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Evaluation of Sector Priorities Fund Pilot

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Welsh Government's Sector Priorities Fund Pilot Programme (SPFP) was designed to ensure that training providers developed innovative training strategies that were more closely aligned to sector and business needs. In order to achieve this, the Welsh Government contracted with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to develop training and development projects to meet business needs.
- 1.2 York Consulting LLP (YCL) was commissioned to carry out an independent evaluation of the SPFP. The evaluation considered the effectiveness of the implementation and the roll out of the pilot programme and the degree to which performance targets were met. The methodology included: a review of SSC project evaluation reports, an online learner survey (generating 70 responses), an employee survey (generating 51 responses), and interviews with stakeholders. Recommendations were made to help inform any future development of similar activities.

2. Key findings

- 2.1 SSCs developed a clear rationale for project delivery based on consultations with employers and from Labour Market Research. A number of qualifications and apprenticeships developed through SPFP evidenced on-going demand and if mainstreamed, were likely to continue to be delivered by providers. There were a number of apprenticeship frameworks for which demand was less likely to continue without further substantial investment of time and promotional activities from providers and without a financial contribution from employers.

- 2.2 Overall, the majority of SSC projects performed well. There were some examples of innovation evidenced through the development of new apprenticeship qualifications, new pathways of progression and through the use of Apps .
- 2.3 Some SSCs experienced challenges in engaging employers, and this resulted in lower than targeted achievements. A small number of SSCs experienced quite substantial problems in the early phases. As a result, targets were re-negotiated and overall budgets re-defined to reflect more closely the predicted spend.
- 2.4 Some learners and employers did not value the essential skills element of the apprenticeship framework as it was not sufficiently contextualised.
- 2.5 A survey of learners achieved 70 responses. This low response rate limited the extent to which findings were considered to be representative of the population of learners on SPFP. However, considering both the quantitative and qualitative evidence together, there was evidence that learners felt more confident about their abilities, were more enthusiastic about learning in general, and felt more optimistic about their career prospects. Three quarters of the learners in the survey stated they had developed job specific skills and over two thirds of learners stated they were able to apply their learning to their work.
- 2.6 Many project evaluation reports evidenced good levels of learner engagement and high levels of satisfaction in both the content and quality of learning provision. A few learners were critical of the essential skills delivery and reported that they did not feel it was relevant to their learning.
- 2.7 Quantitative and qualitative evidence showed that employers recognised the benefits of the training. Most employers valued the training and cited increased capacity by recruiting apprentices as a benefit, particularly for Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SME). There was evidence that apprentices had either continued their employment after the training was complete or found employment elsewhere as a result of the training. In addition, bespoke and short course training, received by many employers, was particularly valued as this met specific employer needs.
- 2.8 The Advocate Service was put in place to provide support and guidance to SSCs during the project design phase and to help identify labour market intelligence to support the evidence of need. The service was re-organised following the recommendations from the Phase 1 report and the simplified structure appears to have been effective. Advocates reported successfully developing relationships with SSCs, providing guidance and information on procurement, labour market information and intelligence and liaising with providers to promote the awareness of SPFP projects. Not all SSCs felt the need for the service and towards the end, some expressed concerns that the service focussed too much on monitoring project outputs and provided little added value.
- 2.9 Projects funded under European Social Fund (ESF) streams were required to demonstrate engagement and impact on Cross-Cutting Themes (CCTs) regarding the equalities agenda and environmental sustainability. A very small number of SSCs appeared to have considered the impact of their project on the CCTs and this was recorded in the evaluation reports. However, the level of focus on CCTs by SSCs

was very low and the reporting of this by individual project evaluations was minimal.

- 2.10 Training was delivered through the medium of Welsh, where this was feasible for providers. Although precise numbers were not collected. There was some evidence that learners wanting to receive learning through the medium of Welsh, did not. Although training providers stated they could deliver in Welsh, they did not have the capacity to respond to individual requests for delivering through the medium of Welsh where other learners do not speak Welsh.
- 2.11 Overall performance of the SPFP programme was close to, but just below, revised targets , including: 99 per cent of participants; and 95 per cent of employers assisted. Performance measured against the original targets was more modest, with 84 per cent of participants engaged. Around 94 per cent of planned revised expenditure was achieved and 76 per cent of original expenditure was achieved.
- 2.12 Performance against the ESF Convergence target for delivery was below the original target (88 per cent of the target for participants and 73 per cent of the target for employers assisted/supported). Delivery in ESF Convergence areas exceeded the output indicator for BME participants (141 per cent) but was below the output indicators for older participants (77 per cent) and female participants (67 per cent). ESF Convergence expenditure was higher (95 per cent) than for non-ESF (92 per cent).
- 2.13 Engagement with business across Wales was balanced; delivery in terms of geography was broadly in line with the population of employers and employees.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 There is evidence that this programme had a positive impact in all three areas as defined in the original aims of the programme: 1) to 'design, develop and test innovative training'; 2) to 'improve the level of business engagement in training' and 3) to 'extend provider capacity'.
- 3.2 We concluded that the majority of SSCs performed well, stimulated demand and developed training solutions to meet business needs. Although they struggled to meet original ambitious target volumes for delivery.
- 3.3 What was apparent from talking with SSCs and providers, was the vulnerability of the employer led infrastructure that was trialled through SPFP: many SSCs had a reduced capacity, particularly in Wales, and expertise had already been lost due to reduced UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) funding.

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 SSCs played a key role in delivering labour market intelligence (LMI) and training provision to meet the needs of sectors. The Welsh Government should review the role of SSCs in any future sector priorities programme considering their capacity in Wales to operate to a similar specification.

- 4.2 SSCs needed to consider the EC/Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) guidance when designing evaluations of their projects to ensure it covered all areas stipulated in the guidance. Welsh Government should review the quality of evaluation reports before signing off final payments.
- 4.3 All ESF funded projects are required to demonstrate engagement with the CCTs. Therefore, there is need for the Welsh Government to give clear direction for SSCs (and all other project management operators) to clearly report on engagement in the CCTs in future reporting.
- 4.4 Some providers need to improve strategies for contextualising essential skills delivery, especially in apprenticeships with adult participants, to avoid learners perceiving essential skills as separate or less valuable to other learning.
- 4.5 The Welsh Government should consider how responsibility for employer engagement should be framed in any future similar projects. Employer engagement had an impact in the speed of project delivery and on the final volumes achieved. It is, therefore, a critical element in helping such projects achieve their targets.
- 4.6 To help understand the extent of delivery through the medium of Welsh, ensure that data on the number of learners who received learning through the medium of Welsh is captured in programme monitoring data.

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[Full Research Report: Evaluation of Sector Priorities Fund Pilot Programme](#)

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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