



Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE)

Policy Group Briefing Paper, No.3

‘Future funding for disability employment services’

December 2021

#SupportedEmployment

The Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE) is an umbrella organisation representing individuals and organisations promoting employment opportunities for disabled people across all employment sectors. Our associated policy coalition advocates for and collectively provides employment support to around 4,000 people with a disability in Northern Ireland. This includes people with a learning, physical or sensory disability, mental ill-health and autism. We employ over 330 staff across our organisations' disability employment services.

Our main **aim** is to highlight employment best practice, influence systems and change, and improve employment outcomes for disabled people. We do this by ensuring employment policy recognises the needs of disabled people, and effectively supports them to reach their potential.

NIUSE endorse Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) [ESF User Group Briefing Paper \(November 2021\)](#).

This briefing paper was produced by Mencap NI on behalf of the Northern Ireland Union for Supported Employment (NIUSE) Policy Group.

For further information, please contact:

Edyth Dunlop

edythdunlop@niuse.org.uk

Overview

People with a disability are at greater risk of experiencing a range of economic, social and health inequalities, including being unemployed or economically inactive. A lack of skills and qualifications means they are more likely to work part-time, be in lower skilled jobs and earn less money. Access to training and employment promotes social inclusion, and helps improve people's life chances and overall well-being.

For over three decades, the European Social Fund (ESF) Programme, funded by the European Commission, has been the main source of funding for disadvantaged people, whose aim is *"to combat poverty and enhance social inclusion by reducing economic inactivity and to increase the skill bases of those currently in and future*

*potential participants in the workforce*¹ It has provided and continues to provide vital funding for the long-term unemployed, ex-offenders young people not in education, employment or training (NEETS), and people with a disability.

The ESF Programme has enabled disability employment services in Northern Ireland to strategically plan for the delivery of longer-term interventions; develop expert staff teams; and build established infrastructure and partnerships. In 2019 the NIUSE Policy Group published a briefing paper highlighting the need for clarity around future funding for disability employment services currently provided for under ESF.

Initially due to finish at the end of March 2022, the programme has since been extended under ESF Call 3 until 31st March 2023, dependant on organisations securing the necessary match funding. Beyond this point, the arrangements post-ESF remain unclear, including the role of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund as its replacement.

This period of uncertainty is framed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic which has had a disproportionate impacted on disabled people in terms of loss of income, furlough and unemployment. Many disabled people have been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable and have to shield for a considerable period. This has affected their well-being, mental health and ability to retain and seek employment.

Key Facts

- Almost one in five people of working age in Northern Ireland has a disability.
- The Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately impacts disabled people who are twice as likely to remain unemployed when they fall out of work for an extended period.

¹ Department for the Economy Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2014 – 2020

- In 2020 the employment rate was 38% for people with disabilities in NI and 80% for those without, indicating a disability employment rate gap of 42 percentage points (NISRA, 2021)²
- This disparity between this disability employment gap in Northern Ireland (42%) and in whole of the UK (28%) in 2020 remains high, and has been higher at least since 2014 (NISRA, 2021)³.
- People with a learning disability or mental health conditions are especially likely to be disadvantaged in terms of employment rate, type of work and level of unemployment (Equality Commission for NI, 2018)⁴.

What works?

Disabled people experience many challenges and barriers to finding work, including:

- Lack of good quality support to get and maintain employment
- Lack of support to build confidence and skills
- Employers' attitudes and recruitment & selection and retention approaches
- Limited understanding as to what disabled people can do with the right support (reasonable adjustments).

