

Merlin Advisory Board Output Note 6 December 2018.

Venue : Merlin Advisory Board 6 December 2018 APM - 40 Newtown Shopping Centre, Newtown, Birmingham, B19 2SS.

Attendees:

DWP -	Patrick Marsden.
ASL -	Susan Smith.
APM -	Steve Hart.
ERSA -	David Mortimer.
INGEUS -	Joanna Lewin.
PROSPECTS -	Debbie Robertson.
I2I -	Natalie Keating/ Diane Barrow.
BASE -	Julia Green.

Apologies.

Catch-22, Office for Civil Society, Gateshead Council, Sussex Community Development Association, G4S, AELP, Working Links, Groundwork, Twist, PLUSS.

MAB expressed their disappointment at the number of apologies. It was suggested that representation at MAB should be revisited by DWP.

Introduction.

Patrick Marsden thanked APM for kindly holding the MAB on their premises. He introduced himself and asked MAB to introduce themselves, their organisations and their opinion of the Merlin Standard.

Feedback was that all attendees thought that the Merlin Standard brought significant value in promoting best practice and protection of supply chain partners in the marketplace.

Some representatives thought that Merlin Assessments were undertaken too soon in after the award of contracts and would be better undertaken after the contract had reached stability. This applied more for new entrants. It was fed back by DWP that unfortunately “someone has to be first”. Where a major procurement has occurred involving a large number of entrants then ASL needs to scope the Assessments in in a finite time. ASL take market entry into account in their planning of assessments.

It was discussed that there may be a place for staged Assessments. This could support new entrants – pre / during / after an assessment and be supported by an Action Plan.

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MAB discussed that the Supply Chain Questionnaire be revisited with more emphasis on making it more understandable and easy to complete. The Future/Past/Present sections format could be revisited.

MAB discussed the response rate of 25% at the 2018 assessments with two being 40% plus. MAB felt this to be too low. MAB recommended that more should be done to encourage returns by improved communications and open Prime to Supply Chain Partner dialogue. For example notifying Supply Chain Partners that the questionnaire sometimes has to be retrieved from the SPAM folder.

MAB is asked to submit any ideas to DWP for consideration.

MAB Terms of Reference.

Patrick reminded MAB of the ToR as there were several new members.

Please see slides.

Merlin Standard Walkthrough.

Susan Smith ASL then walked through the Merlin Standard revised in January 2018.

Please see slides.

2018 Merlin Assessments.

Susan Smith ASL then discussed the 2018 Merlin Assessment round.

Please see slides.

Highlights:

DWP asked Assessment Services to support the development of the 2018 version of the Merlin Standard. All development work was completed on time and the refreshed Standard was launched in early January 2018 with a live webinar for all Primes explaining the refreshed requirements. A recording of the webinar remains on the Merlin website. MAB members were notified of this in January 2018 and again at the meeting on 15 February 2018.

There have been 22 DWP mandated assessments in between January 2018 and the date of this MAB meeting (the 23rd assessment has been completed on site but the QA process is not yet complete). There have also been a further 5 voluntary assessments. Individual Primes have been provided with detailed feedback in their individual Merlin assessment reports – all of which can be viewed at <http://merlinstandard.co.uk/accredited-organisations/>

All assessments have resulted in Merlin accreditation. There have been no de-accreditations as a result of assessments undertaken. There have been some de-accreditations due to the organisation no longer requiring the Merlin Standard (for example the end of a DWP contract – Youth Engagement Fund) or the organisation has failed to book their assessment in sufficient time to maintain accreditation.

The refreshed 2018 Standard has been welcomed by all Primes as being more understandable, less repetitive and providing a better reflection of the supply chain 'journey'.

Assessment Services has continued to maintain a productive partnership with DWP in relation to Merlin. Customer (Prime) satisfaction with the Merlin assessment is 94.11% with 65.38% of feedback forms being returned.

Provider Strengths and Weaknesses – Sharing Best Practice and Collaboration.

Patrick then opened a discussion on sharing best practice and collaboration.

