

**LET'S TALK REAL SKILLS**  
**EVALUATION REPORT**  
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**European Union**  
European  
Social Fund

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Let's Talk Real Skills European Social Fund (ESF) project led by the West Yorkshire Consortium of Colleges (WYCC) was delivered in partnership with West Yorkshire's FE colleges, private providers and universities in West Yorkshire between 1<sup>st</sup> November 2018 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021.
2. The project aimed to collectively create new training provision for businesses to meet the skills requirements over the next five to ten years, by working through 10 Collaborative Skills Partnerships (CSPs) on a sector basis with employers, FE and HE providers, and other sector-specific stakeholders.
3. The project was focused on changing the skills landscape with the CSPs and project support infrastructure working through a number of stages:
  - i. Identify current training provision available for the sector.
  - ii. Identify SME skills needs in the sector and what if any, gaps, challenges or issues exist.
  - iii. Identify new provision and pathways that could plug the skills gaps and meet the challenges and issues for SMEs.
  - iv. Develop, trial and test the provision needed to meet the skills gaps.
  - v. Develop the capacity and capability of both SMEs and providers to deliver and take up the training.
4. WYCC commissioned Tokos Solutions to undertake an independent evaluation of the project, covering a range of factors including assessing and identifying:
  - Achievements, impact and benefits to the economy, participating providers, employees and SMEs.
  - Lessons learnt.
  - How LTRS has made a difference to providers involved in terms of understanding what is needed to better meet the skills needs of SMEs in the Leeds City Region.
  - The impact of COVID on the delivery of the project.
5. The evaluation took place during December 2021 and January 2022, and focused on:
  - Desk Research– Data and intelligence was collected and analysed from a range of sources including management information, progress reports, CSP meeting minutes, overall and pilot project documentation.
  - Consultation interviews – 42 structured interviews were undertaken with 53 consultees involved in one or more aspect of the project delivery. All sectors and delivery activities were covered.
6. The project was originally contracted for £15,704,000 with £7,852,000 ESF, £6,901,475 public match and £950,525 private match, This was reduced in January 2020 to £11,506,324, with £5,753,162 ESF, £5,261,330 public match funding and £491,832 private match.
7. Key aspects of the delivery model, in addition to the CSPs were:
  - The Eight Segment Plan (a framework that incorporated the above stages).
  - Employer Engagement Development Fund (EEDF providing resources to the Delivery Partners to undertake the necessary engagement activities that would underpin the collaborative working).

- Collaborative Investment Fund (CIF providing resources to support the development and piloting of the ideas agreed by CSPs as responding to the skills needs identified).
  - Project management resources in WYCC including Project Director, Skills Associates, marketing team and contract management staff.
  - Delivery Partners to undertake the delivery and/or provide match funding (7 West Yorkshire FE colleges, Go Higher Yorkshire, the Huddersfield & District Textile Training Company and West Yorkshire Combined Authority) with Service Level Agreements combining staffing resources, with one or both of EEDF and CIF, and an agreed allocation of outputs and results.
8. Nine CSPs were established by June 2020 with representative membership to take forward activities for the following sectors:
- Digital
  - Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering
  - Manufacturing of Textiles
  - Health & Social Care
  - Construction
  - Low Carbon
  - Film & TV production
  - Creative Industries
  - Rail
9. The 10<sup>th</sup> – MedTech - was established soon after.
10. The Eight Segment plan was facilitated by the Skills Associates through the CSPs, with the Segment 1 report (understanding of skills provision in the sector across Leeds City Region) produced for each of the CSPs, including FinTech (the latter, despite no CSP being in place). Segment 2 reports identifying the SME skills needs were developed for 7 of the CSPs consulting with members and employers engaged through the project. Activities for the remaining segments of the framework reflected the CSP focus and priorities, which were also impacted by Covid-19.
11. 24 allocations were made to the Delivery Partners for resources through the EEDF, for a range of employer engagement activities.
12. 42 proposals were received under the CIF, of which 14 were contracted, the remainder were withdrawn. The Pilot Projects that went ahead were:

