



merlin standard

THE ROYAL NATIONAL COLLEGE FOR
THE BLIND

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1. KEY INFORMATION

Assessment Type	INITIAL ASSESSMENT
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Anniversary Date	16/01/2021
Assessment Dates	14/01/2019 – 16/01/2019
Lead Assessor's Name	SUSAN SMITH
Customer ID	C19994
Assessment Reference	PN103990

2. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

OVERALL OUTCOME	75% GOOD
1. Design	70% GOOD
2. Procure	67% SATISFACTORY
3. Contract	80% GOOD
4. Fund	80% GOOD
5. Develop	73% GOOD
6. Performance Manage	86% EXCELLENT
7. Quality Assurance and Compliance	80% GOOD
8. Review and Close	64% SATISFACTORY

3. METHODOLOGY

The Royal National College for the Blind (hereafter known as RNC) continues to be mandated by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to be accredited against the Merlin Standard due to being a Prime delivery partner for the Specialist Employability Services Programme (SES). Organisations that hold the Merlin Standard are required to be re-accredited every two years. As RNC missed the deadline for its reaccreditation review in line with the anniversary date, a new initial assessment has been conducted.

The assessment team comprised of Susan Smith (Lead Assessor) and Lorna Bainbridge (Team Assessor) supported by a coordinator from within RNC. The Lead Assessor started to work with the coordinator in November 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 spreadsheet indicating a full list of Supply Chain Partners - past, present and potential - delivering an end-to-end service or specialist intervention activity.

In advance of the reaccreditation review, a survey of the Supply Chain Partners was carried out, with all 28 being invited to participate. Responses were received from 15 present Supply Chain Partners, which represented 53.5% 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 before 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 interview schedule - were shared to enable the assessment to take place as planned.

The assessment team spent a total of 1.75 days each reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews with staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chains. Thirteen of the Supply Chain Partners were interviewed which is in line with the published Merlin scoping framework.

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

4. ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

RNC is the UK's leading specialist residential college of further education for people with a visual impairment (VI), operating since 1872. In addition to educating approximately 120 learners who attend as residential students, RNC also offers specialist training and support to businesses, universities and other education providers, and specialist professionals working with visually impaired people. From philanthropic beginnings in London to Shropshire, via a brief stay in Kent as World War II broke, before finally settling in Hereford, RNC has remained a beacon for people with a variety of visual impairments to increase their independence, build confidence and to learn academically, vocationally and socially.

RNC is the prime holder of the SES contract for people with a visual impairment. The SES VI contract was awarded to RNC in April 2015, with a start date of September 2015 and subsequently extended in September 2018. As VI is a low incidence disability, the contracted volumes for delivery meant that RNC's strategy has been to engage a 'Managing Supply Chain Partner'; the chosen Managing Supply Chain Partner is 3SC. This organisation specialises in managing public services contracts on behalf of third sector organisations. Using a consortium model, 3SC has built a supply chain of local organisations allowing smaller third sector providers to compete for and deliver large contracts.

In the following report, 3SC is either named or referred to as the Managing Supply Chain Partner and the Delivery Organisations as Supply Chain Partners. The delivery model is based upon RNC (the Prime contractor) having 50% of the SES clients and the supply chain, managed by 3SC (the Managing Supply Chain Partner), having the other 50%.

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:

Prior to contracting, all Supply Chain Partners were clear of performance expectations which have been subsequently reinforced through the monthly contract performance meetings. Newer Supply Chain Partners also confirm that performance expectations are clear. This has resulted in effective customer support with many improving in confidence and skills as well as gaining employment. (3.2)

The Apricot Management Information (MI) system operated by the Managing Supply Chain Partner is well regarded as being accurate, stable and simple to use by Supply Chain Partners. It also provides RNC with the information it requires to make accurate and timely payments to Supply Chain Partners. Supply Chain Partners commented that *"it is by far the easiest system I've used"* and *"Apricot has been developed based on our feedback – so changes have been so that the customer record now follows the customer journey"*. (4.2 / 6.4)

There is a positive relationship with open and transparent communications between RNC and the Managing Supply Chain Partner and subsequently between the Managing Supply Chain Partner and the Supply Chain Partners. RNC spoke of the value that 3SC's experience brings to the supply chain, that RNC *"feels indebted to the way in which 3SC have worked to deliver this contract"* and *"there is always a 'can do' response"*. Supply Chain Partners speak of clear links for communications that are *"open and honest"* and *"supportive, with good IAG to help us to support customers"*. (6.1 / 6.2 / 7.3)

