



NIUSE
POLICY
GROUP
BRIEFING
PAPER

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Future funding for disability
employment services

**This paper was prepared on behalf of the NIUSE
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Almost **one** in **five**
people of working age
in Northern Ireland (NI)
has a disability.¹

The European Social Fund (ESF) provides dedicated funding for projects across the United Kingdom (UK) aimed at improving the employability and employment levels of vulnerable and disadvantaged people who are usually overlooked within mainstream provision. In doing so, it aims to help reduce inequalities between communities and regions.

¹NISRA Quarterly Supplement to the Labour Market Report, 20th August 2018.



Introduction

Following the UK's recent decision to leave the European Union (EU) in 2019, the UK Government committed to keeping in place current ESF arrangements until they expire (in 2020 / 2022²), and to create a 'successor' fund. A proposed new **UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)**, which operates across the UK, will serve a similar purpose to the existing European Structural and Investment Funds (of which ESF is one). Current EU funding to the UK for social and economic development comprises **£2.4 billion** per year, including associated match funding from public and private sources.

People with a disability are one of the most economically inactive groups who face significant barriers when trying to access employment. ESF is the main source of funding in Northern Ireland for organisations who support them into education, training and employment. As with the rest of the UK, there is a lack of clarity here about the long-term funding of projects currently provided for under ESF, and no commitment to ring-fencing funding for employment support within the replacement fund.

The **Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE)** is an umbrella organisation representing individuals and organisations providing employment opportunities for disabled people. Our associated Policy Group facilitates discussion with members from 16 organisations³ on a range of areas relating to disability and employment. The Policy Group advocates for and collectively provides employment support to almost **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** staff⁴ across our organisations' disability employment services.

The NIUSE Policy Group's main aim is to influence systems change and improve outcomes for people with a disability. We do this by ensuring employment policy and practice recognises the needs of disabled people, and effectively supports them to fulfil their potential. The Group also aims to highlight best practice in supporting people with a disability in developing their employability skills and accessing paid employment.

² Services in NI are being delivered as part of the current ESF funding round for 2018–2022, until March 2022. The UK government stated that in the case of a 'no-deal' departure from the EU, projects will continue to be funded until the end of the current cycle.

³ See back cover for member organisations.

⁴ Full-time equivalent.

About this paper

This short paper highlights some of the key issues relating to the replacement of current funding for disability employment services in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it outlines why employment matters for people with a disability, the barriers they experience, and what organisations are doing to improve their outcomes via ESF funding. The paper also considers what actions government should take to protect the rights and best interests of disabled people in the development and rollout of new funding provision.

Article 27 of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability** provides that people with a disability have the right to work on an equal basis with others. This includes the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to them.

European Social Fund in Northern Ireland



The strategic aim of the ESF programme in Northern Ireland 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.”⁵ It provides vital funding for the long-term unemployed, ex-offenders, young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), and people with a disability.

ESF Programme – During Call 2 (2018–2022):

- At least **6,500** people with a disability, aged **16–65** years, will receive support.
- **£177** m for **69** projects⁶, including **£60.7** m for **24** disability projects.
- Funding comes from ESF (**40%**); Department for the Economy (**25%**); and a range of match funders (**35%**).
- Match funders include government departments, Health and Social Care Trusts, local Councils, further education colleges, and private sources.

The ESF programme in NI aligns with the EU2020 Strategy for Jobs and Growth. Other NI policy underpinning its provision includes the draft Programme for Government; ‘Supporting Equality through Inclusive Employment’ (Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities); the draft Industrial Strategy; and the Pathways to Success (NEET) Strategy.

⁵ Department for the Economy Northern Ireland European Social Fund programme 2014–2020

⁶ The 69 projects are broken down into the following four categories - Unemployed and economically inactive (22); NEET (18); Disability (24); Community Family Support Programme (5). The list of funded projects is available here www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/ESF-Call-2-successful-applications-by-constituency-and-council-area.XLS

Andrew's Story



The Cedar Foundation supports people with disabilities to achieve their goals of employment and inclusion through its ESF project, 'Inclusion Works.' Specialist physical disability, ASD and brain injury support is available and tailored to each individual and their needs.

