



Education and Training
Inspectorate

European Social Fund provision in
The NOW Group

Workforce III Project

Report of an Inspection in
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The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments



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1. Context

The NOW Group is a social enterprise with registered charity status and contracted by the Department for the Economy (Department) to provide the Workforce III European Social Fund (ESF) project. The Workforce III ESF project aims to support people with a learning disability to engage in training and/or work-experience activities to increase their occupational and employability skills and to develop further their personal capabilities. The project promoter, in partnership with Stepping Stones NI¹, provides opportunities for the participants to undertake vocational training in catering or customer service, and/or personal development. In addition, there are opportunities for the participants to complete, if relevant, industry-specific, information communication technology (ICT) or essential skills literacy training. Just under one-half (47%)² of the participants have undertaken work-experience activities.

The Now Group is managed by a chief executive officer who is supported by a board of directors, a senior management team, and business support staff. The Workforce III project is managed overall by a programme manager and supported by a quality assurance manager. In the NOW Group, a training manager, three vocational trainers, a careers guidance officer, six job coaches, seven employment officers and two transition officers support the delivery of the programme in Antrim, Belfast, Carrickfergus, Mid Ulster and North Down and Ards. In Stepping Stones NI, a services manager, a training co-ordinator, an employment service co-ordinator, one vocational trainer, three employment officers, two job coaches, a careers guidance officer and a transition coordinator deliver the project in Castlereagh, Downpatrick and Lisburn.

The Now Group and Stepping Stones NI operate a number of social enterprises to support the delivery of the project and include three cafes, a picture framing service and bespoke stationery production.

2. Focus of the inspection

In order to promote improvement in the interest of all participants, the inspection linked internal and external approaches to evaluate the:

- outcomes for participants;
- effectiveness of the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes;
- quality of provision for learning and development; and
- quality of the leadership and management.

3. Overall findings of the inspection

Overall effectiveness	Capacity for sustained improvement
Outcomes for learners	Very good
Quality of provision	Good
Leadership and management	Good

¹ Details of partnership arrangements are provided in Appendix B

² All performance data in this report was provided by the ESF project promoter at the time of the inspection.

KEY FINDINGS

4. Outcomes for learners

Despite the delayed start to the project, the project promoter, in partnership with Stepping Stones NI, has worked hard and to good effective to identify and register participants from the target group. In 2015/16, 267 participants were recruited which was under the target of 320, however, in 2016/17, recruitment improved significantly; 145 participants were recruited which is just under the target of 150. Retention rates across the two years of the project are outstanding at 95% and 100% respectively. It is noteworthy that of the 209 participants who have already completed their programme, 50% have achieved an accredited level 1 vocational qualification. The remainder achieved an employability and/or personal development qualification.

Most of the participants undertaking vocational training are developing their occupational skills to a good or better standard, and very often are optimising their personal capabilities and overcoming their learning disabilities. They are able to, for example, prepare and present food, and serve customers during the lunchtime trade in the social enterprise cafes. Those participants who are closer to employment progress more rapidly, steadily building their work-readiness skills through employability workshops, social events, job clubs and work-experiences. They can, for example, work against time-bound pressures and develop further their personal capabilities, including customer service skills, which they are able to transfer to an employment opportunity.

During 2015-16, the project promoter has been particularly successful in progressing 26 participants into full-time employment which exceeds the target of 21; 28 into part-time employment which exceeds the target of 21; 48 into voluntary work which exceeds the target of 23; 15 on to another training and employment programme which exceeds a target of ten; and one into self-employment which is line with the target. For 2015-16, the overall positive progression rate is 44% which is above the targeted progression rate of 29%. To date for 2016-17, the overall positive progression is currently 36% which is below the targeted progression rate of 52%. As participant retention rates are consistently high, it is expected that the progression rate will increase further over the life of the project.

A key strength of the provision is the individualised support provided for the participants which builds effectively their confidence and self-esteem. All the participants interviewed reported that the project has increased their personal, social and employability skills, and in particular their confidence and communication skills. The participants' progress in developing and extending their personal capabilities is tracked and monitored systematically using the 'Outcomes Star' tool, including insightful case studies for each participant, which demonstrate clearly improvements in the participants' personal, social and employability skills. A noteworthy feature of the project is the well-focused and effective attention given to raising the participants' independence and self-advocacy skills.

5. Quality of provision

The curriculum offer of accredited and non-accredited training opportunities is well-designed and appropriately targeted to support the participants develop occupational, employability, social and life skills. The uptake and achievement of accredited vocational qualifications is, however slightly below target; to date 105 participants have achieved the qualification in 2015-16 and 2016-17, against a target of 145 for both years. Going forward, the project promoter needs to continue to monitor and promote further the uptake of vocational qualifications. The participants also benefit from access to a range of industry-related non-accredited training, which includes, for example, barista, food hygiene and health and safety training to support their progression to employment.

For those participants not targeting a vocational qualification there is a wide range of work-inspiration activities to increase and underpin their employment opportunities. The employment officers work hard to support the participants find suitable work-experience placements and to secure an employment opportunity. In 2015-16, the work-experience opportunities exceeded the project target, but are currently below the target for 2016-17 and going forward is an area for development. The recent development of a job club for the participants registered with the NOW Group has enabled them to explore employment opportunities in a structured and purposeful manner, and is a notable strength of the provision.

The participants benefit from a well-structured induction process and initial assessment which informs well their personal training plan (PTP), against which their progress is reviewed appropriately every 12 weeks. The setting of specific and measurable interim targets to inform future training and/or interventions requires further refinement to ensure each participant is progressing at an optimal pace.

