

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in Ulster Supported
Employment Limited (USEL)

Support and Training to Realise Individual Development and
Employment (STRIDE)

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

Ulster Supported Employment Limited (USEL) is a non-departmental public body operating across Northern Ireland. Its aim is to help people with disabilities and health-related conditions move into sustainable employment; there are offices and training facilities across the region, with its main offices in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Portadown.

USEL is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Support and Training to Realise Individual Development and Employment (STRIDE) 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 (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 USEL 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, 75 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 spoke positively about how their experiences on the project are helping them to improve their confidence and to overcome barriers to progression. They cited the caring ethos of the organisation, describing the staff as kind, welcoming and understanding, and highlighted particularly the high levels of individualised support provided by their employment services officers. They reported that they feel safe on the project and know who to contact if they have an issue or problem.

Thirty-one percent of the participants completed the online questionnaire. Almost all of them reported that: the project is well managed; that they are kept up to date with how they are progressing and feel confident to contact their employment services officer or tutors when they do not understand or have a query about something; and that overall, the project is preparing them well for progression.

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, to:

- maximise opportunities for the positive progression of participants to employment and/or further training prior to the closure of the project at the end of Call 3, particularly those participants furthest removed from the labour market; and
- continue to offer a full curriculum and to ensure that as many participants as possible achieve their targeted qualifications before the end of Call 3.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

Key Findings

The Call 3 visit identified the following key findings.

- An appropriate curriculum is in place, with participants able to access accredited and non-accredited training, either face-to-face or online. The range of accredited training available at level one and level two is in areas such as customer service, employability skills, food safety in catering, health and safety in the workplace, manual handling, and personal and social skills. The essential skills of literacy and numeracy are offered from entry level to level two. Participants also have the opportunity to undertake a range of non-accredited training, with a focus on health and well-being, in areas such as confidence building, effective communication, interview skills, living with anxiety, personal development planning, and understanding and managing stress. The management and staff are committed to ensuring that the full curriculum offer remains in place during the remainder of Call 3. They plan to increase the frequency and number of group training sessions and to ensure that as many participants as possible can complete and achieve their targeted qualifications.
- The project promoter operates a number of social enterprises in the hospitality, manufacturing, and recycling sectors, which it uses well to provide work-experience placement and employment opportunities for the participants. An employment academy model has also been developed, with a small number of employers, to identify specific job-roles and provide bespoke training and a guaranteed job interview for participants. The employers interviewed were positive about the model, particularly the screening process used by the project promoter to identify potential candidates for specific job roles. This includes the initial and on-going communication and support from the project promoter to deal with any emerging issues, and the opportunities for staff in the organisations involved to undertake professional learning, for example, diversity training. They report that they are keen to continue working with the project promoter going forward.

- The learning and teaching sessions observed were effective. The more effective practice was characterised by the use of an appropriate range of strategies to actively engage the participants, the effective contextualisation of content to meet their individual learning and development needs, high levels of interaction and engagement by the participants, and the good pace of delivery. The standards of work demonstrated by the participants in the sessions observed were of a good quality. In the less effective practice, the sessions were mostly tutor-led with a need to include activities to encourage more independent learning, and to provide more stretch and challenge for the more able participants.
- The one-to-one participant review meetings observed were also effective. The staff actively support participants to review their action plan and targets through self-reflection on the ongoing development of their skills and competences, and their experiences and achievements during their time on the project. They also help them to identify realistic employment objectives and signpost them to relevant training and/or additional support, either internally or with external organisations, if required. A detailed record of the review meetings is recorded live on the project promoter's electronic management information system, and the information is shared with the participants during their review meetings to keep them informed of their achievements and any actions they need to continue to work on.
- Very effective processes are in place to track and monitor the progress of the participants. An electronic portal has been developed to record and review all participant activity from enrolment on the project through to completion. All of the information is recorded and available in real-time, and a detailed record and communication log is in place for each of the participants. An online employability development tool is also used well to track and graphically represent the development of their skills and dispositions throughout their time on the project. The information is analysed effectively and used appropriately to inform the quality improvement planning process.
- The outcomes on the project are mostly positive. While the targets for enrolment and progression to employment have been well exceeded, the target set to progress participants into education and/or training has not yet been achieved (63%). Almost all of the participants recruited have been retained on the project. The management is currently planning to ensure that an appropriate exit strategy is in place for participants, including maximising the opportunities for positive progression of participants to employment or further training prior to the closure of the project at the end of Call 3, particularly those participants furthest removed from the labour market.
- The project is managed very effectively at both strategic and operational levels. Good collegial working relationships exist between management and staff, and they work well as a team across the offices visited. Regular project team meetings are in place to share best practice, review the project targets and to address any issues emerging. Effective management information systems have been implemented to provide a good oversight of project performance at both a local and regional level.

- A highly effective self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process is in place. A well-planned quality improvement cycle is used to regularly evaluate the quality of all elements of the project including the participant review process, the standardisation of qualifications, the delivery of training, the work of project staff, and the achievement of local and regional performance targets. Participant focus groups and online surveys are used well to inform the process. The documentation scrutinised by ETI provides a detailed overview and evaluation of the quality of the provision and an appropriate action plan has been developed to address the identified areas for improvement. Overall, the organisation is planning very effectively for learning and quality improvement, including planning for the positive progression of participants.
- Appropriate links and partnerships have been developed with a range of stakeholders, including other community organisations, training providers, Jobs and Benefits Offices, and other statutory and support organisations, both for referral and recruitment purposes, and to support and signpost participants to enable them to overcome their barriers to progression.

Safeguarding

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

Overall outcome

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

APPENDIX

A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund – STRIDE	Since 1 April 2022 ²
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	247 (124%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	126 (158%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	25 (63%)
Retention – Number of early leavers and % against target	21 (91%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

Four learning and development and two participant review sessions were observed during the Call 3 visit. ETI spoke with a sample of participants in their learning and development sessions and in focus groups, and had discussions with key stakeholders, including employers. ETI visited USEL offices in Belfast and Portadown and had discussions 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%

² 1 April 2022 – 25 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 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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