



merlin standard

2018

PROSPECTS SERVICES

COMPACT REPORT

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1. KEY INFORMATION

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Assessment Type | ACCREDITATION REVIEW |
| Assessor's Decision | STANDARD MET |
| Anniversary Date | 15/06/2020 |
| Assessment Dates | 11, 12, 14 & 15 JUNE 2018 |
| Lead Assessor's Name | LORNA BAINBRIDGE |
| Customer ID | C16242 |
| Assessment Reference | PN103464 |

2. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| OVERALL OUTCOME | 86% Excellent |
| 1. Design | 90% Excellent |
| 2. Procure | 85% Excellent |
| 3. Contract | 90% Excellent |
| 4. Fund | 87% Excellent |
| 5. Develop | 87% Excellent |
| 6. Performance Manage | 86% Excellent |
| 7. Quality Assurance and Compliance | 84% Good |
| 8. Review and Close | 76% Good |

3. METHODOLOGY

Prospects Services (referred to as Prospects or the 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. Organisations are required to be re-accredited every two-years and consequently Prospects came forward for re-accreditation in line with the anniversary date.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor), Sally-Ann Harding and Graham Pickup (Team Assessors) supported by a coordinator from within Prospects. 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 Supply Chain Partners delivering a range of services funded by different commissioners; DWP, European Social Fund (ESF), Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), Birmingham Local Authority, etc. The list indicated past, present and potential Supply Chain Partners delivering an end-to-end (tier 2) service, specialist (tier 3) or ad-hoc (tier 4) services.

In advance of the Assessment a survey was carried out of the Supply Chain Partners, all 280 were invited to participate. Responses were received from past, present and potential Supply Chain Partners, which represented 27% 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 Prospects staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chains. 36% of the tier 2, end-to-end Supply Chain Partners were interviewed as well as a representative sample of tier 3 specialist providers and tier 4 ad-hoc referral or spot purchase organisations. Consideration was made to all that were past, present and potential, and irrespective of whether the contract was commissioned by DWP or other commissioners.

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

4. ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

Prospects' strapline is '*Inspiring People – Developing Potential*' and aims to inspire and develop people's full potential, through providing tailored education, employment, training and care products and services. Every year it works with more than 500,000 young people and adults through the range of services in order to achieve the aim. The core values by which it operates are Achieving Impact, Working Together, Delivering Change, Valuing Colleagues and Promoting Diversity.

As of the 30 November 2017 Prospects became part of the Shaw Trust Group. Whilst work is being undertaken in the background to design the structure and operational activities of the Group, at the time of the Merlin re-accreditation review, it was business as usual, and Prospects continued to operate as a separate legal entity.

In order to achieve the aim, Prospects deliver a range of programmes on behalf of different commissioners and has been doing so for over 20 years. The current commissioners are DWP, ESF, ESFA, Birmingham Local Authority, etc. In order to meet the customer's needs and those of the different commissioners, 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

DWP Contract - Contract Package Area 11 - 100% direct delivery supported by ad-hoc delivery through tier 3 and 4 organisations and agencies.

Young People & Families ESF contracts

Bounce Back North East London – 61% direct delivery, 39% supply chain

Bounce Back West London – 33% direct delivery, 67% supply chain

CALM Outreach Central London – 17% direct delivery, 83% supply chain

CALM Outreach South London – 25% direct delivery, 75% supply chain

CALM Outreach West London – 12% direct delivery, 88% supply chain

Calderdale - 100% supply chain

Wakefield – 50% direct delivery, 50% supply chain

York, Harrogate & Selby – 50% direct delivery, 50% supply chain

Hambleton, Richmond, Ryedale and Coast – 40% direct delivery, 60% supply chain

Careers Education Information and Guidance (CEIAG) contracts in East Riding and North Yorkshire - 25% direct delivery, 75% supply chain

Improve Your Prospects Leicestershire NEET (not in employment, education or training) – 30% direct delivery, 70% supply chain

National Careers Service

NCS London – 40% direct delivery, 60% supply chain

NCS South West – 64% direct delivery, 36% supply chain

NCS West Midlands – 40% direct delivery, 60% supply chain

Youth Promise Plus - to engage with NEETS and EETS in North and South of Birmingham city – direct delivery in the North 60%, supply chain 40% and direct delivery in the South 40%, supply chain 60%.