Quality assurances are robust and fit for purpose within the supply chain. Recent developments of increased RNC involvement directly with Supply Chain Partners has added to the depth of quality assurance. Supply Chain Partners reflected that the approach to quality assurance meant that risks of DWP extrapolation were minimised. (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:

Several Supply Chain Partners felt that the reasons for the delays in the recent contract extension were not well communicated. Whilst the assessors recognise that this was to provide additional contractual safeguards to the supply chain, it is suggested that active communication could have occurred to explain the delays more fully. In future, it is suggested that both RNC and 3SC plan contract variation communication more effectively. (3.1)

A number of Supply Chain Partners commented that RNC training and support is valuable; however, others requested that there is more ongoing RNC input into staff training. This would further develop adviser skills and capacity in Supply Chain Partners. (5.3)

The recent introduction of the online good practice sharing forum has been welcomed by all parties. It is seen as an effective way for the supply chain to collaborate; however, it is suggested that both RNC and 3SC might consider a system for monitoring usage as the system will only be as good as the input to it. This could also involve more support for collaboration, for example, at the monthly performance meetings. (6.6)

Whilst feedback is routinely sought from Supply Chain Partners on their experiences, it is suggested that rather than 3SC as the Managing Supply Chain Partner leading on this process, a more objective approach might be for RNC to conduct the survey. This would assure RNC of supply chain satisfaction and potentially contribute to further supply chain management and service improvements. (8.1)

7. FINDINGS

PRINCIPLE 1: Design

RNC holds the specialist contract to support people with a visual impairment, with a proportion of customers expected to either have additional disabilities or to not be visually impaired. RNC itself provides support to customers who are visually impaired, leading to high employment outcomes. It also identified that using 3SC as a Managing Supply Chain Partner could extend its reach and offer flexibility in order to meet a greater diversity of customer needs, including those whose visual impairment may not be their primary disability. Hence the design strategy has been for RNC to work with 3SC to assist in developing an appropriate supply chain. 3SC manages the National Consortium of Social Enterprises, which has over 900 members and can offer extremely specialist work placements and work experience to customers. The decision to work with 3SC was based on its national reach, the employment-focus, quality of provision delivered by its membership, and its robust approach to quality assurance. All 3SC delivery organisations (Supply Chain Partners) are third sector and offer advice and guidance on securing employment and self-employment. The combination of RNC and the 3SC supply chain allows for key national delivery sites. By using this model, RNC is able to maximise local knowledge and ensure that customers can choose provision which is geographically convenient to them.

RNC has effective strategies in place to deliver comprehensive support services to stakeholders, customers and Supply Chain Partners through the use of wider networks beyond the formal supply chain through the use of the Managing Supply Chain Partner. This arrangement is effective as Supply Chain Partners can access niche specialist services in order to supplement their service offer. This results in an improved, positive and effective holistic experience for customers.

Consultation with potential Supply Chain Partners informed both the initial and ongoing design of the supply chain and its activities. Staff in 3SC meet with external stakeholders to shape procurement activity. As the Managing Supply Chain Partner, 3SC manages and communicates with all other Supply Chain Partners. 3SC invites Supply Chain Partners to events in order to network effectively, build relationships and input opinions and ideas into the design of proposed contracts and processes. For example, an introductory event was arranged for the entire procured SES Supply Chain to establish formal introductions to RNC and 3SC staff, and to provide a detailed overview of the SES contract prior to contract start. This was a joint initiative by RNC and 3SC, hosted by RNC as the Prime Organisation.

The way in which the supply chain has been designed encourages Supply Chain Partners to operate collaboratively and share resources to deliver comprehensive services. An example of this is the sharing between RNC and the supply chain of information on equipment and aids that they could source to assist individuals with VI on the contract, such as Braille technology, IT Equipment, computer training courses and specialist kit to support vocational qualifications. A further example is the joint working to ensure accessibility of the Apricot MI system. An online forum for sharing best practice is also now operational.

Mutually agreed principles and behaviours, including a commitment to equality and diversity, are embedded in the supply chain. RNC operates on principles of openness, integrity and equality and that 3SC shared these was core to the decision to work with them. The 3SC Contract Management Manual and SES Operations Manual communicate ways of working and expectations and these are clearly communicated to Supply Chain Partners via group information sessions and one-to-one contact; there are also channels of communication via 3SC to RNC which allow for regular feedback. Supply Chain Partner feedback included:

"The relationship is with 3SC, they are experts in contract management, not delivering the service and as a result have different focus – monitoring v delivering a people focused service with the aim of making a difference to people's lives."

