



merlin standard

PEOPLEPLUS GROUP LTD

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1. KEY INFORMATION

Assessment Type	ACCREDITATION REVIEW
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Anniversary Date	01/04/2022
Assessment Dates	30/03/2020 – 01/04/2020
Lead Assessor's Name	LORNA BAINBRIDGE
Customer ID	C18591
Assessment Reference	PN104838

2. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

OVERALL OUTCOME	80%
1. Design	80%
2. Procure	85%
3. Contract	90%
4. Fund	73%
5. Develop	80%
6. Performance Manage	80%
7. Quality Assurance and Compliance	76%
8. Review and Close	72%

3. METHODOLOGY

PeoplePlus Group Limited (referred to as PeoplePlus or the Organisation throughout the report) continues to be mandated by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to be accredited against the Merlin Standard due to being a delivery Partner (Prime) for the New Enterprise Allowance and Access to Work contracts. Primes are required to be re-accredited every two-years, and consequently, the Organisation came forward for re-accreditation in line with their anniversary date.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor) and Ruth Regan (Team Assessor) supported by a Coordinator from within PeoplePlus. The Lead Assessor started to work with the Coordinator in January 2020 to establish the scope and discuss the logistics of the assessment. The dates for the evidence gathering activities 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 (referred to as Partners); past, present and potential delivering an end-to-end service or specialist intervention activity.

In advance of the interview evidence gathering, a survey was carried out of the declared Partners, with all 108 invited to participate. Responses were received from past, present and potential Partners, which represented 31% of the total. The results of the survey informed the focus of the interviews for the assessment team and contributed to the overall scoring.

The Lead Assessor was in regular contact with the Coordinator prior to the interview evidence gathering 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 in line with the agreed timescales to enable the assessment to take place as planned.

The assessment team spent a total of 2.5 days each reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews remotely due to the Covid-19 lockdown. Interviews were conducted with PeoplePlus staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day management of the supply chains. 31% of the Partners were interviewed with consideration made to all Partners irrespective of whether the contract was commissioned by DWP or other Commissioners. Interviews were conducted with a wide range of Partners; end-to-end, specialist intervention, as well as past, present and potential across all contracts.

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

4. ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

PeoplePlus; a Private Limited Company aims to *'make a direct difference to the lives of a million people by 2022'*. Its vision is to *'build and develop the most reliable integrated workforce in the country and be the leading creator of opportunities, jobs and new ideas in the employability, skills and justice sectors'*. Three 'trademarks' define how the Organisation operates:

True North – We have high ethical standards, keeping a sense of our 'True North', even when no-one is watching. We are the best version of ourselves, all the time, in everything we do;

Own It – We always take personal accountability for everything we do, including any issue we come across, owning it until it is fixed and seeking help when we need it;

Improve to be the best – We want to be the best at what we do for our clients, customers, service users and learners. That means we have a passion to keep learning and improving. We never accept second best."

To perform in line with the mission and contribute to its vision, PeoplePlus delivers a range of national and local contracts across its three divisions: employment, skills, and justice. Commissioners include; DWP, Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Local Authorities (LAs).

The Organisation recognises the value of working with Partners to deliver programmes which meet the needs of the customer groups and those of the Commissioner. The following provides an indication of the current contracts and the breakdown between direct delivery and supply chain:

Employability Programmes

Access to Work (ATW) Nationally - Supply Chain 100%

New Enterprise Allowance (NEA) in four Contract Package Areas - Direct Delivery 82%, Supply Chain 18%

First Start Scotland (FSS) in two Contract Package Areas - Direct Delivery 51%, Supply Chain 49%

Skills Programmes

Apprenticeships in England - Direct Delivery 86%, Supply Chain 14%

Skills Support for the Unemployed (SUU), Skills Support for the Workforce (SSW) and Adult Education Budget (AEB) - Direct Delivery 70%, Supply Chain 30%

Traineeships in Wales - Direct Delivery 80%, Supply Chain 20%

Apprenticeships in Wales - Direct Delivery 51%, Supply Chain 49%

Carers Programme in Gloucestershire – 100% Direct Delivery, plus access to specialist Partners

Carers Programme in Stoke and Staffordshire - 100% Direct Delivery, plus access to specialist Partners

Justice Programmes

Prison Education Framework (PEF) in 21 prisons across England – Direct Delivery 96%, Supply Chain 4%

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:

PeoplePlus continue to actively engage with organisations from different sectors including; public, private and third, charitable, social enterprise and community interest companies. These range from national organisations to small, local training providers and sole traders. The Organisation utilises Partners to deliver the end-to-end service (tier 2) as well as those providing specialist intervention (tier 3) to support the delivery of programmes. Partners confirmed that there was a suitable mix of organisations within their respective supply chain, which, where appropriate, encouraged healthy competition and opportunities to work together, as well as access to specialist services. (1.1)

Partners described how clear communications underpinned each stage of the procurement process, including the two-stage Expression of Interest (EOI) and robust due diligence activities. The platform used by PeoplePlus for the procurement process; Proactis, is straightforward, and support is available from a representative of the Organisation to gain clarification, as required. Partners confirmed that the procurement selection process was open and transparent. (2.1)

A TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings – Protection of Employment) strategy has been designed by PeoplePlus and successfully executed in the past two years within the FSS and PEF contracts. Partners confirmed that PeoplePlus worked with them and provided support to ensure a smooth transition of employees in / out of the respective organisation. Similarly, employees felt that whilst the situation of being transferred between organisations was not ideal, the communications were consultative, open and transparent, and everything was in place to transfer their employment from the start, including access to resources to enable them to work. (2.2)

