

European Social Fund Evaluation of Sustainable Development and Green Jobs

By Peter Dickinson and Richard Lloyd

Introduction

GHK Consulting Ltd was commissioned to evaluate the environmental aspect of the sustainable development cross-cutting theme, and the promotion of green jobs, within the European Social Fund (ESF). The study explored progress towards the achievement of the England Sustainable Development Mainstreaming Plan, and provided recommendations for future ESF programming. It also investigated the extent to which ESF projects were:

- complying with European Commission requirements regarding minimising any negative impact of their delivery on the environment – ‘horizontal mainstreaming’; and
- supporting the development of ‘green’ skills and jobs as a core focus of their activities – through ‘vertical mainstreaming’.

The study followed a predominantly qualitative methodology, and featured:

- the review of relevant documentation, and interviews with the Managing Authority and a series of national stakeholders;
- a programme of fieldwork featuring:
 - interviews with staff in Government Offices in all nine regions, in 20 Co-Financing Organisations (CFOs), and in the Innovation, Transnationality and Mainstreaming Unit;
 - a telephone survey of 50 ESF projects; and
 - case studies of 11 ‘vertical’ projects - including consultations with project staff, partners and participants.

Sustainable Development and Green Jobs under ESF

While the primary focus of ESF is on raising prosperity by increasing the labour supply and promoting skills, the current ESF programme also features two cross-cutting themes – gender equality and equal opportunities, and sustainable development. The sustainable development theme focuses on ensuring that ‘...the implementation of the programme will take account of environmental concerns and respect the principles of sustainable development’. ESF regulations require projects to consider the impact of their activities on the environment, to fulfil the commitment to sustainable development set out in the operational programme document.

The current programme places greater emphasis on sustainable development, through a renewed Sustainable Development Strategy and the formation of an ESF Sustainable Development Sub-Committee to report on progress, enhanced efforts to communicate the importance of compliance with ESF environmental requirements, and the development of a sustainable development toolkit and provision of workshops for Government Office (GO) and CFO staff. The Strategy also promotes activity to support the development of skills for sustainable development, improve ‘sustainability literacy’ and green jobs through project activity (‘vertical mainstreaming’).

Key findings

The findings of the study are summarised below:

Government Office and CFO perspectives

Here the study found that:

- Understanding of the sustainable development theme varied, with many respondents requiring additional clarity in defining what sustainable development means.
- Monitoring of the horizontal aspect tended to be light touch, notably around implementing sustainability plans, with CFO staff often requiring more support on effective monitoring, and good practice examples to help them benchmark practice.
- The majority of GO and CFO staff considered that the guidance materials from the Managing Authority were helpful, and widely welcomed developments such as the sustainable development toolkit and workshops for staff. Many considered that additional and on-going support would be useful, and extended to providers.
- The study found that comparatively few vertical projects (less than 30) were being funded under Competitiveness and Convergence. Around one in three of the CFOs interviewed had discrete sustainable development/green jobs dimensions, or had invited calls for such projects when commissioning.

Project experiences – horizontal mainstreaming

The telephone survey of 50 ESF projects found that:

- Virtually all the projects had sustainable development policies in place, although one in five did not have implementation plans. These policies and plans most commonly pre-dated the current programme, and were driven by requirements other than ESF.

- Nevertheless, positive impacts of compliance were reported, including raised awareness of the need to minimise environmental impacts, a raised profile for sustainability issues within their organisations, and similar approaches being applied to other services.
- Most of the projects were satisfied with the way in which sustainable development was introduced to them by their CFO, although one in five were unclear what it meant. Projects' experiences of monitoring ranged from dedicated reviews and support, to being an element in their broader review process.
- The increased profile of sustainable development in the current ESF programme had impacted on projects' awareness, priorities and practical actions. Even when not delivering vertical activities, many projects thought that market opportunities existed in this area. More broadly, demand was reported for vertical projects in rural areas, the construction sector and in sustainable development organisational processes.

Project experiences – vertical mainstreaming

The project survey and case study fieldwork found that:

- Most of the vertical projects focused on addressing worklessness, increasing skills and exploiting market opportunities – and so were typical of other ESF projects. Increasing environmental awareness and activities were the main wholly 'green' project types, with drivers of project activity including environmental and practical factors.
- As with project activity, participant demand was also driven by practical (meeting legislation, reducing costs), attraction (outdoors manual work, exploiting market opportunities) and an interest in promoting sustainable development in its own right.

- The projects were at different points in their lifecycles, although the majority had met or were likely to meet their output targets. Impacts reported by the projects included:
 - for employers/employees – improved competitiveness; skills; career opportunities; environmental awareness, and business diversification;
 - for unemployed people – jobs; vocational, basic and employability skills; increased confidence and motivation; a sense of achievement; reduced social isolation, and increased environmental awareness; and
 - other impacts – meeting LAA targets; supporting regional priorities; new provision; networking, and improved environmental awareness.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The study concluded that:

- The profile of, and commitment to, the sustainable development theme had been raised considerably in the current programme, as a result of the increased emphasis from the Managing Authority. However understanding of what the theme meant in detail varied.
- Efforts to increase the capability of Managing Authority and CFO staff to provide support have been successful, with the toolkit and training being seen as useful and valuable.
- While sustainable development has become a highly visible cross-cutting theme, a series of issues were identified, including:
 - the monitoring of sustainable development plan implementation by CFOs was often light touch and piecemeal, and challenges were faced in the absence of quantified measures or good practice examples to benchmark provider progress; and

- despite efforts to promote vertical projects, comparatively few appear to have been funded, which are clustered in a few regions.

It also emerged that:

- There is an apparent lack of accredited qualifications in some sustainable development topic areas – which led several projects to develop new provision.
- Demand appears to exist for the services of the vertical projects on the basis of the performance of those consulted to date, although the sample size was small.

Recommendations

The recommendations of the study focused on the remainder of the current programme period and into the next programme from 2013 on, included:

- For the **horizontal** theme:
 - Continue to support commissioners and providers in understanding environmental sustainability requirements and in developing policies and plans; and consider how the sustainable development toolkit and GO/CFO training can be continued.
 - Review the current approach to the monitoring of providers' sustainable development plans.
 - Seek to develop provider networks focusing on sustainable development – on a virtual or physical basis and funded through Technical Assistance.
- For the **vertical** theme:
 - Seek to increase the number of vertical projects by: introducing a specific sustainable development priority or strand of activity; promoting sustainable development projects alongside others in future guidance materials; and working with CFOs to promote vertical projects for inclusion in future commissioning rounds.

- Ensure guidance materials provide a working definition of what constitutes green skills and jobs, illustrated by examples of current vertical projects.
- Provide access to specialist support and advice to help develop CFO strategies and prospectuses, where this is not available within the individual CFO.
- Explore the opportunity to utilise ‘the environment’ to support progress in other areas, for example exploring the role of the theme for engaging hard to reach clients, and promote effective approaches in new guidance materials.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 992 5. Research Report 756. June 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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Kate Callow, Commercial Support and Knowledge Management Team, Upper Ground Floor, Steel City House, West Street, Sheffield S1 2GQ. Email: Kate.Callow1@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.