

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 2 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in
Mencap

EmployAbility2 Project

Report of a Call 2 Visit in February 2022



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



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Context

Mencap is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the EmployAbility2 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 February 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 2 visit to Mencap 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, 246 participants¹ were registered on the project.

ETI met and spoke with a sample of participants during their learning and development sessions, in focus groups and in their workplace. Thirteen percent of the participants also completed the online questionnaire, with most providing additional written comments.

Almost all of the participants found their programme both interesting and challenging and those who ETI spoke with reported positively about their work experience and/or voluntary or paid employment. They enjoy taking on responsibilities associated with their work, learning from other employees and are proud of the work-related skills they are developing, such as improved confidence in communication skills and planning travel routes to get to work. Participants know who they can talk to if they have any concerns.

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 EmployAbility2 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 continue to:

- closely monitor and review trainee progression in all aspects of their learning and development; and
- promote the benefits of the EmployAbility2 project to new participants, employers, and the wider community.

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 offer is very good. It is well balanced, very appropriate and suitably tailored to the participants' specific needs; it supports them effectively to develop relevant employability skills which enables progression to and productive participation in the workplace. Staff use their networking expertise and knowledge of local communities very well to maximise potential learning and life opportunities for the participants. The participants receive a comprehensive programme which prepares them well and includes: a thorough induction; completion of a detailed vocational profile clearly identifying and baselining their learning needs, interests and aspirations for different types of work; a trainee agreement; participation in job clubs; establishing productive links with employers; drawing up of risk assessments; health and safety training and signposting to appropriate support services. The majority of those on the programme are currently in work-experience, voluntary employment or paid employment.
- Regular check-ins and progress reviews capture well the progress of the participants; these ensure that the work placement matches well the interests, ability and aspirations of the participants. The process also informs their assigned employment officers of any learning or future training needs identified by the employer and the participant. As a consequence they receive support in aspects of their learning to further their progression, for example, developing their ICT and money management skills or completing the theory driving test. Developing good relationships with employers and fellow employees is prioritised for participants as part of this process. Weekly job coaching is appropriately reduced as the placement progresses. Participants can confidently articulate any reasonable adjustments they need to do their job and are knowledgeable about employment rights.
- The well-being and safety of participants is appropriately acknowledged as a major factor in the overall success of work placements. It is important that there is continued monitoring of overall work experiences, to include health and safety training in the workplace while the participant remains on the programme.
- The sessions observed were effective; staff provided high levels of support and fostered a positive, inclusive learning environment; this resulted in the participants engaging well in their learning and developing their confidence to identify employability and personal skills that they would like to develop further. Almost all of the participants observed are developing a range of appropriate self-management skills for the work-place which enables them to cope well with the challenges of, for example, customer relations and prioritising personal goal setting.

- All of the outcomes on the project are positive; in spite of the impact of the pandemic on a vulnerable group of participants with complex needs, the enrolment target has almost been achieved. Almost all of the participants have been successfully retained on the project. Progression to further education and training has exceeded overall targets, while progression into employment is high.
- Participants have regular opportunities to have their views heard through the annual focus groups and assigned, highly accessible employment officer contact. Disability equality officers with learning disabilities appropriately and empathetically lead the focus groups, enabling honest, anonymised reflection on a wide variety of areas related to their employability programmes. Participants engage productively in these sessions and very much appreciate that their voice is listened to and where possible, acted upon.
- Participants are encouraged to contribute to their local community over and beyond their work placement and are very proud of their contribution, for example, through their involvement in the 'Good Morning' service which supports vulnerable people in the community, and volunteering at a local youth club. The staff provide a high-level of individualised one-to-one support to participants. A particular strength of the provision is the strength of the working relationships developed between staff and participants, which enables both to address barriers to progress in a highly supportive and sensitive way.
- During the lockdowns it is positive that there was regular contact with participants using a range of nurturing approaches, with an emphasis on social and emotional health and well-being. Almost all of the participants reported they were very happy with this support which included telephone calls, zoom calls, "walk and talk" sessions and "home learning" modules. Online resources were developed by staff teams across the organisation to deliver relevant learning programmes to participants to support their independence and future progression. Parents and carers spoken to during the visit praised highly the contact maintained by the staff during the lockdowns, reporting that it had been an invaluable lifeline during a stressful and difficult period.
- Strategic management is very effective; there are clear systems for regular communication and well-established and effective roles and responsibilities within the organisation. The highly collegial approach to continuous improvement is notable; the approach is grounded in aspirational goals for the development of employability skills, along with prioritising the holistic needs of all participants. A well-embedded culture of distributed leadership impacts positively on the quality of the EmployAbility2 programme.

- Since the last inspection in February 2018², appropriate actions has been taken to address areas for development identified including: improved strategic links with the colleges; monitoring more closely the uptake of the learning disability awareness training; and improved use of data and evaluative language in the quality improvement planning process. There remains a need to ensure the quality improvement plan contains more specific, measurable targets and actions.
- There is an appropriate focus on the recruitment of new participants to the project; they continue to develop effective links and partnerships with the statutory referral agencies and employers. Staff raise the profile of the EmployAbility2 project regularly through attendance at a wide range of events to inform relevant groups and stakeholders about its benefits. Additionally there has been an increased presence on social media platforms and the development of a regular, visually attractive, high-quality “Newsletter” which features tips on health and well-being, as well as successes from both employers’ and participants’ perspectives.
- A comprehensive and appropriately specialist learning disability awareness training programme is offered on a regular basis to all employers. The programme, which is delivered by the disability equality officers, is evaluated and reviewed regularly by them, based on feedback from participants and on self-evaluation of the effectiveness of their delivery. As a result of the pandemic the programme has been successfully adapted to online delivery and there has been a significant increase in employer uptake.

Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 2 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the EmployAbility2 ESF project reflect broadly current legislation and practice.

The project promoter, however, needs to:

- enhance the reporting arrangements to ensure all contact details are available; and
- provide all parents and carers with a summary of the safeguarding arrangements.

Overall outcome

At the time of the Call 2 visit, and in the areas evaluated, Mencap demonstrates a high level of capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the EmployAbility2 ESF project.

² [European Social Fund provision in Mencap - EmployAbility \(etini.gov.uk\)](https://www.etini.gov.uk)

APPENDIX

A. Call 2 Performance Data

European Social Fund – EmployAbility2	Over the four-year period ³
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	570 (81%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	69 (95%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	148 (140%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	537 (94%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

The arrangements for this face-to-face visit included: observations of four learning and development sessions of practice (face-to-face and online); speaking with a sample of participants (39) in a number of focus group meetings and one-to-one in the workplace; meetings with parents and carers; discussions with key stakeholders (employers and statutory agencies) 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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