Performance expectations are shared with potential Partners prior to the formal bidding activities and outline the Commissioner's objectives and key measures, ensuring Partners have a clear understanding of expectations from the outset. The objectives and measures are reviewed throughout the contracting activities, and subsequently through dialogue on a regular basis, for example, weekly calls, monthly and quarterly performance reviews. Consequently, Partners understand the performance expectations throughout the life of the contract. (3.2)

Opportunities for additional funding / finance streams are promoted through SharePoint; a central portal designed to provide Partners with access to key information. Also, email prompts, the website and in some cases direct contact with a member of PeoplePlus staff, for example, Partnership Manager signpost Partners to both internal and external sources of additional revenue. Several Partners referred to growth in the current contracts and / or gaining a contract for other programmes. In addition, there was evidence of PeoplePlus supporting Partners to prepare their own bid. (5.2)

PeoplePlus assign a Partnership Manager to all Partners for day-to-day support on the respective contract. In the event of a Partner delivering multiple contracts, one Partnership Manager is allocated to reduce duplicated contact / requests. In addition, Partners have contact names for personnel in compliance and finance, and more recently, a Continuous Improvement Lead. Partners confirmed that PeoplePlus' staff were readily accessible and available when required, and were positive, supportive and professional. They believe communication is two-way, open and transparent, and, as a result, they are confident to share their successes as well as concerns and challenges with the respective contract and associated processes. (6.1, 6.2)

The Organisation has designed a range of communication channels to ensure Partners are updated with legislative and regulatory changes, as well as contract guidance, policy and strategy information. Partners consistently referred to SharePoint whereby they access current and accurate information; it is used as a repository for new information, for example, guidelines for working through Covid-19. Many Partners spoke of the proactive approach taken by PeoplePlus throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, including communications from the Managing Director, updates on the website and ongoing support and understanding from front-line staff. The Partnership Manager follows-up all essential communications regarding changes to legislative and regulatory requirements, as well as those relating to the contract to ensure understanding and appropriate action taken. (7.1)

6. AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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

Partners explained that prior to entering the procurement process with PeoplePlus an analysis of the values and ways of working was undertaken to ensure the two organisations were aligned. Subsequently, throughout the life of the contract, they believe PeoplePlus has operated in line with their expectations; having a common purpose which is consistently upheld, putting the customer at the heart of the operation and working together. In the future, PeoplePlus may consider designing a set of core values / behaviours in consultation with Partners to determine the way the respective supply chain will operate and how they will work collectively to contribute to the Commissioner's objectives. (1.5)

A high proportion of Partners were aware of their percentage of the market share at the start of the contract and believed this to be based on location and / or past performance. However, throughout the life of the contracts there has been market share shift, as Partners have left / joined the supply chain, and as a result, there was a lack of understanding of the current market share allocated to Partners and the rationale behind that allocation. In future, PeoplePlus is encouraged to review and update the market share at regular intervals and subsequently, communicate the current percentage to all Partners, along with a clear rationale for the breakdown. (2.3)

PeoplePlus actively work in line with the latest Cabinet Office directive; to pay all suppliers with the agreed terms and conditions of 30 days. The Organisation can demonstrate its adherence to this requirement through its financial reporting. However, several of the smaller Partner organisations believe the current practice for raising invoices for payment fails to be straight-forward. In some cases, there was uncertainty regarding submission dates for invoices and the subsequent payment date. Consequently, PeoplePlus is urged to review the strategy for managing the transfer of funds / finance with these Partners, providing greater clarity of the process and subsequent payment dates to enable them to manage their cash flow more effectively. (4.2)

Learning and development activities are provided at various stages of the contract, including onboarding, when new staff are recruited and in the event of changes to systems and processes. Consequently, learning interventions tend to be reactive. Consideration could be made to undertaking a training needs analysis with each Partner to identify the learning and development needs of their staff which, if addressed, would contribute to improving performance. Subsequently, the return on investment could be measured by establishing the impact on an individual's performance and that of the contract. (5.3)

PeoplePlus has designed and implemented efficient and proportionate policies and procedures to monitor the delivery of the contracts, including a range of compliance activities. Partners confirmed that these are robust and ensure they are meeting the requirements of the Commissioner. However, recently, some Partners have experienced mixed messages from the claims team concerning findings following compliance activities, which has had an impact on their ability to make claims in a timely manner. PeoplePlus has identified the issue and implemented corrective action; as a result, there is no improvement recommendation at this stage. Nevertheless, the Organisation is strongly encouraged to monitor the activities in this area for the foreseeable future. (7.2)

The Organisation undertakes an annual review of each contract to establish the impact of the programme and at the close of a contract completes an End of Contract Evaluation Report and, where appropriate, a Social Value Impact Report. These reports provide extensive information in relation to the impact the service has on the key stakeholders, customer, staff and Commissioner; however, this information is not being shared with Partners. Whilst case studies and anecdotal evidence of impact was provided throughout the assessment, in future, consideration could be made to sharing the Social Value Impact Reports (or similar) with Partners to enable a greater understanding of the impact of the services on the key stakeholders. (8.3)

7. AREAS REQUIRING SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT

The following area was 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:

Where required by the Commissioner, PeoplePlus undertake an annual self-assessment of the contract which results in a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). Whilst some Partners explained that their Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and QIP are submitted to PeoplePlus, there was uncertainty about what happened with this information. Partners were unable to confirm that they are aware of the SAR and QIP for the respective contract. Consequently, PeoplePlus is encouraged to undertake an annual SAR and QIP for all contracts, irrespective of the Commissioner's requirements, and share these with Partners. This will demonstrate its ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and more importantly engage Partners in working together to improve the performance of the contract. (6.7)

8. FINDINGS

PRINCIPLE 1: Design

PeoplePlus has designed and implemented a Partner Management Framework (PMF), which outlines the journey encountered by potential and present Partners, from supply chain design and procurement through to contract exit. The Partnership and Development Team takes ownership for the identification of suitable bids and subsequent research and preparation through to contracting. After which, the management of the contract is handed to the operational team.