Andrew participated in 'Inclusion Works' after acquiring a brain injury which required neurosurgery. He was supported to design an individual programme based around his needs and aspirations to build confidence, independence and skills aimed at his ultimate goal of securing employment in engineering. He has now commenced a full time Civil Engineering Apprenticeship Training Programme with Atkins Global, which allows him to gain hands-on experience and skills whilst receiving a full-time salary.

"After being out of the loop for so long, the real challenge for me was re-building my confidence in myself and my own abilities. Over the last number of years working with Cedar, I feel I have come so far and reached so many milestones, ultimately reaching my end goal of finding full time employment in the engineering sector."

Why employment matters

In comparison with their non-disabled peers, people with a disability experience many health, social and economic inequalities. Society's attitudes, a lack of accessible information and communication difficulties can create barriers to services and support. Without appropriate support, disabled people are at risk of a range of poorer outcomes, for example, they are more likely to:

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- Grow up in poverty
 - Experience social isolation and loneliness
 - Have poor educational attainment
 - Be unemployed or economically inactive
 - Experience poor physical and mental health
 - Have an average shorter life expectancy.
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Employment is beneficial in promoting independence and social inclusion, as well as improving confidence and overall well-being. In addition to positive impacts for individuals themselves, people with a disability can add great value to employers, the economy and to wider society. For example, evidence shows that hiring disabled people can improve profitability and competitive advantage, and lead to an inclusive work culture.⁷ People with a disability take less sick leave, stay in jobs longer than other workers, and help improve the reputation of the business.

Barriers to employment

Across the UK, people with a disability of working age are more likely than non-disabled people to have no qualifications, and to be unemployed and economically inactive. The greater likelihood of being unemployed is particularly evident in Northern Ireland, where the employment rate of disabled people is 35 per cent, compared with 50 per cent in England and around 45 per cent in Scotland and Wales.⁸ Disabled people are also more likely to work part-time, be in lower skilled jobs and earn less money. They can face many barriers to getting a job, staying in work, and making progress at work, including:⁹

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- Lack of skills and qualifications
 - Lack of flexible, personalised employment programmes
 - Unfair treatment, discrimination, bullying or harassment in the workplace
 - Difficulty with transport
 - Access and support in the workplace is not always adequately addressed (including physical access or a lack of specialist equipment).
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People with a learning disability or mental health condition are especially likely to be disadvantaged in terms of employment rate, type of work and level of unemployment.¹⁰

⁷ Lindsay, S, Cagliostro, E, Albarico, M et al (2018) A systematic review of the benefits of hiring people with a disability. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* 28: 634.

⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (2016) *A prosperous, poverty-free Northern Ireland*. JRF, York.

⁹ Coleman, N; Sykes, W; Groom, C (2013) *Barriers to employment and unfair treatment at work: A quantitative analysis of disabled people's experiences*. Equality and Human Rights Commission, Manchester.

¹⁰ Ibid; and also see Equality Commission (2018) *Key Inequalities in Employment in Northern Ireland* and <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/employment>

Peter's Story



Joining Action Mental Health (AMH) was a turning point in Peter's life. The AMH 'Working It Out' ESF project supports the recovery of adults experiencing mental ill health who are interested in progressing towards employment or further training opportunities. Specialist staff deliver accredited training and work closely with individuals to enable them to access work based training placements.

With a lot of courage and support, Peter completed courses in stress management, confidence building and employability skills. He also completed an NVQ in Customer Service and started a training placement in Savers. When a part-time position arose, AMH helped Peter complete the application and prepare for an interview.

"Lo and behold, I got the job! I am in part-time paid employment, which I enjoy immensely. I have excellent support from the Savers team as well as AMH. I can now balance my work and life and spend all my quality time with my family and children. Without the support I would not be where I am today."

What works?

People with a disability are unlikely to have their employment needs met through mainstream provision. In Northern Ireland, a range of employability programmes successfully support disabled people to develop the attributes, skills and knowledge needed to participate in further education, vocational training, work experience, paid employment, self-employment or volunteering.