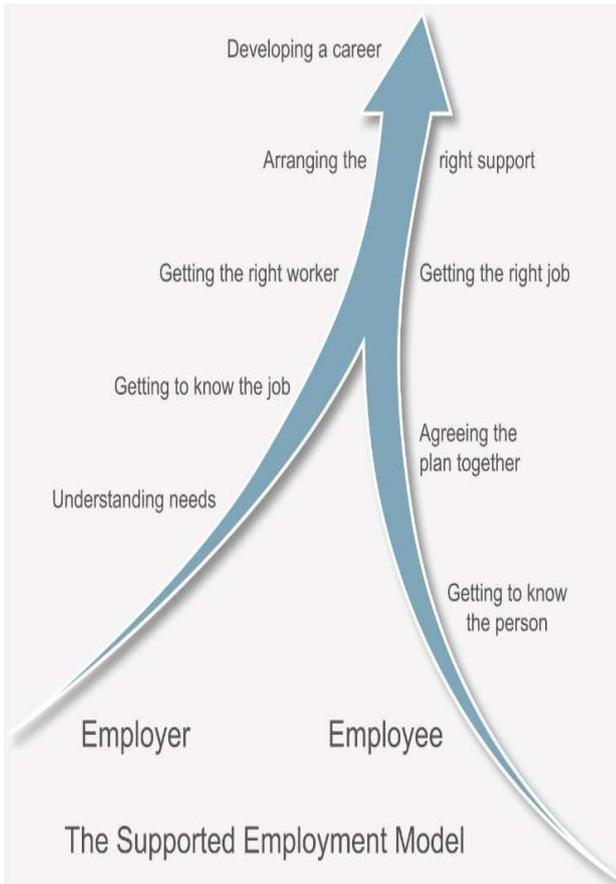
The ESF programme is widely recognised as a model of good practice in supporting those most marginalised from the labour market, including people with a disability. A recent independent evaluation report called *“An Impact Evaluation of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2014 -2020”*⁵ demonstrated excellent value for money. It reported that ESF key strengths include flexibility of approach; investment in relationship building; and the provision of tailored, demand driven supports. The success of the ESF Programme in NI has been requested to share the expertise across other participating EU nations.

² “Disability Employment Gap Northern Ireland 2020” Labour Force Survey, NISRA (Oct 2021) <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/Disability-employment-gap-NI-2020.pdf>

³ As Above

⁴ “Key Inequalities – Employment”, Equality Commission for NI (2018) <https://www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Employment>

⁵ “An Impact Evaluation of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2014 – 2020” commissioned by Department for the Economy and conducted by Grant Thornton (Dec 2020) <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/impact-evaluation-northern-ireland-european-social-fund-programme-2014-2020>



(Appendix 1)

The delivery of the ESF disability employment services is underpinned by the **Supported Employment** approach which utilises vocational profiling, employer engagement and ongoing job support. ESF participants are supported to build their skills to progress from the services to sustainable outcomes including:

- paid employment
- self-employment
- further or higher education
- vocational training
- work experience
- volunteering

This is illustrated in the Case Studies

Evidence shows that participation in these services leads to successful outcomes in terms of *“work readiness, personal and social skills, and increased levels of confidence and self-esteem”* (ETI, 2018)⁶. The most recent outcomes for the period of Call 2 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2020, and 1 April 2021 – 30 June 2021 for the 22 disability projects, shows that:

- **7275** disabled people have benefited across 22 projects
- **20.4%** (1487) progressed into paid employment – this exceeds the 10% target set by ESF
- **20%** (1463) progressed into training/education on leaving the programme
- **8687** qualifications were gained/achieved
- **9437** soft outcomes⁷ were gained/achieved

⁶“ Education and Training Inspectorate, Chief Inspector’s Report 2016-2018” ETI, https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/cir-2016-2018_1.pdf

⁷ The term 'Soft Outcomes' is broadly used to describe a range of qualities and behaviours which make up personal, social and emotional development such as self-confidence, resilience, team-working, communication, social interaction skills and personal motivation.

Key Issues

NIUSE is seriously concerned about the absence of any clear plan to ensure continuation of funding to sustain these core services for disabled people after March 2023. This situation is further compounded by Covid-19 and the uncertainty the ongoing pandemic brings to current and future employment / training opportunities for disabled people.

- **Funding gaps / equity of access**

A recent report commissioned by the Department for Economy and the Department for Communities⁸ indicated that any break in ESF provision would lead to unmet need. It would also result in a '**cliff edge**' in terms of access to suitable support at a time of unprecedented social and economic challenge and therefore must be avoided.