The Partnership and Development Team undertakes extensive research to gain a clear understanding of the Commissioner's objectives, the target customers, the locations and the potential need for a supply chain. Subsequently, the team is tasked with identifying Partners to work with to deliver the contract, taking into consideration location, previous experience and performance, as well as their potential role; end-to-end or specialist intervention service.

Prior to bidding, PeoplePlus engage with potential Partners to establish their suitability and fit for the contract. All types of organisations are considered: public, private and third sector with the aim of being able to meet the Commissioner's objectives and address the diverse range of needs required by potential customers. Within the current supply chains, there was evidence of a mix of Partner organisations from the different sectors, as well as varying sizes and legal status. Supply chains comprise of organisations providing specific training activities through to those with specific knowledge and experience in health and wellbeing, skills and employability, and in the case of PEF, previous experience and success of working within the prison environment. Some Partner comments included:

"...it is a complex contract and PeoplePlus are looking for Partners who have a track record and will have ideas on how to meet the brief."

"...the supply chain is diverse, which is needed to deliver the service; we have different areas of expertise."

Partners spoke of being encouraged to work with wider networks beyond their supply chain to meet the current and future needs of customers. These included referral partners, for example, Job Centres, as well as support organisations to address mental health, drug and alcohol addiction through to recruitment agencies and a wide range of employers to access job vacancies. Partners also referenced working with Local Authorities (LAs) and Local Enterprise Partners (LEPs) to work collaboratively and address the key priorities within the respective areas. One Partner commented:

"...monthly visits and discussions include how third-party organisations are being utilised to support clients."

PeoplePlus has introduced platforms to encourage Partners to work with other organisations and agencies, for example; the Intelligent Routeway Framework to work with training organisations at national and regional levels, Feedthenation.co.uk to work with employers to promote job vacancies and more recently PartnerPlus. PartnerPlus is a trusted partnering approach combining strategic, specialist and delivery capabilities for mutual benefit with the aim of improving the customer experience. Whilst in the early stages of implementation, PartnerPlus will ultimately provide Partners with access to a wide range of additional services at local, regional and national levels. Some Partner comments included:

"...we have a good working relationship with Careers Wales who refer young people to us as well as organisations such as the youth justice service, and other providers who we can refer learners to for progression."

"...outcome and progression side of the contract requires us to work with employers and colleges, job agencies, and also attend events with stakeholders."

"...we need to work with specialists to progress the clients; we can't do everything."

Consultation with potential Partners is undertaken by PeoplePlus to contribute to designing the delivery model and subsequently informing the final bid. Partners (involved in new contracts) explained that consultation had taken place, with one referencing an invite to a meeting where scribble board was used to work collectively through the proposed delivery model. Another referred to the Partners informing the make-up of the supply chain to promote collaborative working.

Partners confirmed that throughout the life of the contract they were consulted in different ways. For example, through LinkedIn, Twitter, telephone calls and performance reviews and, as a result, changes had been made. Some examples included changes to systems and processes, including compliance, as well as how to manage an appointment diary. Some Partner comments included:

"...when they introduced the Smart Assessor platform for everyone, we went to a seminar with PeoplePlus employees – we were all asked for our ideas and give feedback on how it might be improved, and they refined the platform where they could as a result."

"...PeoplePlus come to me quite often and seek my opinion, including the Feed the Nation idea."

Several Partners spoke of the direct delivery and supply chains meeting quarterly, some referring to these at Steering Groups, to review the overall performance where collaboration and sharing of practices are actively encouraged. Partners spoke of working with others within the supply chain for many years, due to the complementary services and / or areas of expertise, for example, those delivering FSS. Another Partner explained the work in the community and working with other Partners and the Prince's Trust. There was evidence of Partners playing to their respective strengths and working with the same customer; one Partner starts the journey and improves the individual's English, maths and personal qualities, and then passes to the second to progress into employment. Several Partners explained how they work with PeoplePlus and gain support to host different events, for example, Women into Sustainability Careers Fair. In addition, several Partners work with PeoplePlus to share vacancies, including those at FeedTheNation.

Some Partner comments included:

"...direct delivery and Partners share good practice – it can happen immediately by email if it is a good idea – for example, how to support clients with challenging behaviour."

"...we had a commercial opportunity to work with another organisation."

"...one of the steering group meeting introduced partners to creating positive ways of working together."

"...we work collaboratively with PeoplePlus, we share information on potential referrals and have helped out with IQA (Internal Quality Assurance) to cover due to sickness."

"...I know there are other training providers working on the contract, so we make sure we are not in direct competition with them – work with them but not compete with them."

Partners consistently spoke of being aligned to PeoplePlus' vision, putting the customer at the heart of the operation, as well as being open, transparent and inclusive. Consequently, these were seen as mutually agreed between the PeoplePlus and Partner organisation. Some Partner comments included:

"...all ethical partners who are very positive and want to perform and do well for themselves and the contract."

"...we had a session with PeoplePlus on their values and ethos when we were onboarded."

"...all PeoplePlus staff have the same values – quite hands-on and open."

"...before we decided to partner, we spent some time getting to know PeoplePlus."

"...there is synergy between the organisations."

Some Partners were aware of the changes to the make-up of the respective supply chain due to underperformance in the contract, for example, non-regulated training and the need to fill the performance gap. Others were aware of Partners that had left the supply chain for different reasons and, as a result, the volumes had been reallocated to direct delivery and / or new Partners brought on board. There was also evidence of Partners being engaged in discussions relating to replacing Partners to ensure the supply chain continued to be fit for purpose and able to meet the Commissioner's objectives.

