



#FOCUS5



#Focus5

Interim Evaluation Report November 2019

Executive Summary

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Abbreviations:

BBO - Building Better Opportunities

ESF - European Social Fund

NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training

‘Unknowns’ – Economic or educational status is not known

CSW - The organisation leading #Focus5

HotSW - Heart of the South West

LEP - Local Enterprise Partnership

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

#Focus5 is part of the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) Programme, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the National Lottery Community Fund. The project targets 15 to 18-year-olds across the Heart of the South West (HotSW) LEP area, who are unemployed or economically inactive and amongst the most socially excluded. It aims to support 920 young people. #Focus5 began in April 2017, with delivery work commencing in July 2017. The project originally was set to run until December 2019 but an extension was approved and the project will be continuing until September 2022.

ERS were commissioned in April 2018 to evaluate the #Focus5 project. The key evaluation questions are below.

- RQ1. Does it move unemployed/inactive young people into sustained education or training?
- RQ2. Does it move unemployed/inactive people into sustained work or self-employment?
- RQ3. Does it break down identified barriers, even for those who do not progress into work or learning?
- RQ4. Does it support young people to participate more in their community?
- RQ5. Does it actively promote gender equality and equal opportunities?
- RQ6. Is sustainable development effectively integrated into the delivery of the project?
- RQ7. Does it improve CSW Group's and partner organisations' capacity and capability in working with these target groups?
- RQ8. Is the project good value for money?

Project context

The project was originally granted £1,706,400 for delivery between 2017 and December 2019. With the extension until September 2022, a further £1,655,000 has been granted. With this funding, the project aims to support vulnerable and disadvantaged young people to become work-ready and access learning, training and job opportunities. The project is targeted to work with 920 young people and, within this, there are sub-targets relating to gender, economic status, disability and ethnic minorities. They have set targets for a number of outcomes relating to skills needed to get into, and remain, in education or training. The three key targets can be seen below:

- 27 per cent of people who were economically inactive when joining the project will move into job-search on leaving;
- 17 per cent of people enrolled on the project will move into education or training on leaving; and
- 14 per cent of people will move into employment, including self-employment, on leaving.

The local area

In the HotSW Strategic Economic Plan 2014-2030 and the HotSW European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) Strategy 2014-2021, the LEP recognises the need to invest in skills and development to move people into the job market, with a particular focus on young people, the most deprived and hardest to reach, the long term unemployed and the economically inactive. Research has also identified limited provision of employment support across the LEP area.

The delivery model

#Focus5 is led by CSW Group, who act as end-to-end provider and contract manager. A team of 13 key workers (11.3 FTEs) guide the young people through the package of support. There is also a network of partners to which participants can be referred to for additional support. The participant journey consists of four stages: engage, support, develop and progress.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation began in April 2018 and will run until September 2022. This 2019 interim report builds on the data gathered in summer and autumn 2018. In autumn 2019, management team interviews and key worker focus groups were repeated. In-depth telephone consultations were also conducted with four partners and three participants. In addition, data gathered by the #Focus5 team was analysed. This included: a participant survey, a partner survey, an employment and education provider survey and a participant self-assessment.

Emerging findings

The need across the area varies greatly, but it is clear that there is significant demand for the project and its offering. The design of the project fits well with the strategy, particularly the one-to-one support and the target age range.

#Focus5 has been given authorisation to use volunteers, to support participants with certain activities, from accompanying young people on public transport to attending appointments with them. It is hoped that this will save key workers time and increase their capacity.

The management team were praised by key workers as being excellent, helpful and responsive. Whilst the majority of partners interviewed and surveyed also thought that management was effective, two felt that communication could be improved. Within the last year, improvements have been made to provide a formal induction process, training and support for key workers. There is also some evidence that information sharing between key workers has improved.

Managing the demand and getting the right kind of referrals for the project has been challenging. Since last year, a marketing and communications officer has been recruited and a large part of

¹ https://heartofswlep.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/May-2016-HotSW-ESIF-Strategy_0.pdf

their role has been focused on communicating with referral agencies to ensure there is consistent messaging and clarity. Key workers noted that they think this has helped increase awareness of the project and appropriate referrals.

Many contracted partners have not had much engagement with the project. In a few cases this is said to be because of the “ad hoc” style of the partnership model, the complicated cost model and difficulties around the lack of onward referrals to them. Despite this, the majority of partners like the project and want to become more actively involved.

Over the last year, CSW have responded to the difficulties that partners have experienced with the costs model. Partners can now choose to remain under their original arrangements (the direct costs model) or take part in the procurement process to become a specialist provider (paid via invoice). It is hoped that the invoicing system will make the process more efficient and straightforward for partners, and increase partnership engagement. Following feedback from last year, the procurement process will involve key workers to ensure those recruited are appropriate to local requirements.

The way the key workers support the young people was seen very positively, particularly the flexibility, one-to-one nature, and the work being led by the young person. 90 per cent of the participant survey respondents (n=307) said they thought that the project was good or very good.

Key workers continue to face challenges with the large and rural nature of the HotSW area and associated travel time and logistics. Key workers continue to report high caseloads. The complex paperwork and changes in procedures over the course of the project are seen as frustrations.

The project is tackling the cross-cutting themes of gender equality, equal opportunities and sustainable development well, with clear strategies in place. The nature and geography of the project does pose sustainability challenges. However, the #Focus5 team have been instrumental in setting up a sustainability action group, signing up to an environmental accreditation scheme, developing new sustainability action plans, for the whole of CSW. The project has exceeded targets for involvement of disabled people and ethnic minorities. One area in which the project has struggled is that of engaging as many female participants as male participants. To tackle this, the team have implemented strategies such as budgets for childcare costs, making links with other organisations and running group work sessions for year 11 female students.

Project spend and outputs

The budget is seen as adequate, although spending has proven difficult. Key contributors to this have been delivery partner compliance and changes in expenditure eligibility from the funder. The team anticipate a slight project underspend of approximately £170,000.

The project is now roughly on target, having engaged 506 participants by the end of Q3 in 2019 compared to the targeted 513, despite having been under target last year. Staff dedication to continual learning and improvement has helped the project catch up on targets.

Project outcomes and impacts

82 per cent of participants surveyed (n=312) said that the project had helped them. On average, participants indicated a slight increase in well-being, self-understanding and skills following their time on the project. It is clear that the project is supporting unemployed/inactive young people to break down barriers and move them into education, training and work. Key workers have observed young people participating more in their community, from getting “out and about” to running clubs for community members. It was highlighted that some impacts of #Focus5 can be longer-term, which are harder to capture.

Most of the recorded project outcomes and impacts are above target. This is with the exception of “participants will have a new or updated CV”, “participants will submit a work/learning/volunteering application” and “economically inactive will enter into job searching activities”. This indicates that more emphasis could be placed on encouraging the participants to enter into job searching, review their CVs and submit applications for work, learning and volunteering.

The project has increased the capacity, capability and working relationships of some of the partners and the expertise of the CSW team. The #Focus5 network has enabled partners to learn how other organisations operate.

The majority of recommendations from the 2018 interim report have been implemented and the team are very proactive at gathering their own feedback and responding to it, in order to ensure continual improvement.