

# EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in Stepping Stones NI

Stepping Stones to Employment 2

Report of a Call 3 Visit in November 2022



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



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## Context

Stepping Stones NI is a charitable organisation providing a range of services and social enterprises that support people with learning disabilities and difficulties to realise their full potential for a better future.

Stepping Stones NI is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Stepping Stones to Employment 2 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 project is aimed at improving the employability skills of participants with learning difficulties or disabilities, from 16 years upwards, and supporting them to progress to meaningful employment, further education and/or training.

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 November 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 3 visit to Stepping Stones 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, 101 participants<sup>1</sup> were registered on the project.

While none of the participants completed the online questionnaire, ETI met and spoke with a sample of them during their learning and development sessions and through online and face-to-face focus groups.

The participants reported that their experiences on the project were positive, and they were well supported in all aspects of their learning and training. They stated that the staff help them to build their confidence and self-esteem and develop new skills and competences.

## 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 further develop the lesson observation process; and
- to review how the e-safety and safeguarding training for participants focuses on learning disability.

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<sup>1</sup> All performance data in this report was provided by the ESF project promoter.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

## Key Findings

The Call 3 visit identified the following key findings.

- An appropriate curriculum is in place to underpin the three key overarching strands of the project: to support participants in their transition from both mainstream and special schools (transition); to provide participants with relevant training and employment opportunities (employment); and to support the participants' personal and social development (youth).
- All of the participants are assigned a key worker at the beginning of the project and a tailored programme is devised and delivered flexibly to meet their individual learning and development needs. Most of them have multiple and complex barriers to learning and progression.
- The organisation's employment academies provide the participants with relevant opportunities to work towards accredited industry and/or vocationally related qualifications at level 1 or 2, in areas such as food hygiene, health and safety, hospitality and catering, manual handling, and world host, as well as preparation for a guaranteed job interview with an employer. The participants and employers reported on the benefits of the academies, including the support for the participants to develop interview skills, and the disability awareness, and autism specific training provided for employers. Employers further reported that the clear communication between the employer, the participant and Stepping Stones NI is a key feature of their successful partnership. They commented positively on the level of pre- and post-employment support which Stepping Stones NI provides, including attendance with participants at interviews and the post-employment engagement with participants and employers.
- Additionally, there are skills academies which are used well to support the development of the employability, personal and social skills of those participants not yet ready to progress to employment. They help to build the participants' confidence and cover a variety of disciplines including communication, healthy living, mental health, and mindfulness.
- The project promoter has rebranded their youth work delivery model through a review and transformation of their youth services in consultation with the participants. In the Youth Onwards Upwards (Y.O.U) programme strand, the participants discussed and planned with one another for the forthcoming local Christmas market, developing customer service skills and creating products to sell on behalf of the organisation. Through this strand, the participants are making new friendships and social connections which are helping them overcome issues such as anxiety and social isolation. Their interactions with one another were good humoured, respectful, and confident and they have established an excellent rapport and trusting relationships with the staff.

- The employment and skills academies and the Y.O.U programme strand support the participants to make new friendships and social connections. The learning and development sessions observed were effective. There was evidence of effective planning, mutually respectful relationships between the participants and the tutors, and most of the participants engaged well in their learning. They responded well when questioned, seeking clarification when appropriate, and most participated well in the small and larger group discussions. The participants were comfortable to share their personal and work experiences which enabled them to learn with and from one another. The positive affirmations by the facilitators were contributing to their self-esteem and confidence to speak out. An appropriate lesson observation process has been implemented across the organisation. This will be developed further over the coming year to support new tutors and encourage peer observation among staff.
- Stepping Stones NI have established five social enterprises which offer participants good opportunities to undertake a work experience placement in a realistic training environment. The three cafes, picture framing and wedding stationery businesses help the participants to develop a range of social and employability skills, including customer service and food hygiene. Participants working in the cafes have the opportunity to undertake national vocational qualifications at level 1 and level 2 in catering and hospitality.
- The needs and progress of the participants are recorded effectively by the staff. The regular reviews capture well their views on their learning and personal and social development, demonstrating an understanding of the challenges that they as young people face, and the effective support given by the staff. In discussions, the participants highlighted that what they are learning is useful; for example, in retail work environments they learn about roles, regulations and expectations. They stated that their learning is relevant to their work aspirations and that they find the regular contact from the staff supportive and helpful.
- The participants avail of a wraparound support service which is inclusive and delivered flexibly, responsively and sensitively to meet their individual needs. Appropriate links and partnerships have been developed with an extensive range of stakeholders, including community organisations, employers, statutory agencies, support organisations, and other key stakeholders for referral and recruitment purposes and to support and signpost participants to enable them to overcome their barriers to progression.
- The stakeholders interviewed reported that the participants are supported well to overcome challenges in their personal lives and in their workplaces, and cited the availability of wider family support, if required, as a notable benefit. In supporting an ethos and culture of inclusion across the organisation, Stepping Stones NI is currently reviewing the content of its e-safety and safeguarding training to ensure there is a clear focus on participants with a learning disability, and plans are in place to provide gender identity and sexual orientation training for staff, participants and other relevant stakeholders.

- Recruitment to the project has exceeded the overall target. The target for participants progressing to employment has also been exceeded, and to date, education and/or training is at 80% of the target set. All of the participants recruited have been retained on the project. The organisation is committed to ensuring that all of the participants recruited, and who remain on the project when Call 3 ends, complete and achieve their individual targets. Management is also currently reviewing how longer-term support can be provided for participants after the end of Call 3 if required.
- The project is well led at both strategic and operational levels. Management have taken appropriate action to address the areas for development identified at the previous monitoring visit in July 2021. The training accommodation and physical resources in place to support the delivery of the project are of a high quality. Additional accommodation to support participants interested in horticulture has been recently secured and planning is well developed to extend the curriculum offered to participants.
- The project staff are well-experienced in working with adults and young people with learning, personal and social development needs. Those interviewed, including a small number of new staff recruited over the past 18 months, report that they have good opportunities to undertake continuous professional development, that effective collegial working relationships exist among management and staff, and they feel well-supported by management. A number of incentives have been introduced by management to support the mental health and well-being of staff and promote a healthy work-life balance; this is viewed as a positive and welcome development by staff. Despite continuing to advertise job posts, management are finding it increasingly difficult to fill a number of current vacancies for the project.
- An appropriate self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process is in place. The documentation provides a concise evaluation of the quality of the provision and identifies key strengths and relevant areas for improvement. An appropriate action plan has been developed to address the areas for improvement. Overall, the leadership and management is planning effectively for learning and quality improvement, including planning for sustainability and progression of participants.

## Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the Call 3 visit, the arrangements for safeguarding participants of the Stepping Stones to Employment 2 ESF project reflect current legislation and practice.

## Overall outcome

At the time of the Call 3 visit, and in the areas evaluated, Stepping Stones NI demonstrates a high level of capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the Stepping Stones to Employment 2 ESF project.

# APPENDIX

## A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund – Stepping Stones to Employment 2	Since 1 April 2022 <sup>2</sup>
Numbers of enrolments and % against target	265 (120%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	54 (154%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	24 (80%)
Retention – Number of early leavers and % against target	0 (100%)

## B. Methodology and evidence base

ETI observed three learning and development sessions, spoke with a sample of participants online, in face-to-face focus groups and in their learning and development sessions, had discussions with key stakeholders, employers and one parent, and 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 – 21 November 2022

## 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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