

**To:** City Executive Board  
**Date:** 14 April 2016  
**Report of:** Executive Director Organisational Development & Corporate Services  
**Title of Report:** Evaluation of Oxford City Council's Welfare Reform Team European Social Fund Project

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To note the outcomes and learning achieved from the Welfare Reform Team's European Social Fund project.
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Executive Board Member:</b>	Councillor Susan Brown, Board Member for Customer and Corporate Services
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	A Vibrant, Sustainable Economy, Strong and Active Communities
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	None.
<b>Recommendation(s): That the City Executive Board resolves to:</b>	
1. <b>Note the outcomes and learning detailed in this report.</b>	

<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1	Executive Summary of the Evaluation Report
Appendix 2	Summary of Project Expenditure
Appendix 3	Equalities Impact Assessment

## **Introduction and background**

1. Following the conclusion of the successful Local Authority (LA) Led Pilot undertaken by Oxford City Council in 2013, the Council was invited by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to bid for unallocated European Social Fund (ESF) money in order to build on the learning from the LA Led Pilots.

2. On 15 October 2014, CEB gave project approval to an ESF project. This was based on applying the learning from the LA Led Pilot project, which focused on customers affected by the Benefit Cap and Bedroom Tax (Under Occupancy Regulations), to a different customer base, namely customers renting privately in the city.
3. The bid secured £292,787 which paid for:
  - four temporary staff in the Welfare Reform Team(WRT)
  - commissioning of specialist support services to support project participants and
  - the reimbursement of participants out of pocket expenses.

### **Outcomes of Project**

4. The project aimed to engage with 600 participants and for 20% to move into employment. Participant numbers were fewer than expected at 230. The expected numbers were based on the experience of the LA led pilot, which dealt with customers affected by the Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap (both introduced in 2013). However the benefit change which affected most private sector tenants was the reduction in Local Housing Allowance rates, which had been introduced in 2011. As such many people had already adjusted to the change. Oxford's labour market had also changed dramatically with the number of jobs increasing from 104,900 to 113,900 from 2013 to 2014. These two factors led to fewer people choosing to engage with the project than had been anticipated.
5. Due to the prescriptive nature of the ESF project and associated funding agreement, it was not possible, despite the relatively low take up, to change the scope of the project and work with a broader customer group. A key aspect of the project was the learning which was derived from the work, so understanding the reasons for the low engagement rate was valuable information.
6. Despite the low take up, the outcomes for participants exceeded the objective initially set. 62 found employment during the project (27% of the cohort), which exceeded the target of 20%. At the end of the project 85% of these were still in work which demonstrates that sustainable job outcomes are being achieved. This is particularly significant given that the project participants were more complex and with a greater range of needs than the customers the Welfare Reform Team had previously dealt with.

### **Project Evaluation**

7. The evaluation of the project covers the 13 month delivery period. Since the project closed in June 2015, participants have continued to be supported, and a further 10 have found work, which means 31% of the total cohort found employment. In addition to employment outcomes, 288 referrals were made to partner organisations for employment support, training or help in removing barriers to work.
8. As part of the evaluation the total public value of the project has been calculated using the same methodology applied by HM Treasury. This shows that the project achieved £728,856 of public value due to savings to the NHS (as a result of reduced appointments) and increased earnings from people moving into work.

9. A researcher from the Social Policy Unit at Oxford University carried out analysis of the data collected during the project. Her most statistically significant findings were that people who had been out of work for 6 to 12 months were more likely to enter work than any other cohort, and that the more income a person lost from changes to their benefit, the less likely they were to move into work. This last finding contradicts existing government thinking in relation to reductions in benefit payments.
10. 86% of project participants said the support received was useful or very useful. Those that didn't respond positively were people who stopped receiving DHP's due to changes in policy which were introduced in April 2015(as a result of a 44% reduction in government funding), or those whose support stopped due to staff reductions at the end of the project. This could have been managed better, and this learning has influenced how we now manage customer relationships.
11. The project highlighted that lack of available childcare is the main barrier to work for customers. This is an important issue for the WRT's current work which is supporting customers who will be affected by the reduction in the Benefit Cap from £26,000 to £20,000, as most customers affected by the Benefit Cap will need access to childcare if they are to move into work. As a consequence we have formed stronger relationships with local Childrens Centres as they are likely to engage with people who will be affected by the lower Benefit Cap.
12. Partnership work was one of the most successful elements of the project, and has had the most significant legacy. The WRT started with three partners in the LA led pilot, and now has over 40 active partners. This means that customers are more able to get the right support, and there is less risk that customers won't be supported due to capacity issues with partners. 93% of partners described their relationship with the WRT as good or excellent. Partners reported that our referrals were usually appropriate and communications were effective.
13. Key partnerships during the project were:
  - Seconding a member of staff from Jobcentre Plus(JCP) into the WRT, and co-hosting job fairs with JCP in central Oxford and community locations
  - Commissioning mental health support which saw a member of staff from Restore working in the WRT for six months
  - Commissioning bespoke debt advice form the CAB, and delivered from St Aldates Chambers
  - Commissioning bespoke training courses for our customers and delivered by the Workers Educational Association
14. Since the project ended the Council has led two partnership bids with 20 third sector partners for funding from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The approach to partner engagement in the ESF project has been a decisive factor in giving these organisations confidence in the Council's ability to lead such work, having regard to the shared interests of all stakeholders and customers.
15. The project evaluation has been distributed locally to all partners and interested parties, and also to the Universal Credit Programme at DWP, the Local Government Association, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

### **Financial implications**

16. ESF funded expenditure was £242,393 which was less than the £292,787 which was successfully bid for. This was mainly as a result of fewer participants engaging in the project. An overview of expenditure is shown at Appendix 2. Funding was claimed quarterly in arrears, so the unspent funding was never claimed.

### **Legal issues**

17. There are no legal implications arising from the report.

### **Level of risk**

18. As the project has been closed, there are no outstanding risks.

### **Equalities impact**

19. The Equalities Impact Assessment conducted at the outset of the project is included at Appendix 3.

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**Background Papers:** None