

An Evaluation of

the Skills for Life and Work
programme

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Education and
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Empowering Improvement

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Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department for the Economy (Department) to evaluate the impact of the changes made in 2021 to entry level and level 1 training provision, provided through the introduction of the Skills for Life and Work programme (programme).

The evaluation considers the extent to which the programme has strengthened learner progression to next stages of education, training or employment, improved learners' skills and dispositions, and provides learning experiences that are aligned closely to the needs of young people and employers.

Background information

Policy context

The programme was introduced in September 2021 as a full-time vocational training pathway for school leavers, replacing the previous programme, Training for Success. In contrast to Training for Success, the programme is offered mainly at entry level and level 1. In 2025, the programme was re-contracted as mainstream training provision for levels 0 to 1.

The programme operates within a wider skills strategy and policy environment, shaped by the Minister's Economic Vision for "Good Jobs" and the Department for the Economy's commitment under the Youth Guarantee to ensure that every young person aged 16 to 17 has access to a training place. It sits alongside the Department's other skills programmes, such as Traineeships, ApprenticeshipsNI, and Higher Level Apprenticeships, acting as a key entry route to training pathways within Northern Ireland's vocational education and training system.

Programme aims

The programme is designed for young people who leave school with low or no qualifications and are at heightened risk of long-term disengagement from education, training or employment. It supports learners facing significant personal, social and educational barriers, including young people with disabilities and those with care experience. Eligibility extends to young people aged 16 to 17, with the upper age limit extended to 22 for disabled participants and to 25 for those from an in-care background.

The programme combines training provision across personal and social development, employability, vocational and essential skills, leading to regulated qualifications. Delivery is flexible and individualised, structured around a learner's personal training plan, with attendance increasing gradually from ten hours in the first two weeks to 24 to 30 hours from week 27 onwards. When learners are ready, up to 60% of their time may be spent on work-experience sampling or an extended work-experience placement, with the remainder in directed training. The programme operates on a 52-week training year, including annual leave, and may last up to 104 weeks, or 156 weeks for disabled participants.

Programme uptake

Since the launch of the programme, enrolment has increased steadily, further highlighting its strategic importance. Analysis of Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency's (NISRA) data shows that starts rose by 58% between 2021/22 (1,236) and 2024/25 (1,956), with the highest proportion of learners enrolling at age 16. Approximately half of the learners participating have a disability, and male participation remains consistently higher (60%) than female participation (40%). Almost half of all learners (48%) live in the most deprived quintile, compared with only 7% of the least deprived. This underscores the programme's central role in widening participation in post-16 training and supporting young people from communities experiencing the highest levels of social and economic disadvantage.

Programme delivery

The programme is delivered across Northern Ireland by 20 private, voluntary and community training provider organisations, along with three further education colleges. This mixed-delivery model supports the Department's ambition to provide all young people, regardless of location or background, with access to high-quality training that enables progression to Traineeships, ApprenticeshipsNI, further education or employment.

The programme contract was awarded in September 2021 to training providers on an annual cycle over a period of three years. The late issuing of key operational requirements created some uncertainty for training providers and limited their ability to plan strategically or redesign their existing provision at scale. Over the period of the contract, however, providers have adapted well to the programme's requirements and made positive changes to support learner engagement, inclusion and progression.

Evaluation methodology

In undertaking the evaluation, ETI carried out evaluation visits to a sample of provision delivered by eight training provider organisations between October 2025 and February 2026. Inspectors also drew on findings from inspections of the Skills for Life and Work programme over the last three years. The Terms of Reference for the evaluation are set out in Appendix 2.

The data used in this report were provided by the training providers included within the evidence base for the evaluation. The evaluation identified variation in the way learner outcomes and progression data are defined, collated, tracked and reported across providers. The findings should therefore be regarded as indicative of the providers and learners included within the evaluation rather than representative of the programme as a whole.

Summary

Overview

The Skills for Life and Work programme provides an inclusive and flexible pathway for young people who require additional support to engage in learning. Across the organisations visited, it is effective in re-engaging learners and developing their confidence, skills and readiness for progression. There are, however at this stage, insufficient system-level measures and benchmarks to demonstrate comprehensively the extent of sustained progression outcomes to education, training or employment.

Based on provider data, learner engagement, retention (70%) and achievement (90%) are strong. Providers use the flexibility of the programme effectively to respond to learners' individual needs and starting points, creating supportive and inclusive learning environments in which essential skills, vocational learning and personal development are well integrated.

