

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 2 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in
Extern NI

Externworks

Report of a Call 2 Visit in March 2022



Providing Inspection services for:
Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments



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Context

Extern NI is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Externworks European Social Fund (ESF) project. This project is part-funded through the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2014 – 2020 and DfE. The strategic aim of the Programme is to: combat poverty and enhance social inclusion by reducing economic inactivity; and to increase the skills base of those currently in work and future potential participants in the workforce. It is aligned to the European Union 2020 Strategy for Jobs and Growth.

In March 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 2 visit to Extern NI on behalf of DfE to evaluate the capacity of the project promoter to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of the provision. The Call 2 visit was informed by the quality improvement plan which has been scrutinised by ETI.

Views of participants

At the time of the Call 2 visit, 79 participants¹ were registered on the project.

ETI met and spoke with a sample of participants in a focus group, during their learning and development sessions, and also through one-to-one telephone conversations. Ten percent of the participants completed the online questionnaire.

All of the participants found that their courses are well managed and that they have made good progress. Those spoken with stated that the programme provides them with structure and an important routine in their lives; they particularly value the small groups and the supportive learning environment. They welcomed the opportunity to complete qualifications to support them in building their confidence and in progressing into the workplace. They all reported that attendance at the project has a positive impact on their mental health and overall wellbeing, and for many it provides an important social outlet and the opportunity to develop and sustain friendships.

Focus of the Call 2 Visit

The Call 2 visit focused on evaluating the extent to which the project promoter is able to demonstrate its capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the Externworks ESF project.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

Two of the key areas which the organisation has prioritised for improvement through its self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are to:

- increase the number of participants attaining an accredited qualification; and
- improve the planning and review process to ensure that all progression needs are appropriately met.

¹ All performance data in this report was provided by the ESF project promoter.

Key Findings

The Call 2 visit identified the following key findings.

- The curriculum provided for the participants is good; there is a progressive range of pathways, in both personal development and vocational skills. A wraparound training programme provides life skills, social skills and vocational training for adults with significant challenges to progression. The flexible delivery model is tailored to meet the individual needs of the participants, from referral stage through to achievement of qualifications and progression on to work or further education or training, where appropriate. The vocational training and accredited qualifications are appropriately aligned with local labour market needs, matched well to the participant progression opportunities; these include warehousing, waste management, construction skills registration course, forklift training, electrical installation, light engineering, catering and plumbing. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses have been made available for refugees through an outreach centre in Belfast city centre.
- The project provides bespoke services for participants who in addition to being unemployed or economically inactive often have additional complex and multiple barriers such as, offending behaviours, medium to high risk offences, homelessness, addictions, mental health issues, and learning disabilities, which severely impact their opportunities to progress to employment, education or further training. As a consequence of the risk classification of all of the participants, they are prevented from enrolling or progressing to programmes with almost all other training providers, where they would be integrated into mainstream provision.
- The participants are referred to Externworks by a range of agencies which include: Health and Social Care Trusts; the Probation Board for Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS); and Hostels for the Homeless. It is positive that new service users from a hospital unit have also had the opportunity to avail of the project and both staff and participants have found it to be beneficial. Extern staff, at all levels, have established effective partnerships with a range of stakeholders, including the NIPS.
- The learning, teaching and mentoring sessions observed were effective in supporting positive learning and progression. The tutors have developed productive working relationships with the participants who engage well in their learning and are developing appropriate employability and vocational skills. Training has been delivered onsite at a specialist facility at Mallusk, as well as in secure hospital and prison units and at the Belfast city centre outreach centre. During periods of lockdown the project staff delivered wellbeing courses to women prisoners in, Ash House Women's Prison Hydebank Wood.