Patrick revisited the MAB ToR to signpost:

Spreading good practice

**Drive continuous improvement by ensuring processes are established to identify and actively promote learning and best practice through, for example, evaluation, learning and promotional activities, Merlin Web Portal, and published guidance;
Help champion the Standard within the Welfare to Work industry and across Government & sectors, driving awareness and promoting its strategic aims and objectives to encourage wider take-up.**

Patrick ran through a small percentage of the identified strengths and weaknesses from the 2018 Merlin Assessment round.

In the spirit of collaboration, we need to share supply chain partner best practice in order to promote continuous improvement.

DWP gather this information from many sources Merlin/Provider Assurance Team/ Contract Management/Subcontractors/Primes/ Other Government Departments.

Does the Merlin Website offer this facility appropriately outside of publishing the reports for analysis? Could it be improved?

Do our primes encourage this and what is the supply chain partner's role in this?

Could we have a supply chain forum. Could this be hosted on the Merlin website?

Collaboration - It was suggested that this may be a problem faced in DWP as the competition element is too high. In MOJ NOMS contracts there is a monthly forum where best practice is discussed.

Is the DWP funding model in DWP too restrictive in promoting competition but not continuous improvement. e.g. in MOJ incentive payments are awarded for breaking performance targets – so by sharing good practice all providers benefit.

MAB is asked to submit any ideas to DWP for consideration.

DWP Contracting Update

Patrick then gave an update to MAB on the latest DWP contracting rounds. These included the Test and Learn DPS, Specialist Employability Support, Additional Healthcare Capacity Contract and Reducing Parental Conflict.

Please see slides.

Merlin Future

Patrick then discussed DWP progress in scoping the Merlin Standard replacement in 2019. A governance structure is in place to approve any recommendations. Discussions have been held internally with Commercial Directorate Category Teams and externally with Other Government Departments.

There is a strong push internally to adopt the Merlin Standard across all Commercial Categories. Estates, Digital Services, Employment and Corporate Services. This will substantially increase the volume of Merlin Standard assessments.

Progress has been slower on other Government Departments although some interest has been expressed including MoJ.

Work is ongoing in defining the Merlin Standard future requirements.

Please see slides.

Mediation Discussion

Patrick then opened up a discussion on the Merlin Mediation process. The take up of this service has been extremely low.

Is the low take up because there is limited breakdown of relationships outside of the Primes own complaints resolution processes?

Does the threat of independent mediation reduce complaints?

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Is the low take up of the service because the process is flawed or not fit for purpose?

MAB discussions:

- The process may not be robust/or is not seen to be robust;
- Fear of repercussions of complaints;
- Primes conveying “be careful of biting the hand that feeds you”;
- Is the line between defining commercial complaint to a Merlin complaint too woolly?
- Is confidentiality an issue?
- Is the Independent Complaints Examiner (ICE) Decision final?
Currently the parties can decide to not comply. An Action Plan is drawn up by the Strategic Supplier Relationship Manager. How can this be enforced?
- At what point does a complaint become subject to legal representation which ICE relinquishes responsibility? At the point of legal letter/court action?
- Should we remove the Independent Mediation Service?
- Should proven indiscretions attract a penalty as in the current ICE complaints process on provisions?

Could a peer review take the place of mediation?

MAB is asked to submit any ideas to DWP for consideration.

Close

Patrick Marsden then thanked MAB for their ongoing participation and closed the meeting.

Agenda attached below.

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1	Introduction and Welcome	P Marsden	11.00
2	MAB ToR	P Marsden	11.10
3	Merlin Standard Walkthrough – new structure Jan 2018.	Susan Smith ASL	11.20
4	2018 Assessment	Susan Smith ASL	11.45
5	Provider Strengths and Weaknesses – Sharing Best Practice and Collaboration.	P Marsden	12.00
6	DWP Contracting Update	P Marsden	12.30
7	Break		12.45
8	Merlin Future	P Marsden	13.00
9	Mediation discussion	P Marsden	13.30
10	Close	P Marsden	14.00