



Innovative practice case studies

Supply chain partner:
Northern Rights

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Northern Rights

This case study sets out an example of utilising a small, local provider with a history of delivering employability services. For this research, we interviewed two Northern Rights representatives and one individual from Reed.

The key positives of utilising a small, well-established local provider include:

- A strong history in the area and experienced staff means Northern Rights understand the landscape in South Shields and have good working relationships in place.
- As a smaller organisation, they believe they are well-placed to make changes over time, and this leads to innovation.
- Innovation from supply chain partners can be shared across the contract more widely.

Introduction and overview

Northern Rights are a social enterprise operating in the North East of England with particular strongholds in South Tyneside (which includes South Shields), Sunderland, and Peterlee. Within Restart, they operate an office in South Shields, on behalf of Reed, and this accounts for 100% of referrals there.

Northern Rights have a track record of delivering employability provision in South Shields, including the Work and Health Programme Pioneer, which is also sub-contracted by Reed and various European Social Fund (ESF)-funded programmes.

Northern Rights had regular partnership meetings with every potential prime to secure a role on Restart. Reed approached Northern Rights with a formal Expression of Interest, and information provided by Northern Rights ultimately went into Reed's submission to DWP. They also bid for roles in Sunderland and Peterlee, but Reed chose delivers directly in those areas.

Strengths of the supply chain model

Northern Rights believe the major benefit of their involvement in Restart is that they understand the landscape and have existing positive working relationships with relevant partners including Jobcentre Plus, and local employers across the area, not just in South Tyneside. Reed similarly highlight their footprint in South Tyneside and their relationships as a major strength. Northern Rights transferred members of staff from other contracts onto Restart, particularly in leadership roles, which helped maintain a sound understanding of the local area. Northern Rights therefore understand the labour market and can recommend appropriate vacancies and identify where a participant's career goals or experience may not be achievable locally. Their employer vacancies are shared across all Northern Rights

contracts, allowing access to a greater pool of vacancies, and incentivising employers to engage with them as it brings access to a wider pool of potential candidates.

An awareness of the challenges in South Shields allows them to modify their offer. In particular, generational unemployment is a major issue. Northern Rights therefore put a lot of effort into changing their mindset and motivating participants in need of that support to ensure they become ready to sustain work, including through training and workshops.

Having worked in the region for many years, many participants are aware of Northern Rights, which increases their motivation to attend. Northern Rights also support individuals on an ongoing basis, even once they have formally left a programme.

Northern Rights and Reed are keen on engaging participant voice and getting ongoing feedback about their experience of their appointments and the support. After an appointment, participants will receive a text or email inviting feedback through the platform, and Reed tell their supply chain that any scores of two or below need to be followed up with a call to the participant to understand why they are dissatisfied and what Northern Rights should do to improve that score. However, Northern Rights go beyond this and follow the same process for scores of three or below.

Northern Rights attribute their success and strong league table performance to their 'participant-led' approach, taking into account the full wraparound support bespoke for that individual rather than focusing solely on job applications.

"We look at everything, it's not just about employment, it's about the whole person. We look at the whole person holistically and what support we can bring in for that person, and thinking about how they are going to sustain that job."

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Related to that, Northern Rights use the 'WETCHA' model in assessing participants – considering their Work, Education, Training, Circumstances, Health, Aspiration. From that, they devise a peers progression plan, setting out the steps they are going to do with the person and move them into work gradually.

Additionally, they report a keen willingness to change processes and the support offer if something is not working, and believe they are better-placed to do so as a smaller organisation because they do not have different layers of management who may need to sign off on any changes.

Northern Rights hold regular meetings between contacts on different programmes, including Work and Health Programme Pioneer as well as Restart, to facilitate knowledge sharing across the organisation. These are held not just at a senior, managerial level; separate meetings bring together Employment Advisors from different contracts too.