Considering that ESF remains the primary and consistent source of funding for employment & inclusion core services for disabled people in NI, the absence of a next steps plan and / or a commitment to ring-fenced funding for employment support within the UKSPF is particularly concerning. While efforts by Department for the Economy and Department for Communities to explore other funding options are commendable, such as the now disbanded ESF Succession Project, there remains a lack of clarity about what will replace it.

This is critical when mainstream provision in Northern Ireland does not meet the specialist needs of those with complex disabilities. NI also experiences the highest prevalence of disability and economic inactivity. Any delay in the creation and roll-out of succession funding, or any reduction in funding, would adversely impact this group. Everyone in Northern Ireland should have equal access to skills development, training and employment opportunities, especially those furthest removed from the labour market.

⁸ "European Social Fund Succession Landscape Paper" commission by Department for the Economy and The Department for Communities conducted by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) (February 2021), <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/european-social-fund-succession-landscape-report>

The recent Strategic Investment Board report⁹ commissioned by DfE and DfC highlighted that the interventions delivered by ESF projects align with the Northern Ireland social and economic policies. These policies include the Draft Programme for Government (PfG), New Decade, New Approach and a range of policies and strategies produced by DfC, DfE, DoH, TEO and other government department and agencies such as

- DfE Skills Strategy for NI: Skills for a 10x Economy,
- DfE Draft Industrial Strategy 2030;
- The Executive Offices “Building Forward: Consolidated COVID-19 Recovery Plan,
- DfC Building Inclusive Communities, (i.e. Disability Strategy, Gender Equality; and Sexual Orientation),
- DfC Disability Employment Strategy,
- Department for Health’s Health and Wellbeing Strategy: Delivering Together Strategy

ESF provision from the Community & Voluntary sector has demonstrated their unique partnership approach in NI to deliver a range of cross-departmental impacts and high level priorities for government. We are concerned that the real need that current ESF provision meets will not be addressed or adequately resourced under domestic policies and strategies - particularly the needs of those who are most vulnerable in society and who require the most support. This is particularly concerning with the pressure across all the Government departments and agencies as we recover from COVID and the impact of leaving the EU. ESF provision may not be given the same priority resulting in a further “*cliff edge*” of support and unmet need.

Current ESF Funds also provided much wider health and wellbeing benefits to the most vulnerable, such as those with complex disabilities including people with mental health issues, learning disabilities, and autism spectrum conditions and who had been disproportionately impacted by COVID. Throughout the life time of

⁹ “*European Social Fund Succession Landscape Paper*” commission by Department for the Economy and The Department for Communities conducted by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) (February 2021), <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/european-social-fund-succession-landscape-report>

successive ESF programmes, the disability projects have been embedded into the referral routes for these thousands of vulnerable people. When ESF funding ends there are no clear plans to make provision for these critical community-based core disability services. This will have a particular impact on the services provided by local Health and Social Care Trusts which are already at breaking point. A significant number ESF participants are referred through the local Health and Social Care Trusts to a range of ESF Projects and they have achieved successful outcomes but if no successor programme available the participants will experience withdrawal of community-based services with specialist disability expertise for employability and inclusion support. This unmet need will exacerbate pressures on Health & Social Care Trusts, families and people with disability. The local Health and Social Care Trust will have to identify and resource services to these participants when the Health Service is already stretched.

- **Match funding**

Administered by the Department for the Economy (DfE), the ESF budget for Call 2 was £168m for 66 projects¹⁰ of which £60m is for 22 disability projects. Funding comes from ESF (55%) Department for the Economy (10%); and a range of other match funders (35%). These other match funders include government departments (i.e. Department for Communities, Department of Health etc), Health and Social Care Trusts, local Councils, further education colleges, and private sources.

There is £20m of EU funding available under ESF Call 3¹¹, for 2022 - 2023 however in order that the successful projects can avail of this, the necessary match funding, £14m must be urgently identified. DfE have confirmed that they are unable to meet all the match funding requirements, with question marks on the funding levels available from other government departments, leaving organisations faced with potential of withdrawal of service.

