

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in GEMS Northern
Ireland Ltd

CO-MENT

Report of a Call 3 Visit in January 2023



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



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Context

GEMS Northern Ireland Ltd (GEMS NI) is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver and lead the CO-MENT European Social Fund (ESF) project, as part of a third Call for projects which will run from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

GEMS NI delivers the project in partnership with the Belfast South Resource Centre, the Greater Village Regeneration Trust, North Belfast Women's Initiative and Support Programme, and Short Strand Community Forum Project. Delivery from the lead partner takes place at its new premises in Belfast and in Newtownabbey, as well as at the premises of its partners.

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 2023 the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 3 visit to GEMS NI 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, 44 participants¹ were registered on the project.

The ETI met and spoke with a sample of current and past participants during their learning and development sessions, online and in a focus group meeting. They all spoke of the importance of having trust in their personal learning mentors (the mentors) to support them in addressing their barriers to progression. Participants value sampling opportunities to experience a range of work opportunities, particularly where they are unsure of what is a suitable progression pathway for them to follow. A past participant who had completed the project was able to talk articulately about how the project benefitted him, allowing him to progress to employment in finance with a national bank which he reported he would otherwise not have had access to.

Nine percent of the participants completed the online questionnaire. They all reported that their programme is well managed, and they are kept up-to-date with how they are progressing. They feel confident to contribute to discussions and to contact their mentors when they have a query about something. They reported that participation in the project is preparing them well for their next steps to employment, education and/or training.

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

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:

- the further development of transition support in progressing participants to employment, education and/or training; and
- the continued local, regional and international development of the provision.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

Key Findings

The Call 3 visit identified the following key findings.

- The curriculum provided is well-informed by effective use of the CO-MENT four zone initial assessment tool (across the areas of learning, leisure, life, and work) and consequently, it is well-matched to the needs of the participants.
- An assigned mentor carries out the initial assessment with the participant and the information gathered is used to help the participant design their own “journey” across the zones, with appropriate actions agreed. An individualised support package is then implemented, informed by the action plan, which acknowledges and accommodates the issues and challenges that the participant is facing, while encouraging and enabling them to make progress. The mentors report that participants have a wide range of challenges and barriers, including addiction, anxieties, mental health, motivation, and previously negative experiences of education.
- The participants are able to access a wide range of relevant qualifications and training programmes that enable them to develop the skills and knowledge to progress towards employment, education and/or training. This includes, for example, short courses such as the Construction Skills Register (CSR), digital skills and health and safety certificates. In collaboration with partner organisations, there is vocational training at level one in beauty, childcare, construction, and digital fabrication. To date, participants have gained accredited qualifications in a range of areas: CSR (10); digital skills (18); forklift (2); manicure and nail art (6); and vocational skills (11).
- Where the need is identified, a “language for work” programme is provided and arrangements are in place to signpost participants to English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses, as well as the literacy and numeracy essential skills provision at the local Further Education College and/or external providers. A number of participants are undertaking ESOL and the essential skills through this signposting.

- The mentoring and training sessions observed were highly effective, with positive working relationships and high levels of trust established. A range of strategies were used in the mentoring session to skilfully engage the participants and to develop their confidence, motivation, and skills. They were encouraged and supported to reflect on personal behaviours; these reflections could be used to meaningfully develop their action plans. In the training session observed, participants developed practical skills and related knowledge that is relevant to their interests and facilitates progression. The training holistically develops the participants' personal, social, and vocational skills through individualised planning in a caring but challenging environment.
- The mentors have regular review and update meetings with participants, linked to the four zone assessment, to discuss and monitor closely progress, agree new actions, provide challenge and plan ongoing support. The participant files scrutinised demonstrated evidence of highly effective, targeted support and training with associated progress towards achieving personal goals, across the four zones. Distance travelled is summarised clearly in flowcharts, including the development of soft skills. Effective use is made of case studies to summarise and celebrate each participant's journey; these provide powerful individual testimonies of the positive impact of the project.
- A key transition development is the provision of bespoke and alternative pathways to employment matched to participants' assessed needs. This includes employer connect and bootcamp opportunities that enable participants to access new progression pathways. For example, the Leadership Through Sport and Business (LTSB) bootcamp programme facilitates progression to level two financial management with a national bank. To date, out of two bootcamps, five participants have been successful, gaining full-time employment and progressing on to the level two programme. Further bootcamps are planned in the financial and other sectors, including entertainment and Information Technology. In addition, level two and level three training progression pathways can be accessed with the project's delivery partners.
- Recruitment to the project is at 94% of the overall recruitment target; the project management report increased referrals through social media during the Call. As well as Belfast, project delivery covers Antrim and Newtownabbey, Ards and North Down, Mid Ulster, and Upper Bann. Outreach connections have been established, including through the Education Authority's Education Welfare Service and in a number of schools, which lead to project referrals. The mentors engage with young people who have experienced exclusion from mainstream education or who are disengaging or at risk of disengaging from school and inform them about the potential benefits of considering the project or other GEMS NI programmes in the future.

