



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions



# England ESF Programme 2007–2013: Evidence synthesis

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May 2016



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# Summary

This report presents the findings of the final synthesis of evidence of the England European Social Fund (ESF) programme 2007–2013. The study aimed to synthesise key learning from the second half of the programme and review the implementation of the ESF Evaluation Strategy 2007–2013, to inform planning for and the evaluation of the 2014–2020 ESF programme. The methodology used included the systematic review of over 30 evaluation reports, qualitative interviews with 15 programme stakeholders, and the review of programme management information.

## The evaluation synthesis

Evaluation reports commissioned by the ESF Evaluation Team, co-financing organisations and other recipients of ESF funding were reviewed, and were found overall to be of good quality and fit for their intended purpose. The evaluations frequently followed mixed methods approaches, where qualitative techniques were used alongside the analysis of project and programme management information.

A limited number of studies assessed the additional/net impact of the project or programme in question, and fewer assessed the value for money resulting. Key strengths of the evaluations lay in the areas of process evaluation, identifying what worked well and what less so – while key weaknesses were the limited assessment of additional impact and value for money. This is important given the expectations under the 2014–2020 programme for an increased focus on the assessment of impact.

While the good practice identified in the evaluations was not new or innovative, they provided a series of useful lessons for project providers and policy makers. These ranged from the role of specialist organisations engaging difficult to engage groups to the importance of recognising soft outcomes achieved by those facing multiple and complex disadvantages. Other areas of learning included the importance of communications and information sharing for effective partnerships and collaboration, and the use of key worker approaches to provide support throughout, and after, project interventions.

## Review of the 2007–2013 ESF Evaluation Strategy

The review found that overall the strategy provided a useful framework for the identification of operational and strategic issues and, through the Programme Monitoring Committee and Evaluation Sub-committee, the formulation and steering of activities to address them. The key findings included:

- **Awareness and understanding** – most but not all interviewees had a clear understanding of the strategy, emphasising the need for continued promotion.
- **Fitness for purpose** – strategy was fit for its intended purpose, and compared well with those produced by other Member States. Few areas for improvement were identified, but suggestions were made regarding specific activities.

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- **Implementation** – a series of challenges meant that the effective implementation seen in the first half of the programme was not repeated in the second. These included reduced staffing, and led to the delay or cancellation of studies and limited support for the development of the new 2014–2020 programme. Despite these challenges the studies, which were completed by the Evaluation Team, continued to be of good quality overall.
- **Management and governance** – the management of the strategy sat with the ESF Evaluation Team, with the Evaluation Sub-committee (a sub-committee of the Programme Monitoring Committee) leading on evaluation issues. The frequency of sub-committee meetings reduced in the second half of the programme, and views of its effectiveness varied.
- **Impact and influence** – while committed to sharing learning to stimulate policy and operational development, there had been few opportunities for this learning to be shared and implications for the programme discussed. Few examples of findings being used in the planning and implementation of the programme were identified, and consultations with wider stakeholders suggested that national and local evaluations had a greater degree of influence at the local level. In addition, it was reported that study recommendations were not always followed up by implemented action plans.

Overall, for the second half of the programme, the study concluded that while fit for purpose, implementation challenges meant that the overall objectives of addressing the operational and strategic needs of the programme (and of the 2014–2020 programme) were not met. Despite this, the evaluations commissioned under it did provide useful insights into the delivery, performance and outcomes for the ESF programme.

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# The Authors

This report was prepared by **James Kearney** and **Richard Lloyd** of ICF Consulting Services Ltd.

# List of abbreviations

<b>AIR</b>	Annual Implementation Report
<b>CATS</b>	Case Management and Tracking System
<b>CBA</b>	Cost Benefit Analysis
<b>CFOs</b>	Co-Funding Organisations
<b>CIE</b>	Counterfactual Impact Evaluation
<b>DWP</b>	Department for Work and Pensions
<b>EHRC</b>	Equality and Human Rights Commission
<b>ESA</b>	Employment Support Allowance
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>ESFD</b>	European Social Fund Division
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>GLA</b>	Greater London Authority
<b>GVA</b>	Gross Value Added
<b>JSA</b>	Jobseeker's Allowance
<b>LAs</b>	Local Authorities
<b>LDA</b>	London Development Agency
<b>LDD</b>	Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities
<b>LRRP</b>	London Reducing Reoffending Programme
<b>MA</b>	Managing Authority
<b>MI</b>	Management Information
<b>NCS</b>	National Career Service
<b>NEET</b>	Not in Employment, Education or Training
<b>NOMS</b>	National Offenders Management Service
<b>OP</b>	Operational Programme
<b>PbR</b>	Payment by Results
<b>PMC</b>	Price Monitoring Committee
<b>PNC</b>	Police National Computer

<b>PSM</b>	Propensity Score Matching
<b>SFA</b>	Skills Funding Agency
<b>VfM</b>	Value for Money

# Summary

The European Social Fund (ESF) was established to improve employment opportunities in the European Union (EU). As one of the EU's Structural Funds, ESF seeks to reduce economic and social imbalances between regions within Member States. The 2007–2013 ESF programme operated with two main objectives:

- The Convergence Objective – covering Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; and
- The Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective – which covered all areas outside the Convergence Objective.

ESF supports a range of interventions for individuals in England, including helping those unemployed and disadvantaged tackle the barriers to labour market participation, and supporting training for people in the workforce who do not have the necessary basic skills and qualifications.

ICF were commissioned to produce the final synthesis report of the England ESF programme 2007–2013 on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which aimed to:

- synthesise the key learning from the second half of the programme, updating and building upon the synthesis of evidence from the 2007–2011 period; and
- review the delivery of the ESF Evaluation Strategy 2007–2013, in terms of the achievement of its components and its influence on the development of policy and practice.

The study was intended to inform planning for the 2014–2020 ESF programme in England, and the further development of the programme Evaluation Strategy. The methodology had three main components:

- A desk-based review of 32 published evaluation reports commissioned in the second half of the 2007–2013 programme – following a systematic approach and ensuring consistency through the use of a common data extraction template;
- In-depth qualitative interviews with 15 programme stakeholders, including both current and previous representatives of: the ESF Division (ESFD) and the ESF Evaluation Team; Co-Financing Organisations (CFOs); the Cornwall Convergence programme; and wider stakeholders including the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), the producer of ESF Works and the European Commission; and
- A review of ESF programme performance data – taken from the Annual Implementation Report (AIR) 2014, the most up to date published data available at the time of the study.

## Performance of the programme

The England ESF programme 2007–2013 operated with two main objectives, namely the:

- Convergence Objective – covering Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; and
- Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective – covering the rest of England.

Six Priorities were established under the objectives, namely:

- Regional Competitiveness and Employment:
  - Priority 1: tackling the barriers to work faced by unemployed and disadvantaged people; and
  - Priority 2: training people without the skills/qualifications needed in the workplace.
- Convergence:
  - Priority 4: the equivalent to Priority 1; and
  - Priority 5: the equivalent to Priority 2.

Priorities 3 and 6 refer to technical assistance under each objective, to support preparation, management, monitoring and evaluation activities.

The programme had an allocated budget of over €6 billion (ESF and match funding), with over €4 billion being spent at the end of 2014. Priority 4 had spent the highest proportion of its allocation (72 per cent), whereas Priority 3 had a negative level of expenditure.

The programme overall outperformed its targets for the absolute number of participants and the absolute number of results achieved, achieving the numerical targets by 2010. Consequently it was decided that it was more appropriate to assess the performance of the programme in terms of the proportion of participants by target group, and the proportion achieving targeted results.

In terms of participation:

- At the end of 2014 over seven million participations in ESF activities were reported, compared to a programme target of below two million, due to the change in economic conditions across the programme period and extra funds resulting from changes in exchange rates.
- However, performance in terms of the share of participants by target group was more variable – for example, only Priority 4 met its target for participants with disabilities, and only Priority 5 for female participation. The programme was more successful in recruiting unemployed individuals and those with higher qualification levels, but less so in recruiting lower skilled workers and inactive participants.

In terms of results:

- The programme also overachieved in terms of the absolute number of results achieved, including 257,000 gaining basic skills against a target of 201,000; 688,000 participants being in work on exit against a target of 201,000; and 1.1 million being in work six months after exit compared to a target of 238,000.
- Performance varied in terms of the share of participants achieving results and by Priority. For example, achievements were similar for Priorities 1 and 4, with the proportion in work at exit being above target, and (positively) the proportion not in education, employment or training (NEET)/at risk being lower than target.
- In Priorities 2 and 5 there was an underperformance in terms of the share of participants achieving a level 3 qualification and a slight overperformance in the share achieving at level 2. Larger differences emerged in the share gaining basic skills (with Priority 5 over target at 100 per cent against Priority 2 under target at 40 per cent).

## Evaluation synthesis

The England ESF programme 2007–2013 supported a wide range of projects with different target groups, expected outcomes and delivery models, and so it was not surprising that different methodologies were employed in their evaluation. The methodologies employed were found to be strong in terms of those applied to process evaluations, but weaker in terms of impact (in part due to the programme comprising a large number of small projects).

Some 32 reports were reviewed covering all six Priorities, commissioned by a range of organisations (the majority being CFOs), and with differences in geographic and thematic focus. Coverage by Priority reflected the distribution of funding, with the majority (26) focusing on Priority 1, with 11 focusing on Priority 2. Overall the quality of the reports reviewed was concluded to be good and the reports were fit for their intended purpose.

A wide range of methodologies were followed in the evaluations, most commonly a combination of qualitative interviews with participants and stakeholders and an assessment of management information (MI). The qualitative interviews focused on process evaluation, often examining what worked well/less well and the level of participant satisfaction with their experiences. Some studies combined qualitative research with wider beneficiary surveys, to explore the impact of the programme and the level of satisfaction with it.

The qualitative interviews frequently featured a broad range of individuals, including participants, project staff, wider stakeholders and employers. This allowed a complete and balanced view of the projects' successes and areas for improvement, and for findings from a range of perspectives to be triangulated.

A limited number of studies (11) assessed the additional/net impact of the project or programme in question – an important finding given the emphasis on identifying impact in the 2014–2020 programme. Two of these used formal quasi-experimental approaches (one Difference-in-Difference, one Propensity Score Matching) and seven a comparator group analysis, each using administrative data to assess the counterfactual. Two further studies estimated net impacts by assessing the 'additionality' of the project or programme.

Fewer studies (five) analysed the value for money (VfM) the project or programme represented using different approaches. Two studies estimated the additional gross value added (GVA) the project or programme generated and compared this to programme expenditure; a further two conducted cost benefit analyses by monetising the results achieved and comparing this to expenditure; and one study estimated the unit cost of provision compared to similar projects or programmes.

The main strengths of the research reviewed lay in the process evaluation of projects and programmes, identifying what worked well and why, and what did not work well. The main weakness of the research was that most studies did not assess the additional impact of the project or programme or the VfM, despite these being important factors when deciding whether a project or programme has been a success.

## Findings from the evaluations

The review of evaluation reports sought to identify what had worked well (and so represented good practice), what less well, and the key lessons for future programmes.

While the examples of good practice identified were not new or innovative to the evaluation community, they nonetheless provided useful lessons for project providers and for policy makers. Examples of such good practice included:

- Involving local or specialist organisations/local partnerships in engaging participants and in the delivery of the programme;
- Using partnership working/networking to bring in specialist knowledge and allowing organisations to learn from each other;
- A key worker approach to provide wraparound, often intensive support from a single point of contact;
- Providing work placements and activities tailored to participants' needs;
- Commissioning projects through correctly specified Payment by Results (PbR) contracts to ensure a focus on sustained results; and
- Recognising soft outcomes, particularly for hard-to-reach groups.

Key areas of learning from the programme included:

- Multiple referral routes are desirable to ensure sufficient participants are recruited, and to allow for referral agencies experiencing difficulties;
- Good communication and sharing of information and learning are essential for effective collaborative/partnership-based projects;
- The use of a key worker approach can be particularly effective when their support continues after the participant enters employment or training, to aid sustainability;
- When offering work placements, consideration should be given to accessibility/travel time, and how this might affect participants' abilities to undertake other activities;
- For PbR contracts to be successful, they must be correctly specified to encourage sustaining results without causing cash flow problems; and
- When looking to engage with specific target groups, such as females or disabled workers, projects targeting these specific groups should be considered.

## Review of the 2007–2013 ESF Evaluation Strategy

The review of the 2007–2013 programme evaluation strategy explored a series of issues including: awareness and understanding of the strategy, fitness for purpose, implementation, management and governance, impact and influence, and lessons for the 2014–2020 programme. Overall, the strategy was found to provide a useful framework for the identification of operational and strategic issues and, through the Programme Monitoring Committee and Evaluation Sub-committee, the formulation and steering of activities to address them. The review findings included:

- **Awareness and understanding of the strategy** – in the majority of cases interviewees had a clear awareness and understanding of the objectives and content of the strategy, although in a few this was not the case, emphasising the need for continued promotion.

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- **Fitness for purpose** – the review concluded that the strategy was fit for its intended purpose, and was described as comparing well with those produced by other Member States. Few areas for improvement were identified, although suggestions were made regarding content and specific activities (e.g. the cohort survey).
- **Implementing the strategy** – a series of challenges meant that the effective implementation characterising the first half of the programme was not repeated in the second. In the second half reduced staffing led to the delay and cancellation of studies and limited the support that the ESF Evaluation Team could provide to develop the new 2014–2020 programme. Despite these challenges the studies which were completed by the Evaluation Team continued to be of good quality overall.
- **Management and governance** – the management of the evaluation strategy sat with the ESF Evaluation Team, with the Evaluation Sub-committee (a sub-committee of the Programme Monitoring Committee) leading on evaluation issues. Intended to meet every six months, the frequency of sub-committee meetings reduced to annually in 2011, with an 18-month gap between the previous and most recent meetings in 2015. Views of the effectiveness of the sub-committee varied – from positive to others who felt it had a mainly administrative function, with the active exchange of learning being limited.

Lessons and suggestions for improvement in the context of the 2014–2020 programme included: involving representatives of other Government Departments in the sub-committee; providing opportunities for the in-depth consideration of evaluation findings and their implications for the programme; and ensuring clarity over the ‘ownership’ of the strategy (the Evaluation Team or the Managing Authority) and responsibilities under it.

- **Impact and influence** – the evaluation strategy made the commitment to disseminate its outputs through a range of channels, to support the exchange of learning and to stimulate policy and operational development. However, there have been few opportunities for this learning to be shared, and the implications for the programme discussed. This limitation was considered to be the main weakness of the 2007–2013 strategy by many of the consultees.

Consequently few examples of evaluation outputs being applied to the planning and implementation of the programme were identified, examples of which included changes to the delivery of the cross-cutting themes, and learning from the cohort survey on the importance of continued support to ensure results are sustained for the most challenging groups. Consultations with CFOs and wider stakeholders suggested that national and local evaluations had a greater degree of influence at the local level. Several interviewees did, however, comment that recommendations from evaluations were not always followed up by implemented action plans, and that this was an area of improvement which could lead to change on the ground.

Overall, for the second half of the programme, we conclude that while fit for purpose, challenges with the implementation of the strategy meant that the overall objectives of addressing the operational and strategic needs of the programme (and of the 2014–2020 programme) were not met. Despite the evaluation strategy not meeting its overall objectives, the evaluations commissioned under it did provide valuable insights into the delivery, performance and outcomes for the ESF programme.



## Recommendations

A series of recommendations were proposed for the 2014–2020 programme, and for the 2014–2020 Evaluation Strategy.

Recommendations for the 2014–2020 programme – included:

- Projects working with individuals a long way from the labour market should consider following a ‘key worker’ approach, where a single point of contact provides holistic or wraparound support for participants throughout service delivery. This was widely reported as being an effective way to engage with, and support, sustained relationships with participants with greatest need.
- Where possible support (from key workers or others) offered to hard-to-reach individuals should not stop when a participant achieves a result, as its continuation can ensure results are sustained.
- Despite the challenges in their design and implementation, include (and promote the use more widely) of impact assessments using Counterfactual Impact Evaluation (CIE) approaches. This requires preparatory work early in the programme to consider what data is required and how potential comparator groups can be constructed.
- Promoting the assessment of VfM as part of all evaluations commissioned under the new programme – including providing data on unit costs to support preparations for the next programme period.

## Recommendations for the 2014–2020 ESF evaluation strategy and plan

For finalising the 2014–2020 strategy, our recommendations included:

- Continuing to follow the ‘rolling programme’ approach from the previous strategy, with a mid-point update to allow change in the wider environment to be considered.
- Actively involving all recipients of ESF funding (and Commission representatives) in finalising the strategy, to help foster understanding, secure commitment and ensure strategic and operational needs are referenced.
- Providing clear information to CFOs and others on the requirements of the strategy and their role/inputs to it – including requirements for data provision.
- Ensuring that the strategy is sufficiently resourced and that the necessary number of appropriately skilled staff are in place in the ESF Evaluation Team, and in the CFOs, to implement the strategy effectively.
- Including specific reference to support for the successor programme in the 2014–2020 strategy – to emphasise the importance of ensuring sufficient resources are available.

## England ESF Programme 2007–2013: Evidence synthesis

In terms of implementing the strategy, our recommendations included:

- Providing clear guidance on evaluation requirements for recipients of ESF funding, with advice on specific issues from the ESF Evaluation Team (e.g. expected standards for evaluation reports produced).
- Improving the process for sharing the learning from commissioned evaluations, and facilitating the discussion of implications for the programme, by:
  - continuing to publish reports and encouraging others to do the same;
  - enabling more detailed discussion of findings at sub-committee meetings or events/ workshops (particularly at the mid-point and towards the end of the programme); and
  - ensuring that all evaluation reports produced set out the implications of their findings.
- Ensuring that action plans are produced to take evaluation recommendations forward, and that implementation is monitored and reported to the Evaluation sub-committee.
- Taking steps to ensure that the staffing complement is maintained throughout the programme – particularly in the latter stages to meet the planning requirements of the new programme.

# 1 Introduction

This is the final report of the European Social Fund (ESF) Operational Programme 2007–2013: Final Synthesis Report for England and Gibraltar. The research was carried out by ICF Consulting for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

## 1.1 Aims of the study

There were two main aims for this study, which were set out in the Invitation to Tender. These were:

- to synthesise the key learning from the second half of the England ESF 2007–2013 programme, updating the synthesis of evidence from the 2007–2011 period; and
- to review the delivery of the ESF Evaluation Strategy 2007–2013, in terms of the achievement of its components and its influence on the development of policy and practice.

