

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 2 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in Specialisterne NI

Recruit+

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

Specialisterne is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Recruit+ 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 Specialisterne 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, 37 participants¹ were registered on the project.

Thirty percent of the participants completed the online questionnaire. All of the respondents indicated that the programme is well managed and that online sessions are well taught and delivered, with clear guidance, and a code of conduct around behaviour protocols while learning online. They indicated that they have good digital skills to enable them to fully engage and participate in the online learning part of the programme. They also indicated that the programme is preparing them well for their next steps, whether that is finding a job or accessing further education or training. Almost all indicated they find the programme both interesting and challenging. They feel confident to contribute to discussions and chat while online with staff and peers; and, when necessary to contact their support consultants if they have a query about something.

ETI also met and spoke with a sample of participants. They are appreciative of the readily available, supportive and encouraging staff and their dedication to helping them to improve their confidence and personal wellbeing. They value how the programme enables them to: write better CVs; develop interview skills; understand how the workplace functions and how to act in the workplace; and, find employment or access opportunities for further education and training. Past participants spoke about how support continues after they move into employment, for example by providing advice and strategies where problems arise in the workplace.

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 Recruit+ 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:

- support the participants' wellbeing and resilience through the delivery of its ReNEW curriculum; and
- further develop and upskill the workforce in the effective delivery of autistic strategies to continue to support participant progression and curriculum delivery.

Key Findings

The Call 2 visit identified the following key findings.

- The curriculum provided for the participants is very good; highly bespoke training has been developed through extensive research and links with a number of internationally recognised autism practitioners. Its ReNEW curriculum supports the participants to prepare for work, to manage when in the workplace and to develop their general social awareness and interactions. There is the opportunity to complete an accredited qualification in employability at level 1.
- The project is participant-led with the provision responsive to their feedback and delivered flexibly to meet their needs. Participants can access the training during their time on the project but also have the opportunity to participate in relevant training and workshop sessions after completion.
- At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic all of the delivery of provision switched from face-to-face provision and continues to be delivered in online mode, with a strong focus on supporting the emotional and mental health and wellbeing of the participants. The participants report that as communication with Specialisterne was facilitated by email prior to the pandemic, it was an easy transition for them to join the online sessions. All of the learning and development and mentoring sessions observed were effective. They were planned well and characterised by: an excellent rapport between the consultants, guest speakers and the participants; an effective range of learning and training strategies and activities; and staff who work well together when peer teaching. Group discussions, quizzes, role play and interactive sessions engaged the participants in enjoyable learning experiences.
- Peer-to-peer learning is used effectively to motivate the participants; past participants return to share their experiences with the current participants. They talk openly about the barriers they faced, how the project helped them to develop coping strategies and how this impacted on successful progression to careers in job roles they really enjoy. Their accounts help to raise the current participants' aspirations and motivate them to develop and progress on their own pathways.

- Bespoke individualised participant development plans are underpinned by the comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of progress. A range of assessment tools are used to measure the distance travelled by the participants, based on five key indicators identified as the main barriers experienced by people with autism or neurodivergence. The participants are encouraged to baseline their skills across the five indicators and throughout their time on the project. Each baseline assessment is supplemented by a practitioner's assessment which takes account of: the initial and ongoing one-to-one meetings with the participant; recording of 'Things of Note' records; session notes; and the weekly catch-up meeting with managers. The overall tracking of participant progress demonstrates that, as a result of the project, the participants make significant progress across the five key indicators.
- Over the four-year period, to date, all of the outcomes on the project are very positive; the overall target for recruitment has been met, and the targets for the progression of participants into employment or education and training have been exceeded. Almost all of the participants have been successfully retained on the project.
- The organisation has recently made a significant investment in an online learning platform and e-learning system, which provides a central repository for all of the programmes and projects offered by the organisation and allows the participants to access a range of research and training materials to support their learning and personal and social development. The organisation continues to develop the e-learning portal in order to improve further its accessibility and support for the participants.
- The staff are highly qualified in the specialist field of autism and neurodiversity and they are provided with ongoing professional learning that further enables them to support the participants. A working environment has been created that embraces diversity and respects the individual's requirements, needs and abilities. New staff are trained on the methodologies and strategies used through: extensive shadowing of a more experienced autism and neuro-diverse consultant; end of session review meetings; and through one-to-one sessions with managers. Mentors either inform practice or actively deliver programmes, including peer mentors. The management team support and encourage the staff to engage in research-based and peer learning through regular development meetings. Tracking analysis of patterns of participant experiences inform methodologies and practice. This ensures that the provision for the participants incorporates the most effective approaches and strategies for their development. A range of other training such as safeguarding is also provided to support staff in their role.
- There is effective and strategic leadership and management of the project with a listen and implement cycle, underpinned by the Specialisterne international value of accommodation, where management listen to, learn from and accommodate participants and staff. There is clear evidence of the high value the organisation places on listening to and acting on the feedback of the participants, both in the content of the learning sessions, the development of

the programmes and in the quality improvement planning process. The areas for development identified during the baseline visit in May 2019 have been progressed and the organisation continues to prioritise appropriately the areas for development. Going forward, there should be more effective reporting of the wide range of data collated in order to demonstrate more clearly the positive impact of the actions to promote improvement on the project.

- A strength of the provision are the links and partnerships established with a range of key stakeholders, including support agencies, autism practitioners and international research partners. The links are used well to share knowledge and experiences and build the staff's own knowledge in the development of solutions to the challenges participants and client companies may face. The stakeholders interviewed were positive about their experiences working with the project and the support and quality of the provision for the participants. They cited the work of the organisation as paramount in dealing with adults and young people with autism. Specialisterne NI also benefit from listening to the experiences of the Specialisterne network across other countries, including supporting wellbeing and mental health during the pandemic.

Safeguarding

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

The project promoter, however, needs to:

- continue the process of updating its policies to reflect further the developments in the provision; and
- review the reporting procedures to ensure that they provide clear guidance to all staff members and participants in relation to the organisation's approach to the safeguarding of young people and adults at risk.

Overall outcome

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

APPENDIX

A. Call 2 Performance Data

European Social Fund – Recruit+	Over the four-year period ²
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	100 (100%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	38 (238%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	25 (156%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	97 (97%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

The arrangements for this online visit included: observation of three sessions of practice (online); speaking with a sample of participants (six) during a focus group meeting; discussions with key stakeholders (a consultant, an employer, and an autism specialist) 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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