Also, based on provider data, a majority (67%) of the trainees who achieve all of their targeted qualifications progress to education, training or employment. Of these, 29% progress to employment and 38% to education and training.

While progression to higher-level education or training pathways may not be an immediate or realistic outcome for all learners entering the programme, evidence from progression pathways and provider practice indicates that outcomes remain variable and are not yet translating consistently into sustained higher-level education or training pathways, or to employment. Consequently, the risk of a significant proportion of the learners becoming 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) remains a key challenge.

Progression to education and training among learners who achieved all of their targeted qualifications ranged from 11% to 77% across the providers visited. This variation is notable and potentially reflects the reported differences in learner profile, the size and composition of learner cohorts, local context, progression opportunities and the extent to which pathways are implemented and supported consistently across provision.

The evaluation, however, highlights limitations in the availability and completeness of baseline and standardised progression-tracking arrangements, which constrain the extent to which learner progress can be evaluated consistently and comprehensively across different learner contexts and over time.

While employer engagement is positive and contributes well to learner engagement and skills development, its contribution to sustained progression outcomes is not yet evident enough across the programme.

Next steps

The evaluation identified the following as the key next steps:

- strengthen progression to higher-level education and training, particularly to level 2, through improved alignment between curriculum offer, essential skills delivery, work-related learning experiences and clearly defined next-stage progression opportunities;
- promote greater consistency and completeness in baseline assessment information, progression planning and access to work-related learning, while continuing to allow flexibility to respond to local context and individual learner need;
- develop more coherent progression-tracking and reporting arrangements to support reliable capture of learners' starting points, measurement of learner progress and monitoring of longer-term outcomes across different learner pathways; and
- strengthen the impact of employer engagement by ensuring involvement is purposeful and structured, aligned to learner goals and programme delivery, and contributes more consistently to routes into further learning, training or sustainable employment.

Key findings

Curriculum provision

The curriculum provision under Skills for Life and Work meets learners' needs more effectively than under Training for Success. Removing the requirement for learners to enter a specific programme strand and level at the outset has increased the flexibility of individualised planning. This enables learners to engage meaningfully from the beginning, with decisions about vocational pathways and levels made later, once providers and staff have a clearer understanding of learners' needs, confidence and readiness. As a result, most learners are placed more appropriately in line with initial assessments, and early engagement has improved, particularly for those with uncertain starting points or low confidence.

Across the training providers, the curriculum offer is broad, balanced and learner-centred. Vocational learning is well integrated with essential skills, employability and personal development, supporting learners' academic, personal and social needs. Induction arrangements are generally well structured and help staff to understand learners' needs and barriers to learning more effectively.

Many of the learners commence the programme without sufficiently reliable records of prior attainment or additional learner information. This limits the extent to which learners' starting points can be identified in line with prior achievement and constrains the ability to evidence learner progress reliably over time.

Some training providers have developed high-quality project-based learning and World of Work activities that offer rich, workplace-focused experiences. For example, one further education college provides opportunities such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award, the Gaisce Award, urban expeditions, sustainable enterprise projects, volunteering and community partnerships. These activities are well aligned to learners' diverse needs and support effective engagement and progression. The examples reflect effective practice in context and are often supported by additional resources; they should not be interpreted as a prescribed model for all provision.

The training staff demonstrate a strong commitment to improving learners' life chances, particularly for those who have previously experienced disengagement or negative experiences in school. Learners and parents report safe, supportive environments in which staff know learners well and help them build confidence and resilience. These positive relationships and nurturing environments enable learners to feel safe, valued and confident to engage in learning, especially those who have experienced educational disengagement or anxiety.

Learner outcomes

Learner outcomes under Skills for Life and Work are improving steadily over time. Evidence from the organisations visited indicates that learners who remain engaged on the programme achieve well in vocational learning and in their targeted essential skills, with a majority progressing to further learning, training or employment.

Based on the data provided, the majority (70%) of learners remain on their programme; of those who stay, almost all (90%) achieve their targeted learning aims and attain the associated qualifications. This represents an overall success rate of 63%.

Based on the data provided, a majority (67%) of the learners who achieve all of their targeted qualifications progress to education, training or employment. Of these, 29% progress to employment and 38% to education and training. It is also notable that just under half (47%) of all learners who had left the programme, with achievement of any or none of their targeted qualifications progressed to education and training (27%) or employment (20%).

Going forward, it will also be important that the targeted levels for essential skills build sufficiently on prior achievement and optimise opportunities for learners to progress to the next stage.

