

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in
Access Employment Limited

Hands On Training

Report of a Call 3 Visit in February 2023



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



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Context

Access Employment Limited (AEL) is a registered charity based in Larne which provides training and support for people with physical disability, learning disability/difficulty, neurodiversity, and/or other health related conditions. The charity is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Hands on Training European Social Fund (ESF) project, as part of a third Call for projects which will run from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

The project aims to increase the number of people with disabilities in work, while promoting independent living and inclusion. It is aligned to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust) area and is comprised of a Head of Services who leads a team of personal development mentors (mentors) and job coaches.

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 2023, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 3 visit to AEL on behalf of DfE to evaluate the capacity of the project promoter to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of the provision.

Views of participants and parents/carers

At the time of the Call 3 visit, 16 participants were registered on the project (all performance data in this report was provided by the ESF project promoter).

The ETI met and spoke with a sample of participants during their learning and development sessions and in focus groups. The participants engaged openly with ETI, speaking about how highly they valued their attendance at AEL. They spoke about how the project has provided them with opportunities to develop new employability and social skills and to develop friendships in a safe, friendly working environment. They also spoke of how it has helped them improve their confidence in communicating with others through teamwork. They all feel safe and well supported and described the staff as being caring and responsive to their needs.

In addition, 75% of the participants completed the online questionnaire. They all reported that the programme is well managed, interesting and challenging and they are given regular feedback about how they are progressing. Overall, they are happy with their experiences and how the project is preparing them well for their next steps, into employment, education and/or training.

Contact was also made with parents/carers who spoke highly of the positive impact of the project on their children, in helping to develop their confidence, work and social skills and address their feelings of anxiety through the development of coping strategies, as well as helping to improve their independent living skills.

Focus of the Call 3 Visit

During the Call 3 visit, ETI evaluated the effectiveness of the quality improvement planning processes and focused on two of the key areas which the organisation had prioritised for improvement through its self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes to:

- further increase the level and number of employers engaging with the project, raising awareness of diversity and extending further the opportunities for work placement experiences and employment; and
- improve the provision for the care and welfare of staff.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

Key Findings

The Call 3 visit identified the following key findings.

- The model of delivery is via a social enterprise model which provides in-house work experience opportunities in catering, horticulture, online retail and warehousing packaging and assembly, and production and manufacturing. The curriculum provided is very good and is well-matched to the needs of the participants. It is effectively tailored to support each participant with an individual progression pathway to meet their specific needs and interests. Level one qualifications are offered in a wide range of areas including administration, catering, employability, horticulture, and stores and warehousing, alongside the associated in-house work experience placements. Level two qualifications can be provided but the uptake to date has been very low.
- Non-accredited training is also provided to support the participants in aspects of independent living, including cooking, healthy eating, independent travel, money management and personal hygiene. There is also a fortnightly evening social club which is very well attended. In partnership with Translink, AEL has recently developed and introduced a pilot programme of Independent Travel Training which has potential to develop further the opportunities for employment outside the Larne area and is highly appreciated by both participants and their parents/carers.
- Following a period of initial engagement and assessment, each participant works with an assigned mentor to devise an effective individualised action plan to address their often complex personal development needs and barriers; they agree short-term targets to meet their goals. The plan outlines the support the participant will receive and the activities they will undertake to develop their employability skills and/or promote their independent living skills and inclusion. Each participant is supported through an individualised programme by their mentor.

