

Commercial in Confidence



matrix Accreditation Review Report

For

THE PLUSS ORGANISATION

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On behalf of EMQC LTD

Assessment Date:

24/09/2007–27/09/2007 and 1/10/2007

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1. Executive Summary

Having carried out the Accreditation Review in accordance with the guidelines provided The PLUSS Organisation has demonstrated that it continues to meet the **matrix quality standard for information advice and guidance services**. Continued Accreditation to the **matrix** Standard is granted for the internal and external services provided by The PLUSS Organisation.

This Accreditation Review Report details the services provided by The PLUSS Organisation and includes a brief description of the organisation, the Assessment methodology and an overview of how The PLUSS Organisation demonstrated that it continues to meet the **matrix** Standard.

2. Introduction

The PLUSS Organisation was assessed against the **matrix** Standard for information advice and guidance services it continues to provide to external clients in the Working Division and to internal members of staff across Divisions.

The PLUSS Organisation was formed as one non-profit distributing Company in 2005, from the previous Industrial Services Group run by three local authorities. PLUSS is owned by Devon, Plymouth and Torbay Councils, but is led by the Managing Director supported by a Senior Management Team, who reports to a Board of Directors that includes members of each Authority as well as independent Directors. PLUSS has three Divisions – Working, Equipping and Manufacturing that all work to the Company's Mission 'to be the first choice provider of employment, development and other services for people with disabilities in the South West'. PLUSS provides services for all disabilities, and those disadvantaged through mental health issues.

PLUSS is a very different Organisation to that assessed three years ago before the transition to the new Company. It now has one H R Department and one set of policies and procedures for the Organisation, rather than the three sets maintained previously. This has led to a more integrated system for information management, an area identified for improvement at the last Assessment. PLUSS has recently undergone further changes, with a new Managing Director taking up the post in August this year and some management positions yet to be filled. The Organisation has extended its boundaries and now works in Somerset as well as throughout Devon.

This Accreditation Review covers the external services provided by the Working Division of PLUSS, that supports people to become 'work ready' through stages of training, work tasters, supported placements and when and if suitable, into supported then unsupported work. Information, advice and guidance are integral to all stages of support, and PLUSS also delivers IAG to adults below Level two through a small contract with **nextstep**. Funding for PLUSS's activities in providing supported learning and employment opportunities comes through contracts with the Learning and Skills Council for Train to Gain and some funded learning, with JobCentre Plus for Workstep and Workprep, and with the NHS to get people back

into work. This Accreditation Review covers internal services provided to members of staff across all three Divisions, in both supported and unsupported employment.

The Assessor found teams of staff dedicated to helping clients with wide ranging needs, to develop their skills and access opportunities for work in a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Sites in Kingsteignton and the new one in Paignton were visited, together with the offices in Exeter. Photos of activities are displayed on walls in Reception areas at the two sites, with a range of information of interest to people pinned on notice boards in the canteen areas. Internally, the Assessor found the majority of employees felt well supported by their immediate line management and peers, but less so by senior management whom it was felt could be more visible and improve communication to employees. The new Managing Director has held 'surgeries' across sites, and there is an awareness of areas needing improvement. Some strategies are already being put in place to address these. The PLUSS Organisation practises what it preaches and employs a large percentage of people with disabilities, both in supported and unsupported work.

Comments made by service users, employers, partners and members of staff include-

'Wonderful, fantastic, saved my life'

'Can't praise them enough – brilliant support'

'Excellent, with human skills'

'Give you confidence to go out and do things'

'Very caring and professional attitude – brilliant service'

'Good teamwork among staff''

'If I didn't feel they performed well, wouldn't refer to them'

'Good relationship, any issues always picked up on'

'Wouldn't have some of our success stories without PLUSS's input'

'Would be happy to help them develop their service'

'Feel supported in my role. Any issues, always someone to help – good team'

'Love my job, it's a good place to work'

(The new MD is) 'shaking the tree and lots of bits falling out'

'In spite of things mentioned, PLUSS do a very good job'

'A lot of changes in the last few years, but going in the right direction'

The priority as stated by a member of senior management is in *'creating a vibrant Organisation where people feel valued and can progress'*. Whilst a number of areas

for development were identified during Accreditation Review, the Assessor found evidence of changes taking place towards this priority.