PARTNER	TITLE	SECTOR
Leeds College Of Building	Apprenticeship Development	Construction
Leeds College Of Building	Low Carbon Apprenticeship Development	Low Carbon
Leeds City College	Robotic Technology	AME
Calderdale College	Calderdale Academy Of Care Excellence	H&SC
Leeds City College	Teaching Care Homes	H&SC
Leeds City College	Introduction To GP Nursing	H&SC
Leeds City College	Digital Skills Development Suite (Digital Support For SMEs)	Digital

Calderdale College	Skills Audit	AME
Kirklees College	Additive Manufacturing	AME
Wakefield College	Site Operatives	Construction
ShIPLEY College	Technical Engineering Skills	Rail
Kirklees College	Furniture Manufacturer Skills	AME
Leeds College Of Building	Inclusivity In Construction	Construction
Leeds City College	Carbon Literacy Training	Film & TV

13. Overall, 44% of the planned CO23 outputs; 25% of the R9 results; and 5% of the O1 outputs had been evidenced and achieved by the project closure.

14. A number of issues and challenges impacting on outputs and results, had been identified through the desk research for the evaluation, these include:

- Difficulties in engaging businesses and supporting them to complete the Skills Plan documentation due to covid restrictions.
- Businesses engaged not signing off the Skills Plan and the Data Capture form. Delivery Partners pipelines figures indicated that an additional 586 businesses had completed skills plans (but not signed them off) that were not counted in final claims.
- Collecting the Participant evidence was difficult, particularly where delivery was on-line, resulting in significantly lower numbers claimed than actually benefitted from the training. Conservative estimates indicate that 360 more people took part in training than have been evidenced and claimed, accounting for 22.5% of total participants targeted.
- Pilot project leads struggled to recruit participants due to covid restrictions or businesses needing to prioritise their production/service activities.
- Pilot projects were significantly delayed in development due to covid restrictions, which meant that they were unable to gain approval for delivery within the timescale.

15. 70% of the planned expenditure was claimed at project closure, with key reasons for this underspend including:

- Covid-related delays and under-activity.
- Inability of staff that were providing match-funding to actively support the project due to other priorities.

16. Feedback from the consultations covered a wide range of questions. The following set out example feedback points against the question theme:

- How the CSPs, pilot projects and supporting infrastructure worked:
  - CSPs worked well in terms of sharing intelligence and talking about skills gaps, with providers able to feedback on how they could potentially respond to them.
  - CSPs were key to agreeing/approving projects, ensuring that they were focused on addressing local skills needs.
  - Whilst most CSPs were well managed, there were others that lacked clarity of purpose and remit.

- What worked well and good practice:
  - Ability to take forward innovative ideas based on flexibility of funding and identified employer needs – this is project’s USP.
  - Pilot projects with sector specialists who identified the needs, and in some cases supported the development of the curriculum, working alongside the providers, who undertook delivery.
  - Involvement of curriculum leads in some colleges in the relevant CSPs, enabling them to share their expertise, as well as gain insight directly from industry.
  - Engagement of existing networks, partnerships and industry associations (e.g. Leeds Care Association)– who brought intelligence and sectoral understanding, along with membership, to the table.
- Challenges, issues and barriers to successful delivery:
  - Projects and other activities were put on hold during the pandemic and then when businesses came out of lockdown, in certain sectors (e.g. construction, creative) they just did not have the time to participate
  - Fitting pilots and activities to eligible outputs and expenditure e.g. capital investment/leasing arrangements, research and curriculum development.
  - Slow in responding to clarifications about leasing/capital and feeding back on claims (and proposed templates).
  - Communications – these could have been better, both within sectors and across sectors.
- Lessons learnt:
  - Collaborative working is powerful – it leads to different ideas and approaches, that may not have resulted simply from providers responding to research.
  - Ensure effective communications channels are in place between colleges and within colleges.
  - To define a clear role and remit for the CSP that is tailored to the specific sector needs, ensuring it is adding value and linked to any existing infrastructure.
  - Build expectations management into the engagement processes, to clarify what businesses can expect and ensure there is an understanding of FE roles.
  - To develop realistic timescales to allow time for both development of delivery models/curriculum and enough employer engagement i.e. lead-time to get potential learners.
  - There is a need for improved risk management processes and contingency planning both within Colleges and overall project management.
- Impact of activities on businesses, providers, and the skills infrastructure:
  - The project has helped to close skills gaps, with several pilot projects demonstrating the benefit of collaborative development of curriculum and training courses.