Thrive Into Work - Individual Placement and Support Service (IPS) to support people with severe mental health difficulties into employment - 38% direct delivery, 62% supply chain.

Employment Plus London – to support people, particularly parents and lone parents in low paid or unstable employment to improve their opportunities to lift them out of poverty – 20% direct delivery, 80% 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:

Prospects recognise that in order to meet the current and future customer needs, as well as the contractual requirements it has to work with a range of organisations and agencies. As a result, it has engaged with organisations and agencies from different sectors including; public, private and third sector (charitable, social enterprise and community interest company) of varying sizes to deliver an end-to-end service. In addition, consideration has been made to working with a number of specialist and referral organisations from the different sectors to access specific services. Supply Chain Partners (referred to as Partners throughout the report) confirmed that there was a good mix within the respective supply chain, which resulted in opportunities to share practices and resources to benefit the customers. (1.1)

Collaborative working with Partners is embraced by Prospects; the supply chain and direct delivery is viewed as '*one team*' all contributing to '*the bigger picture*'. There is a culture of open participation and sharing resources to ensure everyone is successful. The way the supply chains are designed, including the allocation of the market share encourages Partners to work together, actively sharing resources with the aim of improving the performance of the contract against the deliverables. Whilst there is a level of competition amongst Partners this is balanced by a genuine desire to provide the best service to meet the needs of the customers, which often requires a referral to another Partner. (1.4)

There is an ongoing review of the design of the supply chains to ensure they continue to meet the changing needs of customers, for example, mental health is a growing problem and as a result additional Partners (tiers 3 and 4) have been procured to provide that specialist service. In addition, there was strong evidence of Partners being encouraged to build capacity and as a result, they have had the opportunity to extend the delivery and moved into other locations. (1.6, 5.2)

Prospects openly negotiate volume, funding / finance and performance expectations with Partners, and discuss the terms and conditions prior to the submission of the Expression of Interest (EOI). As a result, Partners are able to make an informed decision as to whether to bid for a contract. Partners consistently made reference to submitting information relating to volumes and finance within the EOI, and in some cases having conversations at that stage with Prospects, for example, a National Careers Service Partner stated '*at bid stage we discussed potential contract percentage and volumes*'. Similarly, Employment Plus Partners were advised to submit profiles prior to contract award, and subsequently had open dialogue to agree the contract. Following contract award, expectations are discussed further including volume, funding / finance and performance expectations, and subsequently throughout the life of the contract open dialogue regarding volumes and performance expectations continue to be undertaken. (2.4, 3.2)

As indicated above, performance expectations are discussed prior to Partners submitting an EOI and subsequently throughout the contracting stage. As a result, Partners have clarity regarding the performance expectations, which are reviewed at regular intervals throughout the life of the contract. For example, National Careers Service Partners spoke of a weekly and fortnightly (depending upon the area of delivery) tele-kit whereby performance against Customer Satisfaction Outcome (CSO), Customer Management Outcome (CMO) and Job / Learning Outcome (JLO) is reviewed and performance expectations for the coming weeks are discussed and agreed, complemented with a formal review every quarter. Whilst other Partners experience four-to-six weekly performance reviews, which is considered to be proportionate. The performance review activities provide Partners with the opportunity to review performance against key deliverables. They are confident to discuss issues and concerns with the contract, as well as share their successes and practices. Partners spoke of innovative approaches being identified and recognised, which have subsequently been shared across the supply chain, for example, ways of engaging with different customer groups, achievement of JLOs, etc. (3.2, 6.3)

Prospects have designed processes to enable Partners to raise and submit invoices for the services provided on a monthly basis. Subsequently, payments are made within the agreed terms and conditions, and in some cases earlier. For example, the ESFA made changes to the funding arrangement which would have resulted in Partners experiencing cash-flow issues, and as a result Prospects now pay within 15 – 18 days to mitigate any financial risk. (4.2)