The research is intended to be used for:

- planning for the implementation of the 2014–2020 programme; and
- the further development of the programme Evaluation Strategy for the 2014–2020 ESF programme.

This research builds on the ESF Operational Programme 2007–2013: synthesis of evidence from the first half of the programme. This document synthesised the evidence from the first half of the England ESF 2007–2013 programme (up until 2011), examining the performance of the programme. This included the performance against targets, an assessment of whether the programme was offering added value and what the impact of the programme had been to date.

The synthesis of evidence from the first half of the programme concluded that it was adding value by increasing the quantity and range of support activities available; helping participants find employment and achieve qualifications; and increasing firm profitability and productivity. However, the impact of the programme on individuals claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) was small, despite JSA claimants representing the majority of the ESF cohort. The impact on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants was larger and similar to the impact of mainstream programmes for this claimant group.

This report builds on findings presented in the 2011 Synthesis Report.

## 1.2 Study methodology

The research methodology selected to achieve the study aims revolved around three main components. These were:

A desk-based review of relevant published evaluation reports commissioned in the second half of the 2007–2013 programme by the ESF Evaluation Team, co-financing organisations (CFOs) and other promoters/recipients of ESF funding. Evaluations published prior to 2011 were deemed out of scope for this research, as the evidence would already have been

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collected in the mid-term review. A list of relevant evaluation reports was agreed with the DWP at the start of the research, while additional reports were collected from stakeholders over the course of the review period. A systematic approach was adopted to ensure consistency using a standard data extraction tool (see Appendix A, with the reports reviewed listed in Appendix C).

In-depth qualitative interviews. A total of 15 interviews were conducted with stakeholders. These included representatives of:

- The ESF Division (ESFD) and the ESF Evaluation Team – both current and previous employees;
- CFOs – including the DWP, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), Greater London Authority (GLA) and Central Bedfordshire Council – and the Cornwall Convergence programme; and
- Wider stakeholders – including the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), the producer of ESF Works and the European Commission.

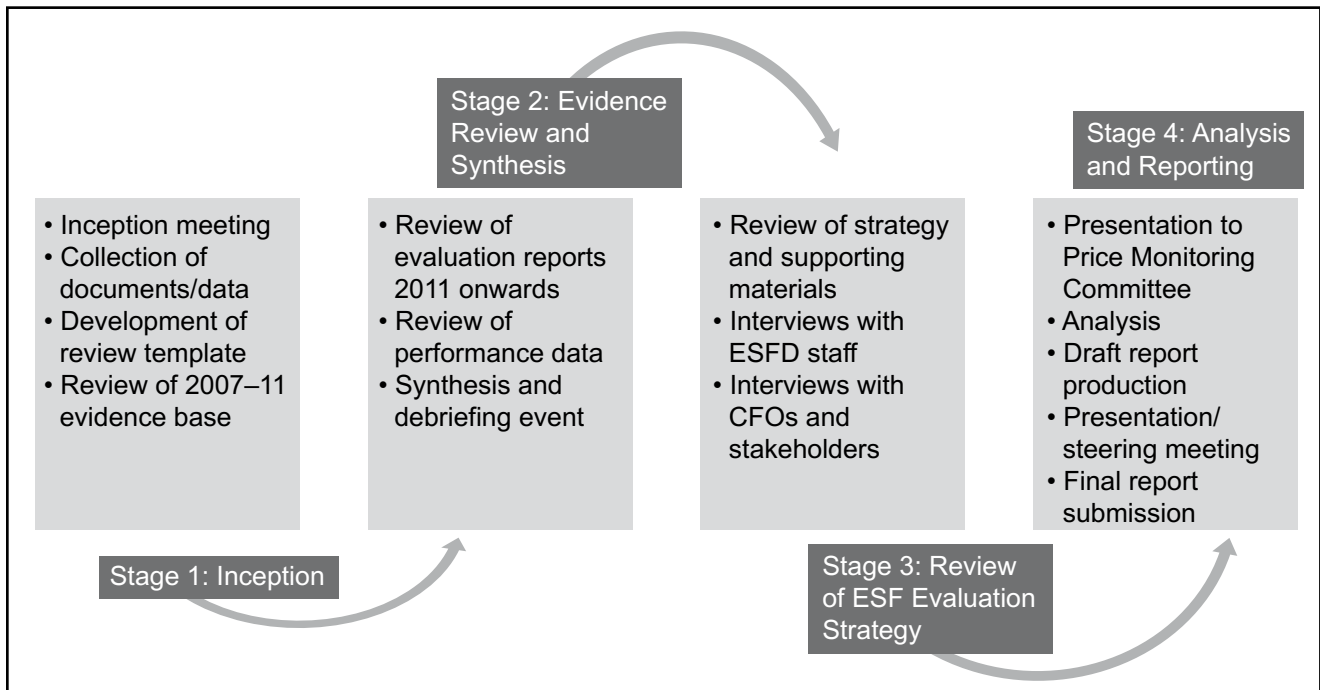
The interviews were semi-structured and scheduled to last between 30 and 60 minutes. Topic guides for the qualitative interviews can be found in Appendix B. A review of ESF programme performance data. This data was taken from the Annual Implementation Report (AIR) 2014. This involved an analysis of spending, participation and results achieved compared to the targets set for the programme. This was the most up to date published data available at the time of the study.

ICF's internal quality assurance (QA) procedures were applied throughout the study. For this specific study the QA process included:

- piloting the data extraction tool thoroughly as part of the development process;
- holding team briefing and debriefing events to ensure all were clear on their roles, the detail of their tasks and timing arrangements;
- reviewing the study outputs (evaluation report reviews, the management information (MI) analysis and interview write-ups) to ensure both quality and consistency; and
- the fieldwork tools and draft/final reports being quality assured by the Project Manager and Project Director, with the final report also being 'peer reviewed' at Director level.

The methodology is summarised in Figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1 Study methodology**



There were several limitations to the research completed for this study. These were:

- the data analysis was based on the most recent data available, rather than the final programme data;
- the final programme evaluations for the three largest CFOs (DWP, SFA and NOMS) were not available at the time of the research;
- there was an incomplete list of evaluations of ESF-funded project or programme evaluations. This means that not all evaluations have been included in the synthesis; and
- although efforts were made to contact the relevant individuals in the qualitative interviews, staff turnover in most of the organisations involved with the programme meant that some interviewees did not have a knowledge of the whole 2007–2013 programme, and could only comment on the time they were involved with it.

## 1.3 Structure of the report

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 presents the analysis of the programme level data, taken from the AIR 2014;
- Section 3 provides an overview of the evaluation reports covered, including the coverage of the reports and an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses;
- Section 4 discusses the findings and learning opportunities from the evaluation reports, including common good practice that has been identified or difficulties encountered which could inform the 2014–2020 programme;
- Section 5 reviews the 2007–2013 evaluation strategy; and
- Section 6 summarises the findings from the research and makes recommendations for the 2014–2020 programme.

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The report also has three Appendices:

- Appendix A provides the template used to extract data from the evaluation reports reviewed;
- Appendix B features the topic guides used in the interviews with ESF Division (ESFD) staff and stakeholders; and
- Appendix C lists the evaluation reports reviewed for the study.

## 2 Performance of the 2007–2013 ESF Programme

This section presents a summary analysis of the performance of the England ESF programme 2007–2013, drawn from data provided in the latest Annual Implementation Report (AIR 2014). This includes information on the budget for the programme, followed by a discussion on the achievement of the programme compared to the targets set at the beginning of the programme. However, as the AIR covers programme performance to December 2014, it is important to note that this does not provide a comprehensive picture of achievements across the entire duration of the programme.

### 2.1 ESF 2007–2013 programme description

The ESF was set up to improve employment opportunities in the European Union (EU). As one of the EU's Structural Funds, ESF seeks to reduce economic and social imbalances between regions within Member States.

The England ESF programme 2007–2013 operated with two main objectives<sup>1</sup>:

- The Convergence Objective. Historically Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly has been marked by higher than average unemployment, low average wages and to some extent a continued dependency on a small number of low productivity sectors. In England, only Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly benefit from ESF funding under this objective; and
- The Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective covers all areas outside the Convergence Objective.

Under the two main objectives, there were six Priority areas. These Priority areas were designed to ensure ESF spending was targeted on specific activities so that it reached the people in most need of support. These Priority areas were:

- Priority 1: 'Extending employment opportunities'. It supports projects to tackle the barriers to work faced by unemployed and disadvantaged people. This Priority is for the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective.
- Priority 2: 'Developing a skilled and adaptable workforce'. It supports projects to train people who do not have basic skills and qualifications needed in the workplace. This Priority is for the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective.
- Priority 4: The equivalent to Priority 1, but targeting the Convergence Objective in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.
- Priority 5: The equivalent to Priority 2, but targeting the Convergence Objective in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2011). European Social Fund Operational Programme 2007–2013: synthesis of evidence from the first half of the programme.

## England ESF Programme 2007–2013: Evidence synthesis

- Priorities 3 and 6: refer to technical assistance under the Competitiveness and Convergence programmes respectively, which support the preparatory, management, monitoring, evaluation, information and control activities of the respective Operational Programme.

The England ESF programme 2007–2013 was managed by an internal team from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which acted as the Managing Authority (MA) for the programme. The MA distributed ESF funding through public agencies known as Co-Financing Organisations (CFOs). There were three main CFOs in England:

- The DWP, but a separate internal department to the MA. The DWP used ESF funding in Priorities 1 and 4 to add value to its domestic employment programmes targeting unemployed and economically inactive people.
- The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) which used ESF funding to add value to its skills programmes such as apprenticeships and other work-based learning programmes. The SFA used ESF funding across Priorities 1, 2, 4 and 5.
- The National Offenders Management Service (NOMS) which uses ESF in Priorities 1 and 4 to enhance the employability of offenders; and increase access to employment and skills opportunities.

There are also a small number of regional bodies and local authorities (LAs) who acted as CFOs, or in the case of Cornwall County Council as lead partner for the implementation of the Convergence programme. These organisations used ESF funding across Priorities 1, 2, 4 and 5, and included the Greater London Authority (GLA, formerly the London Development Agency (LDA)), East Midlands Development Agency and Central Bedfordshire Council.

## 2.2 England ESF programme 2007–2013 budget

The England ESF programme 2007–2013 was allocated a total of over €6 billion (see Table 2.1). This included allocation from the ESF and corresponding match funding. Priority area 1 had the largest allocated budget, representing 60 per cent of the total allocated budget. The convergence area had an allocated budget of over €260 million across three Priority areas (Priorities 4, 5 and 6). The majority of the allocated budget for the convergence area was for Priority 5, which represented 60 per cent of the total allocated convergence budget.

The cumulative expenditure for the 2007–2013 Regional Competitiveness programme is presented in Table 2.1, which shows that the spend for the programme was over €4 billion to end 2014, representing just over two-thirds of the allocated budget. The total expenditure in the Convergence area was almost €170 million, just below two-thirds of the allocated budget. The reasons for this underspend were:<sup>2</sup>

- Variations in the exchange rate which made planning difficult.
- Economic performance in England has improved in the last two to three years of the programme, which led to a reduction in the available customer group for some programmes (such as unemployed individuals).

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<sup>2</sup> ESF PMC (2015) 2007–2013 Programme Performance Report (MC/15/15).



- Some innovative provision did not have as many starters as originally planned. For example, the DWP Families with Multiple Problems programme significantly underperformed with only around £60 million being spent out of the £195 million that was contracted.
- Financial corrections and irregularities which have arisen late in the programme. These resulted in funds being recycled but it was not possible to re-contract for new activity in the last 18 months of the programme.

There were some significant differences in the percentage of the programme allocation which had been spent between Priority areas. The expenditure for Priorities 1 and 2 was just over two-thirds of the allocated budget (as these two Priorities represent the vast majority of the programme allocation and spend, and are close to the programme total percentage). The expenditure for Priority 5 in the convergence area had the highest spend as a proportion of the allocated budget, but the expenditure for Priority 4 represented a little over half of the allocated budget. The expenditure for Priority 3 was negative. This was due to low take-up of Technical Assistance funding and reporting errors.

**Table 2.1 Budget information for England ESF programme 2007–2013<sup>3</sup>**

Priority	Total allocation (€)	Cumulative expenditure (€)	Expenditure against allocation (%)
1	3,651,255,710	2,511,025,018	68.8%
2	1,990,917,526	1,344,708,885	67.5%
3	144,731,642	-2,786,769	-1.9%
Total regional and competitiveness	5,786,904,878	3,852,947,133	66.6%
4	99,526,530	52,483,118	52.7%
5	157,147,152	113,625,070	72.3%
6	5,238,239	3,512,445	67.1%
Total convergence	261,911,921	169,620,632	64.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,048,816,799</b>	<b>4,022,567,766</b>	<b>66.5%</b>

AIR, 2014. All figures rounded to nearest €.

<sup>3</sup> Data correct at 24 June 2015.

## 2.3 Participation in the England ESF programme 2007–2013

### 2.3.1 Absolute number of participants

The number of participants<sup>4</sup> in the England ESF programme 2007–2013 significantly exceeded the targets set for it (see Figure 2.1). There were more than seven million participants in the programme, compared to a target of under two million. This included participants of the Next Step/National Career Service (NCS) programme which accounted for nearly 1.9 million participants. The programme had achieved the target number of participants by 2010.

While Next Step/NCS provision accounted for a considerable share of the recorded participation, questions were raised by the European Commission regarding the nature and intensity of this provision. Nevertheless, even if it is discounted from the total participation figure the programme still over-performed with 5.26 million participants compared to the target of 1.79 million.

The overachievement in recruiting participants to the programme was achieved for the three target groups where targets in absolute numbers were set (individuals unemployed, inactive or with basic skills needs). However, the most significant overachievement was for unemployed individuals, with participation being over 900 per cent of the original target (see Figure 2.2).

The AIR 2014 report highlights two main reasons for this overachievement. These were:

- The changing economic conditions in England and Gibraltar. The targets for the number of participants on the programme were set prior to the economic downturn in England and Gibraltar which began in 2008. As a result of the downturn, the number of unemployed individuals increased rapidly (from 1.7 million in 2007 to 2.5 million in 2010)<sup>5</sup>. This meant that there were a much larger number of individuals who could benefit from the ESF programme. These individuals also required less intensive support than was originally planned, as they were not long-term unemployed or lacking the skills required to gain employment. Therefore the interventions were shorter, allowing more participants to take part in the programme. This is supported by the large overachievement of the number of unemployed participants.
- Additional funding that became available as a result of the revaluation of the programme to take account of exchange rate changes.

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<sup>4</sup> The number of participants relates to the number 'participant events' or starts, rather than the number of individuals. An individual may have joined and left more than one ESF project during the seven years the programme, therefore the number of participants reported could exceed the number of individuals supported. It was not possible to identify the number of individuals supported.

<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics (2015) Summary of Labour Market Statistics.