- Colleges are more up to date with industry in terms of software, technology and production/service techniques, thus enabling them to deliver relevant training.
- Increased awareness amongst employers about college specialisms and capabilities, with the potential to increase collaboration and partnership working to respond to skills needs.
- Over 250 staff in the creative sector have been trained to think sustainably (Carbon Literacy project), and this is now increasingly seen as an essential skill to be embedded in other training.
- Achievements:
  - Improved collaboration between education and business (including national organisations).
  - Changed the perceptions of the FE sector within the wider skills infrastructure, including commissioners and employers.
  - Developing Site Operative qualification to provide an entry level qualification into the construction sector and filling a gap in the career pathway, for those already in the sector, and for potential entrants.
  - Extending the progression pathway in construction, by developing degree apprenticeships.
  - Development of progression routes in Rail for Level 2 and 3 students.
- Future plans:
  - Labour market information and intelligence collected through the Construction and Low Carbon CSPs will inform activities undertaken to address the WYCA Mayor's Green Skills agenda and pledge.
  - More than one consultee suggested that such partnership activity could be more ambitious – i.e. why can't West Yorkshire's skills providers and employers be at the forefront, nationally, at dealing with skills issues. And if they are, then it should be promoted and expanded.

#### 17. Conclusions of the desk research and consultations include:

- The project was viewed in a positive light by a large majority of those that were consulted, but it was significantly affected by the pandemic and the associated Covid restrictions.
- The CSPs largely worked and achieved what they were set up to do. Irrespective of the challenges, this model has further highlighted and enhanced the role of 'local' FE in developing and delivering training to address skills gaps.
- The project has significantly improved access to up-to-date labour market and skills information and intelligence to support strategic and operational skills and curriculum planning.
- Some specific skills gaps have been reduced as a result of collaborative development of curriculum and training courses through the pilot projects (e.g. GP Nursing). However, as these were pilot projects, and were focused on testing out the curriculum and approaches, they were by their nature only intended to directly benefit a small number of participants. Until these projects and the curriculum is available on

a wider basis, it is difficult to quantify the real impact and benefits of the project and the work of the CSPs.

- Strong partnerships have been formed which have created a legacy and will support future collaborative working for skills development.
- More could be done to integrate the cross-cutting themes into delivery of pilots at a localised level, starting with setting out clear targets aligned with local priorities.
- Significant work was undertaken in identifying and developing the 42 pilots approved despite some of them not progressing. The majority of pilots are now being taken forward under new contracts with greater demand post Covid, e.g. Leeds City College's Robotics course developed through the AEM CSP is now being taken forward through the Collaborative Apprenticeship Project.

18. The six recommendations proposed as a result of the findings set out in the report include:

- To communicate the work of each of the CSPs, highlighting progress and any successes.
- To review the project activities that were not supported within the timescales, to identify which could be supported and implemented through other funding sources.
- To share and acknowledge the 'lessons learned' to maintain strong partnership working in the future.
- Track the impact of the project on Delivery Partners to assess longer-term benefits
- To work on a collaborative basis to promote and extend the successful pilot projects.
- To review the project activities that were not supported within the timescales, to identify which could be supported and implemented through other funding sources.
- To raise the profile and 'cutting edge' nature of West Yorkshire's FE sector contributing to the new skills policies as well addressing new sectoral needs, by promoting projects impacting beyond the region e.g. Green Apprenticeships.