

## EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in  
South West College

Step up to Sustainable Employment +

Report of a Call 3 Visit in October 2022



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

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## **Context**

South West College (SWC) is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Step up to Sustainable Employment+ (SUSE+) European Social Fund (ESF) project in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Mid Ulster District Council areas, as part of a third Call for projects which will run from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

It is a well-established education and training programme for the unemployed and economically inactive in these district council areas. Participants range from age 16 to 65 years and have experienced significant challenges and barriers to progression to education and/or training and employment.

This project is part funded through the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme (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 October 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 3 visit to SWC 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, 64 participants<sup>1</sup> were registered on the project.

The ETI met and spoke with a sample of participants of all ages during their learning and development sessions and in focus groups. They spoke about their various educational, work and life experiences which have negatively impacted their self-confidence, self-esteem or mental health and wellbeing. They spoke powerfully about how SUSE+ staff have supported them to address their various individual challenges and barriers, including those caused by social and rural isolation and how they are forging valuable friendships. Some described how participation has allowed them to cope with day-to-day living and engage successfully on the project. Also, they spoke of how the mentors provided them with a “life-line”. All participants value how participating in the project has enabled them to undertake learning and attain qualifications in relevant courses and when ready, progress to further education, training or employment.

Forty-eight per cent of the participants completed the online questionnaire. Almost all of them indicated that the programme is interesting, challenging, well-managed and it prepares them well to progress into education, training or employment. They know who to go to if they have a problem or concern and feel well supported when learning.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 to:

- increase access to courses via remote or blended learning when required; and
- further engage with employers to ensure programmes equip participants with skills for successful employment.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

## **Key Findings**

The Call 3 visit identified the following key findings.

- The curriculum provided is broad, balanced, and appropriate to the local labour market needs and to the diverse range of interests and aspirations of the participants. A wide range of qualifications are delivered, for example: approaches to wellbeing; community development; community independence; digital skills and well-being; managing personal finances; office skills; personal success and wellbeing; and working with children. Additionally, a range of short-accredited qualifications are delivered in a diverse range of skills with practical applications which benefit participants and can lead quickly and directly into employment. These include: construction skills register (CSR) in health and safety; emergency first aid at work; manual handling; paediatric first aid; working at heights; and working in confined spaces.
- Delivery is provided through the SWC with access to relevant courses, workshops and progression pathways. An example of curriculum delivery is through the welding academy, where a strong partnership has been established between the academy, local employers and SUSE+. The partnership working has influenced delivery at the welding academy which has drawn upon elements of the SUSE+ model to, for example, build employability into its level two provision.
- The programme is delivered through an effective mentor-led approach, with highly individualised and supportive needs-based programmes. The participants benefit from wraparound support which encourages and enables each participant to make progress in their individual journey, from the initial assessment to exit. Participants are referred to the programme from an extensive and well-established network of agencies, including Jobs and Benefits Offices and Women's Aid, while around a third of them self-refer, responding to the project promoter's successful social media and marketing campaigns. Additionally, a notable number of referrals come from the SWC careers service and staff.

- A dedicated mentor supports an effective initial assessment process which identifies any barriers to participation and informs well the individualised action planning process. Regular contact and skilful coaching and mentoring is a strength of the provision sustaining participant engagement and motivation. Excellent relationships exist between the participants and the mentor/tutors, built on trust and positive encouragement. For some participants it has given them the confidence to take the first step to go into the college.
- The participants value and benefit from the face-to-face delivery of the programmes through which they are developing their confidence and self-esteem. The college has continued to increase access to courses via remote or blended learning which was a particular success during the pandemic and continues to provide flexibility in delivery and support emergency planning. Some participants are able to access provision at Women's Aid premises.
- Most of the learning and teaching was highly effective, well-planned and matched to the identified education and training needs of the participants. Tutors employed effective strategies to engage and motivate the participants to develop relevant skills, knowledge and work-readiness. Where there are challenges with low attendance or punctuality, strategies should continue to be employed to maximise the benefits of facilitation and participation in the sessions.
- Staff support participants to understand how a pathway to employment will benefit them financially and to feel valued in the contribution they are making to society. Throughout the programme, as appropriate, participants have support to build a curriculum vitae, complete job application forms and prepare for interviews. The mentors have an excellent knowledge of the employment opportunities in the locality which they use to prepare and upskill the participants. Employers have benefitted from the recruitment of new employees who are well-matched and well-prepared for the job. Stakeholders spoke of the confidence, resilience, and self-esteem which the participants develop throughout the programme.
- Effective regular review meetings are held to follow through on agreed targets set with the participant at previous meetings, to set new targets, review progress, communicate relevant information and plan necessary actions. As part of this process, a “wheel of life” assessment is completed by the participant with their mentor at various stages on the programme, providing a clear and effective visual representation of progress.
- The participants are learning appropriate strategies and skills to improve their wellbeing and cope with a range of personal and family issues. There were very good connections made to the benefits of mindfulness in, for example, parenting which is relevant to their lives. When appropriate, participants are referred to other services or agencies, such as health and counselling services. Where participants are unable to progress at a particular point in time the project promoter will signpost them to other agencies and services.

- To date, the outcomes of the project are positive. The target for recruitment has reached almost 90% in just over six months into the programme, while targets for progression into employment and education and/or training have been exceeded. All participants have been retained. Progression pathways include for example business administration; childcare; customer service; and engineering. Very good opportunities are available for participants to access and progress onto a range of relevant vocational pathways within the college.
- The strategic and operational management of the project is highly effective. Strong channels of communication along with well-established roles and responsibilities ensure the aims and objectives of the project are clearly met. A culture of self-evaluation and quality improvement planning informed by accurate and timely use of data is well-embedded and works well in identifying and taking forward key areas for improvement.
- The programme co-ordinator manages a team of five lead mentors across a number of sites, with a further three mentors working across the project and seven staff who have dual roles as facilitators, teaching and mentoring. The staff have had a range of appropriate continuing professional development opportunities, including completion of a Level 5 Coaching and Mentoring qualification, digital delivery, safeguarding, domestic violence, alcohol and drugs awareness, mental health and various corporate modules.
- Proactive planning is underway for how to move forward when Call 3 ends, to continue to provide social inclusion programmes to meet identified need, drawing upon the learning of the project and in particular the mentor-led model upon which its delivery is built. The project promoter is continuing to recruit throughout the life of the programme and is planning to ensure progression and integration of participants into other programmes if required. Overall, the leadership and management are planning effectively for learning and quality improvement, including planning for sustainability and progression of participants.
- Managers of the programme effectively and proactively work with an extensive network of stakeholders, including employers, match-funders, and referral partners. The various stakeholders spoke about how the SUSE+ staff: have a person-centred approach; are passionate, flexible and accommodating; build a rapport to nurture the participants; and are invested in helping participants to make positive choices and progress as individuals. They were highly positive about their engagement with the SUSE+ project and its value in addressing the needs of the community in the two district council areas.

## Safeguarding

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

## **Overall outcome**

At the time of the Call 3 visit, and in the areas evaluated, SWC demonstrates a high level of capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of the provision for the SUSE+ ESF project.

# APPENDIX

## A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund – SUSE+	Since 1 April 2022 <sup>2</sup>
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	352 (88%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	120 (136%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	81 (231%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	0 (100%)

## B. Methodology and evidence base

ETI observed eleven sessions of practice, spoke with a sample of participants during their learning and development sessions and in focus group meetings, had discussions with key stakeholders, including 17 employers and 34 collaborative partners and with 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%

<sup>2</sup> 1 April 2022 - <DN Insert date of visit>.

## **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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