



merlin

promoting supply chain excellence

Assessment Report
For

WORKING LINKS

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On behalf of emqc Ltd

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About the Organisation

Working Links have been '*Changing Lives and Creating Futures*' since being formed in 2000. Whilst its ultimate goal is to get people into employment, they believe their overall role is much broader; working across social spectrums, dealing with diverse needs and expectations, through a wide range of integrated services that meet the needs of each individual customer, giving them, and their communities a positive economic future.

Working Links is a private, public and voluntary company. The private sector shareholders are Manpower and Capgemini. The public sector is the government's Shareholder Executive on behalf of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the voluntary sector share is owned by Mission Australia. The three shareholders bring the private sector drive and commerciality, public sector ethos and voluntary ethics.

An original provider of Welfare to Work, Working Links work in some of the most deprived areas of the United Kingdom to address the challenges faced by people who are long-term unemployed. They have helped over 240,000 people to improve their lives through employment, training and skills development and continue to support thousands of employers to grow their business.

The organisation currently delivers a wide range of programmes on behalf of government departments and funding bodies, including Department of Work & Pensions (DWP), European Social Fund (ESF), Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). It also works with other bodies/organisations for example, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Plymouth City Council and Surrey County Council. The present contracts include:

- Work Programme in three CPAs; Scotland (CPA08), South West (CPA11) and Wales (CPA13),
- Work Choice across five CPAs; North & Mid Wales & South East Wales (CPA05), Leicestershire & Northamptonshire (CPA15), City & East London and North & North East London (CPA20), Kent, Surrey & Sussex (CPA25) and West of England, Gloucester, Wiltshire & Swindon (CPA26),
- ESF Families in one CPA; East Midlands (CPA02),
- Jobcentre Support Contract (JCSC) in one CPA; Devon & Cornwall (CPA03),
- Skills Wales across Wales,
- Moving-on across London.

Working Links have actively designed and developed a number of supply chains over the years to support the delivery of contracts, slowly reducing the percentage delivered internally in order to meet the commissioner's objectives and the needs of the customers. The current breakdown of supply chain delivery is 45% Work Programme, 100% Work Choice, 63% ESF Families, 50% JCSC, 100% Skills Wales and 40% Moving On.

Assessment Methodology

Working Links was mandated by DWP to undertake an initial assessment against the Merlin Standard before 29th June 2012 due to being a delivery partner (Prime) for the Work Programme. Primes are required to be reaccredited against the Merlin Standard every two-years and consequently the organisation opted to undertake the assessment in April 2014 prior to the expiry of accreditation in May.

Whilst the scope for the initial assessment was Work Programme the reaccreditation included all contracts delivered on behalf of government departments and funding bodies, as listed previously.

The assessment team comprised of Lorna Bainbridge (Lead Assessor) and two Assessors: Christine James and Hayley Allen, supported by two co-ordinators within Working Links. The Lead Assessor met the coordinators in January 2014 to gain an understanding of the current portfolio of contracts to be included in the scope and discuss the logistics of the assessment. The dates for the on-site were identified and a plan of action agreed.

Working Links provided a list of partners for all contracts in scope, which indicated tier two (end-to-end), tier three (specialist) and tier 4 (spot-purchase). The Lead Assessor selected a number of partners to be interviewed taking into consideration all contracts, across the CPAs and the different tiers.

The Lead Assessor was in regular contact with the co-ordinators prior to the on-site to review the schedule and logistics of the on-site activity. Prior to the on-site activity all documentation required for the assessment; Self Assessment Questionnaire, Pre-Assessment Notes and schedules were shared within the agreed time-scale.

The assessment team spent a total of 12 days on-site reviewing documentary evidence and undertaking interviews with a total representative sample of 52% of tier 2 end-to-end supply chain partners from across the contracts. Tier 3 Specialist and tier 4 spot-purchase organisations also contributed to the assessment.

All supply chain partners had been made aware of the assessment and the Lead Assessor was able to interview a supply chain partner who had requested to take part in the assessment.

Working Links' staff involved in the strategic and day-to-day delivery and management of the supply chains were interviewed.

Assessment Outcome

| | |
|---------------------|------|
| Overall % | 77% |
| Overall Outcome | Good |
| Supply Chain Design | Good |
| Commitment | Good |
| Conduct | Good |
| Review | Good |

Strengths

The following provides an indication of areas of particular strength, which appeared to be working well and viewed positively by Working Links staff and a large proportion of the partners interviewed, and / or supported by observed and / or documentary evidence. The number in brackets cross-references the findings to the element and criteria of the Merlin Standard.