The PLUSS Organisation sought re-Accreditation against the **matrix** Standard to confirm that internal and external services continue to meet this national quality framework, particularly in light of the changes to the Organisation since previous Assessment, and to identify further areas for improvement.

3. Methodology

The Assessor used a range of methods to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard;

- One to one interviews with 30 members of staff including the Managing Director, and three representatives from partner organisations. Total: 33
- Telephone interviews with two employers, one partner organisation and three service users. Total: 6
- Informal group interviews with five members of staff and four service users. Total: 3 interviews
- Observation of premises across 3 sites, website and staff shared drive, notice boards, information displays and paper based resources.
- Document review including business plan, self-assessment reports, promotional materials, policies and procedures, induction and employee handbooks, appraisal system and feedback, informal feedback file, internal newsletters and bulletins, notes from a range of meetings.
- Feedback from service users, members of staff and representatives from Partner organisations.

4. Strengths

During the Accreditation Review, two strengths were identified. These are outlined below. The numbers and letters in brackets refer to the relevant elements and criteria in the **matrix** Standard.

Areas of good practice from previous Assessment on helping people with disabilities to maximise their potential, caring and supportive staff, and provision of development opportunities for staff, are incorporated within the two strengths identified during Accreditation Review. The two other areas previously identified, on recruitment and selection process and robust processes for identifying improvement were not considered strengths within the new Company as yet.

- (2d, 4d, 4e) The commitment, experience and flexibility of delivery staff enables them to provide a support service that is tailored to the needs of the individual, and keeps pace with any change in needs – for example when less

or more support is required. Coupled with this is the way that people are encouraged to identify realistic goals, and how they are helped to progress towards them.

- (6b) The high numbers of staff in the Working Division who have achieved the NVQ in Advice and Guidance at Level 4, and those who have achieved or are working towards Level 3. This demonstrates the Organisation's commitment to a quality IAG service and to providing appropriate development opportunities for members of staff, and it is hoped that ways of providing this opportunity will continue to be found, now the current funding mechanism has ceased.

5. Areas for Continuous Improvement

The Assessor identified eight areas where further development may improve the quality of service. The numbers and letters in brackets refer to the relevant elements and criteria in the **matrix** Standard.

Areas highlighted for continuous improvement at the previous Assessment have been addressed in the case of the specific weakness in supervision and support at Torbay, and in gathering informal feedback. The issue of three sets of policies and procedures and an integrated system for information management has been removed with the formation of the new Company. Of the areas below, identified during Accreditation Review, some are already known by the Company with plans in hand to address them.

- (1c, 2a, 3b, 3d) If PLUS established a clearer profile for its information, advice and guidance provision – what it covers, who for, and who the contacts are for each aspect, this would help to make it more explicit both externally for service users and internally for members of staff. It could also raise the profile of these IAG services. For example, PLUS may wish to consider introducing route maps for expanding on types of information advice and guidance available for external clients – employers, service users and carers, and similar maps identifying the types of information advice and guidance provided by PLUS to its members of staff, as these could provide clear and visible guides as to what people can expect from the service.
- (8a, 8b) A more unified self assessment process than the current one carried out in isolated teams, would provide greater clarity and a more effective measurement of how each area contributes to the Organisation's objectives.
- (8a) Consideration could be given to how information can be captured to measure the impact of information, advice and guidance on people's progression. This would enable the quality of provision to be monitored, and contribute to the self-assessment process.
- (5b, 8d) During Accreditation Review, the need for improved communication within the Organisation was identified. Whilst PLUS employ a variety of methods to communicate with staff, including an internal newsletter, e-mails and meetings, it was highlighted by members of staff particularly at lower

levels that there is a need for improved visibility of and communication from members of the Senior Management Team. Communication across Divisions could also be improved to the benefit of working practices. The new Senior Management Team have already identified that improvements are needed, and are planning action to address some of the issues raised. Clearer organisational structure charts could provide an easier reference to 'who's who'.