¹⁰ The 66 projects are broken down in to the following four categories – unemployment and economic inactive (21), NEET (18), Disability (22) and Community Family Programme (5). <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/66-european-social-fund-call-2-projects-by-constituency-and-council-area>

¹¹ Funding for ESF Call 3 - 50% ESF, 15% DfE and 35% other match funders.

- **UK Shared Prosperity Fund / role of devolved nations**

The objective of the UKSPF is to tackle inequalities between communities. As announced by the most recent Budget and Spending Review, the fund is worth over £2.6 billion across the next three years, to help people access new opportunities in places of need. This is broken down as £400m in 2022-23, £700m in 2023-24 and £1.5bn in 2024-25. However, there remains an absence of specific detail about the implementation of the UKSPF; the allocated levels of funding for Northern Ireland; and whether it will be a viable replacement fund to the current ESF programme.

When the UKSPF was first announced as the likely successor to EU funding, it was also anticipated that powers would be transferred to the NI administration to allocate monies in line with Northern Ireland's devolved status and responsibility for economic development. In addition, the devolved administrations and their partners would hold responsibility for the detailed design and delivery of relevant parts of the fund to most effectively meet local need.

The UK Government's intention is to retain strategic oversight and responsibility for the design and delivery of the UKSPF. Therefore, the NI Executive will have a limited role, if any, in informing its preparation and roll-out, or determining local funding priorities.

- **Covid-19 pandemic**

It is vital that Government and organisations work collaboratively to tackle the significant challenges posed by Covid-19 for those most vulnerable and disadvantaged, especially when the long term societal and economic impacts remain unknown. Disability employment and inclusion core services under the ESF programme have a critical role to play alongside other interventions in supporting peoples' life chances, health and emotional wellbeing. Resourcing and investment for these most vulnerable people in this sector must therefore be sustained and protected, supported by a clear plan to ensure disabled people are not disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Key Actions for Government

- Set out a clear plan to reduce the disability employment gap with a well-funded ESF successor Programme. This should be developed in partnership with disabled people and disability employment sector, should align with draft Programme for Government and other key policy areas such as the Skills Strategy NI: Skills for a 10x Economy, Disability Strategy, Disability Employment Strategy; and should incorporate Covid-19 recovery planning.
- Clarify post-ESF funding arrangements after March 2023 for support for the disability employment services, including the role of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and / or alternative funding provision. To ensure no gap in funding.
- Ensure that ESF Programme priorities are an integral part in local and domestic policies and strategies and funded appropriately and support those people who are furthest from the labour market.
- Provide assurances that there will be no reduction in current funding levels, or any gap between existing and new funding streams for disability employment support.
- Take urgent action to clarify the match funding arrangements for those projects which have successfully secured funding through ESF Call 3.
- Ensure that the powers to allocate funding through the UKSPF are transferred across nations to maintain Northern Ireland's devolved status and responsibility for economic development. In the absence of this, the NI government must have a significant role in the preparation, implementation, and management of UKSPF funds, including determining local funding priorities.

For further information contact:-

Edyth Dunlop
Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment
Email: edythdunlop@niuse.org.uk

Appendix 1 - Case Studies

Case Study 1 - Colin



The AMH 'Working it Out' ESF-funded project provides a comprehensive programme of specialist training in personal development, vocational skills and employability, to people recovering from mental illness. It supports them to gain paid employment or progress to further education / further training.

Colin initially took part in International Job Shadow Day with Alan Espey Clothing & Interiors Newtownards. This led to a work experience placement, followed by part-time employment in the business. While attending AMH New Horizons, Colin also achieved his NVQ Level Two Certificate in Retail Skills.

Colin said, *“Securing this employment, has meant a great deal to me. It has boosted my confidence and career prospects. I’m indebted to Mr Espey for providing me with the opportunity to develop my retail experience and for encouraging and motivating me.”*

Mr Espey commented, *“For us, this was an excellent opportunity to give someone with no retail experience a chance to gain retail knowledge and practical skills in a real working environment. I watched, over the weeks and months, Colin becoming more confident with weekly tasks such as customer engagement, stocktaking, using tills and displaying stock. It has been a very positive experience and one where we feel we have helped Colin to plan for his future.”*

Case Study 2 – Ben



Orchardville’s ESF-funded Ignite2 project supports people with a learning disability or autism to find the right job and keep it.