- ▲ The supply chain for Work Programme has continued to evolve and utilises public, private and third sector organisations. The number of third sector organisations; tiers 3 and 4 involved in the delivery of the service continues to increase to meet the changing needs of the customers and address the commissioner's objectives. (1a.1, 1a.2, 4a.5)
- ▲ In line with Working Links' overall strategy and ethos the organisation continues to tender for other contracts, undertaking extensive research and implementing pilot activities to facilitate the design of a supply chain with the aim of being equipped to deliver an effective service from live-date. The organisation proactively promotes opportunities to engage partners, operating a fair and transparent approach to the procurement processes with the aim of working with new and current partners across the sectors. (1a.1, 1a.2, 2a.1, 2c.1)
- ▲ The partners delivering the Work Programme in CPA08 & CPA13 work collaboratively and share excellent and good practice, and performance achievements formally and informally with the aim of improving performance across the contract. (2a.3, 3b.8, 3c.4, 3d.1)
- ▲ When appropriate, Working Links supports the development of its partners with the aim of developing sustainable organisations. Specific examples included 'deep dive' activities and direct support for some third sector organisations. (2b.1)
- ▲ Working Links proactively promote and facilitate the development of staff within supply chains through a range of activities, for example, e-learning, workshops, shadowing, on-the-job support and more recently webinars, which proved to be highly successful in Work Programme CPA08. (2b.2)

Strengths Cont./

- ▲ The organisation's core values are embedded and as a result supply chain partners believe there is a common ethos and purpose to delivering the services, which is demonstrated in their behaviours and language. (3a.1)
- ▲ The internal quality standard – QID, includes a number of processes, policies and activities to monitor the quality of delivery, which has become embedded over the past two-years. Partners believe it is an effective process, which is supportive and drives quality improvement. (3b.1, 3b.2, 3b.3, 3b.4, 3b.5, 3b.6)
- ▲ A high proportion of partners made reference to monthly performance reviews, which were supportive and provided opportunities to share and recognise good practice, and raise issues and concerns with the aim of improving performance. (3d.2, 3d.3)
- ▲ Work Programme CPAo8 demonstrated robust approaches to monitoring and analysing diversity and equality data with the aim of identifying trends and using the information at local level. Similarly, evidence within other CPAs / contracts indicated that data was collected, monitored and analysed. (3e.1, 3e.2, 3e.3)
- ▲ Working Links has developed and implemented a range of methods to gain feedback from all stakeholder groups, which links to the annual Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and contributes to the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), which drives continuous improvement. (4a.1, 4a.2)

Areas for Improvement

Whilst Working Links demonstrated that it met the Merlin Standard the following areas could be considered for review and improvement based on feedback from Working Links staff and / or partners, observations and / or documentary evidence. The number in brackets cross-references the findings to the element and criteria of the Merlin Standard.

- ▲ The greatest challenge Working Links faces is consistency across the CPAs / contracts, as indicated above there are a number of key strengths, and consideration could be made to how these could be shared across the supply chains.
- ▲ Work Programme partners in CPAo8 and CPA13 actively develop local and national networks to support the delivery of a range of support services, whilst other CPAs / contracts have access to supply catalogues these are not fully utilised. Consideration could be made to raising partner's understanding of the value of using the catalogues. (1a.3)
- ▲ Consultation with supply chains is effective in some areas, for example, Work Programme CPAo8 and CPA13. In the future, consideration could be made to innovative ways of consulting partners that face geographical challenges, for example, group conference calls. (2a.2)

Areas for Improvement Cont./

- ▲ Working Links strive to build professional relationships with all stakeholders to support the delivery of services. Some partners have experienced difficulty in the early stages of a contract when efforts were being made to develop relationships with other agencies or organisations, for example, Jobcentre Plus, probationary services, etc. In the future, consideration could be made to how these relationships could be developed in a more timely and constructive basis. (2a.4)
- ▲ Whilst Working Links undertake an annual financial feasibility check with partners, due to the economy consideration could be made to increasing the frequency of these checks in the short-term. (2c.6)
- ▲ Clear communications channels are in place, however, the evidence indicated that on occasions these were less robust in relation to understanding the financial protocol. In the future, consideration could be made to developing closer relationships with the finance team and / or performance managers managing partner's expectations more effectively. (2c.7, 2c.8)
- ▲ Partners believe communications of legislative and regulatory requirements, including commissioner / funder wider policy and social objectives have improved recently, however, consideration could be made to de-mystifying some messages to ensure a consistent understanding across supply chains. (3a.4, 3b.3, 4a.3)
- ▲ Whilst Working Links encourage partners to implement an environmental sustainable strategy with measurable objectives, in the future consideration could be made to developing a holistic strategy within the supply chains, which is monitored and measured. (3b.7, 4a.6)
- ▲ There was good evidence relating to how good / excellent practice is being identified, shared and monitored, however, consideration could be made to re-defining 'excellent' practice and encourage all partners to actively identify, share and monitor practices, developing a consistent approach across the supply chains. (3b.8)
- ▲ The access and accuracy of Management Information (MI) for the Work Programme has improved over the past two-years, however, within other contracts it is less robust and some inconsistencies of information continue to appear. Consequently, Working Links should continue to review the MI required across the contracts with the aim of developing a consistent and robust approach. (3d.4)

Areas for Improvement Cont./

- ▲ Working Links and partners work together to deliver the services to gain positive outcomes for customers and contribute to the commissioner's wider social objectives. Whilst a level of evaluation takes place regarding the impact on the wider social objectives / policy intent, consideration could be made to developing a more robust, formalised approach across the CPAs / contracts to ensure partners truly understand the impact of the supply chain, specifically referencing external stakeholders, encourage employee / people well-being and improving environmental sustainability. (4a.4, 4a.6)

Areas Requiring Further Development

Working Links have successfully met all the requirements of the Merlin Standard, as described in the assessment outcome. As a result, there are no areas requiring further development identified throughout this assessment.