Figure 2.1 Total number of participants in the ESF programme

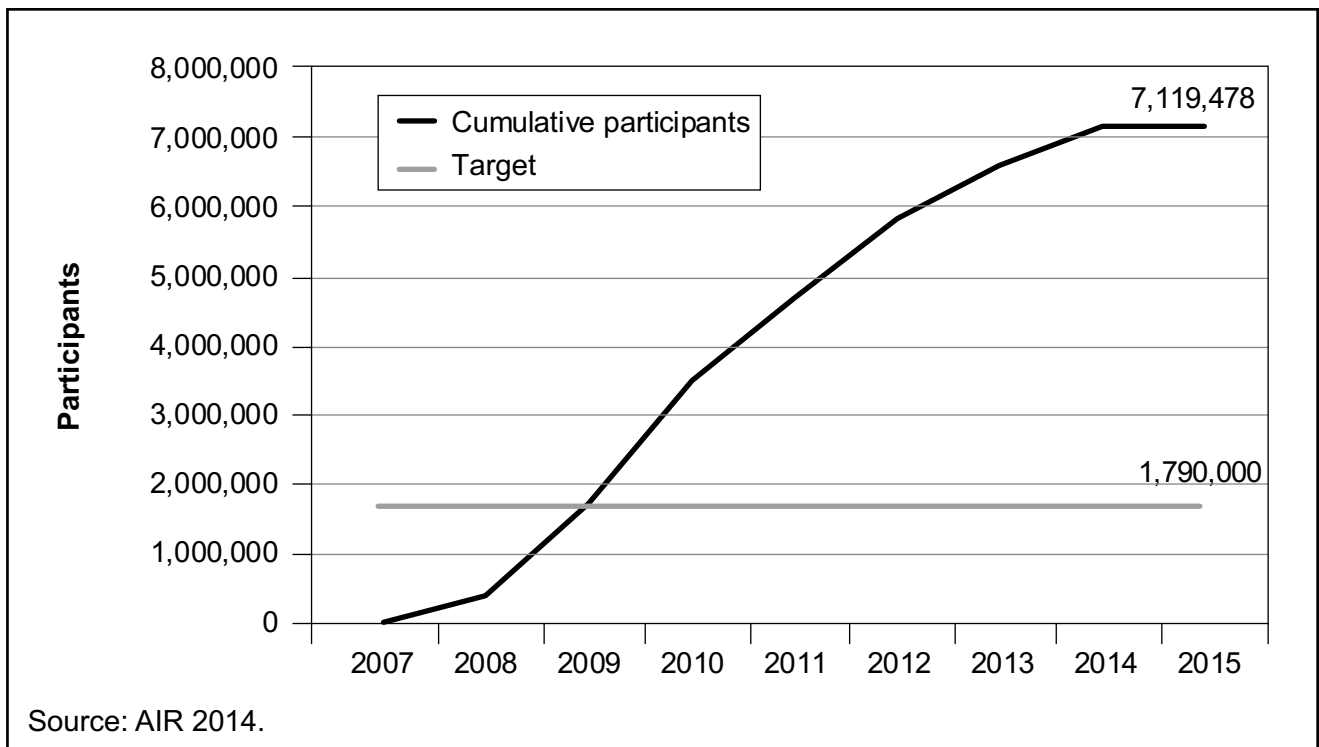
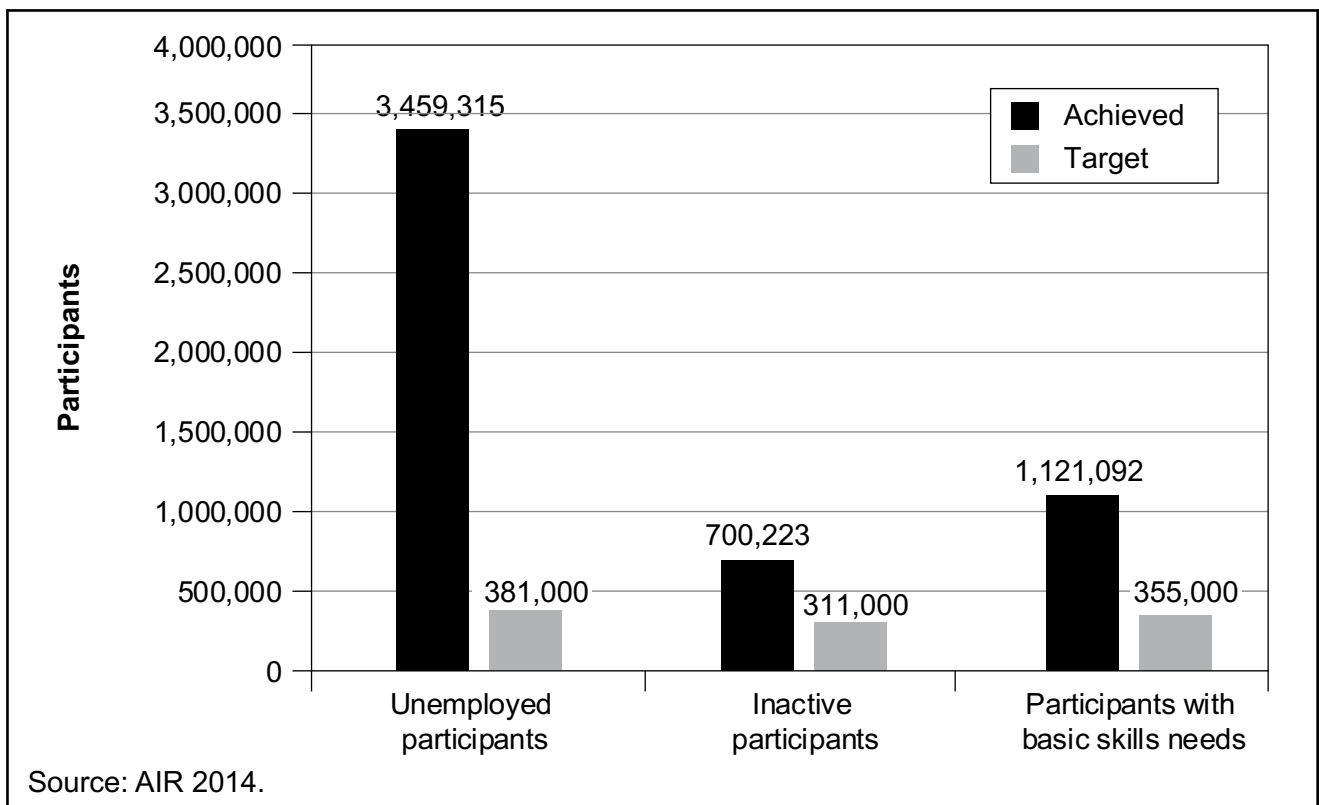


Figure 2.2 Total number of participants by type of participant

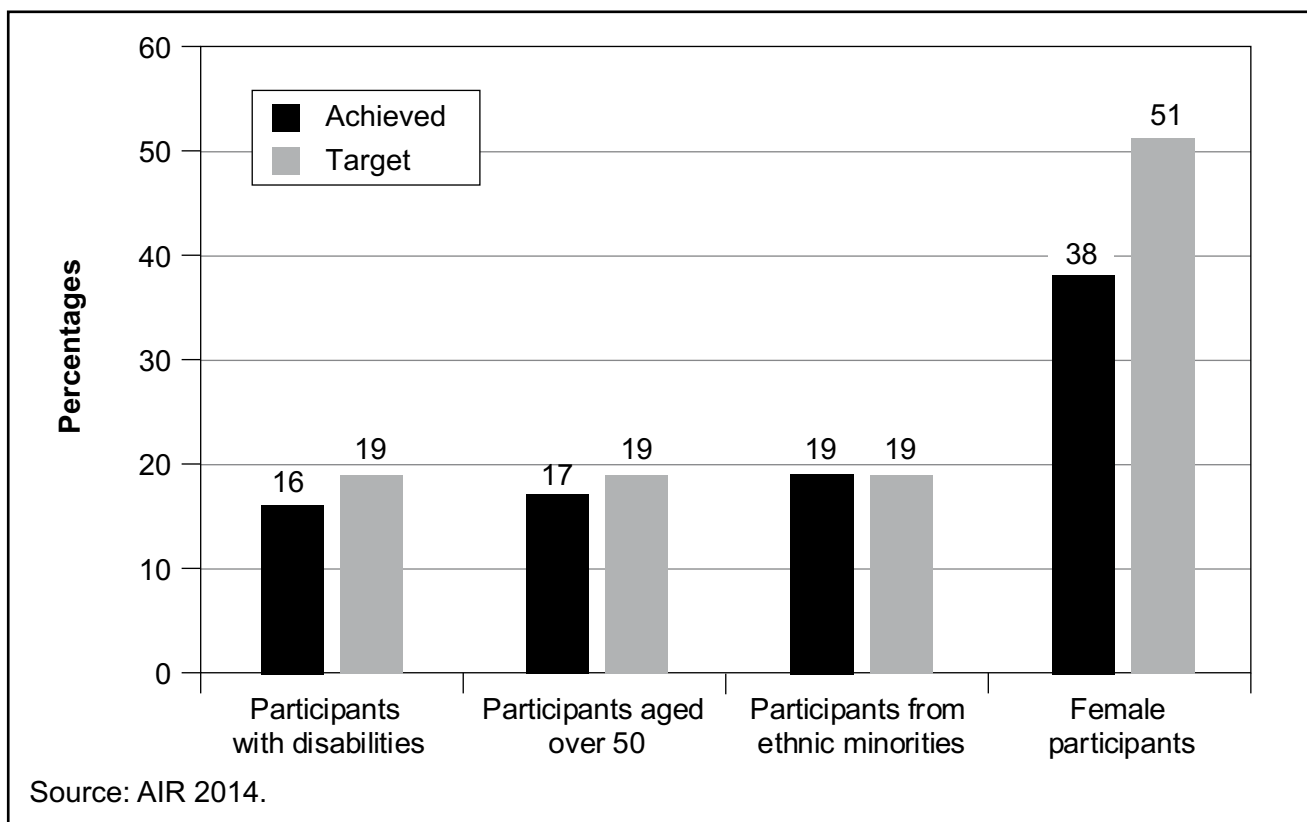


### 2.3.2 Participants by specific demographic group

While the programme overachieved in terms of the number of participants, the share coming from specific ESF target groups showed a somewhat different picture.

The England ESF programme 2007–2013 had four demographic targets for participants, which were: participants with disabilities; participants aged over 50; participants from ethnic minority backgrounds; and female participants. At a programme level, only one of these targets was achieved (participants from ethnic minority backgrounds). The proportion of female participants achieved was markedly lower than the target (see Figure 2.3).

**Figure 2.3 Total programme participants by target group**



### Participants by Priority

The demographic participant targets were examined by Priority. There were some noticeable differences in the performance. For example, although the programme did not achieve the target for participants with a disability, the proportion of participants with a disability for Priority 4 was 41 per cent, well above the target level. All other Priorities were below their target. Priorities 2, 4 and 5 also overachieved on the proportion of participants from ethnic minority backgrounds. Only Priority area 5 achieved the target for the proportion of female participants (53 per cent), with the proportion of female participants being lowest in Priority 1 and 4. The proportion of participants aged over 50 was similar in all Priorities (see Figure 2.4).

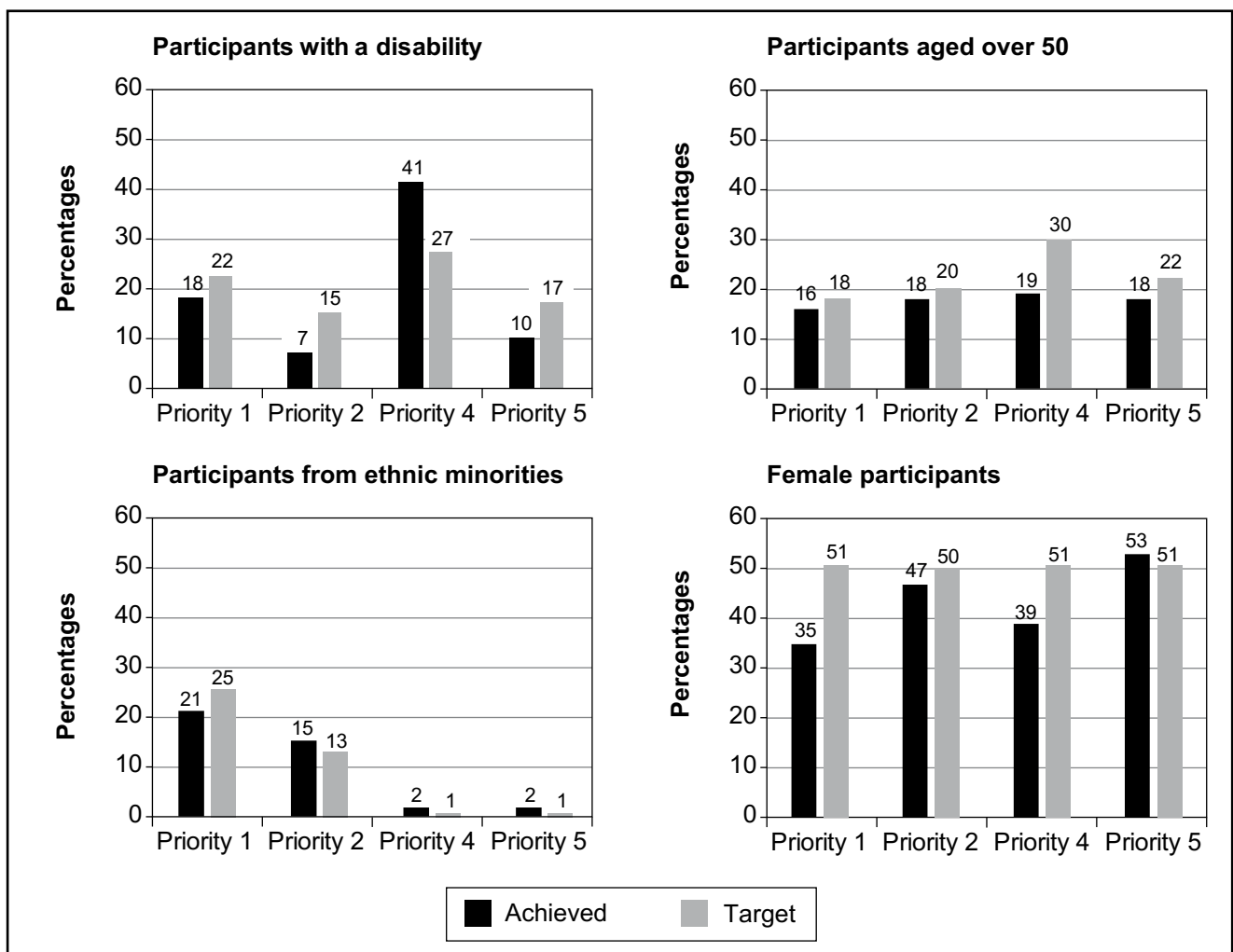
As a result of the failure of the programme to achieve the targeted level of female participants, an Action Note (70) was issued by the ESF Division (ESFD) in 2012. This Action Note required CFOs to review the performance of providers, particularly the extent to which

female participants were accessing their provision. CFOs were asked to identify providers which had a female participation rate below 51 per cent and report this information back to the MA and ESF Sub-committee. Providers with a low female participation rate then agreed an action plan with their CFO to try to improve female participation during the remainder of their contracts.

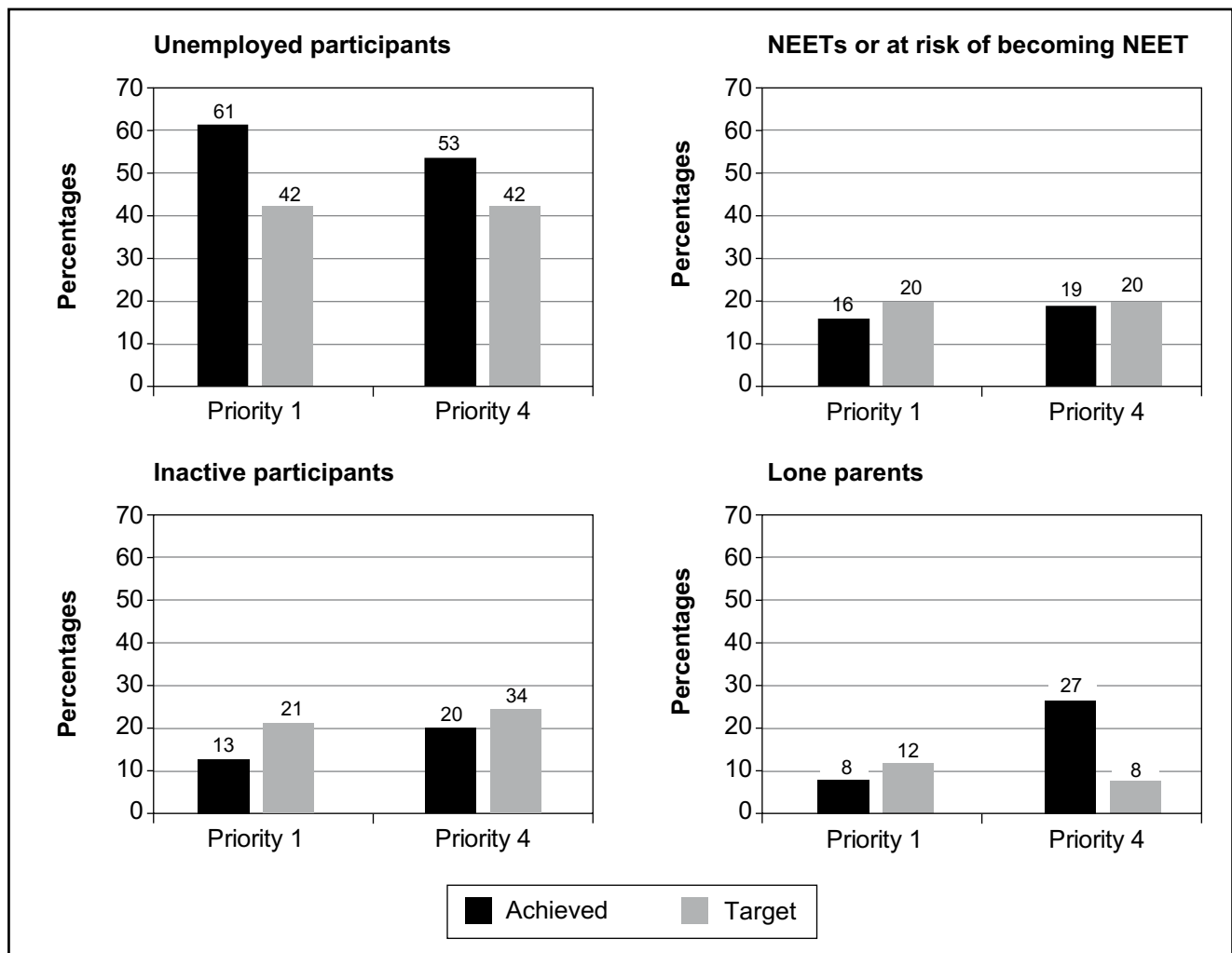
Priorities 1 and 4 had additional targets for participants, around unemployment, inactivity, lone parents and young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). The performance of the two Priorities was similar for most of these targets, overperforming for unemployed participants, slightly underperforming for participants who were NEET or at risk of becoming NEET and missing the targets for inactive participants. There was also a marked difference in the performance for lone parents. Priority 1 did not achieve the target proportion of participants, whereas Priority 4 outperformed the target significantly (see Figure 2.5).

Priorities 2 and 5 have three additional targets for participants around skill levels. Overall, the programme was most successful in recruiting participants with higher level skills, with both Priorities outperforming the target for participants with level 2 but without level 3 qualifications. Both Priorities achieved the same proportion of participants without level 2 qualifications, with both falling below the target level. However, there was a significant difference between the proportions of participants without basic skills in the two Priorities (a higher proportion in Priority 2, 25 per cent, than in Priority 5, 9 per cent), although neither Priority area achieved the target level of participants (see Figure 2.6).