Progression to education and training among learners who achieved all of their targeted qualifications ranged from 11% to 77% across the providers visited. This variation is notable and potentially reflects the reported differences in learner profile, the size and composition of learner cohorts, local context, progression opportunities and the extent to which pathways are implemented and supported consistently across provision.

While progression to higher-level pathways may not be an immediate or realistic outcome for all learners entering the programme, progression outcomes are not yet translating consistently into sustained higher-level pathways for a significant proportion of learners. Consequently, the risk of a significant proportion of learners becoming NEET over the longer term, remains a key challenge.

Overall, learner outcomes can be best understood through a combination of engagement, achievement and progression measures, rather than reliance on any single indicator alone. Further development is, however, required to strengthen progression pathways and improve the measurement and evidence of learners sustaining positive outcomes over time.

Personal and social development and wider skills

Personal and social development is a central and well-embedded feature of the programme. A strong emphasis is placed on building learners' confidence, resilience and well-being, alongside developing the attitudes and behaviours needed for progression. This reflects the complex barriers faced by many learners, including disrupted prior education, low confidence, mental health and well-being needs, and wider personal or social challenges that can affect engagement and readiness to learn.

The training providers use a range of approaches effectively, including youth work methodologies and targeted well-being interventions, to help learners remain engaged and support emotional regulation and behaviour. These approaches are particularly important for learners who have previously struggled to engage in learning or manage anxiety or behaviour. Evidence from learners and parents indicates a positive impact on learner confidence, attendance and willingness to engage in learning.

In some cases, providers through other funded social inclusion programmes, deliver pre-programme provision for young people who are deemed not yet ready to enter Skills for Life and Work. These programmes help learners to re-engage with education and support progression to the programme through finely targeted intervention. This contributes positively to coherent local curriculum planning and provides an appropriately tailored response to the persistent challenges of disengagement within this cohort.

While the short-term benefits of personal and social development are evident, particularly in supporting learner engagement and readiness to participate in learning, evidence of longer-term impact on independence, self-regulation and sustained progression is less consistent across the programme. The absence of agreed indicators for measuring incremental progress limits the extent to which these broader outcomes can be evidenced and evaluated consistently over time.

Learner engagement and motivation

Learner engagement is a clear strength of the programme. Learners consistently report positive relationships with staff and describe feeling respected and supported, which helps motivate them to attend and participate in learning. More flexible attendance arrangements in the early stages of the programme help learners who previously struggled under more prescriptive models to re-engage and begin establishing regular routines.

As the learners become more settled, providers increase expectations over time to support the development of routine and readiness for progression. This staged approach helps the learners build confidence while gradually taking on greater responsibility for their learning. Maintaining sufficient challenge as expectations rise remains important, particularly for learners who require extended periods of support.

Learner views are gathered through a range of mechanisms; however, the extent to which learner voice informs programme design and quality improvement planning consistently across provision varies.

Equity and inclusion

The design of the Skills for Life and Work programme supports equity and inclusion more effectively than the previous Training for Success programme. By avoiding early differentiation into fixed pathways and levels, the programme is better able to accommodate learners with a wide range of needs and starting points. The more flexible programme structure, alongside co-ordinated learning support arrangements, helps reduce barriers for learners with additional needs and complex circumstances. This allows support to be adapted progressively as learners' needs become clearer over time.

Providers are proactive in addressing disability, disadvantage and well-being needs, often working closely with external agencies to put appropriate support in place. Learning environments are generally accessible and inclusive, and learners consistently report feeling supported in their learning.

Delays in obtaining recognised disability coding and inconsistencies in recording reasonable adjustments make it more difficult in some cases to evidence impact fully and, at times, delay access to support. Streamlining procedures associated with these aspects of the programme was recognised as an important next step and has just been implemented in the 2025 contract.

Teaching, training and learner support

Teaching, training and learner support under Skills for Life and Work are effective. Sessions are generally well planned and structured, with clear learning intentions and an appropriate range of approaches, including questioning, discussion and practical activities, to engage learners and support understanding.

The small class sizes and high levels of pastoral support contribute to calm, inclusive and purposeful learning environments, enabling learners to feel comfortable and participate fully. Positive and respectful relationships between tutors and learners support the development of confidence, independence and progress. Learners receive clear, constructive feedback that helps them understand how to improve and move forward in their learning.

Across provision, learners have opportunities to develop vocational and employability skills that align appropriately with employer expectations and local labour market needs. In the most effective practice, these opportunities are integrated well into the curriculum and reinforced effectively through practical activities and work-related learning experiences.