Assessment Findings

1 Supply Chain Design

1a) Supply chain design

Working Links is focused on *Changing Lives, Creating Futures*, dedicating its time to improving people's lives through employment, training and skills development. They believe that education, training and sustainable employment offer the best chance for people to move from social exclusion to social inclusion, helping people to achieve their full potential and benefitting their communities. Over the years Working Links has delivered a number of Welfare to Work contracts and worked with different commissioners / funders to contribute to it's ethos and support the most disadvantaged / hardest to reach customers. Whilst in its infancy Working Links adopted an internal delivery model, it was recognised that working in partnership with experts would contribute to meeting the changing needs of customers and the requirements of commissioners / funders, and as a result, adopted an external delivery model through a supply chain. Currently 66% of the delivery is through supply chains, Working Links continue to deliver the balance internally to ensure it continues to have an understanding of contract requirements and challenges.

As previously stated, Working Links is made up of shareholders from the different sectors; private, public and third / voluntary and consequently recognises the importance of working with partner organisations from different sectors, as well as different sizes and geographical spread to address the holistic needs of customers and meet the commissioner / funder objectives. At the time of this assessment the tier 2 partners (across all contracts) comprised of 26% public, 29% private and 45% third / voluntary sectors. Working Links have contingency plans in place to ensure smooth transition of service is undertaken for customers in the event of a partner leaving a contract. The supply chain is complemented by and draws upon the expertise of a number of organisations categorised as tier 3 specialists and tier 4 spot-purchase, which operate at local, regional or national levels. One partner made the following comment:

"There is the right mix of public, third and private to deliver effectively."

Working Links takes a strategic approach when designing a supply chain and takes into consideration learning from previous experiences. It actively seeks opportunities to meet with Members of Parliament from all parties, within England, Scotland, Wales and Eire to gain information at a national level, as well as Employment Related Services Association (ERSA), Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), Local Enterprise Partners (LEPs) and other national, regional and local networks with the aim of influencing the sector plans and using intelligence to inform supply chain design. In addition, to ensure the potential supply chain is fit for purpose, robust, diverse and mixed; pilot activities have been instigated.

Working Links review its supply chains to ensure they continue to deliver the services and meet the changing needs of current and future customers. The introduction of payment groups, for example, Work Programme - ex-prison offenders resulted in additional research to identify barriers and establish partnerships with organisations equipped to deliver specialist services. Similarly, additional research was undertaken to develop a robust and diverse supply chain for ESF Families, which has resulted in new partners being introduced and subsequently there is a belief that it is fit for purpose, which was echoed by the partners.

Working Links have developed a supply catalogue to promote the use of tier 3 and 4 organisations across CPAs / contracts. It provides a central point for tier 2 partners to access specialist services, which is working well within Work Programme CPA08 and CPA13 and the ESF Families contract. Consideration could be made to raising other partner's awareness and understanding of the value of using the support catalogues.

Working Links have encouraged supply chain partners to retain their links with existing networks of partner and support organisations, which has proven to be beneficial for all stakeholders - the partner, Working Links and the customer. Partners made the following comments:

"We need these specialist organisations because they deliver what we can't"

"Formal partnerships exist and those partners can access specialist / additional support through wider networks through either supply catalogue or independently through their own networks."

2 Commitment

2a) Collaboration, cooperation and communication

Working Links has clear strategies for promoting the opportunities to partner with them with the aim of engaging potential and existing partners in procurement activities. Promotional activities have included, website, e-blasts, briefings, Indus Delta, Carley Consult, Directgov.com, Sell2Wales, central email system and direct approach from a staff member. One partner made the following comment:

"We were approached to join the supply chain due to our innovative programme and Working Links wanted a different approach"

All partners confirmed that the procurement processes to be accepted onto the Working Links' framework and subsequently contracts, including Expression of Interest (EoI), Invitation to Tender (ITT) and due diligence / verification activities, which are structured, robust and efficient. Reference was made to effective and professional communications, which included one-to-one discussions, regional meetings, emails, etc. One partner made the following comment:

"I had regular communication with the performance and contract managers throughout due diligence."

Every effort is made to engage supply chain partners in consultation activities to inform decisions, including the design of systems and processes, for example, a recent Work Programme national meeting invited partners to discuss methods to improve communications, whilst another contract engaged partners in consultation regarding the risk register and submission of documents. In the future, consideration could be made to innovative ways of consulting partners that face geographical challenges, for example, group conference calls.

Opportunities to work collaboratively and openly with others within the supply chain and wider networks are actively promoted, and working effectively within Work Programme CPA08 & CPA13 and a number of other contracts. However, this is not consistent practice across the supply chains; consideration could be made to encouraging more open and supportive working relations amongst some partners.

Partners clearly understand roles and responsibilities of Working Links' staff, including that of the senior leadership team, contract and performance managers, and delivery staff. Partners made reference to senior leaders being visible, supportive and accessible. Similarly, expectations including performance and implementation of systems and processes are clearly communicated through one-to-one discussions and CPA / contract meetings, as a result, partners clearly understand the business relationships and what is expected of all stakeholders. Some partners made reference to the difficulty encountered in the early stages of contracts when efforts were being made to develop relationships with other agencies or organisations, for example, Jobcentre Plus, probationary services, etc. In the future consideration could be made to how these relationships could be developed on a more timely and constructive basis to provide benefits to all stakeholders.