"Slick and thorough, very structured, and have empathy with the customers."

"3SC can be more target driven, but I think they do care about the customer – it's a numbers game."

"They're excellent, they are interested in the customer as well as our performance."

"Individualised customer service – focus on making a positive difference – certainly aligns to our way of thinking and working – they balance support against achieving targets."

There has been a review of the supply chain design to meet the changing needs of both customers and DWP. As the SES VI contract was procured to meet the significant and complex needs of service users with a visual impairment, customers receive detailed individual assessments to ensure their specific needs are addressed. 3SC has built a supply chain that has the experience and skills required to meet the needs of SES VI customers.

PRINCIPLE 2: Procure

Procurement processes, including communications, the selection of Supply Chain Partners, and completion of due diligence activities were found to be fair and transparent. During the most recent contract extension phase, RNC reassured itself that 3SC has the knowledge, skills and proven track record to continue to support and develop the supply chain. The process from procurement to contract negotiation is inclusive and transparent which is demonstrated from Expression of Interest (EOI) to contract start. Opportunities are communicated through a number of different formats to current and potential consortia members and a standardised procurement and assessment process is followed to ensure that all organisations have equal access to opportunities. 3SC sends regular communications to external contacts which include EOI and invitations to participate as well as recent activity and news surrounding 3SC. The communications provide a link to 3SC's website that contains the EOI form for the SES VI contract. This is also advertised through social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to maximise reach and accessibility. A detailed due diligence process enables 3SC to assess the ability of potential consortia members to deliver the contracts and is reviewed at least annually, or when there has been a significant change within the Supply Chain Partner. Each step of the process is clearly communicated through face-to-face meetings and email communications. Successful new Supply Chain Partners are informed by a formal communication via email and unsuccessful organisations are also emailed, with any follow up questions and feedback addressed.

Whilst there have been no cases of TUPE transfer (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment Regulations 2006), there is a process in place. The procedure in the event of a TUPE transfer is clearly set out in the contract between RNC and 3SC. 3SC's own TUPE policy sets out how it complies with the TUPE Regulations to protect the employment rights of employees if the business, or the part of it in which they are employed, is transferred to a new owner.

There is a clear rationale in place to support a viable and transparent allocation of market share. The SES VI contract is a national contract developed to support a very specific customer group and is very clear in its aims and objectives. The contract has low profile numbers and the potential to change lives in a positive way and so 3SC ensured that Supply Chain Partners were clearly informed of the low-profile numbers through events and through contract negotiations. Referrals have subsequently been allocated by geography and the supply chain design ensures full UK coverage. Supply Chain Partners confirmed their understanding of and agreement with this approach.

Negotiations regarding volume, funding and finance, and performance expectations have clearly been undertaken at the outset and then throughout the life of the contract. During monthly Contract Management meetings, RNC and 3SC routinely discuss referral rates, and financial and performance expectations are negotiated and agreed to benefit the whole supply chain. SES referrals are distributed mainly by geography, although expertise is considered when specialist client intervention is assessed as required. Supply Chain Partners have very clear performance indicators and understand the limitations of the contract in terms of profile numbers. Current performance is reviewed monthly and future targets agreed in line with contract expectations.

PRINCIPLE 3: Contract

Contracts for Supply Chain Partners were issued at the start of the SES programme and have been re-issued following discussions around the extensions. There were some delays that could have been explained more fully in the view of a number of Supply Chain Partners. Documentation was seen by the Assessors, and Supply Chain Partners confirmed that an effective change control process is in place; however, communication could have been improved as already noted in this report.

Performance expectations were established prior to commencement of contract. The Operations Manual sets out expectations of Supply Chain Partners in relation to contract requirements, processes and the customer journey. 3SC maintains daily contact ensuring Supply Chain Partners are up to date with the contract status and performance. Supply Chain Partners are routinely contacted on a monthly basis through the Contract Performance Assessment (CPA) meetings by the Managing Supply Chain Partner.

The Managing Supply Chain Partner has clearly defined routes Supply Chain Partners may take when a dispute arises. The process is further communicated via the Management Assurance Framework. Supply Chain Partners confirmed that they would feel able to use the process without fear of any repercussions. There have been no disputes raised since the last Merlin assessment or throughout the life of the contract. In the contract between RNC and the Managing Supply Chain there is a dispute resolution clause that is known and accepted by both parties. It has never been used.