The quality of the directed training in the small sample of sessions observed is mostly good or better. In the most effective practice there is evidence of very good planning with well-structured learning tasks and assessment opportunities; the participants were motivated, keen to learn and made good progress. In a few of the sessions, the quality of the learning, teaching and training had important areas for improvement; these included the need for better planning for more effective, targeted learning and teaching strategies, including access to an appropriate range of resources to enhance and support the learning.

The care and welfare provided for the participants impacts positively on their development. There is an inclusive, caring ethos fostered by the project promoter and the partnership organisation. A good range of links with external organisations are in place to provide any required specialist support for the participants. The staff build effective working relationships with the participants; they are very approachable, supportive and affirming. The participants are encouraged and supported to develop social networks outside of the project, including for example, trips to the food, fish and craft markets and participation in external catering events and competitions which underpin effective development of their confidence and self-esteem.

6. Leadership and management

The project promoter, in partnership with Stepping Stones NI, has a clear and well-considered strategic vision to provide a range of support services and well-targeted training opportunities for people with learning disabilities, particularly through innovative social enterprises. At all levels in the NOW Group and Stepping Stones NI there are high levels of enthusiasm and innovation to ensure the success of the Workforce III project. A key feature of the project is the participants' access to the NOW Group's and Stepping Stones NI's social enterprises to provide them with safe and nurturing realistic working environments to develop their occupational and employability skills.

At all levels, the staff are committed to providing high quality, tailored support, training and employment opportunities for the participants. They are afforded opportunities to undertake appropriate continuing professional development; most of the tutors have undertaken the Certificate in Teaching. While the training resources for the vocational training are consistently of a high quality, the quality of the training facilities for employability and personal development training is too variable. The training rooms in the out-centres have limited access to suitable learning support material and information and learning technology (ILT). In contrast, the training facilities for vocational training are welcoming and well-equipped, including suitable ILT resources to promote and support effective learning.

The recent development of the job club and social hub facility in the NOW Group is a considerable strength of the provision, which is also informing similar planned developments in Stepping Stones NI.

The partnership working arrangements for the Workforce III project have been recently reviewed and revised. Subsequently, the project promoter has implemented new roles and functions for managing and reviewing the quality and performance of the project across both the NOW Group and Stepping Stones NI. In addition, roles, responsibilities and staffing capacity within Stepping Stones NI have changed significantly since the commencement of the project. Consequently, it is important that the project promoter continues to monitor closely the impact of the new management roles and functions. In particular, there is a need to embed the ongoing developments in the management information system, especially the use and reporting of key data to underpin regular monitoring and reviewing of the project's targets and action planning.

The NOW Group and Stepping Stones NI have developed links and partnerships with a range of organisations, employers and external agencies to support the delivery of the project and the development of employment opportunities for participants. The employers interviewed reflected positively on the level of the work-readiness skills demonstrated by participants on entry to employment, and on the additional support provided by the project's employment officers. In addition, there are effective links with local health and social care trusts and special schools to facilitate referral of participants to the project.

While the processes for self-evaluation and quality improvement planning are developing systematically in line with recommendations from previous ETI inspections, there is still the need for further refinement. In particular this includes: more effective use and analysis of data from across all aspects of the project to inform more critical self-evaluation; the consistent use of measurable action planning to effect and sustain improvement; and clearer evidence of involvement of the partner organisation in the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes.

Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the arrangements for safeguarding participants reflect broadly the guidance from the Department. However, the project promoter needs to:

- establish overarching arrangements to incorporate existing safeguarding policies and procedures for the delivery of the project across the partner organisations, including the monitoring of safeguarding training at all levels; and
- communicate more effectively the safeguarding information to all participants in an accessible format.

7. Overall effectiveness

The NOW Group demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the participants. There are areas for improvement that the project promoter has demonstrated the capacity to address and these include the need to:

- collate and use performance data more effectively to monitor and review the distance travelled by each participant in the development of their personal, social and employability skills;

- develop further the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes to include more critical evaluation of the impact of the project across all of its strands; and
- continue to embed the management information and reporting processes for the project, particularly to underpin the development and sharing of best practice across the partner organisations.

The ETI will monitor how the project promoter sustains improvement.

A. Project registrations

Programme	Numbers of enrolments	% against target
European Social Fund Workforce III Project, 2015/2016	267	83%
European Social Fund Workforce III Project, 2016/2017	145	97%

B. Partnership arrangements

The project promoter, the NOW Group, works in partnership with Stepping Stones NI to deliver the Workforce III ESF project. The NOW Group deliver the project in the geographical areas of Antrim, Carrickfergus, Belfast, Mid Ulster and North Down and Ards; and Stepping Stones NI deliver the project in Castlereagh, Downpatrick and Lisburn. The Now Group headquarters are based in West Belfast and Stepping Stones NI in Lisburn.

C. Inspection methodology and evidence base

The ETI's Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework is available on the ETI website www.etini.gov.uk.

Two ETI inspectors and one associate assessor observed 39 participants in ten learning and personal development sessions and two focus group meetings. Discussions were held with the NOW Group and Stepping Stones NI management teams. The tracking and monitoring arrangements, action plans, and planning documents were examined. The project promoter's self-evaluation report, quality improvement plan and other relevant documentation were scrutinised.

D. 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%

Performance levels

The ETI use the following performance levels when reporting on Outcomes for learners, Quality of Provision and on Leadership and Management.

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

Overall effectiveness

The ETI use one of the following inspection outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the organisation:

The organisation has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor how the organisation sustains improvement.
The organisation demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor how the organisation sustains improvement.
The organisation needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.
The organisation needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all the participants. The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

Key Performance Indicators and Definitions	
Retention	The percentage of enrolments measured over the full duration of their programme.
Achievement	The percentage of participants who completed their targeted individual outcomes.
Progression	The percentage of successful completers who achieved positive progression.

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