- Almost all of the participants have been retained. Progression into employment is at 90% of the target, and progression into education and training is at 78%. A personal training and discretionary fund award assists participants who have successfully completed the programme to realise career and development goals.
- The staff have a range of opportunities for professional development, including safeguarding training. This upskilling, along with the appointment of a resilience coach and a transition manager, has benefitted well the participants of the project. Direct delivery development is prioritised, and a buddy system is in place, with the experienced staff supporting effectively the newer staff.
- GEMS NI has worked with a range of international partners to improve the outcomes for young people, by sharing their successful CO-MENT mentor approach to progress young people not in education, employment or training. For example, GEMS NI partnered with Extern and worked with Italy, Hungary, Portugal and Romania as partner-countries to develop a bespoke, online game-based initial assessment resource specifically targeted at younger people, including those with additional learning needs. As part of the [ITER Project](#) partnership, a transitions management handbook has been produced, as a guide for mentors and other key stakeholders working with marginalised young people.
- Overall, there is effective planning for learning and quality improvement, including planning for sustainability and progression of participants at the end of the Call. The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are embedded and inform well the work of the project and the wider organisation, to include key checkpoint participant evaluations through questionnaires and focus groups. For example, informed by a staff mental health and wellbeing consultation, and in conjunction with Belfast Works, a health and wellbeing open day was held recently and attended by current and past participants; contributors included Inspire and Gambling with Lives.
- The leadership and management of the project is highly effective. There are regular meetings of project staff and the programme manager with senior managers and the board and delivery partners, focused on monitoring progress in identified areas of improvement and where necessary, identifying sub-groups to take forward required actions.
- The organisation has strategic links with a wide range of stakeholders, for example a recent job fair involved Belfast Works, the Shaftesbury Square Jobs and Benefits Office in Belfast and the project promoter. A representative of a work-based learning provider spoke about how well participants of the project are prepared to move on to its programmes, having benefitted from confidence building, the forming of friendships and support to become work-ready. Representatives from the Youth Justice Agency spoke very positively about its long-established, trusted partnership working with GEMS NI, and their confidence in the understanding and knowledge of the project team of how best to support the increasing number of young people they refer, along with their parents/carers.

Safeguarding

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

The project promoter, however, needs to:

- continue to update the policies and procedures for child protection and safeguarding young people and adults at risk, to include the lone working and anti-bullying policies; and
- update the reporting arrangements to include the contact details for local child and adult gateway teams and ensure these are incorporated into all delivery partner organisations' reporting procedures.

Overall outcome

At the time of the Call 3 visit, and in the areas evaluated, GEMS NI demonstrates high capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the CO-MENT ESF project.

APPENDIX

A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund - CO-MENT

Since 1 April 2022²

Numbers of enrolments and % against target	150 (94%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	36 (90%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	50 (78%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	14 (91%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

ETI observed a mentoring session and a training session and spoke with a sample of current and past participants during their learning and development session, online and in a focus group meeting; had discussions with key stakeholders, including a parent, the Youth Justice Agency, a work-based learning provider, employers and collaborative partners, 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 – 26 January 2023.

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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