PRINCIPLE 4: Fund

The financial arrangements of the SES VI contract and the most recent extension to the contract were discussed with 3SC and the Supply Chain Partners prior to its commencement. They are linked to milestones in the journey of the client, with a payment being made at the start of the journey. There are financial incentives to get clients into sustainable jobs. Payments and triggers are clearly structured and identified in the contract. The finance model and payment structure were issued to all Supply Chain Partners in advance of the contract to support both the Supply Chain Partner and 3SC in making well-informed contracting decisions. The payment structure and any deductions have been clearly explained and Supply Chain Partners confirmed they have been treated fairly and equitably. Each Supply Chain Partner receives the same amount for each outcome.

Transfers of funds are made directly to 3SC and the other Supply Chain Partners by RNC. Payments are based upon information generated by 3SC using the Apricot system. Payments are made by BACS transfer each month and feedback indicates that these are timely. Should payments be made to Supply Chain Partners from 3SC they follow documented and agreed guidelines.

Prior to commencement of the SES VI contract, management fees were discussed with 3SC and the Supply Chain Partners and are clearly set out in the contract with an explanation of what each payment is for. The majority of Supply Chain Partners confirmed that they felt value for money in terms of the support from the Managing Supply Chain Partner.

PRINCIPLE 5: Develop

RNC and the Managing Supply Chain Partner develop and encourage Supply Chain Partners to fulfil contractual obligations throughout the life of the contract. 3SC provides detailed guidelines within a suite of supporting documents on all aspects of the contract to every Supply Chain Partner. These documents include the Management Assurance Framework and Toolkit, the Supply Chain Partner Operations Manual, and the Apricot Systems Guidelines. These enable 3SC to supportively manage and assess both contractual requirements and the quality of service frontline delivery staff members provide to customers.

The Managing Supply Chains Partner's aim is to develop the consortia of Supply Chain Partners' capability and capacity through inclusion and quality of support provided. For example, an existing small Supply Chain Partner, delivering the Work Programme as part of 3SC's consortia, was identified as an appropriate provider for SES as it could fill a geographical gap. This opportunity provided access to an additional funding stream, increased networking opportunities, and diversification of its delivery portfolio. Supply Chain Partners can access 3SC's processes and systems training and coaching which enables them to continuously improve their internal governance, networking and their own commerciality, increasing their own ability to bid for and win new business. A further example is the Access to Work (ATW) scheme which 3SC manages. This has been widely publicised to Supply Chain Partners, and customer referral and participation is promoted to enable customers to obtain funding for specialist equipment and support to access a wider variety of job opportunities.

At the start of the contract, RNC hosted a training event for Supply Chain Partners which included workshops and information sessions covering areas such as assistive technology, IT, braille and different eye conditions. Staff in attendance gained insight into the resources available to support people with a visual impairment into employment which helped to prepare them for the contract. In 2018, there have been two training and best practice events to ensure that standards were consistent throughout the contract and provide an opportunity for Supply Chain Partners to share good practice and innovative approaches in delivery. An online forum for sharing best practice is now operational. For the SES VI contract, 3SC has developed and delivers bespoke training and guidance to enable effective use of the bespoke Apricot system. Refresher training is also offered throughout the contract lifecycle to ensure staff are up to date with what is required and made aware of recent changes.

PRINCIPLE 6: Performance Manage

There are clear communication channels to ensure that there is clarity in the business relationships underpinning the supply chain arrangements. The SES Launch event hosted at RNC ensured that RNC and 3SC were able to communicate their expectations clearly to all members of the supply chain. Supply Chain Partners confirmed they were clear about who to ask regarding any particular issue. Illustrative comments included:

"We've had consistent staff within 3SC, which has helped."

"Very clear who to deal with at RNC; X tends to be strategy and Y day-to-day, but equally both are readily accessible and responsive."

Communication between RNC and 3SC both during initial negotiations and currently during weekly and monthly communications and quality assurance checks is open and honest. Opinions are freely shared and on occasion difficult subjects, ranging from initial negotiation of payments to issues with performance, have been discussed frankly and fairly, with appropriate resolutions reached. Comments included:

"X, Y and Z are all really positive and supportive."

"So far it has been open, upfront, straightforward."

"We talk about anything within the CPA; issues or concerns on both sides."

"Working with RNC has been a real pleasure, support and guidance has been two-way, very positive and willing to negotiate."

"Open and honest communications regularly with 3SC."