PeoplePlus' senior leaders explained the rationale for the action taken as a result of underperformance and / or Partners leaving the supply chain and confirmed that contingency plans continued to be in place in the event of Partners opting to leave a supply chain. It was noted that every effort is made to replace a Partner, as opposed to increasing the direct delivery to ensure there remains a suitable mix of organisations providing differing expertise and geographical coverage.

PRINCIPLE 2: Procure

PeoplePlus uses a range of methods to promote partnering opportunities, including SharePoint, PartnerPlus, Proactis, email, direct contact and social media channels such as LinkedIn and Twitter. In addition, the Partnership and Development Team deliver regular communications to potential Partners across the country and use external channels such as Employment Related Services Association (ERSA), Carley Consult and Institute of Enterprise and Entrepreneurs to attract different organisations from the public, private and third sectors.

The online portal, Proactis, is used to gain the EOIs from potential Partners. Partners confirmed that Proactis is accessible and the EOI process straight-forward with support available from PeoplePlus to gain clarity if required. Communications with PeoplePlus were as anticipated; clear, timely, open and transparent. Unsuccessful Partners confirmed that general feedback was available to direct them for future procurement activities.

Consistently, Partners spoke of a robust due diligence process whereby finances, insurances, along with a range of policies and procedures, including safeguarding and data protection were requested to ensure they met the minimum requirements expected by PeoplePlus. Some Partner comments included:

"...communications throughout have been good – we have known at each stage what is happening and why – we expected to hear in May (before current issues), and then, if successful, they will confirm next steps and undertake full due diligence."

"...we are really pleased with how open and supportive they have been during this procurement and tender process."

"...completed the EOI, then supplied more information and policies – checked and reviewed before contracting."

"...we completed an EOI and due diligence for the contract and submitted trainer CVs, our direct claims status, processes and procedures etc."

PeoplePlus has a clear strategy to manage the TUPE process, which has been implemented to support the transfer of staff from and into Partner organisations based on the requirements of a contract and legislative requirements. Over the past two years the TUPE strategy has been mobilised, and according to Partners and employees, this was actioned efficiently. The key aim was to provide a smooth and supportive transition with open and transparent communications. Partners confirmed that communication was ongoing and two-way, clear and concise and, as a result, the process was straight-forward, and the experience positive. Similarly, employees spoke positively about their experience, the consultative approach and the opportunities to gain clarity, as required. Upon transferring into PeoplePlus employees were equipped with the resources to enable them to start work. Some PeoplePlus staff comments included:

"...we have a very clear process with information, advice and guidance being based on acknowledged best practice. When we have worked with other organisations, we have shared our approach and information to enable them to handle the TUPE process better."

"...TUPE strategy and process is in place but will adapt it – the employee is at the heart of it, so they need to get the things they need."

A comment from a recent transferee organisation included:

"...the support was very good. They were very clear about what was needed to manage the process, and it was completed successfully within the specified timescales. I keep in touch with the staff that transferred over, and they are ok and happy."

At the start of a specific contract, Partners had clarity regarding the market share allocation and the rationale behind the distribution. Over the life of the contracts, there has been an element of market share shift as Partners have left / joined the supply chain. As a result, for some Partners, the clarity regarding the allocation of the market share has diminished. Partner comments included:

"...we're a large provider and have 25% on the market share based on location."

"...it's done on Job Centres, we have 15, and the other Partner has two."

"...I know where we are working out of and where we are delivering, but don't have a clue how the contract is divided up or who is delivering what in terms of allocation – but in reality, it isn't a concern."

"...market share was set by the Provider with the agreement it would swop around based on performance."

Partners confirmed that PeoplePlus engaged them in open dialogue throughout the initial stages of forming the supply chain whereby they gained a clear understanding of funding / finance, which replicated that of the Commissioner and PeoplePlus contract arrangements. The performance expectations and key outcomes were clearly communicated prior to the Partners entering into the EOI, and these continue to be reviewed and updated on a weekly and / or monthly basis. Partners confirmed that they were encouraged to share their required volumes, which were subsequently discussed and agreed before contracting. Partners referred to volumes being reviewed and changed throughout the life of the contract to reflect performance. Some Partner comments included:

"...volumes were agreed at the start, negotiated monthly and we reprofile quarterly, we're able to hand back, or take more, based on performance."

"...we had growth in regulated training, whilst non-regulated we handed back."

"...performance management is really good. Contract variations come out quickly, and they are very responsive. Can negotiate – when we haven't been performing, they have given us extensions and worked with us to create strategies to get back on track."

"...we put together a justification on how we could manage the increase in volumes and currently 30 new starts are on hold due to the current situation."

PRINCIPLE 3: Contract

The contracts clearly define the obligations and expectations of the two parties; the Partner and PeoplePlus. Partners confirmed they had received their contract in a timely manner, which enabled them to seek legal advice if deemed appropriate. In addition, opportunities were available to meet with PeoplePlus to review and discuss the detail within the contract, resulting in clarification of key facts. A high percentage of Partners felt that the contract was straight-forward and what would be expected for the delivery of a Government funded programme.

In the event of the Commissioner making any amendments to the contract, PeoplePlus openly discuss these with the Partners and check understanding. Subsequently, a contract variation is provided to the Partner clearly outlining the change. One Partner spoke of the revisions to payments made within their programme, and confirmed that PeoplePlus provided sufficient information to ensure they understood the change and implications.

All Partners were very clear about the performance expectations, including the targets and customer service standards. The key measures and outcomes had been shared with Partners before completing the EOI and, as a result, there was a clear understanding regarding the overarching contractual requirements at an early stage. The weekly telephone calls, monthly and quarterly performance reviews and ongoing communications provide clarity regarding the performance expectations throughout the life of the contract. As previously stated, any changes to the contract, including performance expectations, are discussed with the Partner and formally agreed in a contract variation to ensure understanding of the future expectations. Some Partner comments included:

"...very clear from the start and re-emphasised during our calls and performance reviews."