The communication channels are open through formal and informal approaches, one-to-one and group activities. Partners made reference to the weekly tele-kits, fortnightly mid-reviews and monthly performance reviews, in addition, they confirmed that Senior Leaders, Regional Directors and performance / contact performance managers are available on a daily basis over the telephone and email, and that they respond to queries promptly. Partners referenced the quarterly regional meetings and six-monthly national meetings for Work Programme, which are informative and provide every opportunity to challenge (with respect) and have open and honest discussions.

A number of partners believe the strength of the supply chain is that Working Links is open and honest in its communication, ensuring clarity of information, roles and responsibilities, expectations, etc. Whilst tier 3 and 4 organisations do not experience the same robustness of communications they confirmed that staff are readily available and supportive, and communications are managed professionally, openly and honestly. Some partner comments included:

"Very open and very communicative – I could pick up the phone at any time."

"We get emails regularly and can speak regularly too"

"We can challenge each other"

2b) Developing supply chain partners

Working Links actively encourage and support the development of its partners prior to and throughout the life of the contract. Whilst a number of tier 2 partners are well established and experienced in organisational development Working Links continue to undertake audits as part of the QID quality assurance cycle and monthly performance reviews to identify ways of supporting partners, for example, there was evidence of Working Links undertaking 'deep dive' activities and developing transition plans with partners to improve performance and build sustainable businesses. Some partner comments included:

"We did a deep dive with them and learnt so much."

"A transition plan was developed in partnership with Working Links, which allowed the transfer of delivery."

The tier 3 and 4 partners confirmed that Working Links actively support them to ensure they are viable and meet regulatory and legislative requirements, for example, in the past they have shared health and safety, safeguarding and environmental strategies, policies and processes and ensured data and asset security is in line with the minimum requirements. Some partner comments included:

"We didn't have a sustainability policy so they shared theirs and helped us write ours."

"We didn't have all the correct policies, Working Links were very supportive and provided us with examples of good practice, including a business continuity policy."

The services provided by tier 3 and 4 partners are promoted through the support catalogue and presentations at regional meetings with the aim of increasing awareness of their service/s to gain additional business. One partner made the following comment:

"I was invited to present my services at the meeting in January and got more business."

A number of partners confirmed that they are made aware of additional funding streams (despite very few opportunities due to the economic climate), and supported to complete tenders to build capacity, for example, Community Work Programme, and / or have had increased targets and referrals within current contracts. Some partner comments included:

"Made me aware of the EoI to build future business opportunities."

"The invited me to do an EoI for CWP contract."

"There's growth within the supply chain in a controlled way."

"We were encouraged to take on additional contracts as a result of a provider pulling out."

Staff development opportunities are actively promoted and facilitated by Working Links for all partners, including tier 3 and 4, at the prior to contract-live, which includes access to e-learning programmes for health and safety and safeguarding, support to implement the systems and processes and effective use the MI systems, including on-line tools; ZAP and My Way Up. Throughout the life of a contract performance reviews include a review of the delivery staff, case load and knowledge and skills, which often leads to additional learning and development activities being identified. For example, poor performance has resulted in a Working Links staff member working alongside an individual for three-days providing a level of on-the-job coaching, whilst another worked within the Working Links office environment. One partner made the following comment:

"An engagement consultant spent three-days helping us with referrals."

Partners made reference to the opportunities for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities through regional meetings and one-to-one discussions, and more recently Work Programme CPAo8 introduced webinars, which was a great success and as a result, consideration could be made to introducing this method across other CPAs / contracts. Some partner comments included:

"Working Links provided some basic skills diagnostic training."

"We've had training on Working Links' processes."

"I attended JCP events on the sanction process - was useful to meet with others to get an understanding of not just what you're doing but why you're doing something"

"They share good practice regarding quality and compliance, training on the CRM, how to complete paperwork."

2c) Contracting and funding

Working Links provided an overview of a typical procurement process:

- ▲ The development of a specification outlining the services to be commissioned,
- ▲ The development of an appropriate scoring system,
- ▲ Advertising the opportunity by the website, e-blasts, briefings, Indus Delta, Carley Consult, Directgov.com, Sell2Wales, etc.
- ▲ Refer potential partners to complete the EoI, which is made available of the website,
- ▲ Issue an ITT to all interested partners to complete, communicating the scoring system,
- ▲ Score and evaluate ITTs and select preferred bidders, and provide feedback to all applicants; successful and unsuccessful,
- ▲ Engage in commercial negotiations and due diligence / verification.

Partners who could recall the procurement process confirmed that it was fair and transparent, including the scoring system and communication was on going throughout the process. Some partners made reference to contacting Working Links to gain advice and clarification throughout the process, which was willingly provided.

Different funding models have been designed to ensure they are fair, proportionate and do not cause undue financial risk to partners, for example, high and low risk; these also take into account the level of support required in terms of IT, administration, etc. A high proportion of partners across the contracts confirmed that funding arrangements were openly discussed and negotiated to ensure they continued to be financially viable. Some partner comments included:

"We were offered three different payment models – shared risk, part risk or full risk prior to starting."