Both RNC and 3SC recognise that difficult conversations are necessary from time to time and are committed to conducting these conversations in a respectful manner which has led to enhanced trust. Supply Chain Partners are correspondingly encouraged to share good practices and feedback to 3SC. There is also an annual stakeholder survey in which Supply Chain Partners can share views on the effectiveness of communication.

Monthly Contract Performance Management meetings with 3SC provide Supply Chain Partners with regular opportunities to discuss issues regarding delivery and provide relevant information from the DWP. The monthly meetings and weekly telekit between RNC and 3SC allow for good practice to be shared and for opportunities to be identified, adapting procedures where appropriate. 3SC produce a SWOT and Performance Improvement Planning report for monthly contract performance management meetings with RNC that identify areas of improvement regarding delivery on the contract. Regular contact with all Supply Chain Partners was confirmed including a monthly Contract Performance Assessment meeting.

A robust MI system is in place to capture and accurately report on performance. The Apricot system allows for collection of information in relation to the customer journey, ensuring contract minimum requirements are met and analyses the performance of each Supply Chain Partner. RNC staff undertake audits using the Apricot system with all reports stored centrally. Supply Chain Partners confirmed that MI is timely and accurate. Comments included:

"Love Apricot – everything in one place."

"Apricot provides us with access to everything we need and supports different functions including quality assurance as well as performance and tracking data."

"It gives us an indication of performance and predictions, RAG rating, quality assurance, updates to the customer's journey ..."

Supply Chain Partners are measured, encouraged and their performance is supported to help direct improvements. The SES VI contract has clear milestones which are measured and validated by 3SC management and assurance processes documented in the Operations Manual. This manual clearly lays out the performance assessment process; the template used for Contract Performance Assessment meetings provides opportunity for discussion and commentary on performance and identification of any actions required to improve performance. Additionally, 3SC measures wider success through Social Impact Assessment. Good news stories demonstrate and effectively communicate the life-changing impact of the customer journey and positive outcomes.

Good practice within the supply chain is shared in order to improve performance and service delivery. Good practice is proactively shared through coaching and training sessions delivered by 3SC as well as between Supply Chain Partners. Topics include developing a self-assessment report, case studies and good news stories published on the website, and performance tips and hints.

RNC has a Quality Assurance and Improvement Policy and a published quality and audit cycle which detail the process for internal annual self-assessment and the development of quality improvement plans. It provides Supply Chain Partners with a self-assessment template and on completion these are collated by 3SC; RNC completes an overarching Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) specific to the SES contract. The SES QIP is monitored periodically throughout the year to ensure progress with actions identified. The Management Assurance Framework allows a continuous assessment of the quality of service delivered to SES clients.

PRINCIPLE 7: Quality Assurance and Compliance

There are effective policies and procedures in place to keep the supply chain updated with legislative and regulatory requirements, policy and strategy information. Monthly contract performance management meetings held between RNC and 3SC contain standing agenda items relating to feedback from DWP. This ensures that any changes to policy or provider guidance affecting the supply chain are communicated promptly and effectively to Supply Chain Partners. A 'Change Alert' communication process has been established by 3SC to ensure key information and messages are communicated in a clear and timely fashion to 3SC staff, and to the supply chain. Contract Delivery Managers ensure that all communications have been received and understood during routine contract reviews.

RNC has an overarching Quality Assurance and Improvement Policy. The lead Quality Assurance Officer at RNC works with 3SC to ensure the effective implementation of the SES quality assurance annual calendar which details timescales to ensure the quality review and monitoring of services delivered by 3SC and Supply Chain Partners. A minimum of 10% of caseload is quality assured and an action plan is developed and agreed for any Supply Chain Partners where non-compliance or opportunities for improvement are identified. An exit form is completed by all customers and is used to evaluate the effectiveness and quality of the customer journey. In addition, customers are invited to complete an annual customer satisfaction survey on how well the current programme delivery meets their needs and how well Supply Chain Partners have supported their development needs and employment aspirations. For 2018, 34 customers responded to the survey out of 55 active customers. This represents a response rate of just under 62%.

RNC provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) to 3SC during weekly scheduled telekit meetings, via email and during monthly Contract Performance Management meetings. Supply Chain Partners confirmed they are also aware that they have access to the full range of expertise at RNC to address specific requirements for an individual customer. The change alert communication process has been established to ensure key information and messages are communicated in a clear and timely fashion to 3SC staff, and to Supply Chain Partners. The IAG (support) to customers is provided through the quality assurance mechanisms described.