- The staff display good levels of skill, commitment and enthusiasm, providing effective levels of support to meet the complex needs of participants and to promote progression. There is also an appropriate focus on participants' personal and social development. As a result their aspirations are raised and they make good progress in their learning and development.
- The initial assessment is used well to inform tailoring of the programme to each participant's individual needs and interests. Management review the progress of each participant with the relevant staff every eight weeks and any issues are identified and addressed at an early stage. However the use of more detailed individual action plans with appropriate short-term targets would support better the planning and review processes for individual participants, and demonstrate more clearly the overall impact of the work of project staff. While a new soft skills measurement tool has been introduced for participants who attend at Mallusk, this should be applied more consistently across all of the provision.
- Challenges particular to this project during the pandemic include; the closure of secure units which inhibited new recruitment onto the project; reduced capacity during onsite delivery which was further exacerbated by restrictions on numbers who could travel on the Extern minibuses. For some medium and high risk participants, travel on public transport and access to the internet is prohibited which also reduced the opportunity to engage participants. In addition, employment opportunities are restricted for many of the participants because of their conviction history.
- Given these barriers and challenges, the overall outcomes have been positive for recruitment and movement into employment and further education or training. Just over half of the participants remained on their programme; the early leaver figures include those who left the programme early due to their bail conditions being revoked.
- Through their quality improvement planning process the project promoter has been focusing on increasing the number of participants attaining accredited qualifications. There has been variation in the number of qualifications achieved due to the circumstances arising from the pandemic, including recruitment to the programme, lack of access to IT equipment and prohibited use of the internet for some of the participants. Nevertheless attainment has been on a positive trajectory over the life of the project and in year 4, a majority of participants achieved an accredited qualification.
- The management and staff have continued to deliver provision and provide a responsive, effective service in a most challenging operating environment. The project promoter has maintained delivery despite staffing being impacted at both management and operational level.

- Since the inspection of February 2017², there has been a focus on addressing the areas for improvement outlined at that time. There is more effective monitoring and analysis of performance data through the recently introduced cross-organisational management information system and the ongoing development of that system. The quality improvement planning processes have been developed and refined year on year and the project promoter has been responsive to all feedback received.

Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 2 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the Externworks ESF project reflect broadly current legislation and practice.

The project promoter, however, needs to:

- demonstrate more clearly the reporting arrangements bespoke to the project; and
- enhance the written information received by participants during induction about the provision for safeguarding, care and welfare.

Overall outcome

At the time of the Call 2 visit, and in the areas evaluated, Extern NI demonstrates capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the Externworks ESF project.

² [European Social Fund provision in EXTERN - Externworks project \(etini.gov.uk\)](http://etini.gov.uk)

APPENDIX

A. Call 2 Performance Data

European Social Fund – Externworks	Over the four-year period ³
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	1264 (71%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	137 (55%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	73 (43%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	645 (51%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

The arrangements for this face-to-face visit included: the observation of three sessions of practice (face-to-face); discussions with a sample of participants (13) during their learning and development sessions, in focus group meetings and through one-to-one telephone conversations; discussions with key stakeholders (employers and collaborative partners); and staff (to include quality improvement and safeguarding arrangements); and the opportunity for all participants to complete a confidential questionnaire. Inspectors also scrutinised relevant data and documentation provided by the ESF project promoter.

ETI's Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework is available on the [ETI website](#).

C. Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

³ From April 2018 to December 2021.

Overall outcome

ETI use one of the following outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the project promoter:

At the time of the Call 2 visit, and in the areas evaluated, xxxx demonstrates a high level of capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of the provision for xx ESF project.

At the time of the Call 2 visit, and in the areas evaluated, xxxx demonstrates capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for xx ESF project.

At the time of the Call 2 visit, and in the areas evaluated, xxxx has not demonstrated sufficient capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of the provision for xx ESF project. ETI will continue to monitor how the project promoter brings about improvement and the Department may consider further action.

Safeguarding outcome

ETI use one of the following outcomes when evaluating the project promoter's arrangements for safeguarding the participants:

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 2 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the for xx ESF project reflect current legislation and practice.

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 2 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the for xx ESF project reflect broadly current legislation and practice.

The project promoter, however, needs to:

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 2 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the for xx ESF project are unsatisfactory. <DN insert detail>.

ETI will return to the provider within six working weeks to monitor progress in addressing the unsatisfactory arrangements for safeguarding.

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