"...clear expectations from the beginning, KPIs (key performance indicators) were reviewed at the contracting stage and are part of ongoing discussions."

"...allocation of starts every month – can step in and take extra starts if others under perform."

"...profile document is annexed to the contract as a spreadsheet."

PeoplePlus promote the complaints / appeals procedure as well as the third-party mediation service (DWP) to Partners via the contract and SharePoint. As a result, Partners confirmed they were aware of where to locate the information, and that they would be confident to use it if necessary. However, Partners explained that they would approach their Partnership Manager in the first instance and believe that any issue would be resolved without the need to make any formal complaint. Some Partner comments included:

"...we know who to go to if we have a complaint."

"...I know the dispute process is in the contract."

At the time of the re-accreditation assessment, there was no evidence of any formal complaints / appeals against PeoplePlus. Members of the senior leadership team stated that they would fully respect the decisions made as a result of third party mediation services if it were to be deemed to have not acted in accordance with the principles of the Merlin Standard.

PRINCIPLE 4: Funding

Partners confirmed that the funding models were openly discussed and agreed prior to contracting with PeoplePlus. Tier 2 Partners were aware that the funding arrangements flowed down from the Commissioner, and consequently, there was an element of fairness. Similarly, the payment terms and conditions were outlined verbally and contained within the contract, including PeoplePlus' commitment to the Cabinet Office directive to pay all suppliers with the agreed terms and conditions of 30 days. Partners providing a specialist intervention explained that they expressed the unit price of the service to be delivered within the EOI, and this had subsequently been agreed with PeoplePlus. Whilst the payment terms and conditions were typically 30 days, some Partners referred to raising an invoice immediately upon completion of the service and negotiating quicker payment terms to support their cash flow. Some Partner comments included:

"...based on the approach to funding we had to change our budget and plans, but PeoplePlus was very straight about it and made it all very clear."

"...they sent a proposal on what they wanted us to deliver on - and asked us to review it to see if it was achievable in our eyes."

"...we have quoted a cost for the job – it isn't cheap, but PeoplePlus asked us to give them a price we could work with, so we have."

"...all the information is on the ESFA hub; 25% on start and 75% when they finish."

The Cabinet Office directive to pay all suppliers with the agreed terms and conditions of 30 days, is upheld by PeoplePlus. A high proportion of the Partners confirmed that the self-billing process or agreed method of raising an invoice was straight-forward, and consequently, payments were made in line with the timescale outlined. However, there was evidence from several of the smaller Partner organisations that the process for transferring funds and gaining timely payment was not overtly understood. In addition, a few Partners spoke of the inconsistent approach to compliance checks by the claims team, which had recently impact on payments. However, this had been identified by PeoplePlus and decisive action taken as a result. Some Partner comments included:

"...they pay us on time. We just invoice and get paid within the following 30 days."

"...we have never had a problem getting paid. PeoplePlus has paid us every penny that they have owed us."

"...always very prompt and accurate."

Partners were aware of the management fee and what they gain in return, for example, administrative support, performance management, quality and compliance audits, provision of Management Information (MI), SharePoint, learning and development activities, and Partner meetings, where appropriate. Some Partner comments included:

"...20% for which we get contract management, Smart Assessor, training, access to policies and procedures and paperwork."

"...it is in the contract – believe the management fee is fair – and that its value for money."

"...the fee covers them paying for the system we use and managing the contract – it's an overhead they have to cover. I think they earn the fee."

PRINCIPLE 5: Develop

PeoplePlus provides an effective onboarding activity at the start of a contract to ensure Partners are equipped with the resources, knowledge and skills to meet the contractual requirements. Examples provided by Partners were the provision of the contract guidelines, systems and processes, as well as documentation, and access to PeoplePlus' policies and procedures. As changes to legislative and regulatory requirements are released PeoplePlus update their policies and procedures and share these with Partners to provide guidance. Also, support is provided to ensure effective use of the relevant CRM (Client Relationship Management) system. Throughout the life of the contract support is provided to Partners to review and understand changes to systems, processes and documentation. Some Partner comments included:

"...training provided on JMS prior to the start of the contract supported by a Webex to remind us of the learning and how to use the system."

"...PeoplePlus provided copies of their documents to ensure we were on track at the start of the contract."

"...they were helpful and shared their paperwork, so we didn't have to design things from scratch."

"...if we have needed to upgrade policies or haven't had what they need us to have, they have helped us out."

A number of Partners confirmed that the opportunities for additional funding / finance streams are promoted through Share Point and / or the Partnership Manager, as well as external routes, for example, ERSA, Carley Consult, etc. Partners spoke of being encouraged to complete an EOI for other contracts and have subsequently been successful in gaining a new contract, which has contributed to diversifying their business. One Partner explained that due to performance they had experienced growth in two other areas, another spoke of an increase in the number of Job Centres they had been allocated, resulting in additional volumes. Another Partner confirmed they had added non-regulated training to their portfolio. There was also evidence that Partners had been advised of local, regional and national bid opportunities, with support being provided by PeoplePlus to prepare the submission. Some Partner comments included:

"...when discussing performance our Partnership Manager has been happy to look at growth opportunities."

"...we're in the process of discussing future business opportunities with PeoplePlus regarding a new specialised qualification."

"... provision has increased since the initial contract due to performance success."

"...we have just started with an EOI based on information shared by PeoplePlus."