RNC sets rigorous standards for data protection, health and safety, and safeguarding, and appropriate policies and procedures are embedded across the supply chain. Compliance is routinely and actively checked, and all Supply Chain Partners are required to provide evidence of relevant policies and processes to protect all data and assets during the due diligence process. RNC's environment sustainability policy applies to all members of the supply chain. In appointing 3SC as Managing Supply Chain Partner, RNC checked that appropriate policies and procedures were embedded within 3SC's own work. Through the Management Assurance Framework, Supply Chain Partners are informed as they start the contract delivery of 3SC's expectations and requirements regarding sustainability and are required to complete an environmental self-assessment and action plan at the start of the contract and annually thereafter. 3SC monitors this requirement and assess it as part of the due diligence.

The due diligence process has been designed to allow 3SC to capture and review key information for each Supply Chain Partner. As a requirement of this, all Supply Chain Partners are required to have a standalone or incorporated policy relating to working practices in line with the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

PRINCIPLE 8: Review and Close

Stakeholder feedback is actively sought and shared across the supply chain. For example, the DWP Provider Assurance Team audit actions have been shared and action which led to improved quality monitoring and improvements to the claim validation process has been taken. A further example is that an exit and evaluation process is completed for all customers on completion of provision via online surveys. Overall the responses from the 2018 survey were very positive with 100% of respondents rating the quality of information they received about the programme at induction as 'Excellent' or 'Very Good' and 91% of respondents agreeing that the support received has helped them move closer, or into, paid work. As previously described, 3SC offer Supply Chain Partners the opportunity to participate in a stakeholder survey on an annual basis. Illustrative comments included:

"Doing the visits with 3SC to Supply Chain Partners also provides the opportunity to gain feedback from them and identify issues they are facing, for example, Job Centre Plus relationship which we may be able to help with."

"As a result of feedback from customers, forms were changed ... also the case studies provide a good indication of what customers think about the service."

Both RNC and Supply Chain Partners were able to share some examples of how the work they are delivering is having a measurable impact on the Commissioner's wider social objectives. This includes gaining and sustaining employment, improvements in skills and qualifications, unemployment reduction, addressing poverty and reducing potential for crime.

Additionally, Supply Chain Partners have a measurable impact on the wider social objectives around health and wellbeing through the delivery of a holistic service to customers who are supported 'in work' post the end of the contract activity. Case studies collected and shared provide a powerful account of people with visual impairments securing work and transforming their lives. Comments from Supply Chain Partners included *"We can make a real difference to people's lives through this contract as it allows us time to resource solutions to barriers"* and *"We contribute to making a positive difference to people's lives."*

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is embedded into the work of RNC and the supply chain. Inclusion runs through the process, from procurement to contract management. Supply Chain Partners' commitment to and effective processes to promote equality and diversity are checked via the annual due diligence review processes.

There is an agreed process to handle the end of the relationship with the Supply Chain Partner, including timely communication and documentation sharing. As a standard requirement, 3SC would issue a Change Control Notice (CCN) that would detail the arrangements for the end of contract or contract termination. It includes the approach to be used to transition any remaining customers, any ongoing quality assurance/performance management requirements, as well as releasing all documentation and making any outstanding payments within the agreed timescales. The specific content of the CCN would be tailored and written for the exact set of circumstances and organisation or organisations involved. 3SC would request the handover of all records and would conduct a full audit at this time. To date this has not been required but is understood by Supply Chain Partners.

8. CONCLUSION AND CONDITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

In conclusion, RNC has gained accreditation 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 Independent Complaints Examiner may also result in a strategic review being required to ensure the Organisation continues to operate in line with the Merlin principles.

Holders of the Merlin Standard Accreditation must:

- Maintain and continually improve upon their approach to Supply Chain Management.
- Cooperate with annual Reviews as required by Assessment Services Ltd
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd (merlin@assessmentsservices.com) or their Lead Assessor if the key contact name or contact details change.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email:
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd immediately if they gain additional contracts.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received from Supply Chain Partners.
- Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause Assessment Services Ltd and/or the Merlin Standard to be brought into disrepute.
- Only use the Merlin Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines.
- Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for Accreditation Review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by Assessment Services Ltd and do not display the Merlin Standard Quality Mark, nor refer to being a former holder of the Merlin Standard.
- Be aware that Assessment Services Ltd reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.
- Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the Merlin Standard at least 4 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment, completion of the Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ), Pre-Assessment Notes (PAN) and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 2 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.

	
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