



**LANCASHIRE SKILLS  
& EMPLOYMENT HUB**



# **Evaluation of Lancashire's ESF Access to Employment Project**

## **Interim Report – Executive Summary**

**March 2018**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background and Introduction**

Access to Employment (AtoE) is a European Social Fund (ESF) supported initiative, contracted by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and designed to meet the local needs identified by the Lancashire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The project supports unemployed and inactive adults in Lancashire to develop the skills they need, and required by local employers, helping them to progress into employment, apprenticeships or further training.

This interim evaluation will identify areas of good practice as well as challenges and areas for improvement, supporting the project Steering Group and management team to maximise performance and impact for the remainder of the contract period, to the end of March 2019.

The contract funding model has a focus on achieving, and sustaining, progression outcomes for learners. At the request of the LEP, the ESFA contracted the project as two separate themes; Theme 1 'Skills Support for the Unemployed' and Theme 2 'Enhancing Apprenticeships'. While for Theme 1, the objective is to secure progression outcomes to employment, apprenticeships or further training, for Theme 2 the only permitted outcome is progression into apprenticeships. In addition, there is a capacity building budget within the contracts, to support the successful delivery of the project, including through the employment of a Strategic Partnership Manager (SPM) to ensure strategic fit of the project alongside other initiatives in the area.

### **Management of the project**

The project is delivered by the 'Lancashire Employment and Skills Executive Partnership' (LESEP), working with Preston's College (PC) as Lead Accountable Body (LAB). LESEP is a joint initiative between The Lancashire Colleges (TLC) and the Lancashire Work Based Learning Executive Forum (LWBLEF). The Partnership includes 25 delivery partners for the AtoE contract. A Steering Group provides oversight of the project and reports into the LEP's Skills and Employment Board on a regular basis. The Skills Hub chairs the Steering Group on behalf of the LEP.

### **Performance and attaining strategic fit**

The LEP set out priority sectors and groups in the specification. Profiles for outputs, outcomes and funding were agreed with the ESFA and the LEP and reviewed throughout.

At the end of the 2016/17 academic year the Theme 1 claim was at 244% of the funding profile at that point, with nearly double the number of learners supported versus profile. Theme 2 was at 114% of the funding profile at that point, however only 64% of profiled learners had been supported, making success a struggle. Performance against the priority groups was good, however there was no data available to show performance against priority sectors.

While these performance levels are positive, it is noted that progression and sustained progression outcomes in particular were below the contracted levels (in terms of percentage of starts) and have been key challenges. Progression outcomes (into employment, apprenticeship or further training) can only be claimed where these occur within 28 calendar days of the learners completing their ESF programme, while sustained progressions are claimed when the learner remains in that job, apprenticeship or training for 3 months. Many delivery partners were finding it difficult to achieve these outcomes as a result of this EU rule.

In particular, during the first year of the project it became apparent that Theme 2 'Enhancing Apprenticeships' was very difficult to deliver as the focus on only Apprenticeships as a progression outcome for adults made the project unattractive to the vast majority of learners and delivery partners. Theme 1 with its different progression options offered more flexibility and was therefore the preferred route in most cases. This issue was discussed with the ESFA and the Skills Hub on a number of occasions, the result being that it was jointly agreed that this contract would be wound down and the focus be shifted entirely to Theme 1.

A wide range of activity has been delivered to-date through the Capacity Building Plan with the support of the SPM including 'have a go' events to support learner recruitment, CPD events for partners that focus on the specific needs of the target group, mapping the offer available for inactive and unemployed adults in Lancashire to support referral organisations and marketing and promotional work.

### Impact

Surveys were conducted with key stakeholders, learners, employers and delivery partners to inform this Interim Evaluation. While a number of responses were received from stakeholders and delivery partners only three learners responded and no employers, indicating that an alternative strategy will be required to collect learner and employer feedback for the final evaluation. Generally all responses were positive about the project and the support provided by the LAB, LESEP and SPM; the on-going support provided by the LAB team was praised particularly highly. However, delivery partners commented that they had found some of the paperwork and evidence requirements difficult to manage and that this had distracted from performance management. The number of projects and initiatives for unemployed and inactive adults in the LEP area had made it difficult to recruit learners to AtoE; the outcome-focussed funding model and restrictions on which progression outcomes could be claimed were also cited as barriers. The use of capacity building funding to support learner recruitment and delivery partner CPD activities was viewed very positively as was the work of the SPM in helping delivery partners to link to referral agencies and others in the local area. The implementation and growth of the Adult Skills Forum, development

and launch of the Escalate digital tool to support cross project referrals, is an area of high impact with partners working in collaboration.

### Sustainable Development and Equality

The Horizontal Principles required by European Funding have been adopted by the LAB, LESEP and delivery partners. CPD events which focus on the challenges faced by different groups of learners have provided delivery partners with additional skills in working with hard to reach groups, supporting equality of opportunity. Challenges to sustainable development principles include the need for hard copy evidence with 'wet' signatures from learners and the volume of paperwork this generates.

### Key Achievements and Challenges

At the time of writing, the project had supported nearly 1000 adults on their journey into work. The large network of delivery partners is able to offer varied and targeted provision across the whole of the Lancashire LEP area, a strength which has been noted by both the LEP and the ESFA. Performance against priority group KPIs is high. Strong relationships between the LAB, LESEP, delivery partner and the Skills Hub have aided successful delivery and integration with other projects and initiatives. However, the percentage of starts that convert into progressions requires improvement and this has impacted on the performance of the project to-date. Apprenticeship outcomes appear to be particularly challenging to achieve for adult learners and this has directly impacted on Theme 2, which will be wound-down. This is a national issue, following the Apprenticeship reforms; the number of starts has reduced across the country impacting on ESF project progressions.

### Additionality/Future Plans/Project Future

The successes and challenges highlighted at this interim point will be fed into the future delivery of this project. The challenges posed by the payment methodology and restrictions placed on claimable progression and sustained progression outcomes will be fed into the ESFA to inform future procurement and to the LEP to influence future funding. An employer-focussed campaign will be launched to help to engage employers in the project with a view to their providing employment and apprenticeship opportunities for learners.