- The dedicated staff provide high levels of care, support, and guidance to the participants. They are highly skilled, committed and enthusiastic in undertaking their respective roles; their skills are well-matched to their job roles. The regular review process for each participant is underpinned by an internally devised “distance travelled” measurement tool which clearly demonstrates the positive impact the project is having on addressing barriers to learning, development and progression. The tool is highly visual and supports active participation by the participants in the review process.
- The sessions observed were highly effective. Through focused discussion, underpinned by positive feedback and goal-centred action planning, the staff facilitate participants to plan for themselves. The participants receive high levels of empathetic support from the staff who know their needs well, and productive working relationships have been developed. As a result, the participants engage well and are developing appropriate employability, personal and social skills in line with their targets. It is clear the participants have trust and confidence in the staff and know that they have their best interests at heart. The staff have recently introduced a “peer coaching” role which allows participants to take more responsibility for work activities in the social enterprises in order to further develop their confidence and leadership skills.
- Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the return to face-to-face delivery, the project promoter identified the need to rebuild and further increase the level and impact of employer engagement, including more opportunities for high quality work tours, work placements, long-term volunteering opportunities and paid employment. Through the development of an inclusive employer charter, the project promoter recognises and rewards the contribution made by socially responsible local employers, in providing participants with additional support needs with access to a range of opportunities to experience the world of work. The awards within the charter are highly valued by the employers; they spoke positively of the valuable support from the project promoter to help them make reasonable adjustments to develop the employability skills of the participants. This includes regular contact with the mentors, which helps them meet more effectively the needs of the participants. These series of actions have impacted positively and as a result: 16 structured work tours have been undertaken; 11 participants have accessed external work placements; two participants have progressed into paid employment; and two participants have progressed into long-term volunteering.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic caused AEL to recognise the need to increase the support for the overall health and well-being of its staff, so that they in turn are best placed to meet the needs of the participants. This led initially to a review of staff job descriptions and engagement with staff on the organisational values and associated behaviours. In addition, a well drafted communication strategy has been developed to improve information sharing across the organisation. The focus on supporting staff’s health and well-being

has included completing Take 5 Employer accreditation with the Trust, access to various initiatives such as private health care, stress management, yoga, and training for all staff. This ongoing work is valued by staff who report that it demonstrates the organisation's responsiveness and commitment to supporting their well-being.

- To date, recruitment to the project has almost reached the overall target set, at 94%; almost all of the participants recruited have been retained on the project. Progression to employment to date is at 50% of the target and progression to further education and/or training is at 60% of the target. The project promoter needs to consider and review as appropriate the overall targets with DfE.
- The project promoter has also set internal targets for the achievement of level one qualifications, with overall 23 being achieved to date: animal care (6), progression to employment (13), and warehousing (4).
- The strategic and operational leadership and management of the project is highly effective. Self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are well-embedded in the project and across the organisation. An appropriate action plan is in place to address the areas for improvement identified. Overall, the leadership and management is planning effectively for learning and quality improvement. Planning is in place to ensure that each participant has an individualised positive progression pathway and continued support will be available for those participants who need it, for a period of three months following the end of Call 3.

Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 3 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding participants of the Hands on Training ESF project reflect current legislation and practice.

Overall outcome

At the time of the Call 3 visit, and in the areas evaluated, AEL demonstrates high level of capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the Hands on Training ESF project.

APPENDIX

A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund – Hands on Training	Since 1 April 2022 (1 April 2022-2 February 2023)
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Numbers of enrolments and % against target	29 (94%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	2 (50%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	6 (60%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	1 (97%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

ETI observed three sessions of practice, spoke with participants during their learning and development sessions and in focus groups, and had discussions with key stakeholders, including employers and parents, and key staff (to include quality improvement and safeguarding arrangements). Participants had the opportunity to complete a confidential questionnaire. Inspectors also scrutinised relevant data and documentation.

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%

Overall outcome

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

At the time of the Call 3 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 the xx ESF project.

At the time of the Call 3 visit, and in the areas evaluated, xxxx demonstrates capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the xx ESF project.

At the time of the Call 3 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 the xx ESF project. ETI will continue to monitor how the project promoter brings about improvement and the Department for the Economy 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 3 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the xx ESF project reflect current legislation and practice.

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 3 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the 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 3 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the xx ESF project are unsatisfactory. <DN insert detail>.

ETI will return to the project promoter within six working weeks to monitor and report on progress in addressing the safeguarding issues which have been identified.

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