Partners referred to opportunities to access further learning and development identified throughout performance reviews. For example; support for new employees, additional one-to-one coaching on systems and processes, (including the CRM system), PowerPoint presentations uploaded onto SharePoint through to sharing examples of compliance requirements. Some Partner comments included:

"...now the service has gone 'remote' – the PeoplePlus Tech Champion has given guidance on how to run 'group' online sessions."

"...additional learning needs are discussed as they are identified."

PRINCIPLE 6: Performance Manage

Partners confirmed that they have a key contact within PeoplePlus - their Partnership Manager, but also have named contacts within compliance and finance. The role of Continuous Improvement Lead has recently been introduced to work with Partners and, as a result, several Partners confirmed they were able to name their allocated Continuous Improvement Lead. Partners confirmed that PeoplePlus staff are accessible, approachable and responsive to their needs. Some Partner comments included:

"...updates from DWP emailed with explanations as soon as they are received then discussed during the monthly performance review meeting."

"...staff are very helpful with me no matter who I contact; they respond and get back to me."

"...named people for different aspects of the contract and they all respond very well."

"...partnership manager has made this contract doable."

"...meetings are very productive and open."

"...excellent, on hand and contactable when needed."

"...very good relationship, it's a good team and great to work with."

"...productive, healthy relationships."

PeoplePlus continue to use a range of communication methods, including but not limited to; emails, conference calls, Partner meetings, face-to-face meetings, webinars, SharePoint, etc. Recently, Microsoft Teams has been introduced to facilitate remote working with Partners and customers. Feedback from Partners indicated that communications took place two-to-three times a week, or on occasions daily. All forms of communication were viewed as open, honest and without unreasonable constraint, with Partners being able to talk about their issues and challenges, as well as their successes. Some Partner comments included:

"...culture is open and direct, but communication relies on email, much rather have a face-to-face conversation."

"...very open and transparent in their communications – can talk to them about problems, I can suggest things to them, and they always listen and help where they can."

"...all very open – we are not afraid to say if we don't understand and can challenge things if we feel they are not right – there is no comeback."

"...contract manager is very enthusiastic and engaging – she will fight for you; she will get answers for you, and without her, we would have given up."

"...I don't agree with everything their audit and compliance teams do or request and will push back to them – it's not a dictatorship, it's a partnership."

"...all discussions are open and honest no matter who you are talking to at PeoplePlus."

"...we're in it together."

"...they're open, honest and responsive, feels like a partnership."

A robust approach to performance management incorporates weekly telephone calls (for some contracts), and monthly and quarterly reviews (for all contracts). The reviews predominantly take place face-to-face; however, more recently, these have become remote, but this has not been detrimental to the process. Partners spoke of an extensive review of performance against targets, KPIs, customer service standards, etc. as well as a review of their business, policies and procedures, staff changes and development needs, etc. A high proportion of Partners confirmed these interactions were very supportive and positive. Providing them with the opportunity to discuss successes, innovation, issues and concerns.

Some Partner comments included:

"...weekly call and then monthly and quarterly reviews to look at the detail, identify the challenges and issues we may face in the future."

"...we used to do the performance review face-to-face, but recently this has moved to Microsoft Teams, we still discuss the same things in the same detail."

"...we review performance against targets and KPIs every month and re-profile every quarter."

"...she recognises good performance and also our good ideas, and these are shared across the supply chain."

"...an exercise on British Values was recently shared with Partners."

"...X is really positive and understanding, so we can talk about the issues."

PeoplePlus utilise a range of CRM / tracking systems to meet the requirements of the individual contracts. Subsequently, Partners have access to the MI, either directly from the platform being used, or sent by PeoplePlus. The frequency of receipt and review of the MI varies from daily to weekly and / or monthly, or as requested by the Partner. A high proportion of Partners confirmed that the MI met their specific needs and enabled them to analyse performance against the targets. Some Partner comments included:

"...we are reliant on PeoplePlus to send us the reports – which they do every week."

"...I can ask for management information if I need it – PeoplePlus provide it Wednesday and Friday, and I have everything I need."

"...the weekly calls provide the time to review the MI and establish any action we need to take. If I need additional MI, I just ask and its sent."

The performance reviews and MI tracks performance and subsequently drives and facilitates improvements. Partners spoke of the performance reviews being supportive and their respective Partnership Manager working with them to address performance issues. Some Partners had experienced a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) over the past two-years, which aimed to address issues or concerns relating to performance. The Partners spoke of working on an action plan for three to six months, and how, as a result, performance had improved, or profiles had been reviewed to reflect their capabilities. One Partner comment included:

"...the last performance review was carried out by Skype, and PeoplePlus were very positive about our improved performance."

Partners utilise the allocated CRM or other system to enable them to track and monitor customer progression, which is also reviewed throughout performance reviews. Analysis of customer progression has identified individuals (learners) requiring additional support or concerns regarding individual staff performance whereby additional support has been provided. Some Partner comments included:

"...using Smart Assessor helps as it allows us to see what we are doing and where everyone is in the journey."

"...SharePoint is used to upload the learner information so PeoplePlus can see where we are along the journey."

The primary methodologies utilised to identify and share effective practice are the monthly performance reviews and, where they take place, quarterly Partner (Steering Group) meetings. The Partner meetings provide the opportunity for direct delivery and Partner's staff to review performance of the contract as a whole, identify the successes, areas for improvement and different practices adopted.

Partners provided examples of practices that had been shared through the Partner meetings. For instance; learner engagement techniques, different approaches to working with community groups, use of promotional materials, effective ways of progressing customers from the Traineeship programme, approaches to observing staff and gaining feedback from customers. Other examples included sharing how to capture and upload documents to the relevant system, approaches to achieve the customer service standards which are not always easy due to internet / travel restrictions, approaches to working with different cohorts, etc..