"Different funding models were offered to support us, for example, paying start fees to help with cash flow."

"Financial checks were carried out as part of the procurement process."

Partners in possession of a contract or Service Level Agreement (SLA) confirmed that it clearly outlined the obligations and expectations of both parties. Some partners made reference to Working Links reviewing the contract / SLA with them to ensure they had a good understanding of the requirements. Some partner comments included:

"SLA is very clear – it outlines what we will do and how much we get paid."

"Contract very clear and well structured."

Partners understood the rationale of the allocation of market share, which is predominantly based on geographical spread and as a result believe it is viable and transparent. Some partner comments included:

"We understood how and why they were sharing the work 50/50."

"We have capacity to cover a specific area, which was taken into consideration."

Partners confirmed that negotiations regarding the volumes are openly discussed and agreed, and once again, felt confident to challenge and re-negotiate if necessary, which was evidenced throughout the assessment. Some partner comments included:

"They discuss with us what we can do"

"The viability of the 'capacity building' was considered, we weren't offered too much to cope with all at once."

"We had discussions regarding changes to contracts and volumes."

A high proportion of partners across the contracts believe funding / finance is proactively negotiated and managed effectively, and as a result there was a clear understanding of the processes to be implemented in order to submit invoices and gain payment. However, this was not consistent across the contracts and consequently, some partners are failing to receive payments on a timely basis. As a result, consideration could be made to reviewing the processes, developing effective relationships with finance and / or performance managers managing partner's expectations.

A high proportion of partners across the contracts confirmed that performance expectations are negotiated prior to contract live and subsequently throughout the life of the contract, which should become normal practice in the future.

Partners believe their requirements were taken into account in pre-contract award processes and payment structures, and due to the way Working Links operate they were confident to challenge and seek clarification, and on occasions gained additional financial support. A minority of partners believe Working Links could be more proactive and assess the requirements of partners post contract award. Whilst Working Links undertake an annual financial feasibility check with partners, due to the economic climate consideration could be made to increasing the frequency in the short term.

Partners recollected that the management fees were discussed and explained prior to the contract starting to ensure they understood what they were paying and the level of support, for example, IT, administration, access to learning and development, etc. Throughout the interviews a number of partners were unable to recall management fees, but described the range of support they received, including quality assurance activities and performance reviews. In the future, consideration could be made to an annual review of the management fee and related services.

3 Conduct

3a) Demonstrating commercial and business integrity

Working Links' over-riding aim and focus is: *Changing lives, creating futures*. This is underpinned with a set of core values, which drives the organisation and focuses on the customer and building effective relationships. A large proportion of partners confirmed that the shared core value is 'the customer', and they believe that the customer continues to be at the heart of the operation, despite targets and objectives. Some partner comments included:

"Not all about the bottom line."

"Targets and performance is important, but it's about the customer."

Throughout the procurement process Working Links review the core principles of prospective partners to ensure they are aligned to their own. Recently, the core values have been under further scrutiny, which has resulted in the collection of the tier 2 partner's core values and a presentation across the CPAs to share their own vision and values, which led to a mapping activity to ensure the values are aligned. In the future, partnership managers will be observing behaviours as part of the performance reviews and quality assurance activities.

Whilst Working Links has a very clear strategy to manage the TUPE process, which was fully tested in 2012, however, due to no activity over the past two-years this was not assessed throughout this assessment. Confirmation was provided that the TUPE strategy would be mobilised in the future, honouring their commitment to people to ensure sustainable employment.

A high proportion of supply chain partners experience positive working relationships and all interactions are supportive, contributing to a common purpose.

Partners confirmed that through due diligence / verification Working Links checked that they met the contract requirements, for example, insurance, security checks, health and safety policy, equality and diversity and safeguarding policies, as well as an environmental strategy. Subsequently, these were tested to ensure they were fit for purpose, and any recommendations for improvement noted within the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

Communication of legislative and regulatory updates is undertaken through email, memos and weekly tele-kits. Partnership managers ensure partners have received and understood the communication and check that implementation has taken place throughout the monthly performance review. Whilst partners believe communications of this nature have improved and partnership managers follow through, consideration could be made to de-mystifying some messages to ensure a consistent understanding across supply chains. Some partner comments included:

'We get updates from Working Links on changes either by email or at the meetings'

"Updates are emailed and then picked up at weekly tele-kit calls."

3b) Quality Assurance and Compliance

Working Links has developed and implemented a range of tools to contribute to monitoring quality and compliance, which starts throughout the due diligence / verification stage of procurement and continues through the QID internal quality standard. The standard includes a range of external standards the organisation is assessed against and aims to centralise and streamline the policies and processes to monitor the quality of delivery and the customer experience.

Partners confirmed that QID is embedded within the supply chain, and whilst on occasions it is a lengthy process it provides a structured approach to monitoring and reporting quality and compliance, and the customer experience. Those partners who had experienced a 'deep dive' explained that QID was fully implemented, proved to be a useful tool and supported improvements to the service delivery. Some partner comments included:

"QID is a good tool, it brings everything we need to be doing together."

"We receive help from Working Links to ensure we are reporting accurately."

"QID covers everything, its thorough and addresses all quality and compliance requirements."

"The deep dive was so useful, and indicated some areas where we could improve our delivery."