Extensive support is provided to Partners at every stage of the relationship to ensure they meet the contractual requirements. As Partners go through due diligence feedback is provided in relation to policies and procedures, and if required Prospects' policy and procedures or a template for guidance is shared to enable them to design their own which is fit for purpose. Upon contract award Partners are provided with access to the relevant resources, including a range of learning and development activities to ensure managers and delivery staff have the necessary knowledge and skills, as well as an understanding regarding the documentation, systems and processes required to meet the contractual obligations. Subsequently, the regular performance review cycle identifies additional support and development areas, which are implemented throughout the life of the contract. (5.1, 5.3)

100% of those Partners interviewed throughout the Merlin re-accreditation review confirmed that communications; verbal and written are consistently clear, open and honest, and without unreasonable constraint. Even in the event of under-performance and / or non-compliance Partners spoke of Prospects' staff being very positive and supportive, and seeking ways to work together to address the issues. (6.2)

Communication channels have been designed and implemented to ensure timely updates are provided to Partners relating to changes made to legislative and regulatory requirements, and what is expected of them to be compliant. Reference was made to emails noted as 'urgent', for example, the recent General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 were communicated in this way. Subsequently, Supply Chain Managers review the requirements throughout the tele-kit and / or next performance review to ensure appropriate action has been taken, and once again, if required share templates to support Partners design the policy and procedures to address the changes. (7.1)

6. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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

Robust practices have been designed to monitor the quality of service delivery and the customer experience across the supply chains. These include desk top file audits, review of specific requirements throughout the performance review, customer feedback, annual visits to delivery sites, etc. There was evidence of consistent application across some supply chains / contracts, for example, National Careers Service, however there were inconsistencies across others. As a result, consideration could be made to reviewing the practices across the contracts to ensure they are efficient and proportionate. If the findings indicate these practices are overburdensome for a specific contract, consideration could be made to consulting with Partners to co-design an approach fit for purpose. (7.2)

Similarly, a clear observation strategy has been designed to ensure the information, advice and guidance (IAG) provided by Partners' delivery staff is impartial, objective, effective and timely. This approach is consistently implemented within the National Careers Service but failed to be completed in the same robust manner across other contracts. Consequently, consideration could be made to reviewing the approach to ensure it is fit for purpose across all contracts. It should also be noted that there were infrequent observations of the tier 3 and 4 Partners, and as a result Prospects may consider reviewing the approach and designing a strategy to address this aspect of the supply chain. (7.3)

Partners submit their policies and procedures relating to health and safety, safeguarding and information security throughout due diligence and these are stored on the 'gold file' (on line storage system), and subsequently reviewed and refreshed annually, or as and when legislative and regulatory updates are released. The performance reviews include a discussion relating to any health and safety, safeguarding and information security incidents and the action taken. In addition, an annual visit is made to premises whereby once again the policies and procedures, as well as the practices are under review. Whilst Partners' environmental sustainability policy is reviewed throughout due diligence and annually, they failed to recollect any further discussion relating to this topic. Consequently, consideration could be made to working with Partners to agree environmental sustainability targets, which are reviewed quarterly, as a result, Partners would be able to explain how this policy is reviewed and performance measured on a regular basis. (7.4)

Some Partners recollected the wider social objectives of the commissioners and subsequently were able to provide anecdotal evidence of the impact they had in this area, for example, reduced worklessness, NEET, homelessness, etc. In addition, some made reference to targeting specific customer groups in line with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Local Authority (LA) priorities; progressing customers to a positive destination and reducing reliance on benefits. In the future, consideration could be made to working with Partners to undertake analysis and impact of the services on the wider social objectives with the aim of improving their understanding of their contribution in this area. (8.2)

