

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 2 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in NIACRO

Working Well

Report of a Call 2 Visit from January 2022



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



Contents

Context	2
Views of participants	2
Focus of the Call 2 Visit.....	2
Key Findings	3
Safeguarding.....	5
Overall outcome.....	5
APPENDIX	6
A. Call 2 Performance Data	6
B. Methodology and evidence base	6
C. Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate.....	6

Context

NIACRO is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Working Well 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 January 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 2 visit to NIACRO 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, 298 participants¹ were registered on the project.

ETI met and spoke with a small sample of participants during their learning and development sessions and in a focus group. Fifteen percent of the participants also completed the online questionnaire, with nearly three-fifths of the respondents providing additional written comments.

All of the participants responded very positively about the support they receive on the project and feel that their engagement with staff and the project provision has improved their confidence and self-esteem by helping to remove barriers and encouraging them to progress to further training, education or employment.

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 Working Well 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:

- improve and extend the curriculum for offenders on short-term sentences through the delivery of blended/online education and training provision; and
- review the provision to meet better the needs of female participants.

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.

- There is a very good curriculum offer provided for all participants, this includes innovative use of technology to support remote delivery, mentoring, coaching and assessment to meet their needs. Currently the project staff are returning to delivering and supporting a range of activities both face-to-face and online, providing choice to participants as to their preferred delivery method, in order to ensure that they engage effectively, achieve and progress. All of the one-to-one sessions observed were planned well and underpinned by effective use of assessment information, personal action plans and review processes. In all of the sessions, staff were highly supportive, motivational and sensitive to the participants' needs, and had an appropriate focus on progressing the participants into further training, education or employment.
- New online delivery strategies have been developed and are used well to provide a wide range of short level 1 employability and vocational training programmes, both accredited and non-accredited, to meet the individual needs, interests and aspirations of the participants. The project uses contemporary participant survey data to quantify and evidence the positive impact of the various components of the level 1 employability programme on the overall effectiveness of the programme.
- All of the outcomes on the project are very positive and have exceeded the cumulative targets set, including: overall enrolments, progression to further education or training, and into employment. Retention on the programme is good. The early leaver figures include participants who leave the programme early to progress to employment or further education and training outcome.
- A range of assessment tools are used well to identify the needs of participants which are recorded in appropriate individualised action plans. However, information on essential skills achievements and requirements are not captured consistently for all participants as part of the initial assessment process. Where essential skills needs are identified, participants are mostly, and appropriately, signposted to community based provision.
- Through research, the experiences of staff in delivering training, and the evaluation of participants' responses, NIACRO has developed a new "Life Stories" mentoring course to help participants on short-term prison sentences to: understand themselves through self-reflection; identify sources of support; and to plan to overcome challenges, in order to gain sustained employment. The main objectives are to help prevent re-offending and to build confidence and self-esteem. The project staff are also working closely with the prison service to enable the participants due for release to build a portfolio of evidence of the valuable skills and products developed through purposeful activities, in order to enhance their employment prospects on release.

- The project promoter offers expert advice and support to all participants on disclosures when seeking employment, including preparing a statement and guidance on how and when to make a disclosure to a potential employer. A further example of innovative practice is the development of a publicly available online 'spent' disclosure calculator to aid the job application process. NIACRO organise awareness events for employers to help them understand better how they can benefit from employing ex-offenders including practical support on recruitment policies.
- The strategic leadership and management is highly effective. Since the baseline visit in February 2019, NIACRO has taken appropriate actions to address the areas for development identified in relation to: the individual action plans; tracking and review systems; increased access to and participation in training provision; safeguarding structures; and arrangements for self-evaluation and quality improvement planning. There remains a need to ensure that the quality improvement plan contains more specific targets against which progress can be more easily and consistently measured.
- The quality improvement plan is aligned well to the priorities identified in the draft Programme for Government Outcomes Framework and emerging criminal justice initiatives. For example, in collaboration with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), a portion of a participant's community service order can now include time spent on the Working Well project to facilitate progression to employment, and as a consequence reduce the likelihood of re-offending.
- NIACRO has established highly effective partnerships with a range of external agencies to enhance the outcomes of the Working Well project. For example, the excellent working relationships with the PBNI and the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), ensure that most eligible participants are referred to the Working Well project and catered for in their geographical location. Similarly, a mutually beneficial partnership has been established with the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), resulting in the development of innovative 3-dimensional virtual reality headset simulations of construction site health and safety assessments, in areas such as working at heights and manual handling that engage participants in immersive realistic scenarios.
- A comprehensive online management information system has been developed to record, monitor, track and report on the participants' progress on the Working Well project which is highly effective and innovative. The regular high quality reports provided to the PBNI inform them well about participant progress. Training is provided to all project staff to ensure that consistent and standardised reporting is embedded.
- There are effective support and development opportunities for project staff to carry out their roles for the benefit of the participants. The organisation, through continuous professional development opportunities builds on the individual strengths of the employment and enrolment officers supporting them well to explore innovative approaches to engage with the clients.

- The Women's Programme is being developed in collaboration with the PBNI to meet the specific needs of female participants. The women attending the project report that there is a gap in provision following release from custodial sentences, which is filled in part by NIACRO's Women's Services provision. The women value the opportunity to attend the weekly Women's Group, alongside the employability support, as it provides additional emotional health and wellbeing and educational support, helps address social anxiety issues as well as developing their confidence, self-esteem and skills. The women have been involved in co-producing course design and materials and in the longer term it is planned that they will be co-deliverers of the programme.

Safeguarding

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

Overall outcome

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

APPENDIX

A. Call 2 Performance Data

European Social Fund – Working Well	Over the four-year period ²
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	3244 (103%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	533 (120%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	777 (128%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	833 (65%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

The arrangements for this face-to-face visit included: observations of 11 one-to-one mentoring sessions (face-to-face); discussions with a small sample of participants during their learning and development sessions and in a focus group meeting; discussions with key stakeholders (including representatives from the PBNl, the prison services and the CITB) 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%

² 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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