"Two weeks were spent on-site resulting in changes to processes and the customer journey."

A Customer Engagement Survey, Customer Listening Groups and Mystery Shopper activities are used across the supply chains with the aim of gaining further intelligence regarding the quality of service delivery and to gain feedback on the customer experience. Partners confirmed that these approaches are valuable and provide feedback to address quality and compliance concerns. Working Links takes ownership for customer complaints received fully investigating and identifying the root cause and taking appropriate action. Some partner comments included:

"It includes feedback on data security and health and safety, which is always useful."

"The feedback from the surveys and mystery shopper have been pretty positive, its another way of getting to know how you're doing and that the staff are doing a good job."

Partners who have been encouraged to maintain their own supply chain and networks to contribute to the service delivery are expected to manage the quality and performance of these partners. However, Working Links have taken a proactive approach and visited the tier 2 partners implementing QID to monitor and report findings.

Performance managers work with partners to develop an action plan following the results quality and compliant activities, which clearly indicate remedial activities and a timescale for completion. This is subsequently checked through a tele-kit, the fortnightly mid-review or the monthly performance review. Partners confirmed that the process was supportive and provided them with clear actions. Some partner comments included:

"A few concerns were raised, but at least we know what we've got to do."

"The action plan is detailed and I have to report back by the deadline."

Working Links is accredited against the **matrix** Standard, which demonstrates that the information, advice and guidance (IAG) services provided are effective. Working Links apply the same principles when providing IAG to their partners to enable them to meet the contractual obligations, which was confirmed by the partners. One partner made the following comment:

"We get IAG through the monthly meetings and via email."

Whilst a number of partners are accredited with the **matrix** Standard it is not a requirement and as a result Working Links address the quality of IAG provided by partners through QID and performance reviews. Partners made reference to the QID diary, which clearly indicates the monthly themes, for example, observation of intervention (IAG) with a customer, observation of a facilitated session, documentation checks, etc. In addition, reference was made to the performance reviews regarding staff levels and the knowledge and skills of staff to ensure the quality of IAG. Once again findings and remedial actions are documented on the action plan and reviewed at a later stage. One partner made the following comment:

"Working Links also monitor our IAG through observation of sessions with clients."

Working Links has a Partner Security Policy, driven by Head of Security, which ensures a robust approach to checking and monitoring partner's security of data and assets. The policy starts at the due diligence / verification stage of procurement and continues throughout the life of the contract; it is part of QID, Mystery Shopper and informal observation of practices when Working Links visit the premises.

Partners with limited resources to manage security of data and assets have gained support from Working Links, for example, encryption facilities, simplified policies and processes, learning and development activities, etc.

The due diligence / verification activities require partners to submit their health and safety and safeguarding policies, which are subsequently checked annually as part of QID. Throughout monthly performance reviews health and safety and safeguarding are agenda items and observation of practice is made whilst on the premises. Working Links check to ensure all staff under-go the base-line security requirements, which is outlined within contracts / SLAs. In the event of changes in legislation Working Links check implementation of the requirements throughout a monthly performance review or tele-kit. Some partner comments included:

"Policies are asked for during pre-contract negotiations and then touched on during performance meetings, recently we discussed 'vulnerability level' of prison leavers."

"Health and safety and safeguarding are a standard agenda item at the monthly performance meetings."

"The Annual reviews include a full discussion on health and safety, and other policies."

Partners clearly understand their responsibilities in terms of reporting any serious or reportable incidents relating to customers.

Working Links has an environmental management system, which is proactively implemented with targets to reduce waste, carbon footprint, etc. Once again as part of the due diligence / verification stage partners are required to submit their environmental sustainability policy and targets. Whilst environmental sustainability policies are reviewed through QID the depth of reporting could be improved. In the future, consideration could be made to developing a holistic approach within the supply chains, which is monitored.

Working Links work with their partners and identify good / excellent practice as a result of performance analysis and discussions at monthly performance reviews and tele-kits, which are shared with others within the supply chain. The regional meetings provide a formal platform for sharing good / excellent practice, which works effectively in Work programme CPA08 and CPA13, similarly, the six-monthly Work Programme meetings bring all partners together and provide an opportunity to share practices. One partner made the following comment:

"Good practice is asked for directly during performance meetings and any examples are shared through partner meetings."

Partners are encouraged to work collaboratively, sharing practices across the network, which was evidenced within the Work Choice contract; two partners undertook shadowing activities and learnt from other's experiences. Similarly, within ESF Families a partner was working with Working Links staff, sharing practices with the aim of improving performance at local level.

Whilst there was evidence relating to how good / excellent practice is being identified, shared and monitored, in the future, consideration could be made to re-defining 'excellent' practice and encourage all partners to actively identify, share and monitor practices, developing a consistent approach across the supply chains.

3c) Honouring Commitments

A high proportion of partners across the contracts confirmed that expectations have been managed effectively through written and verbal communications whilst working with Working Links. Similarly, those partners confirmed that pre and post contract negotiations were clear and open, and that Working Links have subsequently honoured all agreements and commitments to date. This further demonstrates its commitment to developing good relationships and being open and honest.