In the event of a Partner exiting the supply chain voluntarily or due to under-performance, Prospects discuss and agree the process to handle the close of the relationship and to ensure contractual requirements are met. Similarly, as a contract is coming to a close a clear plan is designed indicating actions to be taken within agreed timescales, which are reviewed on a weekly basis. There was evidence of Partners discussing different scenarios in relation to the National Careers Service, for example, if successful or unsuccessful and the TUPE implications. Consequently, tier 2 Partners confirmed that the approach to ending a relationship was effective, open and transparent. Those Partners that had ended a relationship, for whatever reason, also confirmed that the last payments had been made accurately and timely. However, there was evidence of Work Programme tier 3 Partners being uncertain of the current status of the contract and the plans to end the relationship. Consequently, consideration could be made to ensuring a plan is designed for these Partners and timely communications are undertaken. (8.5)

7. FINDINGS

The feedback below is reported against key criteria of the Merlin Standard, aligned with the “Plan-Do-Review” business cycle.

| PLAN |
|--|
| <p>Through planning an effective supply chain, the range of Partners and how they are engaged ensures there is a group of organisations that cover a diverse range of providers that all understand the requirements of the contract and their contributions to achieving the desired outcomes.</p> |
| <p>Prospects recognise the importance of working with supply chains that are made up of different types of organisations from the public, private and third sector, as well as those of varying sizes that provide national, regional and local coverage.</p> <p>Extensive research is undertaken prior to bidding for a contract to establish the aims and objectives of the commissioner and engage with different stakeholders LEPs and LAs, etc. to identify the priorities in the different areas, including the focus in the different groups of customers. As a result there was evidence of organisations being able to provide bespoke services to a specific group of customers, for example the Bangladeshi community, Black, Minority and Ethnic groups (BME), Eastern European, etc.</p> <p>In addition, consideration is made to the barriers customers’ experience and consequently, Prospects have engaged with organisations and agencies that provide health related services; public health, mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, etc. There was also evidence of a number of colleges and private specialist training providers within the supply chains in order to provide customers with a range of options to meet their academic, vocational and personal development requirements. Partners understood the importance of having a mix of organisations within the supply chain and believe that Prospects has taken this into consideration throughout the design of the respective supply chain.</p> <p>Some Partner comments included:</p> <p><i>"Prospects look at the LEP requirements and select Partners based on their specialist knowledge, including prisons."</i></p> <p><i>"The 4 Partners are specialists in the IPS model."</i></p> <p><i>"We are aiming to reach the BME community. We are aware of the mix of Partners through the meetings."</i></p> <p><i>"We provide expertise in self-employment advice."</i></p> <p><i>"Partners cover different geographical areas, we cover Wakefield."</i></p> <p>Prospects actively work with Partners throughout the relationship and encourage collaborative working between direct delivery and the supply chains, and there were many examples of this taking place. Some examples included: local offices working with tiers 3 and 4 - a tier 4 National Careers Service provider was delivering employability courses with Prospects. In addition, Partners made reference to being supported in the design of promotional materials through to sharing vacancies, provision of coaching opportunities and staffing resources when required.</p> |

Within the supply chains there was evidence of Partners working together, for example within Thrive they used focus groups to discuss marketing and stakeholder engagement activities across the project. Partners actively refer customers within the supply chain to address specific customer needs, for example, English and maths qualifications, personal development training, etc. In addition, Partners share vacancies in order to ensure that employers had a choice throughout the recruitment and selection process, and consistent reference was made to the sharing of practices.

Where feasible Partners work across supply chains, for example, Employment Plus Partners from North East and Central London actively work as one team, and on occasions the National Careers Service Partners share practices and learn from others to improve performance against the measurables.

Some Partner comments included:

"We are encouraged to work together and review case studies together to identify ways to improve delivery."

"We work together as a team."

"We cover self-employed and they cover the employed side of the service."

"We work as a team, it is not dictatorial."

"Prospects have helped with cover when we have had staff off sick."

"They (Prospects) have been great at hosting our courses."

"We work across the supply chain to achieve the CSOs, CMOs and JLOs; and it works well."

"Prospects put us in touch with other Providers within the network which was really useful."

The make-up of the supply chains is reviewed on an ongoing basis to identify gaps in delivery, and as a result additional Partners have been brought in. For example, specialist Partners were procured in the Coventry area to address a range of disabilities and to work with different customer groups. Whilst others have been brought on board to provide outreach service, support with mental health issues, and / or to meet the growing and changing demands of the contract, which was evident within the Employment Plus contract.