Northern Rights also differ from many other providers in setting targets on a team rather than an individual basis. They believe that targeting individual Employment Advisors a certain number of job outcomes per month is too simplistic because some individuals will have more difficult caseloads than others. They believe this ensures the team works together collaboratively because it is a team target, and a team event when this target for the month is reached. This approach is based on the senior staff's experience delivering employability programmes, having found that sometimes staff who have achieved their monthly targets can then under-perform for the remainder of the month. However, this is combined with individual accountability. Northern Rights conduct a monthly caseload review and ask Employment Advisors to name their five people who are most likely to go into work that month.

Reed also highlight that having an element of sub-contracted provision is helpful in keeping their direct delivery 'on its toes' and making sure they are innovating and taking on best practice from elsewhere as appropriate, with supply chain partners innovating as in the example above.

The supply chain provide you with challenge, which is good. If you're sitting with all of the delivery, you challenge yourself in what you need to do differently. But the supply chain give a different perspective... they might have different ideas that we haven't thought of and vice versa. So it's a good challenge to see how other organisations operate and how you can do things differently. You cross-pollenate the good practice between internal and external.

Reed

Relationship between prime and supply chain

Northern Rights are very positive about the relationship with Reed, and find that there is great alignment when they discuss challenges and progress. While day-to-day contact is generally a 1:1 relationship, different individuals within Northern Rights are also involved in communication with Reed as appropriate. More generally, Northern Rights highlighted clarity of communication as central.

"As a partnership, we work really, really well together... she's on my wavelength, I know what she's going to ask me before she asks me, so I have the information ready... I think she sings our praises when she goes to the governance board, she does back us up all the way. I'm glad I've got someone like [her] where I know where I stand, I know what's expected."

Northern Rights

Reed balance this support giving appropriate challenge when needed, and note that Northern Rights respond positively to that approach when necessary.

Northern Rights describe their approach as being about delivering what is required by Reed, but also building on this where appropriate; Reed give them the flexibility to do this as they are going beyond contractual requirements.

“We do [get autonomy] because we’re not deviating away from what Reed are asking us to do, we give Reed more for their money really. I’m giving Reed more than what is expected of us, because we do put that extra resource, extra staff.”

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Reed brings together its supply chain partners in the North East through a supply chain forum every three months where senior representatives will present on different topics and discuss common challenges, and Reed staff working on their direct delivery will also participate in these.

Reed provides online training resources to their supply chain partners, with YouTube videos covering different aspects of the contracts and the procedures; Northern Rights believe these are effective. They supplement this with their own induction training to talk through organisational specific aspects and shadowing established Employment Advisors. Northern Rights-developed materials need to be signed off by Reed’s Learning and Development team.

Northern Rights also highlight that the established Reed software systems (such as Orion) has been positive, and that a larger organisation which has delivered on a large-scale basis previously is well-placed to develop this. Reed give supply chain partners access to their ‘Power BI’ system which helps them understand their data on the Restart contract. They can use this to compare their performance relative to their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

Reed have a formal quality improvement platform called MESMA, which Northern Rights can use to record how they will improve quality – this ensures it is centralised and a formal process rather than simply relying on conversations between the supply chain and their Reed point of contact. This same system also allows them to look at what Reed’s direct delivery is doing to address particular challenges. Reed also make suggestions for Northern Rights on things they might want to consider outside this system.

Reed highlight that having supply chain leads report directly into the Restart Senior Leadership Team at Reed is effective and ensures learning from supply chain partners influences direct delivery. They believe managing a supply chain is about influencing, rather than dictating. They may give ideas to supply chain about particular areas that could be improved, but the specifics of how this might be achieved would be led by supply chain partners.

We might give [supply chain] broad headings, for example it could be job brokerage, it could be quality of action plans, attendance to training courses.

That might be the broad action that we set. The supply chain come up with their actions and what they need to do under those umbrella terms.

Reed

Challenges and mitigation

While few challenges have come up related to being a supply chain partner, Northern Rights would prefer to take responsibility for the warm handover process rather than Reed leading it.

They meet the Job Centre, then they meet Reed, then we're ringing them, and it's like a triangle effect. So we would rather we be the first point of contact, so you know you're coming to Restart, you'll be speaking to Northern Rights, we're the people that take care of that from day one. That would have been a better process, for us.

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