There was evidence of an annual self-assessment resulting in a SAR and QIP for specific contracts whereby it was a contractual requirement for PeoplePlus; however, this was not consistent practice across the contracts / supply chains. Whilst some Partners recollected submitting their QIP to PeoplePlus, there was some uncertainty of the rationale behind the submission, and others made reference to the quality team undertaking a full review, which resulted in a report. However, they were unaware of the overarching outcome of this activity or how PeoplePlus utilised the findings. Consequently, PeoplePlus is encouraged to review its current practice to develop a consistent approach to the SAR and QIP across the Organisation, irrespective of the Commissioner's requirements. One comment included:

"...SAR/QIP was on the agenda but has been deferred due to the current situation."

PRINCIPLE 7: Quality Assurance and Compliance

PeoplePlus actively communicates and promotes updates to legislative and regulatory requirements, as well as changes to policy and strategy. A range of approaches are used including email alerts, SharePoint, the relevant CRM and communications and follow up by the Partnership Manager. PeoplePlus explained that communications from external bodies, including the Commissioners, were reviewed and explanations written in plain English before being forward to the Partners. Consequently, Partners confirmed that policies, procedures and communications from the Commissioners were readable and easy to understand; however, if necessary, they could contact the Partnership Manager for clarification. Some Partner comments included:

"...SharePoint has improved things."

"...communication of updates and changes is good and timely, and the Partnership Manager checks that you have implemented the change."

Partners believe the communications are effective and cited the recent call hosted by the Managing Director concerning Covid-19 and the different approaches to working throughout the Government lockdown. Consequently, a high proportion of Partners clearly understood what was expected of them as they started to work remotely with customers. In addition, PeoplePlus have started to use Microsoft Teams, which facilitates conversations with Partners, individually and in groups, and also provides a platform for instant messaging. The latter provides the opportunity for live discussions, once again providing Partners (and PeoplePlus) with an effective way to share practices, successes and issues, and subsequently gain input from others. Some Partner comments included:

"...we have been informed they are looking at how working from home can accommodate the paperwork, i.e. scanning from your phone, and also offering some support."

"...Microsoft Teams appears to be great for different discussions both through calling and messaging – a good way to go – especially with all this."

A range of practices have been designed and implemented to ensure Partners are compliant and delivering a quality service to meet the different Commissioner's requirements. Partners have a good understanding of the different approaches used, which range from file audits, specific activities throughout performance management visits and discussions, including learning walks. In addition, observations of practice, six-monthly quality assurance activities through to feedback from customers through forums and Qualtrix surveys, and the monitoring of complaints, contribute to compliance and quality activities. Partners confirmed that these were efficient and proportionate and ensured they were meeting the contractual requirements. Some Partner comments included:

"...file audits are completed monthly, which is fine, it's not intrusive, and feedback tends to be positive."

"...compliance checks are necessary, and PeoplePlus have got it right."

"...X has observed delivery a couple of times. Feedback was aligned to the Ofsted framework."

The introduction of the Continuous Improvement Lead role will further enhance the work undertaken to ensure compliance and quality of service. Some Partners had already had a visit from their allocated Continuous Improvement Lead and found the experience to be positive. One Partner comment included:

"...Continuous Improvement Lead visited us towards the end of last year – suggested a few paperwork tweaks that was all."

Findings as a result of the different practices are documented and communicated to Partners. This is followed up by the Partnership Manager and / or compliance team to ensure appropriate action has been taken. Partners referred to improvements made as a result of quality assurance practices, for example, errors reduced within the paperwork submissions, a greater understanding of the funding rules, improving contact with customers, etc.

A high proportion of Partners confirmed that the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) received from PeoplePlus was informative, impartial, current and accurate at the time of provision. The most recent IAG focused upon Covid-19 and was being released at the time of the re-accreditation assessment. Partners found this to be practical at a time of uncertainty and extensive change as staff were transitioning to working from an office environment to home and looking at ways to continue to work with customers remotely. One Partner comment included:

"...PeoplePlus have been really proactive in their communication regarding the current situation, certainly leading the way."

Partners spoke of being signposted to further information in the form of websites, articles of interest and training, as well as other organisations and agencies to gain appropriate advice and guidance in relation to specific themes, for example, health and wellbeing.

The IAG provided by Partners' staff is reviewed through observation of practice by either PeoplePlus and / or the Partner. Also, action plans and other documentation are reviewed. Some Partners referred to PeoplePlus reviewing marketing materials to ensure it was factually correct, as well as feedback from customers and being **matrix** accredited.

Partners spoke of the extensive due diligence activities before contracting with PeoplePlus whereby policies relating to health and safety, information security and safeguarding were evaluated. Subsequently, monthly performance reviews seek to establish whether there have been any incidents or reportable accidents etc., as well as being an opportunity to observe the environment and ways of working, which indicate adherence to the policies. During the life of the contract an annual due diligence activity is undertaken whereby policies and procedures are submitted to PeoplePlus to ensure they have been reviewed and updated, as appropriate. In addition, visits to Partner premises by the compliance team or more recently, the Continuous Improvement Lead, include an audit of policies and procedures and observation of working practices. Some Partner comments included:

"...review at due diligence and then annually – also reviewed during audit by Continuous Improvement Lead."

"...the performance review includes a discussion about the policies and procedures, and any incidents on site."

"...we are very clear about the information security requirements of PeoplePlus. We are GDPR compliant and have all the required policies in place. We use password-protected systems and data."

Partners confirmed that an environmental sustainability plan was requested throughout the initial due diligence, and this is subsequently required on an annual basis. One Partner spoke of reviewing the performance of their organisation against the targets; however, this fails to be a consistent practice across the Partners or supply chains.