- (7d) Linked to the point above, a more cohesive process for analysing feedback, communicating results and promoting what action has been taken (or if not, why not) to both service users externally, and members of staff internally, would ensure people feel they are being kept informed, and that their views are valued and acted upon. Where there is a time lapse between communicating results and action taken, communication on progress towards could still be made.
- (1c, 5d) PLUSS may wish to revisit whether having dedicated advisers providing information advice and guidance through the **nextstep** contract, would provide a clearer focus for IAG delivery to the target group and help the Organisation to maximise potential from this contract.
- (4c, 6f) Whilst PLUSS has already sought feedback on the new appraisal process from members of staff who have received appraisal training, it may wish to consider more user-friendly paperwork appropriate for all levels of staff, and with easier links to strategic objectives if one system is to be used across Divisions and levels.
- (6b, 6f) A post training reflective summary completed by members of staff to record the impact of training, what they have learnt and how they will apply that learning to their work would be helpful in evaluating the value of training undertaken. This would be particularly useful for those completing the NVQ in Advice and Guidance, to identify how it has impacted on their working practice.

In addition to areas for improvement identified above, the following points were identified or commented on by individuals during Assessment. PLUSS may wish to take these into account when planning for future improvements and consistency in working practice -

There are no guidelines for recording of supervisions and how often these should be done, some guidelines would encourage consistency in approach; It would be helpful for an employer to have a point of contact at PLUSS for NVQs, so they know who to contact if there are any problems with the assessor; A less hierarchical decision making process that does not take so long is needed; Whilst confidentiality is explained to people, and all were clear who had access to their information, PLUSS does not have a Confidentiality Policy – this would be useful to ensure the understanding of members of staff; There needs to be more open discussion at the Communications Group meetings; There could be more resources shared among teams for better working practices; Clearer information on progression routes within the Company, and what skills are needed for the

roles; The training team needs more structure rather than going after too many different things.

6. Detailed Findings against the matrix Standard

The following information is a summary of the findings against each element and should be read in conjunction with the previous sections.

1.

People are made aware of the service and how to engage with it

Although PLUSS has been formed since the previous Assessment, the purpose of IAG services and potential users remain the same. Users include external clients referred to PLUSS for training and support in finding work and employers who may need information and advice on supporting people with disabilities in the workplace. Internally, members of staff in both supported and unsupported roles may seek information, advice and guidance on details of employment, training and progression opportunities available and any personal or work-related issues.

PLUS continues to use a range of methods to promote its services, these include a range of brochures and marketing leaflets covering services offered and how to access them. Since the previous Assessment an 0800 advice line has been introduced, and people who access this are signposted to the right support, whether individuals, employers or members of staff. The new website is user friendly with clear links to different areas, and to the services offered by area for employment and training. Some sections have still to be completed. The website for PLUS internally, includes recruitment and development and links to H R. PLUS has well developed networks with external agencies, and works with them to promote and provide services to meet the needs of those with disabilities or disadvantaged through mental health issues.

Job opportunities within PLUS are advertised internally, before being distributed externally through Job Centres and in some cases press advertising.

Services, including training courses are available through outreach and on other PLUS sites. All premises are accessible, and information can be provided in other formats – for example, large print and use of pictures and symbols.

2.

People's use of the service is defined and understood

Service users are told at initial and subsequent meetings about types of training and support available. Vocational profiling and matching is carried out with clients, using software packages such as Adult Directions where appropriate, to help people identify their areas of interest. Internally staff are told about what the Company provides to employees, for example Company pension scheme, pay structure, holidays and benefits. Employees have job descriptions and contracts with terms of employment.

All those interviewed had been told about what happens to their information and who has access to it. The Equal Opportunities policy covers both staff and service users,

and people are made aware of their rights. One person commented that *'any discrimination including bullying, is acted on promptly'*.

Support is available for people according to their needs and at what stage they are at. This includes training for those on Workprep programmes in CVs, timekeeping, behaviour and job goals leading to a work placement with support. On Workstep people are provided with support to try and find a job and ongoing support to sustain it. People returning to work can access training on employment skills, advice on voluntary work and support to help them explore job opportunities. Employers can access help and advice to enable them to support those with disabilities in the workplace.

Those on pre-Workstep programme are treated as employees in terms of rights, expectations and holidays. Those employed on Workstep internally have appraisals as well as assessments for JobCentre Plus. The Company is now trying to bring both these together.