Prospects actively encourage Partners to grow and evolve, and where feasible diversify with the aim of developing a sustainable organisation. As a result, one Partner explained that they started delivering in one Borough of London and currently works across London, providing a range of services to address the specific needs of customer groups. This approach supports Prospects to move quickly and address any gaps in the provision of the services.

In the event of a Partner leaving the supply chain Prospects have designed a strategy to ensure the customer continues to be in receipt of the service. This will result in allocating remaining customers to either a direct delivery office or a Partner, whichever is best suited to meet the needs of the customer, and also taking into consideration location. In the case of the Work Programme, the two tier 2 Partners ceased trading, and as a result, due to the life of the contract it was decided to move to 100% direct delivery and to work with the existing tier 3 and 4 Partners, as and when specialist support was required.

Some Partner comments included:

"They contacted us to help cover the Bangladeshi Community."

"We identify the areas not covered and discuss how they can be."

"We got a friendly call due to positive reputation and this developed into us obtaining a contract."

"We started in X Borough and now work across London delivering the service."

Partners, including tiers 3 and 4 confirmed that the procurement processes were fair and transparent, and communications; from being advised of the opportunity through to due diligence were open and honest. Partners explained the different communications adopted to advise them of the bid opportunity. Some Partners made reference to Supply Chain Partner Managers calling a formal breakfast meeting to enable them to put a business case together for Growth Funding, which was very inclusive.

Partners confirmed that the EOI was straightforward, and support was available, if required. Partners spoke of regular communication sessions held to keep them abreast of the situation of the bid; this was consistently confirmed by the National Careers Service potential Partners and those involved in the Growth Fund.

Similarly, unsuccessful Partners confirmed that the procurement processes were fair and transparent and explained that they were advised of the outcome and offered the opportunity to gain verbal feedback.

The due diligence activities were described by Partners as fit for purpose and once again they felt well supported by Prospects to ensure the information submitted met the requirements of both the Prime and the commissioner.

Some Partner comments included:

"Prospects kept us well informed on the new contract."

"Put in an EOI – was informed of dates, etc."

"We have regular contact with the area manager from Prospects."

"Felt well supported by Prospects at every stage; good communications."

"The due diligence was clear including, our background, policies, financial situation and our delivery capabilities."

"We did put in an EOI but were not successful – we did get feedback which was fair."

"EOI submitted for extended contract – kept informed all the way."

Prospects proactively negotiate volume, funding / finance and performance expectations with Partners, prior to the submission of the EOI and throughout the life of the contract. Partners are confident to raise discussions at any stage to increase or decrease the volumes in order to ensure the success of the supply chain overall.

Some Partner comments included:

"We were smart at the start and set cautious performance profiles."

"Our volumes were agreed and related to our capacity."

"We suggested profiles – then negotiated."

"We struggle with JLOs, so have been able to re-negotiate."

"There is some fluidity in profiles and contract has been varied due to our success."

"We came in late but were able to negotiate achievable targets."

As previously indicated, Partner's understanding of performance expectations is an area of strength. Partners including tier 3 and 4 clearly understood what was expected of them as a result of discussions prior to bidding and throughout the life of the contract.

Some Partner comments included:

"In all honesty it is understandable and straightforward."

"Profiles broken down and achievement targets are in the contract."

"Performance expectations are very clear all the way through."

"Regular reviews ensure we clearly understand what is expected of us."

"The bi-weekly tele-kit looks at previous performance and what we need to do going forward."

Another area of strength was the systems and processes designed to enable Partners to submit invoices and receive accurate and timely payment to ensure their cash-flow remains positive. There have been occasions when payments have been made early to support a Partner's cash-flow.

Some Partner comments included:

"It's a good system – we always get paid timely and accurately."

"We have always been paid on time and accurately."

"We send the invoice, they are quick with any queries and we are paid on time."

"Claims are simple – straightforward."