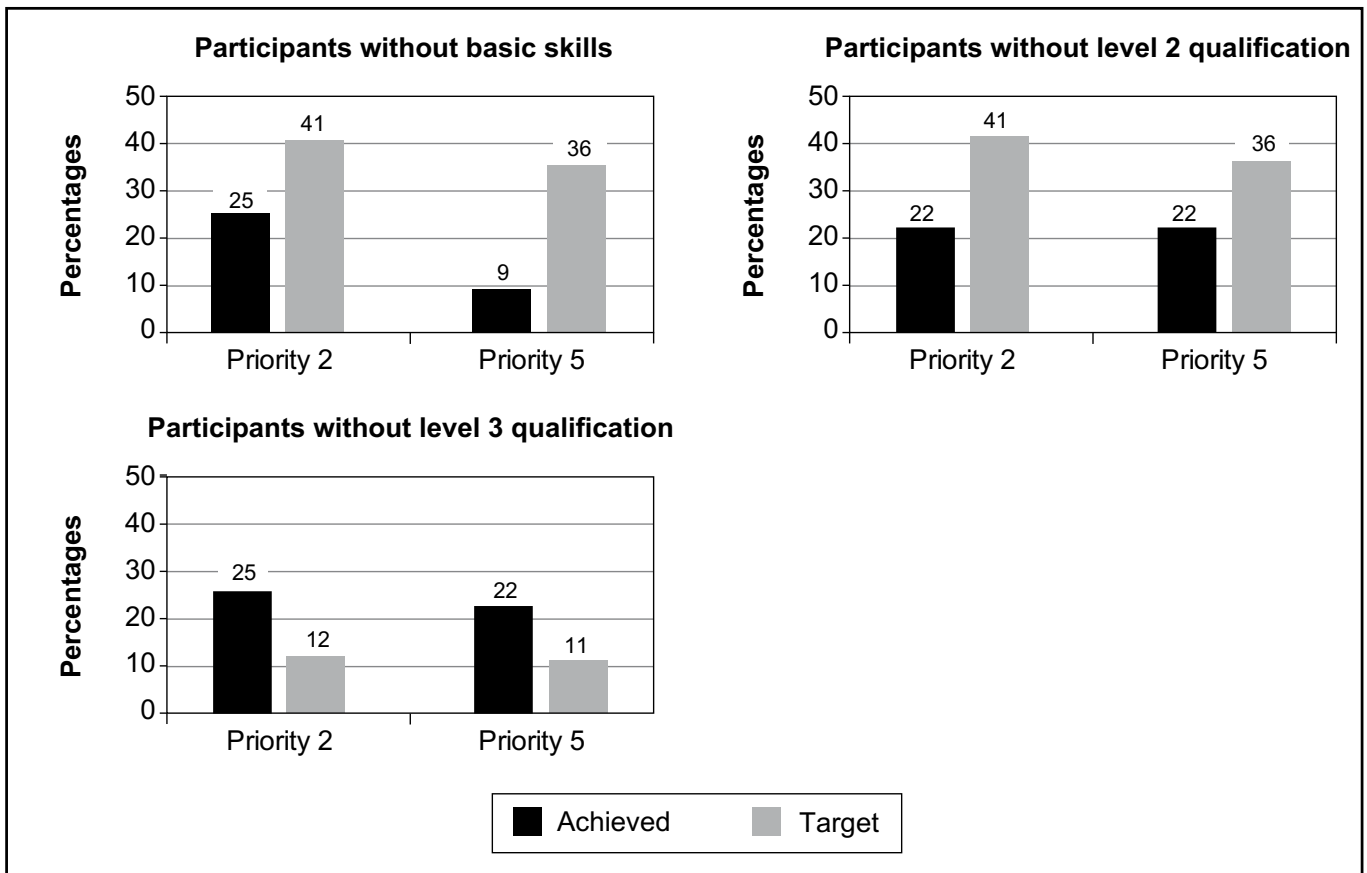
**Figure 2.4 Proportion of participants by Priority demography, AIR 2014**



**Figure 2.5 Proportion of participants by Priority and target group for Priorities 1 and 4, AIR 2014**



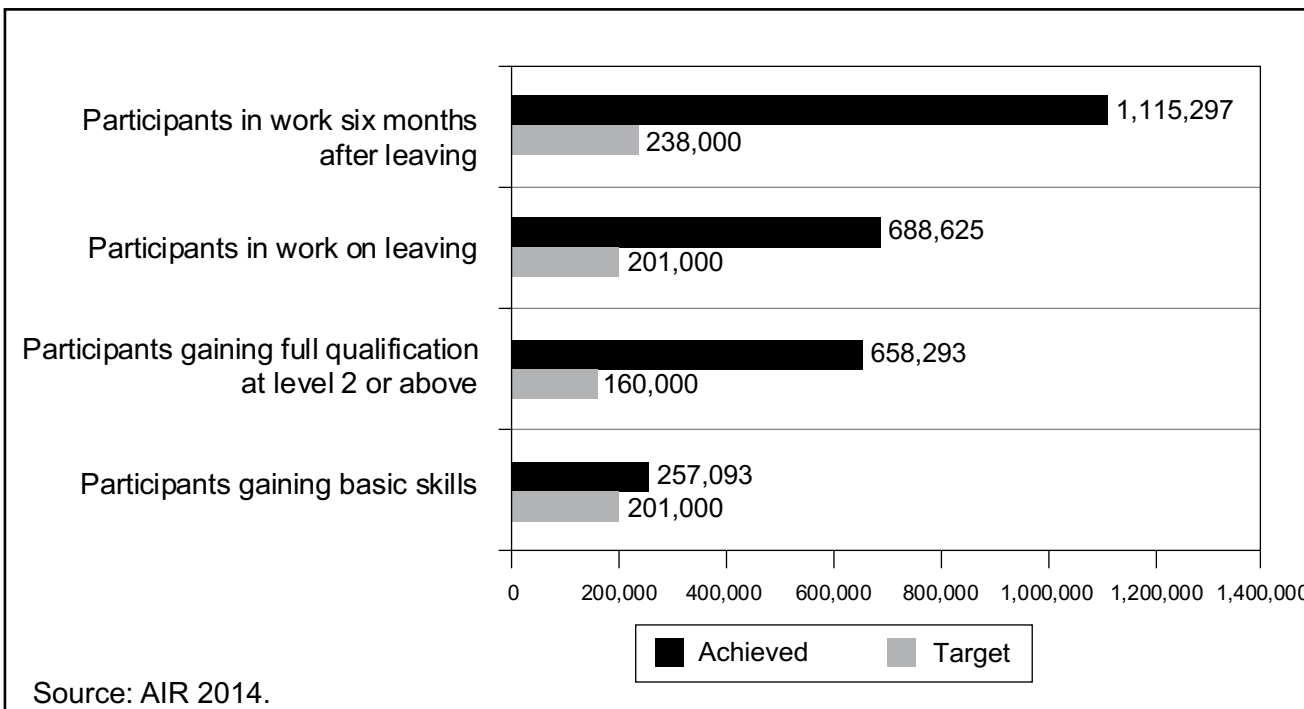
**Figure 2.6** Proportion of participants by Priority and target group for Priorities 2 and 5, AIR 2014



## 2.4 England ESF programme 2007–2013

Due to the large number of participants in the England ESF programme 2007–2013, the programme overachieved on the absolute number of results achieved (i.e. participants gaining basic skills or qualifications at level 2 or above, or finding work and sustained work, as a result of their participation, see Figure 2.7). The overachievement was largest for participants being in work six months after leaving the programme, achieving 469 per cent of the target.

Figure 2.7 Total programme results



Due to the number of participants being significantly above the target, the MA agreed that results data should be assessed against the proportion of participants achieving results, rather than absolute numbers, as discussed below.

### 2.4.1 Results by Priority

The Priorities achieved different results, with Priorities 1 and 4 having the same target results and Priority 2 and 5 having the same target results. The achievement of results was similar in Priorities 1 and 4, with the proportion of participants in work on completion of the programme being below the target proportion (14 per cent in both Priority 1 and 4 compared to targets of 22 per cent and 24 per cent respectively). In both Priority areas, the proportion of participants who were NEET or at risk of becoming NEET at the end of the programme was below the target proportion (64 per cent for Priority 1 and 79 per cent for Priority 4 compared to a target of 45 per cent, see Figure 2.8).

For Priorities 2 and 5, the performance for the proportion of participants achieving qualifications through the programme was similar for both areas, with a slight underperformance in the proportion of participants achieving a level three qualification (29 per cent and 28 per cent in Priority areas 2 and 5 respectively compared to a target of 30 per cent) and a slight over performance in the proportion of participants achieving a level two qualification (43 per cent and 44 per cent in Priority areas 2 and 5 respectively, compared to a target of 40 per cent). However, there is a large difference in the performance in the two Priority areas for the proportion of participants gaining basic skills who previously did not have basic skills. In Priority 5, all participants (100 per cent) gained basic skills, whereas in Priority 2 achievement was below the target level, at 40 per cent of participants (see Figure 2.9).



Figure 2.8 Proportion of participants achieving results, Priorities 1 and 4

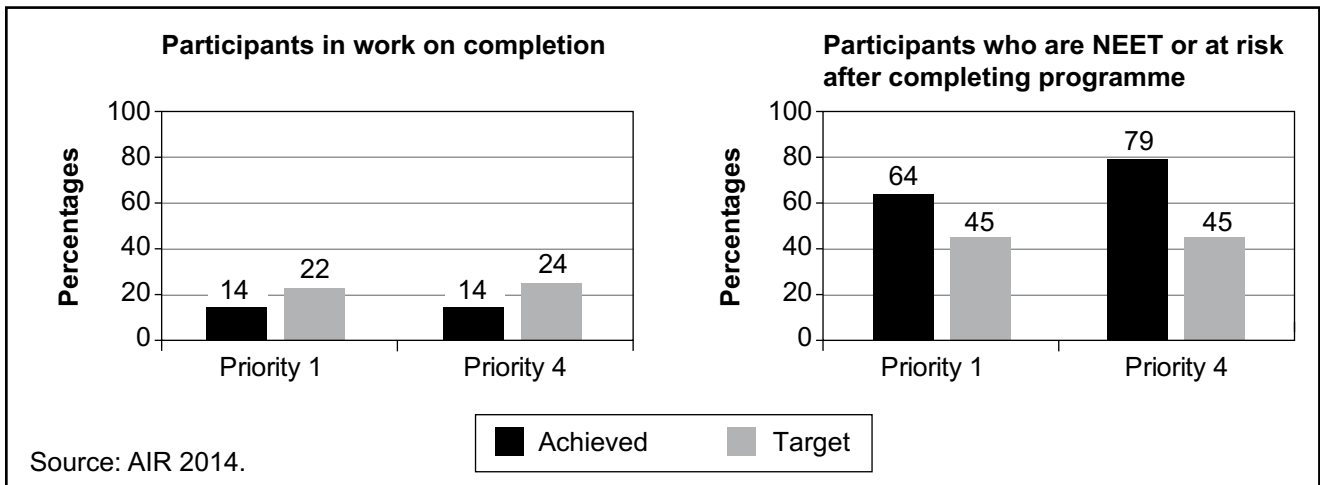
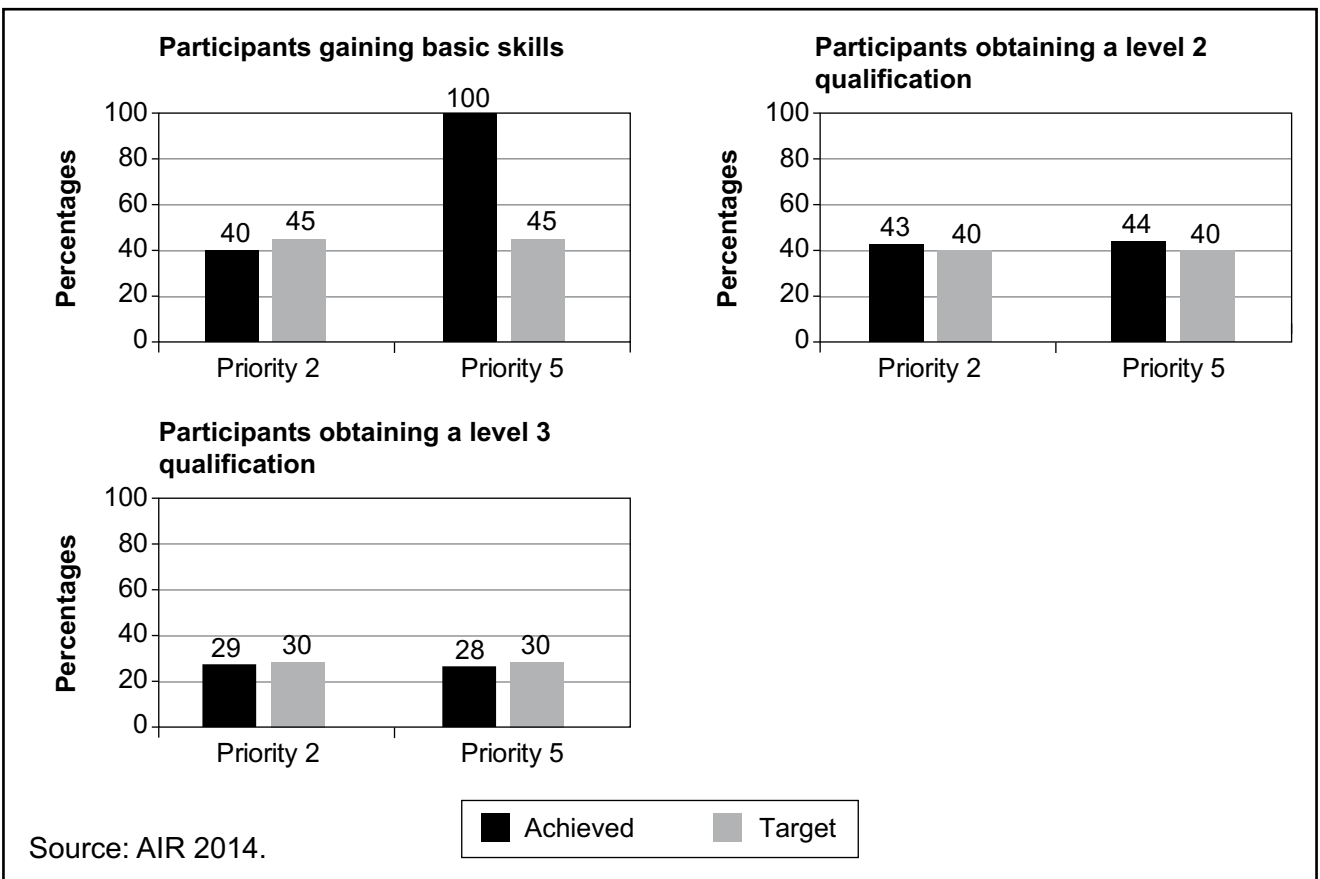


Figure 2.9 Proportion of participants achieving results, Priorities 2 and 5



## 2.5 Summary

The England ESF programme 2007–2013 had an allocated budget of over €6 billion. Up to 2014, the programme had spent over €4 billion, or two-thirds of this budget. Priority area 4 had spent the highest proportion of the allocated budget (72 per cent), whereas Priority 3 had a negative level of expenditure.

## England ESF Programme 2007–2013: Evidence synthesis

The programme outperformed its targets for the absolute number of participants and the absolute number of results achieved. However, this was due to changes in the economic climate and exchange rate fluctuations. Therefore it is more appropriate to assess the performance of the programme against targets for the proportion of participants from target groups and the proportion of participants achieving targeted results.

The targets for participants were examined at a Priority area level. This showed that there were some differences in the performance of the different Priorities. For example, Priority 4 was successful in recruiting participants with disabilities, whereas no other Priority area achieved the set target, and Priority 5 successfully achieved the target level of female participants, whereas no other Priority did. The programme was successful in recruiting unemployed individuals and individuals with higher levels of qualification, but less successful at recruiting lower skilled workers and inactive participants.

There were smaller differences in the performance of the different Priority areas with respect to the proportion of participants achieving results. The programme did not achieve the targeted level of participants in work on completing the programme, or the proportion of participants who were (or were at risk of becoming) NEET. However, the programme did successfully achieve the target for the proportion of participants achieving a level two qualification. The main difference in performance between Priorities was in the proportion of participants gaining basic skills, where Priority 5 outperformed Priority 2 significantly.

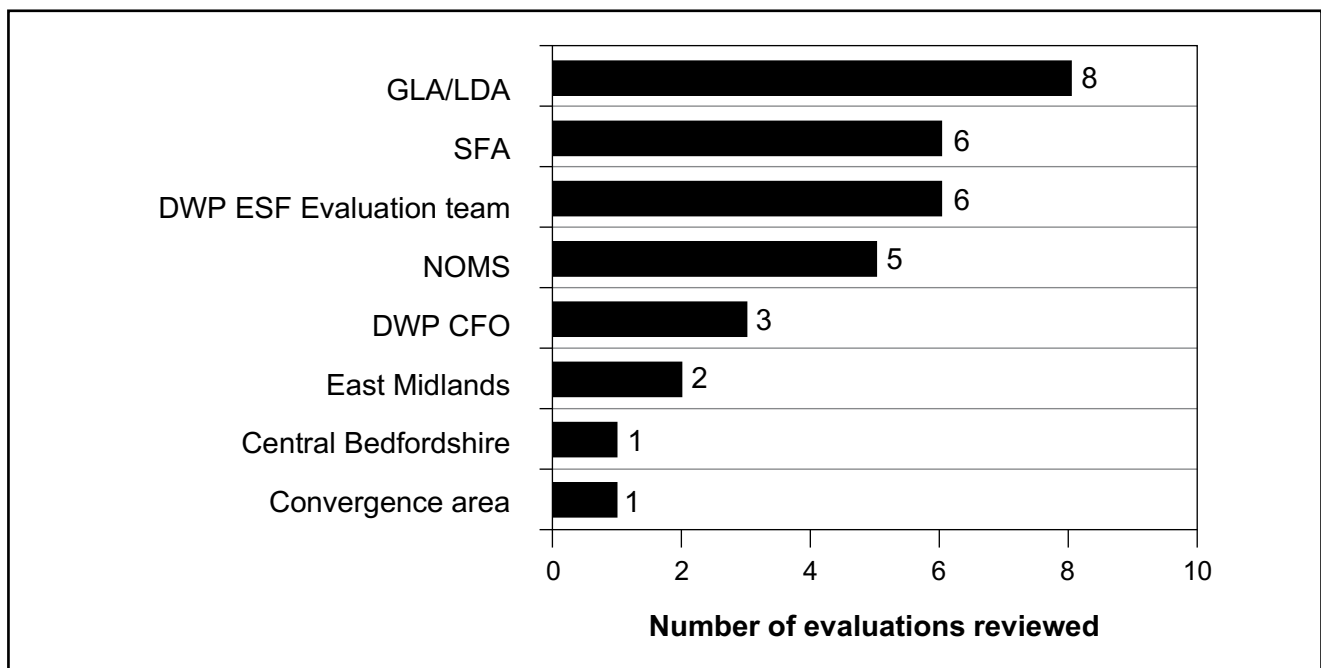
# 3 Synthesis of published evaluations

This section provides a description of the published evaluations which have been reviewed as part of this research. This includes a mapping of the coverage of the evaluations, a discussion of the methodological approaches used and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the body of evidence presented.

## 3.1 Coverage

A total of 32 published reports have been reviewed as part of the synthesis research<sup>6</sup>. The evaluations reviewed were commissioned by eight different organisations. Six of these reports were commissioned directly by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) European Social Fund (ESF) Evaluation Team (19 per cent), each of which were proposed in the updated programme evaluation strategy produced in 2013. The majority of the reports reviewed were commissioned by Co-Financing Organisations (CFOs), with the highest number of reports commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA)/London Development Agency (LDA) (eight, 25 per cent).

