

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 2 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in
Extern Group

Moving Forward, Moving On

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 Group is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Moving Forward, Moving On European Social Fund (ESF) project. It is primarily a mentoring support project targeted specifically at participants who have experienced previous exclusion from mainstream education and/or those who have a history of offending behaviour. 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 Group 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, 178 participants¹ were registered on the project.

Ten percent of the participants completed the online questionnaire. All of the respondents indicated that their programme is well managed, that the induction process prepares them well for the face-to-face programme, and that the face-to-face sessions are well delivered. They know who to go to if they have a problem or concern and feel well supported. Almost all indicated that they find the programme interesting and challenging and are kept informed about how they are progressing on the programme. They reported that they are making good progress.

ETI also spoke to a sample of participants during their mentoring or support clinic sessions. They reported that they are able to discuss their current situations and experiences with their mentor or support worker. They are signposted to appropriate sources of support, for example statutory agencies or other external support organisations, if required.

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 Moving Forward, Moving On ESF project.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

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

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

- closely monitor participant progression into further education and training, and take active measures to ensure the targets and outcomes set are achieved; and
- prioritise the physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing of participants.

Key Findings

The Call 2 visit identified the following key findings.

- The curriculum provided for the participants is good. A model of practice has been developed, informed by research through The Queen's University of Belfast and the project staff, which is based on the three core elements of emotional support, informed advice and guidance, and "hand-holding". The participants can access a suite of courses that focus on addressing their personal and social development and supporting their transition into education and training. These include: college orientation; assertiveness training; improving confidence and self-esteem; exploring feelings and emotions; stress management; understanding individual rights and responsibilities; and employability training. They are also signposted to learning programmes with other education and training providers to best support their career progression needs, such as the DfE Skills for Life and Work programme.
- There is clear evidence of the project working well with participants, many of whom have a multiplicity of complex needs, to address and overcome their barriers to learning and development. A number of key challenges for the participants have been identified as a result of the pandemic including: financial difficulties; increased anxiety; limited access to specialist services; and, digital poverty. The delivery of the provision has been adapted accordingly. Over the four-year period, to date, all of the outcomes on the project are positive; the overall target for recruitment has been exceeded, and the target for the progression of participants into employment has been met. The progression of participants into education and training is just slightly below the target set. Almost all of the participants have been successfully retained on the project. It is of note that a significant number of the participants recruited each year progress from a number of Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) providers.
- During the lockdowns, engagement with the participants moved mainly to online provision with the key aim of keeping them engaged through one-to-one mentoring and support. Those participants who were unable to access this provision were provided with "garden gate" visits to encourage participation and re-engagement. A stronger focus was placed on promoting self-care with

wellbeing packs delivered to participants and their families and the promotion of activities such as Take 5 for both participants and the staff. The wider Extern organisation COVID hardship fund was also used to provide participants with access to mobile phones, data top ups and the project's online platform.

- The participants are assigned a mentor on entry to the project who provides them with regular one-to-one personal support and puts an agreed programme of interventions in place for them. The sessions observed were mostly effective. All of the mentors have formed supportive working relationships with the participants. They provide the participants with informed advice and guidance on the range of support and welfare services available to them.
- An appropriate process is in place, using an initial assessment, to identify and agree an action plan which reflects the level of need to support the development of the participants' soft skills, such as their social, emotional and communication skills. The participants initially identify a baseline position in key areas of their lives: choices and behaviour; making a difference; hopes and dreams; wellbeing; education and work; and communications. In the wake of the pandemic, the initial assessment now includes a digital poverty assessment as the project promoter has identified this as an additional barrier to progression for many of the participants. Effective processes have been developed to engage with training providers to ensure participants have access to adequate equipment and resources.
- The initial assessment is reviewed at regular intervals during the participant's time on the project. There is limited evaluation of the effectiveness of the process. Going forward a more effective analysis of the outcomes of the initial assessment process should be carried out, triangulated with the information contained within the participants' mentoring and support records, to demonstrate more clearly how the project is impacting on improving their life chances.
- The leadership and management are committed to the work of the project. Good working relationships exist among the project team who demonstrate a clear commitment to supporting the participants to progress. They are provided with appropriate opportunities to undertake ongoing professional learning and have continued to deliver provision in a most challenging operating environment.
- Since the inspection of February 2017², the project promoter has worked appropriately to address and progress the areas for development identified. Through its management information system, introduced in January 2022, the project captures and collates information from delivery of its provision, such as the mentoring and conscience work sessions. This information can usefully inform the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the work for participants through the project's self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes.

² [European Social Fund provision in Extern Group Northern Ireland - Moving Forward, Moving On Project \(etini.gov.uk\)](#)

- Effective links and partnerships have been established with a range of key stakeholders, including statutory agencies, support agencies, specialist services, and education and training providers. The stakeholders interviewed were positive about their experiences working with the project and the support they provide for the participants.

Safeguarding

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

The project promoter, however, needs to:

- continue reviewing associated policies at project level, including setting out fully the reporting procedures for all staff members and participants in relation to its approach to the safeguarding of young people and adults at risk; and
- develop the social media/information and communication technology policy to reflect the various mediums of engagement used by staff and participants at project level.

Overall outcome

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

APPENDIX

A. Call 2 Performance Data

European Social Fund – Moving Forward, Moving On	Over the four-year period ³
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	494 (103%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	56 (100%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	313 (92%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	448 (91%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

The arrangements for this face-to-face visit included: observation of four sessions of practice; speaking with a sample of participants (seven) during mentoring and support clinics; discussions with key stakeholders (education and training providers) and with key staff (including the 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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