Whilst there have been some contract variations a number of partners confirmed that these were openly discussed and agreed, and once again expectations were clear. Over the past two-years Working Links have adopted a transparent approach to sharing expectations of the internal delivery team and supply chain for the Work Programme through league tables, which has proven to be a positive step across CPA08 and CPA13.

Working Links has a three-stage complaints procedure, which partners are aware of, however, due to the good working relationships there have been minimal complaints thus far. Partners are confident to address concerns with their performance manager, or a member of the senior leadership team, and believe positive action will be taken as a result.

Members of the senior leadership team stated that they would fully respect the decisions made as a result of the Merlin Mediation Service, if it were to be deemed to have not acted in accordance with the principles of the Merlin Standard. A number of partners are aware of the Merlin Mediation Service (Work Programme), but believe they will never need to use it based on the behaviours displayed by Working Links to date.

3d) Performance

As previously state, Working Links promote opportunities to work collaboratively with partners and the wider networks to deliver the services, for example, quarterly regional meetings are working effectively within Work Programme CPA08 & CPA13 and a number of other contracts. In some cases tier 3 and 4 partners have been invited to regional meetings, to promote their services and encourage collaborative working within the supply chain.

A number of partners described how they work collaboratively with others, for example, delivering joint programmes, sharing office space, resources, knowledge and information with the aim of improving the service delivery and impacting on the customer experience. Some partner comments included:

"We deliver their 'Inspire' programme to PG6 clients."

"We tap into the support catalogue and use some tier 4s."

"We collaborated with others in the region – we'd heard that YMCA has offered outward bound training to young people – we told the other partners in the region about it."

The performance management of partners has evolved over the past two-years, it provides a structure to manage performance and implement a range of support activities. Partners made reference to the monthly performance reviews, which are robust and provide a clear indication of achievements, good practice, expectations and areas for improvements.

Some partners have experienced 'being on Performance Improvement Plan', which a number they believe was a very supportive and encouraging process, helping them to identify issues and areas for improvement. Some partner comments included:

"The PIP was a positive experience for us, and really improved our performance."

"They were so supportive throughout the process."

As referenced previously, Working Links take an active role in the quality of delivery and performance of partners, delivering on behalf of a tier 2, for example, undertaking a performance review with the partner and sub-contractor. Some sub-contractor comments included:

"X came up to the office and spent a few hours with us."

"The three of us meet to review performance."

Performance expectations are clearly defined at the start of, and throughout the life of the contract through a range of activities, for example, one-to-one meetings, briefings and regional meetings, as well as weekly tele-kits, for partners to raise issues and identify concerns, including wider issues, for example, commissioner / funder expectations and / or procurement. One partner made the following comment:

"Performance measures are clearly defined and monitored weekly for ESF."

Working Links have made every effort to develop and update its MI systems with the aim of providing consistent, accurate and appropriate performance information, which is shared across the supply chain. The use of ZAP and My Way Up across the Work Programme has improved over the past two-years. Performance achievements are openly interrogated within the CPAs and reviewed throughout weekly tele-kits, fortnightly mid-reviews, monthly performance reviews and quarterly regional meetings, which has developed a level of healthy competitiveness within CPA08 and CPA13. One staff comment included:

"We don't have any real issues with the CRM – they get an MI report that has YTD figures on which is generally right – they can use it to compare their performance against others in the CPA."

One partner made the following comment: *"We get monthly MI at the monthly meetings and its usually accurate."*

There was evidence that some contracts continued to experience difficulty in gaining consistent and accurate information, which is under review by Working Links. One partner made the following comment:

'We've had issues in the past as there are so many different systems – CRM, then ZAP - yesterday we got the most thorough league table – it's obvious that Working Links have listened, it gives us everything.'

Performance managers are responsible for managing performance, quality and compliance across the supply chain, and to ensure partners are delivering value for money. The QID, Customer Engagement Survey, Customer Listening Groups, Mystery Shopper and performance review tools all contribute to evaluating the level of service delivery and ensure value for money. Some partner comments included:

"Ex-prison offenders are being supported and advised by an ex offender - this adds value as the support worker can relate directly to the client group."

"VFM is considered in every decision we make – we are cautious with the money we spend."

"All our delivery staff have teaching qualifications which means clients are able to achieve qualifications, which is great on their CV and employers have less to spend on training costs."

Partners made reference to the quality, compliance and performance measures and believe that they contribute to ensuring consistent performance and service delivery, which adds value to the contract. A number of partners spoke about the achievement of performance targets and the difference / impact on the lives of the customers, which demonstrated value for money.

Working Links monitor the distance travelled by customers through the CRM systems, including the on-line tools: ZAP and My Way Up. These methods have improved over the past two-years and as a result, Working Links measure the quantitative Minimum Service Levels (MSLs) through the CRM reporting system and qualitative MLS through QID and monthly performance reviews. All partners confirmed that there are methods to track customer progression, depending upon the contract, however, some work more effectively than us.

3e) Promoting Equality and Diversity

Working Links is working towards the Investors in Diversity accreditation and as a result have engaged partners, customers and staff in surveys, which informed its strategy. The aim is to ensure all partners are aligned to its strategy, approach and values.

Partners confirmed that they are expected to demonstrate a commitment to diversity and equality, aligned to that of Working Links, which is checked at due diligence / verification and throughout the life of the contract. They also confirmed that they are expected to promote diversity and manage equality at every opportunity, and Working Links provide them with e-learning opportunities to support delivery staff in these efforts.