**Figure 3.1 Evaluations reviewed by commissioning body**



<sup>6</sup> The 2014 ESF Cohort Survey had not been published at the time of writing, so is not included in the count here, but was included in the subsequent analysis.

As the majority of reports reviewed (19 of 32) were delivered by CFO's, the main focus of the reports was on the local regional effects of ESF programme interventions rather than a national focus. All of the documents reviewed from regional CFOs (Central Bedfordshire and East Midlands) and from the Convergence partnership were local, as were all the reports published by National Offenders Management Service (NOMS) and studies from DWP

Table 3.1 below maps the coverage of reports reviewed by ESF Priority area. This shows that most of the evaluations reviewed covered Priority area 1 (84 per cent). This is not surprising, given that nearly two-thirds of the cumulative expenditure of the ESF programme was for Priority area 1. All of the reports reviewed from the GLA/LDA, NOMS, DWP and Central Bedfordshire covered Priority 1. The next most frequently covered Priority area was Priority 2, again not surprising given the level of expenditure for the Priority and that it is a national Priority. However, at the time of writing, none of the final evaluation reports for the three main CFOs were available for review.

Priorities 4 and 5 relate only to the Convergence area. The report reviewed from the Convergence area covers both of these Priority areas. The national reports reviewed from the ESF Evaluation Team, DWP and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) also cover these Priority areas, as the projects being evaluated operated in the Convergence area as well as the Competitiveness area.

**Table 3.1 Evaluations reviewed by Priority**

<b>Commissioning Organisation</b>	<b>Priority 1</b>	<b>Priority 2</b>	<b>Priority 4</b>	<b>Priority 5</b>
DWP ESF Evaluation Team	5	3	5	3
DWP CFO	3		1	
SFA	4	2	3	1
NOMS	5			
GLA / LDA	8	4		
East Midlands	1	2		
Central Bedfordshire	1	1		
Convergence			1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>

## **3.2 Methodological approach**

The majority of the evaluations followed a similar methodological approach. This was to measure the outputs and results achieved by projects and programmes and comparing these to the targets set. This was coupled with a process evaluation of projects and programmes, to analyse what had been done, what had worked well, what challenges had been faced and how these were overcome.

A variety of different methodologies were used in the evaluations reviewed. These are discussed in more detail below.

## 3.2.1 Qualitative research

### Literature review

The majority of evaluations reviewed did not include a literature review as part of the methodology (71 per cent). A total of nine studies did use a literature review as part of the study. The literature reviews were used for three main purposes: a review of evaluations already carried out; identifying good practice or barriers faced for specific target groups; and assessing how projects fit into the national policy context.

The ESF Operational Programme 2007–2013: synthesis of evidence from the first half of the programme used a literature review to summarise the evaluations completed in the first half of the programme. This highlighted good practice in the programme and areas where lessons needed to be learned.

The majority of evaluations which carried out a literature review used it to identify good practice, barriers faced and issues relating to specific target groups the projects were targeted at. For example, the SFA study ‘supporting learning with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities to Access European Social Fund Priority 2 and 5 Provision’ carried out a literature review to identify the barriers to participation faced by learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD learners), and the SFA study ‘Engaging unemployed women in ESF-funded training’ used the literature review to examine information on women’s employment issues and the barriers females face in the labour market.

The literature review in some of the regional evaluations (commissioned by Central Bedfordshire and Cornwall County Council) was used to explore how the ESF projects commissioned in the local area complemented national policies. This helped to place the ESF projects being evaluated in the national political context.

All three of these uses of a literature review were appropriate to the evaluations they were used in.

### Qualitative interviews

Almost every study used some form of qualitative interviews as part of evaluation (87 per cent). This was expected, given the focus of the studies on qualitative information collection and process evaluations. The studies which did not use qualitative interviews were either surveys or impact evaluations using administrative data.

The qualitative interviews were carried out with a wide range of individuals. The most common groups of individuals were participants, grant holders / project leads, wider stakeholders (for example individuals from organisations not directly involved in running the project but with a wider oversight of the topic area, such as local authority (LA) staff), and employers.

### Cohort survey

The ESF cohort survey was a large survey which provided evidence on the longer term results of individuals who received support funded by the 2007–2013 ESF Programme. This covered participants from all ESF activities.

## England ESF Programme 2007–2013: Evidence synthesis

The research involved a two-stage longitudinal quantitative survey; the first wave comprised a total of 8,440 interviews between October 2012 and November 2013 with individuals who had received support or training funded through ESF. A follow-up survey was conducted with 4,276 of these individuals between February 2013 and March 2014. The cohort survey found that satisfaction with ESF provision was high (82 per cent of participants satisfied).

The cohort survey found that in addition to employment and qualification outcomes achieved (reported in section 2 of the report), the ESF programme developed the soft skills, such as self-confidence and motivation to work. Nearly all (91 per cent) participants believed they developed at least one soft skill as a result of ESF provision. The ESF programme also helped participants improve soft skills over the longer term, with 93 per cent of participants having developed or improved soft skills six months after completing/12 months after starting provision.

### Survey of participants

A survey of participants was carried out in 12 of the 32 studies examined (38 per cent, and in addition to the cohort survey itself). The survey element of the research differed in size and aim between the studies.

Large-scale surveys were conducted as part of the evaluations of the Next Step project and the National Careers Service, both commissioned by the SFA. The purpose of these surveys was to collect information on the satisfaction of participants with the service, how they could help and what could be improved. A second wave to each survey was carried out to capture information on the progression of participants – what they were doing after completing the project. A large survey was carried out for the day one trailblazer evaluation, which aimed to capture results data for participants and the level of satisfaction with the project.

Smaller scale surveys were used in some other evaluations. For example, the evaluation of the London Reducing Reoffending Programme (LRRP) used a small scale survey of participants to collect information on the distance travelled by participants. This survey focused on the soft outcomes achieved by participants, collecting information using a Likert scale. The evaluation of the Daedalus programme carried out a small scale survey to find out the views of participants on offending, employment, education and training. The survey was carried out in two waves, once while the participants were in custody and once after they had been released. The small size of the survey was due to the small population size of participants.

A further study by the SFA carried out a survey of ESF providers rather than participants. This survey was carried out to discover what had worked well in projects which provided employment support and opportunities to females.

### **3.2.2 Analysis of Management Information**

The vast majority of the studies examined included an assessment of Management Information (MI). Two types of studies did not include examination of MI. These studies were large scale surveys, examining participants' views and progression, and reports collecting examples of best practice of provision targeting specific groups (such as females or learners with LDD). The management information was used to assess the number and profile of participants, outputs and results achieved and comparisons to targets where appropriate.

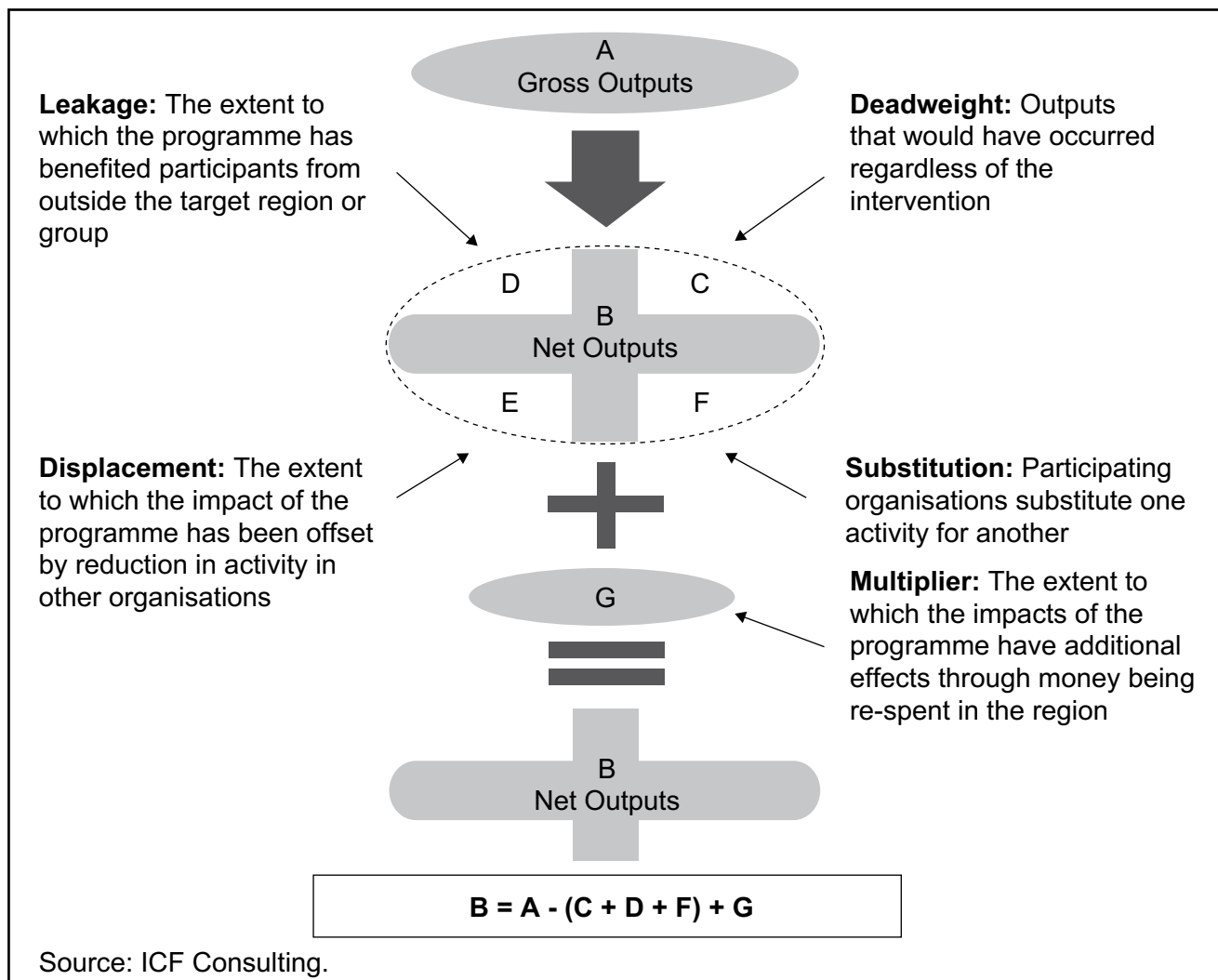
### **3.2.3 Assessment of additional impact of ESF projects and programmes**

A total of ten (around one-third) of the reports attempted to assess the additional impact of the ESF project or programme. The majority of these (eight) assessed the additional impact of the project by looking at the difference in results between the treatment group (those that had taken part in the project or programme) and a comparator group (individuals who had not taken part in the project or programme). These are discussed in the sub-section below.

The other studies which addressed the issue of additional impact used the approach of assessing the “additionality” of the project or programme. This approach is outlined in Figure 3.2. The gross results achieved by the project or programme are adjusted using data collected during qualitative research or information from existing literature for deadweight, leakage, substitution, displacement and a multiplier effect to estimate the net (additional) impact of the project or programme.

These studies used this approach to measure the additional number of participants the ESF has supported and the results the project or programme has achieved. This approach is less robust than using a comparator group, but is the next best alternative if a counterfactual analysis using a comparator group is not possible. Difficulties in developing suitable comparator groups can include: identifying individuals with sufficiently similar characteristics, engaging with them and securing consent, and collecting the relevant data within available budgets.

Figure 3.2 Summary of approach to assessing additionality



## Counterfactual Impact Evaluation

Three of the evaluations which assessed the additional impact of the projects or programmes being evaluated used Counterfactual Impact Evaluation (CIE) methodologies. A CIE is defined as:

*‘...in its simplest form, counterfactual impact evaluation (CIE) is a method of comparison which involves comparing the outcomes of interest of those having benefitted from a policy or programme (the “treated group”) with those of a group similar in all respects to the treatment group (the “comparison/control group”), the only difference being that the comparison/control group has not been exposed to the policy or programme.’ (European Commission).*

The evaluations which used this approach were commissioned by the ESF Evaluation Team, DWP CFO, and the GLA/LDA. The common theme in these three CIE approaches was that administrative data was used to assess the impact of the project or programme (such as Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) claimant data and National Police Computer data), rather than project reported results or participant self-reported outcomes. The use of administrative data for CIE approaches offers several benefits:



- It removes any reporting bias from the results which can be an issue when using information from projects or participants; and
- It does not place a burden on individuals that have not benefited from ESF funding.

The first CIE carried out was part of the synthesis of evidence from the first half of the programme. This used administrative data on JSA claimants and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) participants, comparing results for individuals who had participated in the ESF programme with a comparator group of non-participants. The non-participants were individuals claiming JSA or ESA who had not taken part in the ESF 2007–2013 programme. A Propensity Score Matching (PSM) approach was used to create comparable treatment and comparator groups. The assessment found the impact of the programme on JSA claimants was low. There was a small initial increase in the number of participants claiming JSA, but in the following eight months there is no difference between the treatment and comparator groups. For individuals claiming ESA, there was a reduction in the rate of benefit claims of nine percentage points and an increase in employment rate of 11 percentage points after one year. This study was cited by several interviewees as a key piece of research – both in terms of its findings and as a ‘trailblazer’ for future CIE studies.

The second CIE examined the impact of the Day One Support for Young People Trailblazer. This used a Difference-in-Difference approach to measure the impact of the project. This approach used administrative data of JSA claimants and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) employment data for North and South London (where the programme was running) and compared this to data from East and West London (a comparator group). The study found that the project caused a decrease in the number of JSA claimants after four weeks and the duration of time individuals spent as a JSA claimant decreased after the introduction of the project. However, the impact of the project on the number of JSA claimants over longer than four weeks is not statistically significant.

The final CIE examined the impact of the London Reducing Reoffending Programme (LRRP) on reoffending rates among young offenders. This impact analysis used data from the Police National Computer (PNC) to examine whether individuals on the programme had committed another offence following taking part in the programme. These results were compared to a group of similar young offenders who had not taken part in the programme. The results showed that young people taking part in the programme were much less likely to reoffend than individuals who had not taken part in the programme.

Four of the five reports produced by NOMS included a form of CIE. These looked at the Case Management and Tracking System (CATS) data to produce this analysis. The results examined by these reports was the resettlement needs of individuals when they are released from prison. The proportion of individuals with specific resettlement needs (for example, financial status, housing, health, education and employment and training needs) taking part in projects was compared to proportion of other offenders with these needs. No attempt was made to match the participants to similar participants who had not taken part in the projects, the comparison was between participants and the main cohort.

### 3.2.4 Assessment of Value for Money

Few evaluations included an assessment of the value for money (VfM) of the project or programme being evaluated. A total of five evaluations provided some form of assessment of VfM. A further two studies were interim evaluations which provided a detailed methodology of how VfM would be assessed in the final evaluation.

The two most detailed economic assessments were both carried out for studies commissioned by the GLA/LDA. These were for the LRRP and the Daedalus programme. Both of these programmes were targeted at young offenders, and both used a Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) approach. This included an analysis of all the benefits which accrue from the programmes, including:

- a reduction in crimes committed (the costs of crime, including judicial, victim and preventative costs);
- benefits accruing from increased employment in the participant group; and
- benefits from increasing the skill level of participants (through providing qualifications to participants).

Both these CBAs showed that the programmes offered VfM, with the benefits to the economy being higher than the costs of the projects.

The two studies which assessed the ‘additionality’ of the project or programme used this information to assess the VfM of the project or programme. The VfM was calculated using the additional Gross Value Added (GVA) results of the project or programme generated for the economy and comparing this to the expenditure of the programme. Using this approach, the benefits generated by the Central Bedfordshire programme were higher than the cost of the project or programme. However, the expenditure for the GLA/LDA Personal Best programme were higher than the benefits generated, meaning the programme was evaluated to offer poor VfM.

One study offered an assessment of the VfM of the programme attempted to assess the unit cost of provision.<sup>7</sup> The unit cost was then compared to benchmarks of unit cost from other programmes. The unit cost was calculated as a ‘cost per starter’ rather than cost per result achieved, as the net results had not been calculated. The unit cost per starter was calculated separately for different groups (for example projects targeting individuals who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), those with health conditions, women and lone parents). The unit cost per starter varied from £1,548 to £1,842, with projects targeting women and lone parents being the most expensive.

A further study provided a wide range of economic indicators which the programme might have had an impact on.<sup>8</sup> These included employment (and unemployment), female participation, output, the skill levels of the workforce and the proportion of young people who were NEET. The study showed how these indicators had changed over the course of the programme. However, it did not present a monetary value for the impact of the programme to assess against the programme expenditure.

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<sup>7</sup> GLA (2015) London ESF 2007–13: Programme Report – Priority 1 Extending Employment Opportunities.

<sup>8</sup> Cornwall County Council (2015) Evaluation of the Convergence European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2007 – 2013.

## 3.3 Strengths and weaknesses of published evaluations

This section addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the reports reviewed. In general, the majority of reports reviewed were concluded to be of good quality and fit for purpose – a view shared by the majority of individuals consulted in the evaluation strategy review.

### 3.3.1 Strengths

The strengths of the reports reviewed are mainly focused on the qualitative methodologies and findings. The quantity and breadth of qualitative interviews carried out was a real strength of evaluations. In most cases participants were interviewed to discover the results achieved and progress made, their views on the project or programme, what worked well and how the project or programme could be improved. The number of interviews carried out in the studies suggests that the results offered a range of views to inform any recommendations made.

However, the evaluations did not solely focus on the views of participants. A wide range of stakeholders were interviewed for the majority of evaluations. These included project leaders and grant holders, delivery staff, wider stakeholders (including various interest groups, the voluntary sector) and employers. The wide range of individuals interviewed also helped to establish context. A beneficiary was only able to comment on what worked well for themselves; project staff could offer greater insight into how the project was working for a wide range of participants. Wider stakeholders and employers could offer insight into the management of the project, how it compared to other similar schemes and wider issues of inclusivity. Where surveys of participants were carried out the sampling design allowed for robust analysis and reporting of statistically significant differences.

