

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in First Steps
Women's Centre

Women Towards Education and Employment

Report of a Call 3 Visit in December 2022



Providing Inspection services for:
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Context

The First Steps Women's Centre is a registered charity contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Women Towards Education and Employment European Social Fund (ESF) project, as part of a third Call for projects which will run from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

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 December 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 3 visit to the First Steps Women's Centre 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

At the time of the Call 3 visit, 170 participants¹ were registered on the project.

The ETI met and spoke with a sample of participants during their learning and development sessions and in focus groups. They all spoke positively about participation on the programme, including for example the opportunities provided to: make good friends; reduce loneliness and anxiety; gain or regain confidence; and, improve their overall health and well-being.

Twenty-three percent of the participants completed the online questionnaire. They all reported that the induction process was useful and prepared them well for their programme which they find both interesting, challenging and well managed. Overall, they are happy with their experiences on the project.

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 improve:

- levels of progression of participants into employment; and
- participant administrative and tracking systems.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

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

Key Findings

The Call 3 visit identified the following key findings which include any areas for improvement to be addressed for the remainder of the third Call.

- The project works with female participants representing over 24 nationalities and provides a safe, inclusive and welcoming venue for all of the women, including refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. In the bright, attractive and well-equipped centre, the women develop friendships, address personal barriers they are experiencing and gain the confidence they need to progress towards employment.
- The curriculum provided is well-balanced and appropriate to the needs of the participants. There is a wide range of non-accredited training such as computer programming using Java, cultural awareness, photography, and a wide range of classes in health and wellbeing such as African drumming, Chi Me, creative writing, holistic therapies, meditation and journalling, pilates and yoga. Accredited qualifications offered include a suite of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications, essential skills in literacy, as well as first aid and food safety. It is notable that over one hundred ESOL qualifications have been achieved to date in this call. An information technology lending library was set up during the pandemic which has continued and enables participants to borrow iPads, tablets and laptops, and for some, to access free data to enable them to continue their learning.
- Through the curriculum delivery, the project provides a holistic, individually tailored training and education programme for unemployed and economically inactive women to enable them to upskill appropriately and empower them to succeed in the workplace. The participants are developing well their confidence, self-esteem and employability skills and demonstrate resilience in overcoming the social and medical barriers they may have; they show respect and support for their fellow participants. The project promoter has appropriately identified the need to improve how they capture and measure the distance travelled in the development of soft skills to better demonstrate the impact of the project.
- Overall, the sessions observed were effective and staff supported the participants well in their learning. The staff have a very good understanding of participants' individual needs and they have developed highly positive working relationships; they use an appropriate range of strategies to promote learning. There is a purposeful balance of theory and practical work in the therapeutic and community engagement sessions, for example in holistic therapies and gardening. Participants are empowered to improve their physical and emotional well-being and they benefit from having regular opportunities to apply skills and knowledge in purposeful contexts. The very effective creative arts sessions, including African drumming, focus sensitively on individuals' emotional health and well-being whilst the participants engage fully in highly creative group music-making.

- Important support services are provided by the project promoter for the women, including: an on-site creche; bi-lingual staff; free transport using their own minibus; benefit checker guidance; and an on-site counselling service. These services are instrumental in removing the barriers to participation which face the women. The committed and experienced staff provide high levels of care, support and guidance for the participants.
- Recruitment to the project has exceeded the overall target and the target for progression into education and training has been fully met.
- The target for progression into employment is low at 24%. A pilot mentoring programme recently introduced to address this included scheduled group sessions on assertiveness, resilience, self-confidence, and defining your own goals. One-to-one sessions with a job coach were an important aspect of the programme. Almost all the participants involved progressed into employment, including a small number of participants who have successfully progressed into the workplace in volunteering roles. While plans are in place to continue to deliver a similar programme, it is necessary that the project promoter consider and review as appropriate the overall target for progression into employment with DfE. The management is actively seeking alternative funding for the project after the end of Call 3.
- Overall, the leadership and management of the project is effective. There is a collegial approach to the delivery of the project and a positive ethos permeates the life and work of the centre. The team plan appropriately for learning and quality improvement. To reduce possible barriers to access, administrative and tracking procedures have been adapted and streamlined to enable participants for whom English is not their first language, to better understand and fully complete, for example the initial registration process and personal training plans. Tailored in-house evaluations of all courses have also been adapted to make them more user-friendly and more applicable to subject areas.
- There is a self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process in place, with planning for exit and progression of participants. The areas for improvement identified in the detailed quality improvement plan need to be more clearly prioritised, with the use of specific and measurable targets to better demonstrate the impact of the project.
- The organisation has good links with a range of stakeholders including referral agencies, as well as trust and community-based support organisations which are used well to recruit and to signpost participants with a range of issues.

Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 3 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding the participants of the Women Towards Education and Employment ESF project reflect broadly current legislation and practice.

The project promoter, however, needs to:

- ensure vetting records are updated and kept for all staff.

Overall outcome

At the time of the Call 3 visit, and in the areas evaluated, the First Steps Women's Centre demonstrates capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the Women Towards Education and Employment ESF project.

APPENDIX

A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund - Women Towards Education and Employment

Since 1 April 2022²

Numbers of enrolments and % against target	258 (112%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	11(24%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	32(100%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	17 (93%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

ETI observed six sessions of practice; spoke with participants during their learning and development sessions and in focus groups; and had discussions with key stakeholders and with key staff (including the 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%

² 1 April 2022 – 6 December 2022.

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 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 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 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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