Employer engagement, labour market alignment and work-related learning

The programme has strengthened engagement with employers for this cohort of learners and increased flexibility in work-related learning opportunities. Employers involved in work-experience placements report positively on learners' attitudes, preparedness and the support provided by training organisations. In many cases, the curriculum offer aligns appropriately with local labour market opportunities and supports the development of relevant vocational and employability skills.

However, the availability, consistency and alignment of work-related learning opportunities vary across provision. Work-experience placements do not always align sufficiently well to learners' interests, needs or readiness for progression, particularly for learners with more complex needs or those requiring higher levels of support. Opportunities for work placements in some vocational sectors and geographical areas are constrained due to uptake from other programmes such as Traineeships.

In response to the challenges in securing work-experience opportunities, some providers have developed alternative approaches, including simulated work environments and community partnerships, which help the learners gain experience and develop work-related skills. While these approaches provide useful interim opportunities, they are not a full substitute for sustained, high-quality work-experience placements linked clearly to progression opportunities.

Overall, while employer engagement contributes positively to learner engagement, confidence and skills development, its contribution to sustained progression to education, training or employment is not yet sufficiently realised across the programme. Employer feedback is also not yet used systematically enough to inform curriculum planning and strengthen appropriate progression pathways over time.

Progression pathways and transitions

Progression pathways under Skills for Life and Work are more flexible and realistic for many learners than under the previous Training for Success programme. Progression often occurs incrementally through sustained engagement in learning, training or employment rather than through immediate transition to higher-level pathways alone. Consideration of sustained destinations provides a more accurate reflection of learners' circumstances than reliance on immediate progression measures alone.

While many learners develop greater confidence, skills and readiness for progression during their time on the programme, this is not yet translating consistently into movement to higher-level education and training pathways across provision, as indicated in the analysis of the progression data provided, referenced earlier in this report.

The clarity and consistency of progression pathways also vary across the programme. In some contexts, learners' understanding of available progression opportunities is not sufficiently secure, and the effectiveness of transitions continues to depend too heavily on local practice and provider relationships rather than consistently implemented approaches across the post-16 vocational education and training system.

Sustainability, quality improvement and system coherence

Quality improvement planning arrangements aligned to contractual requirements are in place and continue to develop across the programme. Providers demonstrate increasing self-awareness and use self-evaluation processes to identify strengths and areas for action, with a growing focus on actions that have the greatest impact on learner engagement, support and progression.

Increasing learner numbers, alongside more complex learner needs, are placing growing demands on specialist vocational facilities, learning support arrangements and accommodation across some providers, including further education colleges. While additional general accommodation can be secured, expanding specialist vocational provision is more challenging and requires longer-term strategic resource planning.

Across the programme, there are not yet sufficiently coherent, agreed and consistently implemented approaches to baseline assessment information and progression-tracking arrangements. This limits the extent to which learner progress and sustained outcomes can be evaluated comprehensively across different learner pathways.

While progression to higher-level pathways may not be an immediate or realistic outcome for all learners entering the programme, there are not yet standardised programme-wide indicators for measuring and evidencing improvement in key areas, such as distance travelled, personal development, readiness for progression, confidence and employability skills over time.

Consequently, the extent to which providers and the Department can evaluate learner progress, value added and sustained outcomes consistently across different learner pathways, based on reliable starting points is underdeveloped.

Despite these challenges, there is evidence of incremental improvement in key areas of action over time, including more structured local improvement planning, clearer alignment between identified priorities and actions taken, and increasingly responsive approaches to supporting learners with complex needs and barriers to learning.

Child protection and adult safeguarding

The evidence from the full inspections (nine) of providers of the Skills for Life and Work programme shows that all of the organisations demonstrate that their arrangements for child protection and adult safeguarding align to the current statutory guidance.

Conclusion

Overall, the Skills for Life and Work programme has had a positive impact on learner engagement, inclusion and the responsiveness of provision. It provides an effective pathway for a majority of learners to re-engage with learning and develop the confidence, skills and behaviours needed for progression to education, training or employment.

These strengths provide a strong platform on which to build the next phase of the programme.

While learner engagement, retention and achievement are strong, progression to higher-level education and training pathways remains too variable across the programme. In particular, progression to level 2 remains limited, indicating that the programme is not yet supporting learners well enough to move beyond entry and level 1 pathways and low-skilled employment opportunities.