The breadth of stakeholders consulted, and the common use of project MI and in some cases survey data, allowed evidence sources to be combined and for findings to be triangulated. In general this was done well in the evaluations reviewed, with key themes from different parts of the methodology being brought together into a single narrative within the report. This made the report findings clear and easy to understand.

The fact that two CIEs were carried out (the Day One Support for Young People Trailblazer – preliminary Impact Analysis; and the impact assessment as part of the synthesis of evidence from the first half of the programme) was a strength in itself. CIE are difficult to carry out due to difficulties in identifying an appropriate counterfactual group and collecting relevant data for the comparator group. These two CIE studies used administrative data for participants and non-participants (or non-participating areas) in order to carry out the analysis. Both of these studies were able to use administrative data from before the ESF intervention began to demonstrate that the comparator groups were appropriate for the analysis. The strengths of the methodologies used were that they were statistically robust and included variables in the analysis which could also have had an impact on the result. This means that the findings from the impact modelling will accurately reflect the true impact of the programme.

Other studies also included a form of CIE as part of wider evaluations (for example the evaluation of LRRP, the Daedalus project and the evaluations carried out by NOMS). These studies also used administrative data. The CIE elements were not the sole purpose of the studies. The selection of the comparator group was not done as robustly as the CIEs mentioned above (treatment group compared to everyone else in the cohort), and the

analysis did not include other variables which may have an impact on the result variable. However, carrying out this analysis using a comparator group is still a strength of the research reviewed, especially when the findings are triangulated with qualitative research and analysis of the MI.

An additional strength of the body of evidence was the clear identification of what worked well and cases of good practice. This is particularly important as many of the reports were process evaluations, aiming to inform future projects and programmes. This was often highlighted in specific case studies, which could be used when looking for what worked in specific areas or for certain target groups.

### 3.3.2 Weaknesses

A general weakness of the reports reviewed is the lack of assessment of the net impact of the project or programme and analysis of the VfM of projects. This is an important aspect of judging whether a project or programme has been a success, and is missing from a large number of the evaluations. The number of outputs and results achieved is presented in the majority of the research. However, as this includes outputs and results that could have been achieved in the absence of the project or programme, it does not accurately measure the impact of the project or programme.

The assessment of the net impacts of a project or programme can be done in different ways, depending on the information and data available to researchers. For example, in the literature reviewed the net impact of the project or programme has been assessed using CIE and through the assessment of the additionality of a project or programme through survey findings and published information. Therefore it is possible to make an estimate of net impact without having the data required to carry out a CIE. Some studies clearly explained why a CIE was not possible (for example, lack of geographical comparator group or lack of data to construct a comparator group) which is helpful for future evaluations, but others did not include this level of explanation.

Following on from the lack of analysis of the net impacts of ESF activities, there is a lack of analysis of the VfM. An assessment of the VfM of the project is important as it helps to demonstrate whether a project has been successful, in terms of economy and efficiency of resource use, or otherwise. The evaluation strategy for the 2007–2013 ESF Programme reflects the need to assess the cost-effectiveness of a project or programme, but does not specify how this should be done. As described above, some of the evaluations did include an assessment of the VfM of the project or programme, and there are different ways in which VfM can be assessed. The appropriate methodology depends on the project and what it is trying to achieve, but these studies show that it should be possible to assess VfM. The fact it has been done infrequently is a weakness in the reviewed reports.

- while the absence of assessments of net impact and VfM were the most commonly identified weaknesses amongst the reports reviewed, several weaknesses were also identified in a minority of studies, including: The absence of clear links between conclusions drawn and the findings of the research, so making interpreting the conclusions difficult;
- missing links between process evaluation and results data – leading to conflicting reports about a project's success and why a project is (or isn't) working well; and
- the lack of a narrative in presenting case studies, or limited information on how a case study was developed – making identifying good practice difficult.

## 3.4 Summary

A total of 32 reports were reviewed for this study, which covered all Priorities, were commissioned by a range of organisations and had differences in geographic focus. In general, the quality of the reports reviewed was concluded to be good and the reports fit for purpose.

A wide range of different methodologies were used in the evaluations, but the most common were qualitative interviews with participants and stakeholders, and an assessment of MI. The qualitative interviews were used to carry out process evaluations of projects and programmes, examining what worked well, what worked less well and the level of satisfaction of participants with the project or programme. Some studies combined qualitative research with wider beneficiary surveys addressing the impact of the project or programme and the level of satisfaction with it.

The qualitative interviews were mainly carried out with a range of individuals, including participants, project staff, wider stakeholders and employers. This allowed a complete and balanced view of the projects' successes and areas for improvement.

A limited number of studies (11) assessed the additional impact of the project or programme being evaluated. Two of these used formal quasi-experimental approaches (one Difference-in-Difference, on Propensity Score Matching). A further seven assessed the impact of the project or programme using a comparator group analysis. All of these studies used administrative data to conduct the CIE. Two further studies estimated the net impact of the project or programme by assessing the 'additionality' of the programme.

Fewer studies (five) analysed the VfM the project or programme represented. Where this was assessed, different approaches were used. Two studies estimated the additional GVA the project or programme generated and comparing this to project or programme expenditure; a further two conducted CBAs by monetising the results achieved by the project or programme and comparing this to expenditure; and one study estimated the unit cost of provision and compared this to the unit cost of provision for similar projects or programmes.

The main strengths of the research reviewed was in the process evaluation of projects and programmes, identifying what worked well and why, and what did not work well. The main weakness of the research was that most studies did not assess the additional impact of the project or programme or the VfM, despite these being important factors when deciding whether a project or programme has been a success.

# 4 Findings from the evaluations

This section provides a description of what has worked well in the England European Social Fund (ESF) programme 2007–2013, what has worked less well and can be learned from, and details some of the reasons why performance was below expectation.

## 4.1 Good practice identified

The good practice which has been identified, or aspects of projects which have worked particularly well are presented here. These findings come from the process evaluations which have been reviewed. The good practice has been split into four topic areas:

- **Engagement** – what worked well in recruiting participants and engaging them with a project or programme;
- **Delivery** – aspects of the delivery model which have worked well;
- **Commissioning** – details information on the commissioning process which have aided the successful delivery of projects and achievement of results; and
- **Results** – presenting results from projects or programmes which have been successful in the participant journey towards sustained impacts.

### 4.1.1 Engagement

Several studies identified good practice when engaging with participants, particularly for target groups commonly considered to be ‘hard to engage’. However, there were common themes in what worked well in different programmes. Well-resourced and proactive participant engagement was found to raise awareness in the local area or target group. It also helped to start building trust between the participant and the programme, which assists with delivery and achieving results.

The use of specialist ‘grass roots’ organisations in programme delivery was found to benefit engagement. These organisations were often third or voluntary sector bodies, found to either be local organisations with a good knowledge of the geographical area, or organisations specialising in providing services to a particular target group. The use of these organisations was particularly helpful when support was targeted at hard to reach groups. Utilising smaller, more specialist organisations made accessing participants much easier for several reasons:

- these organisations were better placed to reach participants, as they had pre-existing contact with target groups;
- established providers also had pre-existing connections with local delivery organisations, making referrals easier; and
- participants already knew and trusted these organisations, making them more willing to engage.

The use of partnerships was identified by one study as helping to engage groups of traditionally hard-to-engage participants. This finding is linked to the use of specialist organisations, as organisations with different areas of expertise can broaden the reach of a project or programme by adapting measures already taken by partners. This means organisations do not need to create totally new processes.

The timing of engagement was found to be important to successful project delivery. This was identified as good practice particularly for offenders and young offenders. Support delivered prior to the release from custody helped to prepare offenders for the transition out of custody. Engaging with young people while they were still in custody allowed activities to be delivered through a structured daily routine, which helped participation.

Some specific examples of good practice in engaging with female participants were highlighted in a study carried out for the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). This found that female participants respond well to direct promotion by ESF providers (for example, through taster sessions, directed advertising and the use of social media), rather than leaving promotion to third parties.

The use of frontline workers and outreach in community centres was found to help reach women, as many were unaware of initiatives taking place and are most likely to hear about them through word of mouth. The use of trusted figures (the frontline workers) also makes women (and their families) less wary of the service being offered. This is particularly true of those furthest from learning.

*'Frontline workers such as librarians, health visitors, youth workers, community workers, school and Children's Centre staff have the contacts, insights and capacity to inform and encourage the women they work with to engage with training.'*<sup>9</sup>

A separate study for the SFA examined how to engage with learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LDD). The best practice identified in this study was that advertising materials (and materials used in the project or programme) should use inclusive language and promote equal rights/access in all materials. The benefits of the project or programme should be advertised not just to potential participants, but also to their employers, emphasising the benefits of LDD support to both the business and learner.

*'Stressing the business case for workplace learning is likely to be something that many of you are already actively doing in your engagement with employers. However, the following benefits might be particularly useful to emphasise when talking to employers to ensure that the offer of workplace learning includes disabled employees:*

- *Improves employee retention rates*
- *Provides motivated employees who are committed to the company*
- *Enhances company reputation, both externally and internally*
- *Demonstrates corporate social responsibility*
- *Retains talent and keeps recruitment costs low.'*<sup>10</sup>

The use of appropriate venues for a local Co-Funding Organisation (CFO) was found to help people engage with projects and programmes. An appropriate community-based venue was highlighted as being particularly successful in gaining engagement for two reasons. Firstly, selecting a venue that people could easily access using multiple forms of transport was important in removing transport barriers to attending. Secondly, using community-based buildings helped overcome people's initial fears or reluctance to engage with formal/statutory providers. This was also found to be the case for female offenders, where using women's centres instead of probation offices was found to be beneficial.

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<sup>9</sup> SFA (2011) Engaging unemployed women in ESF-funded training.

<sup>10</sup> SFA (2013) Engaging individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities in workplace learning.

### 4.1.2 Delivery

Multiple examples of good practice in delivery were highlighted in the evaluation reports. However, some common themes across multiple evaluations were identified. The first of these was that networks between different organisations were found to work well. This was between different delivery agents for the same service, between delivery agents and statutory providers (for example, Jobcentre Plus) and between delivery agents and training providers and employers.

The relationship between delivery agents and statutory bodies was identified as important, as it meant that Jobcentre staff were aware of the project or programme and could refer participants onto it, but were also aware that a participant was taking part in a project or programme, avoiding duplication of effort of potential problems for the participant.

However, the relationship between different organisations delivering the same project or programme was highlighted as a source of good practice in more evaluations. The main reason for this was the sharing of good practice between organisations with different areas of expertise, which provided benefits for participants. For example, clients knew and trusted local delivery agents, and the organisations fully understand the challenges local clients faced. Smaller, specialist providers tended to already have existing support projects in place which predated their involvement in ESF, and they were able to use this support to complement their ESF provision

Partnership arrangements also offered benefits to the CFOs, where sub-contracting elements of delivery unable to be provided in-house could create efficiencies. Informal partnerships between CFOs providing different projects or programmes also provided benefits, so that each were aware of what the other was doing and so avoided duplication.

The use of a single key worker to provide services to participants was identified as particularly important across multiple evaluations. This is where a participant has a single point of contact for the project or programme, who provides support but also refers them on to other services to get them the help they need. This approach was identified as an important aspect of delivery for all evaluations of projects and programmes targeted at offenders and young offenders. The key worker approach was identified as important for these participants for the following reasons:

- giving participants a consistent point of contact;
- allowing participants to contact the key worker at any time, not just at a scheduled appointment;
- positive approach of key workers allowed participants to focus on future, not their past mistakes; and
- helped to preclude the isolation that offenders can feel.

However, the key worker approach, and providing wrap around, whole person support was found to work for other groups as well. For example, among unemployed participants in Priority 1 and 4 the key worker approach was highlighted as good practice. This was again because of the continuity of contact, the key worker having knowledge of the multiple barriers faced by the client and therefore being able to coordinate a holistic response.



Another area of good practice highlighted by multiple evaluations was that support tailored to a participant's needs was more successful than generic support. There were multiple examples of this in the documents reviewed including:

- tailored work placements, where a participant was placed in a work setting they were interested in were more successful for participants than generic work placements (for example in a charity shop). Participants were more likely to complete the placement and report that they were satisfied if the placement was tailored to their interests;
- tailoring project specifications specifically for disabled people or those with limiting health conditions (including requiring projects to detail how they make adjustments to cater for disabled people's needs). This helped ensure disabled individuals could access the project or programme;
- positive activities (such as short training courses) were more likely to be completed if they were tailored to the needs of the young person and clearly linked to their individual action plan and thus engaging and relevant; and
- designing provision that is bespoke to the actual person increases participants' commitment to the project by making them feel treated as an individual and receiving a personalised service. This is particularly important for sub-groups of offenders, such as sex offenders.

Some examples of good practice relating to specific target groups was highlighted in the literature. For projects and programmes targeting individuals with LDD, it was highlighted as important to use appropriate language and ensure that staff providing services have received adequate training in recognising and taking care of LDD needs. One-on-one information and guidance works better for participants with LDD, as it offers greater privacy to the LDD learner and also helps providers to tailor the support they offer LDD individuals.

The use of mentors for offenders and young offenders was found to work well. Mentors are selected as individuals who have been in a similar position to the participants in the past. They can be used as a role model and provide information that the participants can relate to. This, along with the key worker role helps to reduce the isolation some ex-offenders feel when they are released from custody.

Good practice was identified for the delivery of projects for sex offenders. These participants were deliberately included in mainstream provision, rather than put into a sub-project, in order to avoid making them feel segregated and to reduce additional stigma and barriers. The use of social enterprises meant there was a place where sex offenders could definitely be placed. Finding these placements then boosts participants' self-esteem and confidence, also giving them some stability. Where a participant was successfully placed in a mainstream college, having the police consult with the college to explain how the participant could be managed effectively helped overcome the college's fears. This type of approach helps overcome negative perceptions held of sex offenders.

### 4.1.3 Commissioning

Lessons on commissioning presented in the second half of the programme focused on the use of Payment by Results (PbR) contracts, which were generally identified as working well in the reports reviewed. A PbR contract is where a proportion of the value of the contract is payable when a result is achieved. This compares to contracts where organisations are given a grant to deliver a project or programme, or being paid for activities provided. The PbR contracts provided different payments attached to different results. For example, a payment linked to a participant completing a training course, another payment for a participant obtaining employment and a payment linked to a participant sustaining employment for six months.

This approach has been identified as good practice as it focuses provider behaviour on achieving results. In alternative funding models, providers can focus on providing training and activities. A PbR contract encourages them to concentrate on fostering new relationships with employers to achieve sustainable results.

In order for a PbR to be successful, the contract needs to be structured correctly. The structure of payments cannot be too heavily weighted towards sustained employment. A contract which places too much emphasis on sustained results can lead to cash flow problems for organisations providing the project or programme and the organisations which sub-contract from them.

Despite this finding, one study discovered that there was a relationship between PbR and higher project achievement, especially noticeable in the correlation between higher percentages of contract value paid based on sustained results and projects achieving higher levels of sustained results. The optimum level of PbR appears to be somewhere over 20 per cent of contract value.

To support upfront costs in a PbR payment model, providers for one programme were allowed to cross-subsidise with other sources of funding. Grant holders reported that this was the only way they were able to deliver given the intensity of resource required for supporting participants.<sup>11</sup>

### 4.1.4 Results

The majority of results reported by ESF programmes are hard results which are easily measured, for example the number of qualifications completed, the number of participants starting work and the number of participants in sustained employment. For certain groups of participants, particularly those that are furthest from the labour market, soft outcomes<sup>12</sup> are more appropriate at measuring success. This was illustrated in the reports reviews particularly the case of programmes aimed at offenders.

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<sup>11</sup> GLA (2014) GLA ESF Youth Programme – Young Offenders Project. Interim Evaluation Report.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Soft outcomes’ refer to are outcomes resulting from interventions which cannot be measured directly or tangibly, as opposed to ‘hard outcomes’ such as jobs and qualifications. They can include achievements such as improved personal skills (motivation, confidence, etc.), interpersonal skills and organisational skills.

As a result of this, an area of good practice identified by the review of reports was the collection of data on soft outcomes achieved. Sometimes these will be the only outcomes achieved by participants. Even though the participant does not achieve a hard result such as employment, it does not mean that there has been a lack of progress achieved by the programme.

An example of where measuring soft outcomes may be appropriate was shown in an evaluation of a programme targeting offender's receiving a life sentence in custody. Many of the project participants had low-level mental health needs and needed to achieve soft outcomes such as improving confidence and self-esteem. No hard results were achieved, but the soft outcomes could contribute to the participants achieving hard results in the future.

## 4.2 Lessons to be learned

The lessons learned from the evaluations reviewed have been split into the four main categories used for good practice.

### 4.2.1 Engagement

A common lesson learned in the evaluations is that there can be problems if a programme relies on a single referral route. This was the case for several programmes. For example, the referral route for the Personal Best programme was through Jobcentre Plus. It was reported that ensuring advisers both understood the purpose of the Programme and referred suitable candidates in sufficient volume was a significant struggle (especially as JobCentre Plus had no targets for referrals in the initial stages of the programme).

This was also reported as a problem in the evaluation of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) European Social Fund Support for Families with Multiple Problems:

*'An initial lack of referrals from local authorities (LAs), at first the sole referral route, was a significant early challenge. In response, effective actions were taken to increase volumes on the provision through widening the referral mechanism to include a 'secondary referral route'. This enabled delivery providers to source their own referrals, in addition to those received from LAs, and proved to be a key turning point in the provision's functioning. Using Jobcentre Plus to signpost individuals for support was also important in increasing the numbers accessing help. As a result of these actions, numbers receiving support increased and referral mechanisms were widely reported to be working well by the time of the research.'*<sup>13</sup>

The importance of having multiple referral routes was highlighted in the evaluation of Central Bedfordshire's ESF programme. This reported that some projects had difficulty recruiting clients due to: underdeveloped mechanisms for referrals from providers; a fall in unemployment in the area; and the distance from the labour market and lack of interest of many of those who were unemployed.

Overall, it seems that relying on a single referral route to engage participants onto ESF programmes was a risk. A variety of factors can affect the success of a partner being able to refer sufficient numbers onto ESF programmes. Using multiple referral routes can help to mitigate against this risk. These were issues that the programme management could not control but still affected the number of referrals.

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<sup>13</sup> DWP (2016) Evaluation of the Department for Work and Pensions European Social Fund Support for Families with Multiple Problems.