Having previously worked in events, Ben, like many former employees in that sector, was forced to re-think his chosen career pathway due to the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Changing job and career path can be challenging at the best of times, however the pandemic presented Ben with a whole new set of challenges to overcome.

Supported by his Employment Officer, Ben completed accredited interview skills training, giving him the tools to approach interviews with greater confidence and a better understanding of what employers look for during selection. He also attended mock interviews using zoom, adapting well to all the difficulties that method of communication can present!

Despite having several unsuccessful interviews Ben never gave up, securing paid employment at ASDA with his perseverance and determination to succeed clear for all to see. Commenting on his new job in retail Ben reflected, “At the time changing careers felt like a challenge but with the right support from my Employment Officer and my colleagues at ASDA I’ve managed to do it. I’m really enjoying my work right now.”

Case Study 3 – Diane



Eye Work Too is a supported pre-employment programme from the RNIB in NI and funded by ESF. It offers life-changing opportunities for blind or partially sighted people to gain, sustain and retain long-term paid employment.

Diane (48) is blind, having lost her sight overnight at the age of 24 due to complications after contracting bacterial meningitis. She found the programme invaluable as it gave her the opportunity to gain essential experience through extensive on the job training and support. Diane has now been offered a full-time, paid, permanent position with the NI Health and Social Care Board. She says,

“My social worker told me about RNIB’s Eye Work Too project as I had been saying how frustrated I was getting that I couldn’t get a job.”

“I needed to work. I refused to sit on my backside doing nothing. Also, my partner and I realised we were barely making ends meet and we just

wanted a better quality of life.”

Case Study 4 – Thomas

After a very challenging year due to personal and health issues, Thomas wanted something positive to work towards. He was supported by Mencap NI's ESF-funded Employment Service to set goals to find a job, learn new skills and to learn to drive. Thomas said *"I was really down and having a hard time. My Employment Officer helped me to think about what I was going to do, to make things better. I am proud of all I have achieved and happy with where I am at in my life right now'."*

Thomas was delighted to secure paid employment in Grounds Maintenance with IDverde. Barry Mott, IDverde Operations Manager said, *"We get great support from Mencap NI and we as an organisation have gained so much from this experience. I personally have noted the positive impact of employment for Thomas, who has proved to be a hard-working, valuable member of the team."*

Thomas is well on his way to achieving his goals and much more, having completed his Construction Skills Register training and applying for his driving theory test.



Case Study 5

B was referred to the Cedar's Inclusion Works service in by a social worker within the local Stroke healthcare team. Having suffered a stroke in 2017 B was no longer able to work at the job they had previously held. B's main aim was to find out what he would like to do with his life now.

B describes his first experience of coming to the Cedar building as an eye opener as he had nearly been injured by a car before arriving. He did not think of himself as having a 'disability' and had expected to be able to cross the road as quickly as he previously could have. This was an obstacle in itself for B as he was still trying to live life the way he had done prior to his stroke which had left him with significant

mobility issues. He attended the Personal Effectiveness after Brain Injury training and stated that this gave him not only insight and understanding of his acquired brain injury but also practical strategies that he can and does use on a daily basis.

B commenced a work placement assisting with a local stroke support group, he reported an increase in confidence and really enjoyed helping others. Feedback from the group included statements such as “he is an asset to our group, always helping out when he can and the clients love him”. This placement has turned into an official voluntary role for B, one that he continues to do to the present day. B has also participated in a project with Nuvoic which aims to improve voice recognition technology for people who have non-standard (‘dysarthric’) speech. He is halfway through this and making excellent progress.

Case Study 6 - Marana



Marana acquired a disability in 2005, impacting the movement in her hands and arms. In addition to caring for her family and supporting a disabled child, she has since completed an Associate BSc in Creative Technologies, and worked as a Creative Technologist for an Animation company. This role ended due to business downsizing and Marana subsequently experienced a dip in self-confidence due to difficulties trying to secure her dream job and employer perceptions of her disability. She had not long been referred to Job Match when the Covid-19 lockdown came into effect.