Progression to education and training among learners who achieve all of their targeted qualifications range from 11% to 77% across the providers visited. This variation is notable and potentially reflects the reported differences in learner profile, the size and composition of learner cohorts, local context, progression opportunities and the extent to which pathways are implemented and supported consistently across provision.

While employer engagement is a strength of the programme and contributes positively to learner engagement and skills development, its contribution to sustained progression outcomes is not yet sufficiently consistent across provision.

In conclusion, the programme is effective in engaging and supporting learners with complex needs and in providing flexible and inclusive learning opportunities. Further development is now required to strengthen progression pathways, improve consistency across provision, and develop more coherent approaches to baseline and progression-tracking arrangements. This will be important in supporting and improving sustained progression outcomes, reducing longer-term risks of disengagement and NEET outcomes, and contributing even more effectively to wider economic and skills priorities.

Next steps

The evaluation identified the following as the key next steps:

- strengthen progression to higher-level education and training, including to level 2, through improved alignment between curriculum offer, essential skills delivery, work-related learning experiences and clearly defined next-stage progression opportunities;
- promote greater consistency and completeness in baseline assessment information, progression planning and access to work-related learning, while continuing to allow flexibility to respond to local context and individual learner need;

- develop more coherent progression-tracking and reporting arrangements to support reliable capture of learners' starting points, measurement of learner progress and monitoring of longer-term outcomes across different learner pathways; and
- strengthen the impact of employer engagement by ensuring involvement is purposeful and structured, aligned to learner goals and programme delivery, and contributes more consistently to routes into further learning, training or sustainable employment.

Appendix 1: Progression data and explanatory notes

The tables below set out the progression data using the main cohorts referred to within the report. They are intended to provide transparency regarding the different progression measures and the cohorts used in their calculation.

Table 1: Progression data for all learners

Measure	Number	Percentage rate
Learners starting the programme	3,159	-
Learners who had completed their programme or left early	2,098	-
Progressed to education and training	576	27%
Progressed to employment	429	20%
Total progression to education, training or employment	1,005	47%

Table 2: Progression data for full-qualification achievers

Measure	Number	Percentage
Learners achieving all of their targeted qualifications	1,093	-
Progressed to education and training	416	38%
Progressed to employment	321	29%
Total progression to education, training or employment	737	67%

Notes on interpretation of the data

The data used in this report were provided by the training providers included within the evidence base for the evaluation. The evaluation identified variation in the way learner outcomes and progression data are defined, collated, tracked and reported across providers. The findings should therefore be regarded as indicative of the providers and learners included within the evaluation rather than a definitive representative of the programme as a whole.

Appendix 2: Terms of Reference

The key objectives of the evaluation are to determine the extent to which the changes and flexibilities introduced through the Skills for Life and Work programme have:

- strengthened learner progression from level 0/1 to the next stages of education, training, or employment;
- improved learners' skills, including their literacy, numeracy and digital skills; and
- provided learning and training experiences that are aligned closely to the needs of young people and employers.

To evaluate to what extent the provision for the Skills for Life and Work Programme is realising the key aims of the programme and Departmental vision of: access to good jobs, the evaluation will include:

1. Curriculum design

- The extent to which the curricular provision meets the diverse needs of level 0/1 learners in order for them to gain the necessary skills and dispositions to progress to the next stage.

2. Learner outcomes and progression

- The extent to which the learners achieve the most appropriate skills, dispositions and associated qualifications that enable them to progress to level 2 education or training programmes, or sustained employment.

3. Personal and social development

- The extent to which the learners are supported in their personal and social development to engage in meaningful learning and empowered to make positive career progression decisions.

4. Learning, teaching and training

- The effectiveness of the learning, teaching and training, including initial assessment, additional learning support and work experience placement, to support learners to achieve and progress.

5. Equity, inclusion and relevance

- The extent to which equal opportunities are provided, barriers to learning, achievement and progression are reduced, and programme content is tailored to individual learner needs and relevant to progression and employment opportunities.

6. Partnership and collaboration

- The extent to which partnerships and stakeholder working is established to ensure effective sharing and collaboration across education and training providers to underpin positive learner progression.

7. Quality improvement planning

- The effectiveness of organisations' quality improvement processes to bring about continuous improvement, including sharing of effective practice with other training providers to empower system-level improvement (including participation in the DfE Peer Support and Development Network).

8. Child protection and adult safeguarding

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the arrangements for child protection and adult safeguarding (included on full organisation inspections only).

Appendix 3: Quantitative Terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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