Many projects utilise the **Supported Employment** approach, a person-centred way of working with disabled people and other disadvantaged groups to access and maintain paid employment in the open labour market. Fundamental principles behind the model include individuals receiving equal pay for work undertaken, and the same wages, terms and conditions as other employees in open employment.¹¹ The Supported Employment model has five key components:

- **Engagement** – Underpinned by the core values of accessibility to ensure informed choices are made.
- **Vocational Profiling** – Ensuring empowerment to the individual throughout the process.
- **Job Finding** – Self-determination and informed choice are central.
- **Employer Engagement** – Accessibility, flexibility and confidentiality are key values to be nurtured through this process.
- **Ongoing Job Support** – Particularly when the individual is in paid employment and supported by an Employment Support Worker / Job Coach.

Adopted internationally as a model of good practice, there is clear evidence that Supported Employment has significant positive impacts for people with a disability.¹² The Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities highlights its successful use in NI, predominantly through ESF projects. It also envisages that wider use of the model will significantly contribute to the achievement of the Strategy's key objective to assist disabled people to find, sustain and progress within paid employment.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) formally inspects all ESF funded projects in NI, with the most recent ETI Chief Inspector's report highlighting very positive outcomes.¹³ Significantly, most participants enhance their work-readiness, personal and social skills, and display increased levels of confidence and self-esteem. The flexible, tailored provision works particularly well in meeting what can often be very complex needs. The need to improve evaluation processes and better demonstrate projects' overall impact was identified, notably in relation to the development and application of participants' softer skills.

¹¹ European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE) (2010) EUSE Toolkit.

¹² Centre for Economic Inclusion (2014) Fit for Purpose – Transforming employment support for disabled people and those with health conditions.

¹³ Education and Training Inspectorate (2018) Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018. ETI, Belfast.

Matthew's Story



Mencap NI's 'EmployAbility2' ESF project provides a tailored programme of support to help people with a learning disability achieve their employment goals. This increases their social inclusion, as well as leading to improved motivation and ability to find work. EmployAbility2 also works closely with employers, resulting in improved employer attitudes and readiness to employ people with a learning disability.

After successfully completing his training on the project, Matthew is now an employee at Argos. Initially contracted over the Christmas period, his hard work and dedication stood out from day one and he was offered a permanent job after just a few months. Recently Matthew received a fantastic accolade by being voted in 2019 as Argos 'Employee's Employee of the Year.'

The award was particularly important to Matthew as his work peers voted for it – "I feel really chuffed that everyone voted for me." The Argos Store Manager said, "Matthew is hardworking and dedicated to the team. A well-deserved winner!"

Hannah's Story



Hannah came onto Disability Action's ESF Project 'Job Match' to gain suitable employment after having tried a number of different roles that were unsustainable due to her disability. Hannah wanted to build confidence and create a pathway to enjoying a better work / life balance.

During her time on Job Match, Hannah discussed her enjoyment and passion for baking. The project supported her to create her own business where it suits both her wellbeing and her enjoyment of work. As a result, Hannah is now the proud owner of a successful local home baking company. Her business can be found on twitter @hannahsbakesni / facebook – Hannah Bakes.

"Job Match empowered me to make my own decision to start up Hannah Bakes. When I first joined Job Match I didn't even think that the journey into employment would be setting up my own business, but I am proud of myself for doing it and I believe that the passion I have for baking will allow my business to grow."

Replacement funding – key issues

As one of the most disadvantaged parts of the UK, Northern Ireland should be a priority for investment within the UKSPF. It is a post-conflict society with high rates of poverty and greater levels of disability, economic inactivity, mental ill-health and suicide compared to other UK regions. Derry City and Strabane is the most disadvantaged of the forty local authorities in the UK identified as having the greatest challenges in terms of pay and employment.¹⁴ Several other areas of NI feature in the top twenty, notably Causeway Coast and Glens (3rd), Fermanagh and Omagh (18th), and Belfast (19th).

ESF is the primary and consistent source of funding for employment projects for disabled people in Northern Ireland. It is also the main funder for organisations working with young people most at risk of becoming NEET. There is a lack of clarity about the long-term funding of current ESF projects in NI, and no commitment to ring-fencing funding for employment support within the UKSPF as its successor. Mainstream provision does not meet the needs of these groups; therefore the loss of ESF and the need to replace it is a critical issue. This is particularly important in order to ensure **equity of access** to skills development, training and employment opportunities for those most removed from the labour market.