PeoplePlus continues to address the minimum requirements to comply with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. It shared the Modern Slavery Statement with Partners in March 2018 and provided information and training for relevant employees to raise awareness of the requirements to comply with the Act. Partners have access to appropriate support to develop a statement which is fit for purpose. Their Modern Slavery Statement is reviewed throughout the initial due diligence, and this has subsequently been included within the annual due diligence activity. One Partner comment included:

"...they asked for our Modern Slavery Statement as part of the annual review of policies."

PRINCIPLE 8: Review and Close

PeoplePlus actively seeks feedback through meetings, forums and surveys with Partners, customers, Commissioners, LAs, LEPs, etc., to identify priorities, what is working well and areas for improvement. LAs and LEPs share the priorities and engage with PeoplePlus to establish future ways of working, and Partners understand this takes place. One Partner comment included:

"...they shared some feedback from the LEP recently."

Partners confirmed that feedback is sought through the quarterly Partner meetings and discussions relating to performance. Consequently, they believe their voice is heard and reference was made to improvements made to systems and processes, as well as paperwork – if agreed with the Commissioner.

External auditing and assessment activities are used to inform and improve practices throughout the life of the contract. The Organisation undertakes ISO assessments and also engages in the **matrix** accreditation process, both of which inform improvements across the business. Feedback from the latest audit conducted by the Provider Assurance Team (PAT) was positive, but PeoplePlus were encouraged to review their contingency plans for replacing staff that fulfil crucial roles. Most Partners confirmed that they receive feedback from PeoplePlus following external audits and assessments, as one Partner comment included:

"...feedback shared during monthly meetings from external visits / audits."

PeoplePlus completes an End of Contract Evaluation Report for the contracts that come to a close, and in some cases a Social Value Report. These reports indicate the impact of the service on individuals and areas targeted, the impact and benefit to the organisation and additional benefits, outcomes or synergies that occurred. For example, PeoplePlus building additional links with local employers, preparing learners to understand the world of work and, as a result, they have a higher level of readiness to commit to the overall routine of starting work.

Partners were able to provide anecdotal evidence of the positive impact in relation to the wider social objectives of the Commissioners. Some examples provided by Partners included:

"...saving tax-payers money; it costs £60K to keep an offender in prison, when we get them into sustainable employment, we can save those costs."

"...30% of offenders leave prison and gain a job outcome."

"...over the past nine months, 111 clients started self-employment, contributing to the local community."

"...the contract is good for the local economy – there will always be a need for this type of contract."

"...reducing the number of benefit claimants and benefitting the community with people going into work."

"...we've supported over 1000 learners over the years – that has to have a positive impact on the region."

Similarly, Partners explained the positive impact on the customer and other stakeholders, including staff and the Commissioner. Some examples included: high levels of staff satisfaction, gaining new knowledge and skills to enable them to transfer to other contracts in the future. In terms of the Commissioner, Partners explained the achievement of the targets and key objectives as the primary outcome.

Many examples were provided which demonstrated the positive impact the work of Partners had on the customers, and these were shared with PeoplePlus by Partners through a range of case studies. Some examples provided by Partners included:

"...improvements to customer's health and well-being, self-worth and motivation, gaining employment and independence and in the long term being better off."

"...achievement of setting up their own business."

"...help for non-academic learners to build their confidence and get a qualification that they didn't think they would ever get."

"...a 16 year old gaining an Apprenticeship after three-days of work experience with an employer."

"...a young person was home-schooled – lacked confidence and communication skills – brought him on and is now in college."

"...we really try and get case studies – the ones we focus on are those where people have developed. One lady hadn't left the house in years. Very low in confidence. She kept coming and meeting people and her confidence really improved. It's not just the job - it's how we improve their lives."

Equality and diversity are actively promoted, and data is collected and analysed in line with the Commissioner's requirements, and subsequently used to inform improvements. Reports are generated which indicate the split between male / female customers, age, ethnicity, disabilities, etc. One Partner spoke of the high number of males in a specific location, whilst another area was predominantly female with a number of single mothers. Subsequently, this information was analysed against the regional data to establish whether it was representative of the area, which identified the need to target specific groups. Another Partner referred to the demographics within each Job Centre and the comparisons made to the referrals, once again identifying the need to target specific areas and groups.

The process for a Partner to end their relationship with PeoplePlus is outlined within the PMF, which was cited by a high proportion of Partners. In addition, a number spoke of discussions at the start of the contract relating to exiting the contract for a range of reasons, as well as the action to be taken when the contract came to an official close. This included final referral dates and working with customers through the programme, compliance requirements, archiving of paperwork and storage of electronic data through to final claims and payment. One Partner summarised the process in the following way: *'...the end of the contract is June 2021 with an option for a two-year extension. As it is a one-off assessment contract, there is no wind-down required, and the contract can be just cut off within the eight working days – this is the customer service standard timeline of referral to sending the report back.'*

The interviews with past Partners were positive as they spoke about the approach taken to close the contract and the support provided to ensure a smooth process, and if appropriate a seamless service for the customers and staff to transfer into the incoming organisation. Some Partner comments included:

"...our staff who are managing the winding down of the contract are working from the PeoplePlus office while the X (Partner name) clients go through and complete the programme."

"...we have always been happy with the relationship we have had with PeoplePlus - very open and honest - all the way through they have shared what they are doing and what they expect from us."

9. CONCLUSION AND CONDITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

In conclusion, this assessment provided the opportunity to review the practices of PeoplePlus Group Ltd for the current contracts against the Merlin Standard.

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

Holders of the Merlin Standard Accreditation must:

- Maintain and continually improve upon their approach to Supply Chain Management.
- Cooperate with annual Reviews as required by Assessment Services Ltd
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd (merlin@assessmentsservices.com) or their Lead Assessor if the key contact name or contact details change.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email: (merlin@assessmentsservices.com)
- 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