One evaluation highlighted that one route to successfully recruiting specific target groups onto ESF programmes was to use smaller, specific projects.<sup>14</sup> This worked well in London as through the smaller projects the programme leads were able to make specific requirements for projects to show how they were going to reach out to certain groups. While the projects in question referred to recruiting target groups with very specific characteristics and disadvantages, including those often considered hard to engage such as offenders and substance abusers, this principle could also be applied to the recruitment of participants from the broader ESF target groups (such as women and individuals from minority ethnic groups) where performance under the 2007–2013 programme was less positive.

### 4.2.2 Delivery

There were several lessons learned for the delivery of programmes in the reports reviewed. The first of these relates to partnership working and provision of programmes using networks. It works well both in terms of recruitment and referrals and in delivering the programme. However, this is only effective if there is good sharing of information and good practice.

One evaluation found that partnership working had not been successful.<sup>15</sup> This was because there were difficulties working across multiple organisations, such as having to delay provision as other providers were not ready to deliver, organisations being unaware they were going to be working in partnership prior to the programme starting, leading to issues around building new relationships, and having multiple management systems. However, these findings were in the minority as multiple evaluations found that partnership working was beneficial.

Another evaluation highlighted that in the second half of the programme ESF regional committees had been removed.<sup>16</sup> The evaluation commented that these were useful to share information between local and national CFOs and build positive relationships between organisations. Once the committees had been discontinued, there were fewer opportunities for co-ordination and fewer opportunities to develop positive relationships between local and national CFOs.

This shows that in some cases the sharing of information between organisations could be improved. This could be done by introducing mechanisms at the network/partnership level for the dissemination of information and best practice.

The value of a key worker approach and wraparound support was highlighted as good practice. However, there were some inhibitors and lessons to be learned for this type of provision. In particular it was found that in order for this approach to lead to sustained employment and education results, the key worker relationship needs to be maintained.

The lack of support after a participant gains employment or a place on a training course led to some participants dropping out of their placements, particularly for target groups which began the programme the furthest from the labour market. In the evaluation of the LRRP, it was noted that the key worker could continue to offer support and encouragement to the participant to ensure they stayed in their placement. However, the key worker also acted

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<sup>14</sup> GLA/London Councils (2013) London Councils Evaluation 2007–13 ESF.

<sup>15</sup> GLA (2011) LDA ESF Programme Evaluation 2007–2010 Personal Best.

<sup>16</sup> DWP (2013) Evaluation of European Social Fund: Priority 1 and Priority 4 (Employment and NEET) Provision.

as a point of contact for the employers or training provider where the young person was placed. For example, if the employer had a problem (for example, the young person being late for work) the employer could contact the key worker. The key worker could then mediate between the employer and participant, to ensure that their result had the best chance of being sustained.

Two evaluations, which examined projects and programmes targeted at helping people into employment, raised concerns about the length of time participants spent in the work placement and travelling to and from the placement. In the *Evaluation of the Day One Support for Young People Trailblazer* (DWP, 2014), participants had to complete 30 hour per week work placements, and many had long journey times to reach their placement. This meant that the participants had less time to complete job searches for employment opportunities once the placement finished. Long journey times were also raised as a concern in the evaluation of the *Personal Best programme* (GLA/LDA, 2011).

This shows that it would be beneficial for work placements to be geographically close to participants, to reduce their travel time. This would help to improve satisfaction with workplaces and improve completion rates and allow participants time to complete other tasks, such as searching for job opportunities. However, this may be difficult to reconcile with providing tailored programmes in line with the participants interests.

A lesson for project and programme providers was that they need to fully understand the details of the contracts of the project or programme they are delivering. This is particularly the case for PbR contracts. In some cases, providers oversubscribed on outputs and hoped to receive the unit payments for the additional outputs. However, this was not allowed in the contract, therefore the provider ended up not being paid by the ESF programme for some of the outputs achieved. A complete understanding of the contract at the outset of the project or programme would have avoided this situation. This is a lesson for both commissioners and providers – it is important that commissioners make providers aware of the contracts so that they receive good quality provision from providers.

Finally, one element of learning which related to female participants was the provision of childcare. Female participants with childcare duties often find that there is a lack of affordable or accessible childcare, which is a big deterrent to participate in the project or programme. No solution or best practice was discovered which addressed this issue, but organisations designing projects and programmes should consider this barrier to female participation in the future. Indeed, the 2014–2020 programme includes a commitment to providing free childcare to individuals who would be unable to participate without it.

### 4.2.3 Commissioning

While there were benefits associated with the use of PbR, the application of PbR did create some issues in some areas of ESF provision. The issues surrounding the PbR contracts were described as:

- Potential cash flow problems for organisations, both prime contractors and sub-contractors. These cash flow problems stemmed from payments being structured towards results and sustained results, whereas much of the upfront cost was in delivering outputs, resulting in a time lag between when expenditure was spent and when funding could be drawn down from the commissioning body. These potential cash flow problems were identified as a disincentive for small, specialist providers taking part in PbR projects or programmes, as they do not have the financial reserves to cover the difference in timing of expenditure and payment.

- A lack of high quality, specialist providers and partnership work. Linked to the cash flow issue described above, many specialist providers would not take part in PbR projects or programmes. This reduced the quality of provision which is available to the projects or programmes and potentially reduced the appeal of the project or programme to hard-to-reach target groups.
- PbR models can inhibit innovation in provision, as providers cannot risk an unproven approach as they will not receive payment unless it is successful.

These problems with PbR contracts should not be seen as prohibitive. These points reinforce the need for PbR contracts to be correctly specified for projects and programmes so that a wide range of providers can tender to provide services. This could include providing a tranche of the funding upfront, to cover some of the project set-up costs and delivery of outputs, or weighting the payments so that they encourage providers to target sustained results without causing cash-flow problems. Commissioners could also provide support to potential providers in the bidding stage, to ensure they are not submitting proposals that will cause them financial problems.

Two other issues were raised in evaluations relating to the commissioning process. These were that some of the tender deadlines to bid for projects and programmes were short. This meant that smaller organisations did not necessarily have the resources available to bid for projects at short notice and therefore could not submit bids. The second issue related to the regulatory burden of taking part in ESF projects and programmes, which require the collection and submission of a lot of evidence. Again, this could be a disincentive to smaller, specialist organisations taking part in ESF projects and programmes.

### 4.2.4 Results

The good practice highlighted for results was the collection of soft outcomes data, particularly for some hard to reach groups. However, soft outcome data is more difficult to collect than hard results and is not required for ESF submissions. Therefore it is not routinely collected. Further, some of the payment mechanisms used by ESF do not encourage provision for soft outcomes or the collection of data on soft outcomes achieved. For some projects targeting specific hard-to-reach groups, it may be beneficial to focus on soft outcomes.

## 4.3 Factors affecting ability to achieve targets

The performance of the programme against the targets set is outlined in section 2.3. This showed that in many of the Priority areas, the programme came short of achieving the targets set for specific target groups. Some of the findings from the evaluations sought to address why these targets had not been achieved.

The main finding was about the demographics of potential participants. The change in the economic climate created a large pool of unemployed potential participants. These were mainly younger, male participants. This was highlighted in the European Social Fund Equality Impact Assessment, which found that the number of unemployed participants under Priority 1 was higher than forecast, and the gender imbalance in the unemployed population affected the programme's ability to meet gender equality targets.

Women, ethnic minorities and older people tended to face a greater range of disadvantage (that distance them from employment) than younger white males, making them more challenging to engage. Given the larger number of unemployed males in the economy the proportion of female, ethnic minority and older participants was reduced.

The target setting process also meant that in some areas the participation targets did not reflect the situation on the ground. This was particularly the case as the economic climate changed, further increasing the number of unemployed males and so restricting projects' abilities to meet the participation targets set. It was suggested that the targets for the programme could be more flexible in response to changes in workforce demographics.

Priority 5 was the only Priority which successfully achieved the female participation target. The reasons behind the low proportion of female participants is explained by the change in the economic climate, meaning there were larger numbers of potential male participants who were easier to engage. Some good practice in engaging with female participants was identified in the *Evaluation of the Convergence European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2007–2013*, which enabled Priority 5 to achieve the target on female participation.

*'The Empowering Smart Women project was a very good example of successful engagement with females. This project established all female peer groups, able to identify and discuss barriers of moving into middle/senior management roles and worked with participants to help overcome these. Participants lacked confidence when they first joined, and cited lack of role models in their own organisations as a factor. The project helped them build confidence, run businesses more effectively and move into management roles. Participants benefitted from had their own personal mentor, and action learning workshops delivered by mentors, which were bespoke to their particular needs.'*<sup>17</sup>

However, there were some examples of targets being achieved. In Priority 4, the target for disabled participants was met, which was not achieved in any of the other Priorities. Some examples of good practice in engaging with disabled participants in this Priority were highlighted in the *Evaluation of the Convergence ESF Programme 2007–2013*.

'Good examples in relation to equality included broadening of the delivery partner mix to include non-traditional partners who had a better understanding and engagement with key client groups – such as women's groups. Some workshops were held on how to engage with individuals from disability groups.'

*'This (The achievement of the target level of participants with a disability) has been widely attributed to the Priority 4 project Cornwall Works for Learning Disabilities, which was established specifically to provide a tailored package of support for participants.'*<sup>18</sup>

This shows that although there were mitigating circumstances which explains why the programme did not achieve all the targets set on the demographics of participants, there were ways in which this could be overcome, and these should be considered in the future.

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<sup>17</sup> Cornwall County Council (2015) Evaluation of the Convergence European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2007–2013.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

## 4.4 Summary

This section has highlighted the good practice and lessons learnt from the evaluation reports. While the good practice identified was not new or innovative to the evaluation community, it nonetheless illustrated examples where interventions were working well and so provided useful lessons for project providers and for policy makers. Examples of such good practice included:

- involving local or specialist organisations in the engagement of participants and delivery of the project or programme;
- using partnership working between different organisations to bring in specialist knowledge and allowing organisations to learn from each other;
- a key worker approach to provide wraparound support from a single point of contact;
- providing work placements and activities tailored to participants needs;
- commissioning projects through correctly specified PbR contracts to ensure a focus on sustained results; and
- recognising soft outcomes, particularly for hard-to-reach groups.

In order to implement these areas of good practice there were some areas of learning from the programme:

- in order to successfully engage with enough participants using multiple referral routes is desirable, otherwise the project or programme risks not receiving enough referrals or a referral agency experiences difficulties;
- when organisations are working in partnership networks, good communication and sharing of information and learning is needed for the project or programme to be delivered successfully;
- if a project is using a key worker approach, the best results are achieved when the support from the key worker continues after the participant enters employment or training, in order to sustain the result;
- where a participant is placed on a work placement, consideration should be made of the travel time needed to attend the placement, and how this might affect participant satisfaction and their ability to undertake other activities, such as looking employment;
- for PbR contracts to be successful, they need to be correctly specified to balance a focus on sustained employment without causing cash flow problems which could discourage some organisations from participating in the project or programme; and
- when looking to engage with specific hard-to-reach groups, such as females or disabled workers, projects should be run that target these having specific groups in order to boost participation in these groups.



# 5 Review of the Evaluation Strategy

This section provides a review of the 2007–2013 European Social Fund (ESF) evaluation strategy, based on the review of the original and updated strategies and minutes of meetings of the Evaluation Sub-Committee, and interviews with representatives of ESF Division (ESFD), Co-Funding Organisations (CFOs) and other stakeholders (including the European Commission).

The areas explored in the qualitative interviews included:

- understandings of the aims and objectives of the evaluation strategy – and the extent to which the strategy was considered to be ‘fit for purpose’ in this context;
- the development of the initial evaluation strategy – and the update endorsed in 2012;
- the implementation and delivery of the strategy, including arrangements for its management and governance, and for the sharing of results/wider learning;
- achieving objectives/impact of the strategy – including informing and influencing programme activities, ensuring regulatory requirements were met, and meeting the objectives set for it; and
- the key lessons from the 2007–2013 programme to inform the evaluation strategy for the 2014–2020 programme.

A total of 15 individuals were interviewed, as follows:

- three current and former members of ESFD;
- three former representatives of the ESF Evaluation Team;
- five representatives of CFOs operating in 2007–2013 – including Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Skills Funding Agency (SFA), National Offenders Management Service (NOMS), the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Central Bedfordshire;
- a representative of the Convergence partnership in Cornwall;
- a representative of the European Commission; and
- a representative of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), and the producer of the former ESF Works.

The development of a comprehensive picture of the development, implementation and results of the evaluation strategy was hindered by the degree of turnover amongst staff within ESFD and the Evaluation Team (as well as amongst the various stakeholder organisations). Consequently the interviewees were selected to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible both in terms of coverage and coverage over time.

## 5.1 The ESF Evaluation Strategy 2007–2013

The *Programme Level Evaluation Strategy and Plan for England and Gibraltar*<sup>19</sup> was published in January 2008, with an update being endorsed by the Programme Monitoring Committee in March 2012<sup>20</sup>.

The initial strategy responded to the requirement for ESF evaluation as set out in guidance documents from the European Commission<sup>21</sup> and the relevant ESF regulations<sup>22</sup>, which allowed for an evaluation plan which covered both the Regional Competitiveness and Employment and the Convergence objectives (as previously, applying to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly in England). Two objectives were set out for the evaluation strategy:

- to ensure that the appropriate Structural Fund regulatory requirements were met; and
- to provide timely and in-depth policy feedback to decision makers on a range of strategic and operational aspects of the programme, and how it is contributing to the relevant Community priorities and objectives.

Designed to meet both strategic and operational needs, the strategy was underpinned by four principles or areas of specific Commission interest, namely:

- Relevance – how relevant was the activity in terms of the objectives of the Operational Programme (OP) and the social, economic and environmental context in which it is set, and the extent to which resources are concentrated on the most important needs;
- Consistency – in terms of the relationships and complementarities between the different Priority areas, and their contribution/value added to the objectives of the OP;
- Effectiveness – how effective was the assistance in terms of achieving the expected outputs, results, impacts and overall programme objectives, exploring the reasons for any variations identified; and
- Efficiency – comparing processes and effects in terms of the resources mobilised, in particular the cost effectiveness of the resources used in comparison to similar interventions.

Within this, a series of areas for investigation in the first half of the programme were set out, including topics of relevance across all evaluation activity and more specific topics. These included:

- contribution to and the added value of the programme to European, national and regional strategies;
- participant progression – including considering the soft outcomes achieved, and the sustainability and quality of employment secured;
- participant achievement in terms of qualifications/units of qualifications and other results for those receiving Priority 2 and 5 services – i.e. those in work;

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/esf-evaluation-strategy-2007-to-2013>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Indicative Guidelines on Evaluation Methods: Evaluation during the programming period.

<sup>22</sup> Specifically Regulation 1083/2006 Article 48.

- activities and specific target groups not covered in the OP indicators, including training for workers under Priorities 2 and 5 in sectors with poor training histories;
- the quality of provision under ESF and its impact on systems and structures, including the extent to which it meets the needs of individuals participating and employers; and
- the cross-cutting themes of gender equality and equal opportunities, and sustainable development.

More specific possible research areas (as discrete studies or topics to be explored across studies) to meet strategic or operational needs were proposed in the initial strategy, including for the first half of the programme:

- Operational needs – including evaluation research into: regional ESF frameworks; Higher level skills in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; innovative, transnational and inter-regional activity; the implementation of ESF under an entirely co-financed system; the changed funding situation and the legacy of ESF in the UK; and the programme's information and publicity measures.
- Strategic needs – including gender equalities and equal opportunities; sustainable development; key disadvantaged target groups; in-work training and the production of case studies of ESF activity.

These needs would be met through three 'strands' of activity, which combined would allow a comprehensive evaluation of both the Regional Competitiveness and Convergence objectives:

- The ESF Administrative Databases – using a new Management Information (MI) system based on individual records to allow more detailed analysis, the databases would be used to explore and report on programme performance and achievements.
- The ESF Cohort Study – featuring two large surveys of current and previous ESF participants, one reporting in 2010 and one in 2013. The cohort study would also be used to measure a number of programme indicators which cannot be measured through the MI system (i.e. those with a retention/sustainability dimension), to provide insights into the sustainability of results achieved and participants' experiences of ESF delivery.
- ESF research studies – comprising a series of research and evaluation studies taking place throughout the programme period, to complement the findings from the ESF databases and cohort surveys. A number of specific themes and studies for the first half of the programme were identified in the strategy, covering both operational and strategic needs and including studies on regional ESF frameworks, gender equality and equal opportunities, higher level skills in the Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Convergence area, In-work training, sustainable development and disadvantaged groups. A synthesis report is also described to bring the findings of activity in the first half of the programme together.

The evaluation strategy consequently provided a framework for the evaluation of both programmes, and a mechanism for identifying both the programmes' information needs going forward and ensuring the regulations and guidelines for evaluation set out by the European Commission were complied with. This also extended to providing a framework for implementation – including that each study required the approval of the Programme Management Committee, had clear objectives and clear terms of reference, had a steering group featuring representatives of relevant stakeholder bodies, and were designed to meet both their specific and wider Commission objectives.

The ESF Evaluation Team were responsible for the day-to-day management of the evaluation strategy, who while based in DWP were functionally independent of the Managing Authority. At the time of the initial strategy the staffing complement of the Evaluation Team comprised 2.6 full-time equivalent staff: a team leader, a Senior Research Officer and a Scientific Officer. Across the lifetime of the programme, some £2,882,591<sup>23</sup> was spent on the evaluation studies set out in the initial and update (see 5.1.1) evaluation strategies and plans. NB: this figure does not include other evaluation activities commissioned by CFOs and other recipients of funding outside the programme evaluation strategy.

### 5.1.1 Developing the strategy

The strategy was developed by the ESF Evaluation Team working with colleagues in ESFD, particularly representatives of the policy team, and following the guidance and guidelines provided by the Commission. According to the recollections of the individuals around at the time, direct inputs from CFOs (as confirmed in the CFO interviewees able to comment) and wider stakeholders were limited, with the exception of the European Commission representative.

An initial ‘high level’ strategy was developed and submitted with the draft OP, which aimed to ensure that the strategy covered the relevant aspects of the structural fund regulations and focused on areas of interest for DWP and the UK Government more widely. This ‘high level’ strategy was subsequently expanded to include specific activities and a timeframe for implementation. CFOs and other stakeholders were given the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy, either through the evaluation strategy group established to steer the process or through direct consultation.

