

# EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in  
The Advantage Foundation Ltd

QUEST

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

The Advantage Foundation Ltd (Advantage) is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the QUEST 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 QUEST project is a unique employability project, with its Mugshots social enterprise print business (Mugshots) based in Hydebank Wood College (Hydebank). The project is designed to break the reoffending cycle by equipping young offenders with the skills, support, resources, network and ethics to compete more effectively for 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 January 2023, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 3 visit to Advantage 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, 9 participants were registered on the project (all performance data in this report was provided by the ESF project promoter).

Inspectors met with current and past participants who spoke about the positive impact their involvement on this project has had on their time in Hydebank and in preparing them for release. Through participation, they were able to set short and longer-term goals, which helped to motivate them to prepare for the world of work outside of Hydebank. In particular, they spoke with pride about the practical aspect of the work placement and training in the Mugshots workshop. They really enjoyed working in the social enterprise, with the opportunity to create bespoke products as well as fulfil orders from external customers.

Thirty-seven percent of the current and past participants completed the questionnaire. Written comments from participants were very positive and included appreciation of the hard work the participants felt project staff put in to helping them to realise their potential, through the opportunity to work in Mugshots and the effective preparation for interviews to help them gain employment on release.

## 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:

- deliver successfully the restorative justice piece; and
- maximise purposeful activities in Mugshots during quieter business periods.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

## 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.

- Central to the curriculum provided is a clear focus on encouraging participant aspiration and self-belief through purposeful work experience in Mugshots, the completion of an impactful restorative justice piece and access to a recently revised employability curriculum, with the opportunity to achieve an employability qualification. The partner agencies within Hydebank spoke of their confidence in making referrals to the project of those young offenders most disengaged or who struggle with the mainstream learning and skills provision in Hydebank.
- Working with experienced staff in the Mughshots workshop, the participants have the opportunity to acquire the skills, experiences and aptitude to become work ready on release. The workshop, while small, is well-resourced and reflects a realistic working environment. Appropriate training resources, activities and monitoring checklists have been designed to maximise purposeful use of time when business for the social enterprise is slower, ensuring participants continue to have the full range of experiences of a print workshop environment. The staff report the positive progress they observe some of the most disengaged young offenders making in the workshop, in developing independent working, creativity, problem solving, organisational, team player and leadership skills.
- In the session observed, participants were well-supported to independently undertake productive and purposeful work in fulfilling external orders of printed mugs and t-shirts. The project promoter has worked hard to build on the practical work experience, with an emphasis on establishing and maintaining links with employers across Northern Ireland and the provision of a range of events to enhance participants' skills set. These events include interview skills days with employers and lived experience days to highlight the positive progression of past participants. The participants are actively encouraged to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and to consider starting a business as a realistic and viable career option.

- The restorative justice piece is an effective element of the project. The participants created a piece called '#Stop. Don't GetLocked', which is underpinned by a series of postcards for distribution with key messages from current young offenders in Hydebank to discourage other young people from ending up in the system. The piece was presented externally to over thirty young people attending two education other than at school settings. Feedback from the young people and staff in the settings was very positive and they commented upon the powerful input by two past participants of the project with positive outcomes.
- The revised employability curriculum has been informed by a project research piece which identified skills that employers require for entry level jobs following Covid-19. The content better reflects the changing labour market and is intended to better equip young people with the skills required to gain employment. The level one award in employability is delivered over a period of approximately 12 weeks, covering applying for work, teamwork skills and workplace relationships, self-development and career planning, writing a curriculum vitae, and interview skills modules.
- On completion of the project, each participant has an individualised "Future Options Plan" in place, and this includes onward referral. There is clear evidence of the value the participants place on their engagement and re-engagement with the project as they near completion of their sentence. They spoke highly of the guidance and support offered to help to prepare them for release. In the one-to-one session observed, discussion was sensitively and empathetically undertaken with the participant, while appropriately challenging them to identify and address personal barriers.
- To date, recruitment to the project has almost reached the overall target, at 90% and most of those who started the programme have been retained. Recruitment has been extended to include a target of four participants from Ash House Women's Prison during this Call. While they benefit from the employability aspect of the project, they do not currently get access to the work experience in Mugshots.
- Just over half of the participants have progressed into education or training, which is just over half of the agreed target (55%). The target for progression into employment, which includes both employment and supported employment has been fully met.
- A range of methods are used to evaluate the impact of the project. For example, there are indicators to measure attitudes to subjects such as drug and alcohol misuse, emotional health, confidence, and motivation before and after project participation. Data collected by the project staff demonstrates the positive and constructive progress that has been made by participants.

- A significant strength of this project is that post-release participants are accessing further employability support from the project staff to help them on their journey into work. One hundred percent of the profits from Mugshots is reinvested to support young offenders who have completed the project and then been released from custody. They are encouraged to apply for a professional development bursary fund for up to £250 to further support them with work clothing and emergency housing costs. This practical support contributes positively to reducing the risk of reoffending; the partner agencies spoke very positively about success stories as a result of the 'through the gate' follow-on by the project.
- Delivery of the project is effectively informed by self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes which have been continuously developed and improved. For example, systems have been introduced for Call 3, to better capture the work experience outcomes and distance travelled by participants. There is good use made of past participants' journey testimonials. It is important that the management recognise more fully the strengths and uniqueness of the provision this project delivers.
- Overall, the leadership and management is planning appropriately for quality improvement and progression of participants. As Call 3 comes to an end, the organisation is exploring delivery and funding options and how and where best to deliver the project going forward, as well as the potential for partnership working; this includes discussions with the leadership of Hydebank and the Northern Ireland Prison Service.
- The project staff play an active role in wider prison events in Hydebank, with representation on an engagement forum and at the time of the visit, they were involved in the delivery of a Mental Health event. There is positive and beneficial collaborative working with the art department in the prison's mainstream learning and skills provision.

## Safeguarding

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

The project promoter, however, needs to:

- ensure all training is up-to-date and recording processes are in place.

## Overall outcome

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

# APPENDIX

## A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund – QUEST	Since 1 April 2022 (1 April 2022-16 January 2023)
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Numbers of enrolments and % against target	27 (90%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	8 (100%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	6 (55%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	4(85%)

## B. Methodology and evidence base

ETI observed two 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 the Northern Ireland Prison Service and partner agencies, 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%

## 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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