EU Structural Funding cycles have clearly provided a degree of stability in terms of enabling organisations to strategically plan for the delivery of longer-term interventions. Any undue delay in the creation and rollout of its successor, and / or subsequent reduction in funding, would adversely affect the delivery of employment provision for people with a disability. As well as reduced employment opportunities, these delays could also lead to a loss of staff expertise, and a weakening of long-established infrastructure and partnerships.

There is a lack of detail about the UKSPF's design, purpose and implementation process, and the level of funding for NI. As announced by the UK Government in July 2018, the objective of the UKSPF is to tackle inequalities between communities by raising productivity, particularly in places that are furthest behind. It is intended that the new Fund will be 'cheap to administer, low in bureaucracy and targeted where it is needed most.'¹⁵ However, there is an absence of specific detail about how the UKSPF will be resourced or work in practice after the UK departs the EU.

In order to maintain Northern Ireland's devolved status and responsibility for economic development, it is essential that powers are transferred to the NI administration to allocate monies to local areas under the new fund.¹⁶ This view is supported by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Post-Brexit Funding for Nations, Regions and Local Areas, which conducted an inquiry to inform design and delivery of the UKSPF. They also recommend that government rolls forward the four nations' existing shares of EU funding into the UKSPF; and that devolved administrations and their partners should hold responsibility for the detailed design and delivery of relevant parts of the Fund.

Brexit presents an opportunity to create a more efficient and effective successor to the ESF. In our experience, despite some recent improvements, the current ESF programme is still overly bureaucratic. It also lacks a clear focus on outcomes, quality evaluation and understanding of what works. In leaving the EU, there is huge potential to build on learning to date and design a new, flexible, forward thinking initiative that will also help tackle current skills gaps and ensure disabled people can visibly contribute to strategies for economic growth.

¹⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018) Designing the Shared Prosperity Fund. JRF, York.

¹⁵ Conservative Manifesto, 2017.

¹⁶ The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 provides, in most cases, that powers devolved under the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland Devolution Acts will remain so by default after leaving the EU.

Organisations who support local communities and vulnerable groups are often best placed to offer solutions in tackling the economic and social problems facing the people they work with. It is therefore vital that they, and those they support, have their voices heard in discussions about a replacement for ESF. The APPG Inquiry Report recommends that local partners be given flexibility to define the types of projects on which the UKSPF is spent, so long as the activities remain consistent with the wider objectives of the Fund.

A recent paper by the ERSA / NCVO working group in GB, has proposed a set of design principles to inform the development and delivery of an ESF successor fund.¹⁷ These include:

- Taking a more holistic approach
- Fostering innovation and finding new approaches
- Using a mix of long term and short term funding (to test ideas / innovation)
- Having a better and quicker process to identify need and allocate funds
- Creating multi-agency / sectoral partnerships that could be commissioned around place and needs.

¹⁷ Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) & Championing Voluntary Action (NCVO) (2018) Future employment and skills training for disadvantaged groups: A successor to the ESF.

Gary's Story



Triangle's 'Progression to Employment' ESF project prepares people with learning disabilities and autism for the world of work using the Supported Employment model. The service focuses on individuals whose needs and disabilities prevent them from availing of mainstream support programmes. Gary joined the service in 2012 and his Employment Officer supported him to secure part time paid employment in a local B&M Home Store.

"I've been in paid work now for around five years and it has really changed a lot for me. I'm very happy. I like working in the food aisle, I like to tidy up and keep the shelves well stocked for customers."

"It's nice to get paid work, it's made a big change to my life. I had been searching for a job for about five years since I left school. It wasn't too easy at the time. I've made a lot of good friends."

Key Actions for Government

- Set out a clear plan to reduce the disability employment gap, including actions to ensure that the NI Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities is appropriately resourced, and fully implemented.
- Clarify future funding arrangements for disability employment projects currently delivered through ESF, including the role of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and / or alternative funding provision.
- Provide assurances that there will be no gap between existing and new funding streams for disability employment projects.
- Ensure that new funding at least matches the current total ESF resources, and that this is future-proofed for inflation increases.
- Ensure that powers to allocate funding through the UKSPF are transferred across nations in order to maintain Northern Ireland's devolved status and responsibility for economic development.
- Consult at a local level on the priorities to be supported in Northern Ireland through the UKSPF and / or alternative funding provision – this should include consultation with people who have a disability.
- Develop an effective evaluation framework to guide expenditure based on what works; and create knowledge transfer platforms to share learning.

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