Members of staff have developed links with external agencies for signposting and referral, as well as referring to other parts of PLUSS – Horticulture and Four Seasons catering. Examples given included links with Access to Work for specialist assessment and equipment. In one case this provided funding for a 'buddying system' whereby a person with epilepsy could have someone to drive them to places. Other examples included signposting to South Devon College for courses, to Adult and Community Learning and to 'Why Worry' – Devon Council's independent living training.

Internally, examples were given of members of staff being signposted to a counsellor and to the Training Team for dyslexia screening.

3.

People are provided with access to information and support in using it

PLUSS holds information on databases to record clients' details and updates of progress.

A range of information is provided by PLUSS, including information packs for employers, client brochures and leaflets on services available. Fact sheets, information from external agencies and of general interest are displayed on notice boards and in Reception areas. Members of staff provide verbal information at a pace and time to support the needs of both employers, and service users.

Admin staff update notice boards and keep leaflets up to date, while support staff update their own information. The new website is currently being completed.

PLUSS use total communication aids to support people in using information, and signers can be made available if required. Information can be accessed in braille through the RNIB. Leaflets and the website are reviewed by people with disabilities. Verbal feedback from employers and some service users confirmed that they had received sufficient information both written and verbal.

Roadshows have been organised to provide information on changes to members of staff. Divisional meetings and away days are held to keep people informed, and external agencies are invited in to share information on what they provide. A

quarterly staff newsletter is circulated both electronically and in printed format. One person commented that,

'the staff newsletter is very informative'.

4.

People are supported in exploring options and making choices

Members of staff described how the information and advice they provide is focused on an individual's needs, and if those needs are best served by another provider they will refer on.

People interviewed described their work placements, support received from Employment Consultants and Job Coaches, and how they have regular reviews of their progress. Examples were given of people moving into paid work, and no longer needing high levels of support in the workplace. Other people described the help they had received in getting back to work through exploring opportunities for volunteering, and having access to training courses to develop their skills. They commented on how support was always available, by telephone or face to face and often outside working hours.

Options are available for people to try things, in order to work out what they can do for themselves and to help them overcome any pitfalls. People are given time and any support they need to consider choices available to them.

Internally members of staff are encouraged to go through their line manager for any issues, but can contact H R for advice if needed – for example on entitlements. Since the previous Assessment a Training Unit has been set up to support and deliver staff training, and information and advice is provided by this team to other members of staff on what is available. Members of staff gave examples of options in terms of flexible working hours, support for personal issues and for phased return to work after illness. One commented,

'I am now part-time and the option for days and hours worked was my choice'.

5.

Service delivery is planned and maintained

PLUSS have 5 strategic aims in their current 3 year business plan, these include:

- to be recognised at a national level as a leading provider of disability employment support services
- to continue to offer supported employment choices by maintaining direct employment opportunities within the Company
- to develop an Organisational culture that motivates staff to deliver quality services

Information, advice and guidance is implicit in all these objectives. Each aim has a series of targets, and there is a management action plan for delivery against these aims.

Since the previous Assessment and the formation of PLUSS as a Company, there is a clear management structure with tiers of management for each Division, led by the Managing Director supported by a Senior Management Team. A mechanism is in place for communication via a range of meetings at all levels, including a quarterly Communications Meeting for managers and Employee meetings that are attended by representatives from Senior Management Team, H R, Trade Union and staff from each of the three Divisions, down to meetings of different teams. Managers are allocated budgets, and asked for submissions for areas of growth.

Members of staff can put forward their views at team meetings, at one to one meetings with their Line Manager, or at their appraisal. Whilst members of staff confirmed they are able to make comments and suggestions and some confirmed that these were taken into account, others felt that the hierarchical structure leads to delays in decision making.

Each project has its own budget, and spending outside that budget has to be sanctioned by senior management. The Company has well trained and qualified staff with resources needed to carry out their roles.

There is now one clear set of policies and procedures in line with legislation, including Health and Safety, Equality and Diversity and Grievance and Discipline. Whilst the Company complies with data protection , there is no confidentiality policy. Service delivery links to the Principles for Coherent IAG Delivery, with professional and knowledgeable staff providing an impartial, friendly and enabling service, taking account of clients needs.

