

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND CALL 3 VISIT

European Social Fund provision in the
NOW Group

Verve

Report of a Call 3 Visit in September 2022



Providing Inspection services for:
Department of Education
Department for the Economy
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Context

The NOW Group is a social enterprise supporting people with learning difficulties and autism into employment. It is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Verve 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 September 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a Call 3 visit to the NOW Group 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, 181 participants¹ were registered on the project.

The ETI met and spoke with a sample of participants during their learning and development sessions and in a focus group. During the focus group, all of the participants spoke of the positive impact of the project on their employability skills, social inclusion and preparation for work, with some of them describing the impact as 'life changing' and 'life-saving'.

Thirty-four percent of the participants completed the online questionnaire. They all reported that: their programme is well managed; they know who to go to if they have a problem or concern; and they feel well supported when learning in the organisation. Most indicated that they find the programme both interesting and challenging.

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 the employment opportunities for the participants through an academy model of delivery; and
- to improve the timely monitoring and evaluation of participant progress to promote successful learning and development.

The arrangements for safeguarding were also included.

¹ All performance data in this report was provided by the ESF project promoter.

Key Findings

The Call 3 visit identified the following key findings.

- An academy model of delivery typically involves a 12-week programme incorporating an academic qualification up to level 2, and including a relevant work placement in the final six weeks. Delivery is across all of the council areas in Northern Ireland. Appropriate reflection and self-evaluation of this model of delivery has resulted in improved planning with a focus on assessing participants' suitability, the specific roles and responsibilities in certain industries, as well as placement and job opportunities.
- The curriculum provided is very good; it is well-balanced and individually tailored to support each participant with an individual progression pathway to meet their specific needs, interests and aspirations. It ranges from short-term support with the job application process through to achievement of accredited vocational qualifications and non-accredited training, linked to work experience and support into and during employment, including essential skills provision where needed.
- The co-designed skills and training developed by staff, with the participants and employers, is well-aligned to local labour market intelligence and industry needs. The provision includes an appropriate range of academies in administration, cleaning, digital skills, hospitality, and retail and warehousing. For example, the practical skills required for a level 2 qualification in hospitality and catering are developed effectively through on-the-job training in social enterprise cafés managed by the NOW Group. A pre-employment academy also equips the participants with vital, relevant employability skills to support and enable them to transition into the workplace, for example, learning how to effectively communicate in the workplace, working as part of a team and developing appropriate workplace behaviours.
- Further non-accredited training has also had a positive impact in supporting the participants. This includes areas such as healthy eating, mental and physical health, developing personal confidence and self-esteem, using information and communication technology, and money management.
- All of the job club engagement sessions and training sessions observed during the visit were effective and well-structured, with an appropriate range of teaching strategies and well-targeted support to assist the participants to overcome barriers to learning.
- To date, 423 training accreditations have been achieved against a target of 200 and the retention rate is very high at 99%. A good range of progression opportunities exist and are well used by participants to transition to paid employment posts within the organisation's social enterprises.

- With the support of a significant number of strategic partners the project is making good progress to achieve the progression targets of participants into employment during Call 3. Planning is in place to complete targeted recruitment in a timely manner in order to enable all of the participants to meet their targets before the completion of Call 3 in March 2023. Continued employment support will be provided for those participants who require it through other funded programmes.
- The organisation has appropriately identified the need to monitor, evaluate and review participant progress in a more timely and effective manner to determine distance travelled by the participants over the course of their programme. An appropriate action plan is in place to assess and improve the impact of a measurement tool which identifies progress achieved and developmental needs at key points of the participant journey. Participants who met with inspectors during the visit have made significant progress in their personal development from their starting point on the project.
- The strategic leadership and management of the project is highly effective, with a strong emphasis placed on promoting an inclusive ethos and the welfare of both participants and staff. There is a strong commitment to providing flexible and participant-centred programmes, and listening to and acting on feedback, both in the development of the programmes and in the professional development of the staff. The staff spoke of the high levels of care and support provided by the management team and of the emphasis placed by the organisation on listening to and incorporating their views and experiences.
- A process of self-evaluation and planning for quality improvement is well-embedded across the organisation. An appropriate action plan is in place to address the areas for improvement identified, including measurable targets and regular review milestones. Overall, the leadership and management is planning effectively for learning and quality improvement, including planning for sustainability and progression of participants.
- There are very good links and collaborative partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders and external bodies to support the delivery of the project including: the councils; the health and social care trusts; a range of referral agencies; and, a network of specialised support agencies and employers. The strategic partners have signed up to an initiative, the JAM (Just A Minute) card, which the organisation has introduced to support participants in the community; they have also engaged with training provided by the NOW Group.

Safeguarding

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

Overall outcome

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

APPENDIX

A. Call 3 Performance Data

European Social Fund – Verve	Since 1 April 2022²
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Numbers of enrolments and % against target	271 (68%)
Numbers of participants into employment upon leaving and % against target	72 (45%)
Numbers of participants into education and/or training upon leaving and % against target	15 (38%)
Retention - Numbers and % against target	268 (99%)

B. Methodology and evidence base

The ETI observed five sessions of practice, spoke with a sample of participants during a focus group meeting, and had discussions with key stakeholders, including employers 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%

² 1 April 2022 - 27 September 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 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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