"When ESFA changed the funding, Prospects consulted us and changed the payments to between 15 and 20 days, so it doesn't affect our cash-flow."

"We have the opportunity to rectify errors."

DO

Supply Chain Partners are supported to develop their services to meet or exceed expected performance and quality assurance requirements.

Partners are provided with extensive support at every stage of the relationship with Prospects to ensure they meet the contractual requirements. They spoke of the due diligence process and the assurance gained that policies and procedures are fit for purpose, as well as support to implement the documentation, systems and processes to set up at the start and throughout the life of the contract to ensure performance, quality and compliance requirements are met.

Some Partner comments included:

"We were supported to adopt the new Privacy Statement for our clients."

"Prospects is good at running contracts, setting them up and supporting its Supply Chain Partners."

"We got the Sub-Contractor Handbook at the set-up stage, and all the support we needed."

"They helped us get set up, as well as meeting Prevent as that was on the agenda at that time."

"We had an induction, support with the CRM, which has continued."

Prospects actively promotes and facilitates the development of staff within the supply chains; the performance review meeting provides the opportunity to review the performance of delivery staff, and as a result identify training needs. In addition, some Partners made reference to a formal Training Needs Analysis (TNA). Subsequently, training activities are provided through a range of methods, for example, e-learning, workshops, one-to-one coaching, shadowing, webinars, advisor days, Partner meetings, etc. Partners explained that a weekly bulletin included a link to forthcoming Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities, which acted as a prompt. Reference was made to a range of activities: Barclays Life Skills Assessment, Resilience Mentoring, Presentation Skills, COACH, Quality Assurance and Compliance, CRM, Skills Action Plans, Mandatory health and safety, safeguarding, information security, etc.

Some Partner comments included:

"Training on paperwork – gave good and bad examples - really helpful."

"Prospects delivered workshops on Skills Action Plans."

"Prospects will provide some staff training, for safeguarding, online IPS and mental health first aid."

"Prospects helped get our new staff up to speed."

"We had Advisor training on learner loans, the CRM and the paperwork."

"Meetings – online training - Careers London, safeguarding and other generic training available – also shadowing."

"Prospects set up with "call of the wild" for Level 4 IAG for our staff."

"Excellent – skills training, equality and diversity, disabilities, digital skills, social media, mental health and others."

"Training for the SAR and QIP was really useful."

"An annual training programme is shared and reminders sent every week."

"10% discount on the IAG qualification."

Partners made reference to the positive and supportive approach made to partnership working and the fact that communication is open, honest and without unreasonable constraint.

Some Partner comments included:

"Good communications, open and honest - to a point we know there will be a level of commercial sensitivity – that's expected."

"They are open, honest and straight up."

"Approachable, accessible and personable."

"Prospects have been very open and honest with us about the contract ending. They are responsive, we submitted a claim late but they were prompt in making the payment."

"The meetings are very open, we started recently and have had conversations with other Partners about how to do things."

"We have a good relationship with Prospects' operational leads, they are flexible and understanding and respectful of our customers."

"Advisors are brilliant at Prospects."

"Really good relationship."

"Very organised and very helpful – it's been a pleasure working with them."

As previously indicated, performance reviews take place consistently across the supply chains, whilst the frequency varies across the contracts, Partners believe this is proportionate to the size of the delivery. Partners confirmed that they are confident to discuss issues and concerns regarding the contract, as well as share innovative approaches, which are shared across the supply chain by the Supply Chain Manager or throughout the Partner network meetings. The network meetings take place quarterly and provide Partners with the opportunity to discuss challenges and issues, as well as sharing practices and outcomes.

Some Partner comments included:

"We have a monthly contract review, which is very positive and they're always understanding of the situation and as a result support us to address the challenges."

"We meet with the Supply Chain Manager every four-to-six weeks, which is great."

"We have regular tele-kits to discuss our targets and performance."

"We discuss progress against targets at the six-weekly meetings."

"We discuss performance at the meetings and would swap the allocation around if need be."

"We talk about anything; our successes – case studies and what's not working."

"Its open dialogue; I talk about the issues and what I'm doing about them – it really is supportive."