With businesses and schools closed, Marana was caring for her children at home and felt that the opportunity for employment was moving further away. However, Marty, her Job Match Supported Employment Officer (SEO), worked with Marana to reassess her career goals and provided support with business start-up opportunities so she could fulfil a long-time aspiration to be self-employed. With Marty’s reassuring presence at every step of the journey, Marana’s new venture, the PastryBase café, has provided her with a profound sense of confidence and purpose.

Case study 7 - Jason



COMPASS - WE CAN project provides qualifications and training towards employment for adults with learning disabilities, autism and mental ill-health.

Jason began his journey with the WE CAN Project shortly before the first Covid-19 lockdown. As a result his induction period was slightly different and all contact and training during this period was through weekly phone calls. However by the summer of 2020 Jason was back gaining 'hands on' work experience at the CAN Can Recycling social enterprise (processing of waste materials). This really boosted his confidence and he gained many new skills including health and safety, time management and working as a team.

Clare, Senior Skills Trainer explains, *“As part of Jason’s training we gave him some additional cleaning duties as he enjoys this type of work and he had proved he was more than capable of this additional responsibility”*. In 2021, Jason was delighted to accept the position as a part-time cleaner to help with the ongoing pandemic for one afternoon each week. Jason said *“I was happy the staff at WE CAN could help me achieve my goal of getting a paid job and I love to do all my tasks keeping the kitchens and bathrooms clean.”*

Case Study 8 – Dean



Dean left school without any qualifications, due to several daily seizures that he encountered because of his epilepsy. He was unable to get a work placement as employers were reluctant to provide the help he needed. This impacted on his well-being and left him feeling isolated.

However, things changed for Dean when he joined Clanrye’s Positive Directions IT Programme which is funded by ESF. They undertook a risk assessment of the classroom, and staff completed first aid and epilepsy training so that Dean could participate.

As a result he completed all modules of his ICT Qualification both Level 1 and 2, and thrived through remote learning.

Dean was supported to gain part-time employment, saying *“My life has just begun, aged 29. My experience with Clanrye has been vitally important to getting into work.”* *“Everybody was great with supporting me with my education and when the time was right finding me opportunities that would suit somebody with my disability. Even as my contract ended with TK Maxx the support I was offered after to find work again was top notch leading to my current position in Iceland.”*

Case Study 9 – Jordan



Jordan joined Triangle’s Supported Employment Service in 2018 to gain experience in retail with the goal of securing paid employment locally in Coleraine.

In order to increase Jordan’s employability, his Employment Officer identified a work placement in a small, but busy convenience store, which would allow him to develop his transferable skills in retail such as customer care, stock rotation and replenishment. When Jordan had gained the experience he needed, he decided it was time to look for paid work with a bigger company. His Employment Officer Tracey saw Tim Hortons were recruiting and approached them.

In September 2021, Jordan was successful in his interview for the role of ‘Team Member’. Tim Hortons has been extremely flexible and willing to accommodate reasonable adjustments for Jordan to ensure that they have an inclusive workforce -this means that Jordan is able to work ‘front of house’ only and is not required to serve the ‘drive through’. His job role also includes serving customers, preparing hot/cold beverages and food orders and general housekeeping of the customer areas.

Jordan says: *‘Tim Hortons is a great employer. It is a nice place to work. I love my job because no day is the same. I enjoy the variety of tasks. Everyone is friendly and helpful, and I get good support from my manager and colleagues. My confidence has grown, and I enjoy earning my own money as it makes me feel proud and gives me independence’.*

Manager Taylor Jones says: *‘Jordan is a great asset to Tim Hortons: his personality is perfect for front of house-it really shines! He is meticulous in everything he does, and I have seen his confidence grow as he settles into the role. The input from Triangle has been invaluable since the start - from initial support with Jordan’s induction to visiting regularly to check in with his progress.’*