All partners capture diversity and equality data and submit to Working Links, where-by a level of analysis is undertaken to meet the commissioner / funder requirements. Some tier 2 partners have sophisticated systems to monitor and analyse the data, resulting in trends being identified and the development of action plans. For those partners with limited resources Working Links provide the diagnostic tool My Way Up in English and Welsh and access to the CRM to enable them to monitor diversity and equality.

Within the CPAs / contracts there was evidence of good practice emerging relating to monitoring and analysing the data, breaking down findings and outcomes to improve service delivery. The data analysis goes beyond the identification of ethnic minority and other typical measures, for example the success rate of:

- ▲ Young people having grade 1 – 3 in English and maths, compared to those with level 4 & 5 and those with no qualification entering employment,
- ▲ Customers with learning and / or physical disabilities entering employment,
- ▲ Young people who declare a criminal record to those that fail to do so entering employment.

Whilst other CPAs / contracts are sharing, monitoring and analysing diversity and equality data, consideration could be made to sharing excellent practice across the supply chains to improve performance and develop a holistic approach.

4 Review

4a) Supply chain review

Feedback continues to be gained from stakeholders; supply chain partners, customers, local authorities, community groups, other local and regional networks, ESF, SFA and DWP to mention a few. Working Links have adopted a range of feedback methods, for example, Partner Engagement Tracker, Customer Engagement Tracker, Customer Listening Groups, Mystery Shopper and a proactive approach to complaints. In addition, reference was made to external inspections and audits, for example, DWP, ESF and SFA, Investors in Diversity, **matrix**, etc. Partners also made reference to the weekly tele-kit, monthly performance reviews, quarterly regional meetings and the informal discussions that facilitate and encourage feedback. A number of partners made reference to a recent national meeting for Work Programme, which facilitated feedback regarding communications, and a regional meeting, which engaged them in a review of QID. Some partner comments included:

"They conduct / facilitate customer listening groups which are brilliant."

"The mystery shopper gives real-time feedback."

"Working Links always ask for feedback to improve practice and they do listen."

"We've recently done a Survey Monkey and now waiting for feedback."

Working Links actively include tier 2 partners in the development of the annual Self Assessment Report (SAR) through the reporting requirements of QID, which contributes to the QIP. Whilst some tier 3 partners believe they are involved in the SAR this was not consistent practice, and as a result, consideration could be made engaging tier 3 and 4 partners in the cycle. One partner comment included:

"The six monthly QID feeds into the annual SAR."

Working Links initially communicate information regarding the wider policy and strategy prior to EoI to ensure potential partners are clear about the commissioner / funder objectives and plans. Subsequently, partners are kept updated and informed of the objectives by the website, email, weekly tele-kit and other communication channels.

A number of partners; Work Programme, Work Choice and ESF Families had an understanding of the wider policy and strategy of the commissioner / funder, and how they impact on some elements for example, reducing worklessness, improving well-being, reducing poverty and homelessness, reduction in the number of people receiving benefits, etc. Some partner comments included:

"A booklet was produced to help improve people's wellbeing, and as a result it has increased customer engagement."

A few partners could provide evidence regarding the impact their organisation had on environmental sustainability, however, there was minimal understanding regarding the impact of the supply chain. Consequently, if a holistic approach was adopted and monitored as mentioned previously, the impact could be measured. One partner made the following comment:

"The webinar resulted in our MSL improving by 70% and reduced our carbon footprint."

Whilst there was recognition that specific objectives / outcomes are achieved, for example, achieve 26 weeks sustainable employment, partners made reference to some of the softer outcomes, which are not always recognised, for example, progression of customers within specific payment groups, those with mental challenges, learning / physical disabilities, etc. In addition, partners made reference to working collaboratively, engaging the services of tier 3 and 4, which contributes to building sustainable businesses and supports the local economy. Some partner comments included:

"Capacity building within the supply chain helps to secure jobs and services."

"After running an 'Inspire Programme' with the PG6 many of them gained more confidence, and as a result, volunteering and supporting each other."

One partner made reference to the introduction of the support catalogue and paying for tier 4 specialist services as and when required, which had resulted in saving of £24k.

Working Links have continued to review and develop the supply chains to ensure they are fit for purpose and contribute to the measurable outcomes, which have resulted in some changes in the make-up of supply chains, for example, ESF Families. In addition, due to the introduction of new payment groups and identification specific issues / challenges being experienced by customers the supply chains have been refreshed and additional specialist partners and spot-purchase providers have been targeted at national, regional and local levels.

Conclusion

Working Links continue to meet the requirements of the Merlin Standard, having demonstrated that their behaviours are positive and supportive and communication is open and honest.

It was evident throughout the assessment that Working Links had responded to the feedback provided throughout the initial assessment in 2012 and as a result had improved in specific areas, for example, principle 4; review. Whilst a number of areas of good practice have been demonstrated, consistent application of systems and processes across the supply chains will be required to contribute to continuous improvement of supply chain performance.

In summary, some partners made the following comments:

"I think they have got it right, just need to continue to support us to achieve the outcomes."

"One of the best Primes to work with."

"Always there and they do listen."

"Much more of a partnership approach, less us and them"