"We've been on a PIP (Performance Improvement Plan) – it was scary, but really positive."

"Positive performance management."

Partners explained the different CRM / reporting platforms used for the relevant contract and confirmed that access was provided to management information to enable them to drive performance.

Some Partners comments included:

"The MI is good, accurate and timely."

"MI sent out monthly."

"Reports are readily available and give me the information I need."

"If I need any specific MI – I go to the Supply Chain Manager – it's always been provided."

Prospects has a clearly defined strategy, supported by a range of practices to monitor the quality of service delivery and the customer experience across the supply chains. Partners described the range of activities which contributed to identifying areas of non-compliance, for example, information missing from documentation, duplications of entry, progression dates not clear, insufficient evidence, Skills Action Plans failing to meet the requirements, etc. Partners confirmed that the findings are clearly communicated, and realistic time is provided to address the issues.

Partners made reference to customer feedback through surveys, mystery shopper, observations and forums, which indicate the overall satisfaction level throughout the programme, and occasionally inform improvements to the delivery of the service, for example, increase participation level, access to food and drink, etc.

Some Partner comments included:

"The quality and compliance audits highlighted missing information and the quality of the SAP (Skills Action Plans) had to be addressed."

"The paperwork and progression dates are confusing, and we had work to do."

"Prospects observe delivery and interview customers afterwards, they also review the action plans and goals of the customers."

"Prospects use mystery shoppers, which findings are discussed at sub-contractor meetings."

"The audit team do a 10% check, if there is more than 5% errors they will do 100% check."

"Prospects carry out observations and share ideas to improve performance."

"Worked on paperwork completions as identified in observations to meet the requirements of the funding."

"Prospects observe our customer awareness session."

"Lessons observed and even I have been observed observing!"

REVIEW

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

As previously stated, some Partners had a clear recollection of the commissioner's wider social objectives and were able to provide anecdotal evidence of the impact they had on key Government agendas, for example, reduced worklessness, supporting the 50plus customer group, reducing NEET, homelessness, addressing mental health issues, etc.

Reference was also made to LEP and LA priorities and targeting specific customer groups; those most disadvantaged or in deprived areas and providing a service, often bespoke, to enable them to overcome barriers and progress to a positive destination.

Some Partner comments included:

"It's impacting on the worklessness agenda, and getting young people into work or training."

"We've got 30% of young people into employment or education, reducing employment and reliance on benefits."

"Enabled us to deliver a tailored programme and support those NEET in the Borough."

"It's given us access to disadvantaged groups like Bangladeshi women in the area."

"Provides a programme for specific people in society and helps to get them into employment."

"We're starting to address some real mental health issues."

"We're aware of the priority groups, for example the Somali women and we are looking to develop better engagement with them."

In relation to the positive impact on the different stakeholders; customers, staff and the commissioner, some examples provided by Partners included:

- Customers have progressed and overcome barriers, and in some cases, gained employment, which has impact on immediate family, and started to reverse the generations of unemployment within the family,
- Customers have improved their personal attributes, for example, health and well-being, self-worth and motivation; gained employment and with it a new level of independence,
- Specific groups, for example, Bangladeshi and Somali women have become socialised and integrated into the community,
- Staff have gained additional knowledge, skills and qualifications, a number have progressed from Information, Advice and Guidance level 3 to 6 throughout the life of the contract, as well as developed softer skills,
- Staff have gained stable employment for an extended period and experienced a high level of job satisfaction,
- Staff have gained promotion,
- The aims, objectives and targets of the commissioner have been met, etc.

8. CONCLUSION AND CONDITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

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

Holders of the Merlin Standard Accreditation must:

- Maintain and continually improve upon their approach to Supply Chain Management.
- Cooperate with annual Reviews as required by Assessment Services Ltd
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd (merlin@assessmentservices.com) 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.

ASSESSMENT SERVICES



PO Box 14,
Grantham,
Lincolnshire NG31 0EL

T: 0044 (0) 2038805059

E: merlin@assessmentservices.com

https://twitter.com/merlin_standard