PLUS has developed links with other providers and external agencies to enable service users to access a range of services from within and outside the Company. These include A4E and Rethink, The Working Division has contracts with **nextstep**, Learning and Skills Council, JobCentre Plus and Social Services for external provision, and some funding through LSC has enabled staff development. Members of staff attend external meetings, including the Learning Disability Forum and **nextstep** Provider meetings.

6.

Staff competence and support they are given are sufficient to deliver the service

Newer members of staff described their induction to the Company. An induction pack is given to all new staff, and a checklist is worked through. Advice and Guidance is one aspect of the induction checklist. One person described how they work shadowed other consultants, and received training on Health and Safety, Equal Opportunities through the 'Fair's Fair' course, and SMART targets. Another described how they were given a tour of the building, learned who to go to for support and had to complete a checklist to ensure everything had been covered. All policies and procedures are included in the induction file and available on the shared drive.

All staff receive job specific and mandatory training. Updates in mandatory training are dependent on the job – for example those in high risk areas receive more frequent updates.

Members of staff provided examples of the support they have received for their own development in their job role. These included L4 subject specialist in numeracy, PGCE, NVQ L4 management, NVQ L4 and L3 in Advice and Guidance, **nextstep** Certificate in Professional Practice.

People were clear about the boundaries of their role, and when they seek support or refer on to others. The IT department provide support for software, and training can be cascaded from trained members of staff.

Supervision and support are provided through line management, and all staff have access to regular one to ones. Examples were given of support received by those off sick, and flexible arrangements to ease their return to work.

The new appraisal system is in operation, which provides for both self assessment and two way discussion. Identification of development needs forms part of this process.

Currently, any training other than job specific and mandatory training is on hold due to funding constraints.

7.

Feedback on the quality of the service is obtained

PLUSS has a compliments, comments and complaints leaflet that sets out the procedure to follow. Those interviewed confirmed they would be happy to voice their opinions if unhappy about any aspect of the service, and most had been told about the complaints procedure. Internal complaints procedure goes through the H R department, and a grievance and discipline policy is in place.

A variety of mechanisms are used to gather feedback from service users. These include regular progress review meetings that include feedback for employers and clients, user group meetings, questionnaires and pictorial feedback. A file of informal feedback is kept - thank you cards, letters and e-mails from service users, carers, employers and external agencies. Internally, a staff survey has recently taken place to find out what members of staff would like to see improved, and an evaluation of feedback from the recent appraisal training will inform changes to the system next year.

Feedback from partner agencies is obtained at both informal and formal meetings, and those interviewed noted the responsiveness of PLUSS staff to any suggestions made. Comments included -

'We work together for the needs of the client, and have achieved a focused partnership'.

'I have no hesitation in recommending PLUSS to employers'.

'We have a good to and fro relationship'.

The Working Division has an annual away day to share information with members of staff and to get their views, people also give feedback at team meetings and at one

to ones with line managers. Staff gave examples of changes made as a result of feedback. One person commented –

'I have been listened to in my wishes to change roles – this is now happening'.

Whilst there is evidence of how comments are evaluated and acted upon, this action is not always communicated back to people and a more cohesive system for 'closing the loop' would be beneficial for both external and internal comments received.

8.

Continuous quality improvement is ensured through monitoring, evaluation and action

A performance management framework for reporting against key performance indicators on a quarterly basis is being introduced, with performance measured on a traffic light system to highlight outperforming target, underperforming by under five per cent, and failing target by more than five per cent. The self assessment process is used to monitor performance against contracts and to draw up action plans for improvement. This is currently done in isolation, but will benefit from becoming a more unified process.

The Managing Director has recently held a series of 'surgeries' to gain feedback from members of staff, and action to be taken to address the findings is currently being worked on. Feedback from service users and members of staff has led to changes in paperwork, changes in training and courses offered, and how information is provided.

The Company has gone through a series of changes since its formation, and further changes are now beginning to be implemented to ensure continuous improvement. For example, a new marketing strategy has been identified, further work on communication and on tightening up policies and procedures is planned, and work is currently being undertaken on drawing up a training matrix for the Company from analysis of job roles and required skills.