improvement Plan. Whilst the Improvement Plan is available, Sub-Contractors could not recall seeing the document and as a result failed to recognise how they contributed to the development of the overarching plan, and consequently an area to be addressed.

PRINCIPLE 7: Quality Assurance and Compliance

EDT advise Sub-Contractors of updates to legislative and regulatory requirements, for example, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Modern Slavery Act 2015 through a weekly YAMMER (social on-line networking tool) which is subsequently deposited on the Inspiration Portal. Similarly, information relating to policy and strategy is shared in the same way. A read receipt facility is provided, which expects the recipient to have read and understood the content. The action required to address the changes in legislative and regulatory requirements is followed up throughout the quarterly performance review and if required, appropriate support is provided to ensure the Sub-Contractor meets the minimum expectations, for example, policy that is fit for purpose.

Robust practices have been designed to monitor the delivery of the service, including the customer experience. Sub-Contractors cited the monthly SAP, quarterly Customer Journey Checks and performance review, as well as the three-yearly BPI visit. A high proportion of Sub-Contractors confirmed that whilst there were numerous interventions, these were proportionate and contributed to mitigating any risk attached to running a Government contract. One Sub-Contractor comment, which was echoed by a vast majority included: *"None of the processes were over burdensome – they were put in place to help the contract."*

Sub-Contractors referenced findings as a result of these interventions, which included incorrect recording of PGs, 56% of customers having an incorrect email address through to SAPs which were lacking information and supporting evidence, including actions not owned by the customer, inadequate use of LMI, etc. Reference was made to action plans been discussed and agreed to ensure the findings were addressed within a specific timescale.

A range of customer surveys are used to gain feedback from the users of the service, which is reviewed by the Sub-Contractor and EDT, and areas of concern are identified and addressed. However, Sub-Contractors explained that there is minimal negative feedback.

Emails, weekly YAMMER updates and direct communications with EDT staff provide Sub-Contractors with information, advice and guidance. The information is gained from reliable sources, for example, Government, commissioner, associations, etc. which assures the currency and accuracy of the information provided. The information is subsequently stored on the Inspiration Portal enabling Sub-Contractors to access as required in the future. The policies and procedures that are shared with Sub-Contractors are reviewed annually, as a minimum, and as updates are made version control is applied, which ensures the most current copy is being referenced.

The monthly SAP Quality Audit Checks and quarterly Customer Journey Checks, provide the opportunity to review the range of information, advice and guidance provided to customers by delivery staff, and identifies any gaps, for example, effective use of LMI. As a result, such findings are addressed and reviewed throughout the next intervention. These are complemented with annual observations of practice, as a minimum, which provide further assurance of the information, advice and guidance being provided to customers, and this has recently indicated improvements to the use of LMI.

Throughout due diligence the policies and procedures to address data security, health and safety and safeguarding are reviewed and if, appropriate feedback provided to the Sub-Contractor to make any changes to ensure they are fit for purpose. Subsequently, these policies and procedures are reviewed throughout the quarterly performance review, along with staff training requirements, and if appropriate changes and / or training needs identified. Similarly, any incidents or potential breach of requirements would be identified and discussed, and appropriate action taken, for example, review of the policy and / or further training identified for staff. The three-year BPI provides the opportunity to undertake a full review of the key policies and procedures, and once again establish any updates to be undertaken, if any.

The Sub-Contractor's strategy relating to environmental sustainability is also submitted throughout due diligence however, any further action in terms of reviewing targets and monitoring performance fails to take place, which is a potential area for improvement in the future.

The requirements of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 have been addressed by EDT, and plans are in place to ensure Sub-Contractors are adhering to the principles of, or meeting the criteria to ensure they fully comply with the requirements. Some Sub-Contractors spoke of a contract variation to include the Act however, this was not consistent across the supply chains. At the time of the Merlin assessment it was apparent that plans had been designed to address the requirements and EDT were in the early stages of implementation.

PRINCIPLE 8: Review and Close

EDT actively engage in external audits and assessments with the aim of learning from the experience and subsequently making improvements, which was a primary aim of undertaking a voluntary Merlin assessment. Other activities that have influenced changes / improvements have been the feedback following OFSTED inspections, **matrix** assessments and the annual continuous improvement check, as well as feedback from the commissioner and Sub-Contractors.

Sub-Contractors are eager to provide feedback regarding the relationship and the systems and processes, which was evidenced with a 76% return rate to the Merlin survey, as well as a high percentage engaging in the annual Sub-Contractor survey released in January. Sub-Contractors strongly believe that there is a culture of continuous improvement within EDT and as a result feedback is valued.

Performance against profile is reviewed throughout the network meetings, which provide an indication of the performance against the targets; CSO, CMO and JLO. As cited by Sub-Contractors this clearly indicates the contribution the supply chain is making and establishes areas for improvement.

As previously stated, EDT assess the activities of the supply chain in terms of having a measurable impact on the wider social objectives, for example, the Fuller Working Life Agenda, Industrial Strategy, Worklessness, etc. and every effort is made to communicate this information to the Sub-Contractors. In addition, some Sub-Contractors actively assess themselves in terms of the impact specific contracts have on the wider objectives, for example, reduced employment, less reliance on Government benefits, less referrals to medical services, etc. however, this was not consistent practice.

In terms of the positive impact on the different stakeholders, including the customers there was far better understanding, and examples were cited which included; improved confidence, better health and wellbeing, increased independence, changes to the lives of family members and breaking down the barriers and stigma attached to being employed (after generations of a family have been unemployed). In addition, some referenced the opportunity that customers gained to realise the barriers to employment and as a result gain a bespoke service to move them closer to the labour market.

Over the life of the contract delivery staff had experienced extensive support through mentoring and coaching, as well as learning and development opportunities to gain additional knowledge and skills, and in some cases higher level qualifications. The contract had provided stable employment for advisors and Sub-Contractors were hopeful that this would continue in the future resulting in a team with years of experience, and a wealth of knowledge and skills going forward.

In terms of the impact on the commissioner reference was consistently made to the achievement of the targets, the focus on the PGs and the number of customers that had entered into employment, education and / or training. One Sub-Contractor comment included a statement based on its ambition

"To impact 2020 people in the local community by 2020."

Sub-Contractors spoke of the quarterly performance review when the equality and diversity policy was reviewed, along with ways of working with different customer groups and further training identified for staff. Information relating to equal opportunities is captured through YETI, and subsequently analysed by EDT whereby areas to address are identified. A number of Sub-Contractors are providing an end-to-end service to a specific customer group and as a result, the focus is on achieving their targets, currently they do not see the importance of reviewing the data relating to equality of opportunity across the supply chains.

A process for exiting the contract has been discussed, agreed and successfully executed with Sub-Contractors that have opted to leave the supply chain. These Sub-Contractors confirmed that all outstanding payments were made in a timely manner and accurately, and YETI was closed down within the agreed timescale. Sub-Contractors are aware that there will be a close down plan for the current National Careers Service contract, which they feel will be a supportive process with EDT. In addition, they spoke of the current, robust practices in place to assure compliance and quality of service and believe the process will be straight-forward.

9. CONCLUSION AND CONDITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

In conclusion, this assessment provided the opportunity to review the practices of Education Development Trust for the current National Careers Service contract against the Merlin Standard. As a result, the Organisation will be accredited with the Standard for a period of two-years. 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.

EDT will be due a re-accreditation review in June 2020. Whilst an annual health check / review is not mandatory for organisations to retain accreditation against the Merlin Standard, EDT may consider undertaking such an activity in June 2019 to gain objective, independent feedback regarding the improvements made over the year.

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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