One of the issues facing the strategy was how to foresee, over the life of a seven year programme, the specific evaluation requirements of the programme. As the requirement for a mid-term evaluation in the 2000–2006 programme were not continued into the 2007–2013 programme, England instead decided upon a rolling programme of evaluation studies, with space in the initial strategy for review and new studies to be included at the half way point.

### 5.1.2 The evaluation strategy update

In September 2011 a revised evaluation strategy for the second half of the programme was presented to the Price Monitoring Committee (PMC), which was formally endorsed in March 2012. The updated strategy described progress in terms of the implementation of research studies since 2008, including the extent to which the strategic and operational needs identified in the initial strategy had been met (see 5.2.5 below).

As with the initial strategy, the update was prepared by the ESF Evaluation Team. It was discussed at the Evaluation sub-committee (and so with other CFOs and partners), before being finalised and agreed with the Managing Authority and the Commission.

Strategic drivers for the 2011–2013 included assessing the new delivery arrangements for Priority 1 and 4, particularly families with multiple problems and supporting young people not in education, employment or training (NEET); responding to the lower than anticipated female participation rate and assessing female participation across all areas of activity;

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<sup>23</sup> Updated Programme Level Evaluation Strategy and Plan for England and Gibraltar 2011–2013 (April 2013) – comprising 2007–2011 actual spend and 2011–2014 projected spend.

assessing the effectiveness of the ESF Innovation, Transnationality and Mainstreaming strand; and exploring policy maker requirements to help prepare for the ex-ante evaluation of the 2014–2020 programme.

The document also contained a preliminary list of additional evaluation issues, and a series of research projects and studies to be delivered in 2011–2013, including: a new ESF cohort survey; a qualitative study of ESF employment and young people NEET provision; a qualitative study of ESF Innovation, Transnationality and Mainstreaming projects; research into ESF support for families with multiple problems; research to evaluate the Day One Support for Young People; and research into the gross unit costs of each type of ESF provision to support the development of the 2014–2020 programme.

## 5.2 Findings from the review

The following sections set out the findings from the review of the evaluation strategy, exploring:

- awareness and understanding of the objectives of the evaluation strategy;
- the strategy's fitness for purpose;
- the implementation of the strategy;
- management and governance;
- impact and influence; and
- suggestions for the 2014–2020 evaluation strategy.

### 5.2.1 Awareness and understanding of the strategy

As would be expected, interviewees from within ESF D and the previous and current ESF Evaluation Team demonstrated a clear awareness and understanding of the aims, objectives and content of the strategy. This also applied to individuals from the majority of the CFOs interviewed, particularly those where the interviewees had been in post for much of the programme period.

However, in a few cases interviewees' awareness and understanding of the strategy was limited. While a small number had only a limited understanding of the objectives of the strategy, a couple reported no awareness of the strategy at all, a concern given the roles and remits of the individuals interviewed (although those with no awareness were both new in post). This suggests that the strategy had a limited profile outside the direct 'ESF evaluation community', and emphasised the importance of strong communications around the 2014–2020 strategy.

The majority who were aware of the strategy demonstrated a clear understanding of its aims and objectives. Three broad sets of objectives were described:

- to provide evidence-based learning to inform the delivery of the programme, and to maximise its benefits for participants and stakeholders;
- to support policy decision making during, and following, the programme period; and
- to meet the requirements of the European Commission, in terms of the regulatory requirements of the 2007–2013 programme.

The balance of emphasis between these objectives varied between the interviewees, depending on their roles and extent to which their interests focused on practical/operational or more strategic considerations. For some, ensuring that the regulatory requirements were being met was the ‘bottom line’ – for others lessons for policy development were the main areas of interest.

### 5.2.2 Fitness for purpose

Where the interviewees were able to comment, the strategy was consistently considered to be fit for its intended purpose, and capable of meeting its primary objectives. The evaluation strategy and plan was described as comparing well to those produced by other Member States, and was widely considered to be comprehensive and to represent ‘... a good starting point to deliver a good evaluation plan’.

Few areas of improvement in the strategy itself were identified, although suggestions were made regarding changes to the content and with reference to specific activities. One example of this was the cohort survey, as discussed below.

#### **The ESF Cohort Survey**

The cohort survey was widely considered to provide a range of useful information, particularly on the extent to which programme participants results have been sustained (or indeed realised) following the end of their participation, and which is not available from the ESF monitoring data.

However, in some cases the view was expressed that the cohort survey, while providing information on results achieved/sustained following participation, was less useful in terms of linking results back to the service or services received. As a wide range of provision is available under each of the programme Priorities, identifying learning in terms of what works (and for whom) was more challenging. Learning at this level of granularity was, however, expected to be provided through evaluation studies of specific funded activities, where more qualitative approaches could help unpick the reasons why certain provision proved to be effective (or otherwise).

These overall perceptions of the strategy tally with the conclusions of the evaluators, with our view being that the initial and updated strategies were relevant and appropriate in terms of their coverage, ability to meet the regulatory requirements, and potential to provide useful learning to inform and improve delivery. As intended, the ‘rolling programme’ approach provided a degree of flexibility to allow the focus of evaluation activity to change with implementation.

It is noticeable, however, that the revised strategy makes only limited reference to the information and evaluation requirements of the new 2014–2020 programme (listed under Key Evaluation Issues, although reference is made to preparations for the ex-ante evaluation and the production of the second synthesis report). While reference is made to a study to explore unit costings to inform the new programme, more specific reference could perhaps have been made to the requirements of the new programme and to raise the profile of its time and resource requirements.

### 5.2.3 Implementing the strategy

While the design of the evaluation strategy was viewed positively by the consultees able to comment, and seen as providing a useful framework and a set of criteria for studies to be included within it, a series of challenges were identified in its effective implementation.

A picture emerged of an implementation period very much of two halves:

- In the first half of the programme, 2007–2011, implementation was characterised by the presence of a well-resourced Evaluation Team with the capacity and capability to deliver externally and internally commissioned studies. Research and evaluation studies and other outputs produced were of good quality and delivered to time (or within acceptable tolerances).
- In the second half, 2011–2015, the position changed, with the ESF Evaluation Team operating at a reduced level of staffing which led to delays in or the cancellation of studies and other outputs. Perhaps most importantly, reduced staff and the difficulties in replacing them limited the support that could be provided for the development of the 2014–2020 OP and associated materials, which led to both the ex-ante evaluation and the evidence synthesis being undertaken externally rather than internally as planned.

Despite the challenges faced in the second half of the programme, it is important to note that the studies which were completed under the auspices of the ESF Evaluation Team continued to be of good quality throughout the programme. Given these challenges, it is clear that this was no small achievement in the second half of the programme, although the inability to sufficiently service the development of the new programme emphasises the importance of an adequately and appropriately staffed Evaluation Team.

### 5.2.4 Challenges faced

In the second half of the programme implementation of the strategy faced a series of challenges, which resulted in delays, and in some cases cancellation, in the planning and delivery of the activities programmed in the revised evaluation strategy and plan. This influenced the extent to which lessons from the 2007–2013 programme were drawn together to inform the 2014–2020 programme, as well as the ability of the ESF Evaluation Team to support the development of the OP more widely.

Two main challenges were recognised across the interviewees:

- **Change in Government and accompany change in the policy landscape** – and which also directly influenced both the second half of the programme and influenced the demands on the ESF Evaluation Team. Many of the ideas developed for the second half of the programme were scrapped, and resulted in the re-shaping of the programme (and the focus of DWP activity on the Troubled Families and support for the Work Programme). The change in Government was also inextricably linked to the financial crisis, although the latter had less of a direct influence on the implementation of the strategy. Uncertainties around the future of the management of ESF, and the proposed move to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), also caused considerable uncertainty.

- **Maintaining staff resources** – throughout the first half of the programme the then Evaluation Team leader described a team comprising himself, one full-time qualitative researcher and one full-time quantitative researcher. However, in the second half of the programme this position changed, with the subsequent team leader describing an ongoing challenge in securing staff resources. Several reasons were proposed for the difficulties in maintaining a staff team:
  - General staffing policies within DWP post-2010 – with the Department seeking to reduce costs, in line with other Government Departments, leading to reduced staff numbers and a particularly uncertain environment.
  - The developing shortage of analysts within DWP – previously an area of considerable strength for the Department – and compounded by shortages of individuals with a pre-existing understanding of ESF.
  - Challenges for prioritisation within the Department – with higher profile policy areas and areas of specific Ministerial interest seemingly being most likely to be prioritised. This was a particular challenge in terms of planning, and securing additional resources to support, the development of the 2014–2020 programme.
  - The practice within the civil service of rotating professional analytical staff between posts as part of their career paths – while positive for the staff in question and broadening their experience, this presents a problem for retaining a research team particularly in an area where understanding of the funding system is so important.

Several interviewees drew attention to preparations for the 2014–2020 programme as a specific area of weakness, and where the expected contribution from the evaluation strategy to support its formulation was limited. The team leader at the time described how despite working with a reduced staffing allocation it would be possible to deliver the main components of the strategy. However the additional requirements associated with planning for the 2014–2020 programme could not be resourced from within the existing staffing complement, and resulted in neither function being delivered effectively.

One additional area of challenge focused on the **development of a sample of former participants for the cohort study** (including match individuals). This led to changes in the timing of the study and the subsequent late delivery of the results and reporting. The issue seemed to focus on when data would be available for sampling purposes from the CFOs, and led to the project being longer and more complex (so needing additional staff time) than was expected. It also raised a wider point, relating to the engagement and interaction of the main CFOs with the strategy, and the degree to which its practical requirements had been effectively communicated to the key CFO representatives.

### 5.2.5 Management and governance

Responsibility for the management of the evaluation strategy sat with the ESF Evaluation Team, where their separation from the Managing Authority, and other staff in the division provided a degree of independence.



Early in the programme a sub-committee of the PMC was formed, the Evaluation Sub-committee, to lead on evaluation issues. Envisaged as meeting twice a year, the Evaluation Sub-Committee was chaired by the Managing Authority and included members of the ESF Evaluation Team, nominees from the PMC, representatives of the main CFOs and wider stakeholders including the voluntary sector, and representation from DG Employment in an advisory capacity. However, over the programme representation changed as a result of the removal of the regional tier of Government Office and Regional Development Agencies as well as staff changes in the organisations represented. Several interviewees reported that attendance outside the core ESFD/CFO membership could be variable, with social partners, such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and others with specific interests, showing the most variation in attendance.

While for the first half of the programme the sub-committee met twice a year, meetings were reduced to one a year from 2011, although there was an 18-month gap between the last meeting of the group in 2013 and the most recent meeting in 2015.

Interviewees' views on the effectiveness of the Evaluation Sub-committee were varied, but overall it was considered to have worked well (particularly in the first half of the programme), allowing developments and findings from studies to be shared and providing a degree of challenge on findings (and the contractors invited to present them). For others, the sub-committee was considered to have a largely administrative function, with the communication and sharing of learning being less of a feature, and the implications of the findings presented being rarely discussed.

As the new programme envisages a similar structure for the management and governance of the evaluation strategy in 2014–2020, suggestions for improvement were gathered from the interviewees able to comment. Several points emerged:

- Involving representatives of other Government Departments – to explore the contribution of ESF to domestic policy delivery, as well as identifying practice and learning from mainstream activities which could usefully inform programme activities. This reflected the view that links with domestic policies, and the two-way exchange of learning between them, was an area for further development in the new programme.
- While providing a useful forum for discussing and raising awareness of planned, ongoing and completed studies, and sharing their findings through presentations and discussion, it was widely felt that sub-committee meetings did not provide the opportunity to explore findings, and their implications, in-depth. This point is returned to under 5.2.5 below.
- Clarity over ownership – while the strategy states responsibility for implementation lies with the Evaluation Team, there was some discussion around whether this should sit within the Managing Authority, with the Evaluation Team focusing on commissioning and managing studies and associated technical issues to maintain their independence and ensure that the requirements of the programme are met. Agreement was common, however, regarding the need for a named individual to be the 'single point of contact' for the strategy, who would drive the strategy forward across the wider ESF community.

- For the interviewees most closely involved in the programme, a degree of duplication was reported between the role of the sub-committee and the PMC. While this was considered to a degree as inevitable, it may be useful in finalising the terms of reference for both committees to consider how they can best work to complement each other. This also raised questions of whether, in serving the PMC, the evaluation sub-committee should take more of a technical focus to ensure differentiation. If so, the decision would be between the sub-committee providing a forum for the more detailed review of findings (which would have a policy-focused audience), and/or a more technical function including providing advice on appropriate evaluation methods.

### 5.2.6 Meeting operational and strategic needs

As described above, the initial evaluation strategies set out a series of operational and strategic information needs which the evaluation strategy was intended to address. The updated strategy document provided an assessment of the extent to which the needs in the initial strategy had been addressed, and which remained outstanding. The findings are summarised as Table 5.1 below, which has been extended to include the evaluator's view on whether the needs and strategic drivers identified for the second half of the programme.

As the table illustrates, studies undertaken in the second half of the programme contributed to the strategic and operational needs set out in the initial strategy, and the additional 'strategic drivers' listed in the updates evaluation strategy. Female participation emerged as an issue investigated across several studies, although one notable area of weakness was in terms of information to support the ex-ante evaluation of the 2014–2020 programme (and the development of the new programme more widely).

However, as the following text describes, the extent to which the information collected through the studies undertaken in the second half of the programme actively informed operational and strategic developments appears to have been limited. In the case of the ESF Families provision, delays in the production of the final report meant that its findings were of limited use in the 2007–2013 programme.



### 5.2.7 Impact and influence

The true value of any evaluation strategy lies not in the number of reports and other outputs produced, but in the extent to which the learning within these outputs has been used to inform policy and practice. As previous sections have described, the view across the consultees (and shared by the authors of this report) was that the reports produced were of good quality in terms of their own aims and objectives. The key question was therefore whether best use had been made of the learning available across the programme period.

### 5.2.8 Mechanisms for sharing learning

The initial evaluation strategy set out the commitment to disseminate the outputs of the strategy through a series of channels, namely the publication of reports commissioned by ESFD, the production of an ESF e-zine (which became ESF Works), holding specific seminars/sharing of learning where relevant, and through presentation and discussion at the Evaluation Sub-committee and the PMC.

However, and as the comments on the management and governance of the strategy suggest, there appear to have been few opportunities for discussions on the implications of any findings presented, and what they mean for the programme going forward. Indeed, for many of the consultees this emerged as the main weakness of the strategy, and an area where improvement in 2014–2020 would be most valued.

### 5.2.9 Impact and influence

Despite the acknowledged quality of the evaluation reports, and the appropriateness of their focus, the extent to which they were found to have impacted on the planning and implementation of the programme was limited. In addition to issues associated with supporting the new programme described above, ‘in programme’ change resulting from the investment in evaluation also seemed to be limited.

Individual consultees were asked to provide examples where evaluation findings had influenced the planning and implementation of programme activities. For the majority this proved challenging, with one ESFD consultee describing the strategy as “...*being more about generating, rather than using, learning*”. It is worth noting, however, that several consultees felt that from 2010 the change in Government became the dominant influence on the second half of the programme.

Examples of the limited cases of influence are summarised below.

### **Impact of the Evaluation Strategy – Influence on Policy and Practice**

Examples of the influence of the evaluation strategy identified at the national level through the consultations with ESFD representatives were limited and included:

- Changes to the delivery of the cross-cutting themes of equality of opportunity and environmental sustainability – following the evaluation of the relevant strategies for implementing the cross-cutting programme themes.
- Learning from the cohort survey on the importance of steps to ensure results are sustained for the most challenging groups.
- Although not directly impacting on the programme, the counterfactual impact assessment undertaken by the ESF Evaluation Team in the first half of the programme proved to be influential in moving practice forward in this area.

However, consultations with the CFOs and wider partners suggested that both national and 'local' evaluations had a greater degree of influence at the local level. These appeared to focus on identifying good practice, or areas for improvement, within their local programmes, so their benefit was primarily local.

Discussion on the impact of the strategy led to further questions being raised over what the strategy should be trying to achieve, in the context of adding focus to evaluation activities for the 2014–2020 period. First, the importance of seeing ESF as a funding stream was stressed, and that often there would be little difference in the nature of what was being funded (outside of additional target groups). Consequently there is little value in evaluating such activities if this has taken place elsewhere, as their performance can be monitored through the programme performance data, unless there is some fundamental difference in the activities provided via ESF. Second, the importance of focusing attentions on what is new, or innovative, under the programme was emphasised – for many of the consultees the 'innovative' aspect of ESF provision was where most opportunities for 'applied learning' lay. Third, given the intent to inform planning and delivery, the importance of the accurate interpretation of results was stressed – with examples being cited where this had not been the case. This emphasises the importance of facilitating detailed discussions on the implications of the research undertaken – to avoid misinterpretation and stimulate response.

A final point, raised by several interviewees, was that the recommendations of evaluation reports were not always followed up by action plans, which were themselves not always updated or reported upon. Strengthening this area was seen as important to ensuring that resources invested in evaluation lead to real change on the ground.

Overall, a degree of disappointment was expressed that the influence of the strategy on the 2007–2013 programme, and on preparations for the 2014–2020 programme, were limited. Consequently, despite the overall high quality of the evaluation studies undertaken within the strategy, their active contribution to the programme's operational and strategic needs appears to have been limited. Our conclusions and recommendations therefore focus on ways in which the effectiveness of the evaluation strategy can be improved in the new programme period.

# 6 Conclusions and recommendations for 2014–2020

This section provides the main findings from the research, both in terms of the performance of the 2007–2013 programme and the evaluation strategy. A series of recommendations for the 2014–2020 programme are made, drawing on the findings from the research.

## 6.1 Conclusions

### 6.1.1 Performance of the England ESF Programme 2007–2013

The England European Social Fund (ESF) programme 2007–2013 achieved more than the target number of participants and the absolute number of results achieved. The target was achieved by 2010. Therefore it is more appropriate to assess the performance of the programme against targets for the proportion of participants from target groups and the proportion of participants achieving targeted results.

For most of the targets for participant demography, there was little difference between the performances of the different Priorities. The proportion of participants aged over 50 was below the target level and in general so was the performance for female participants and participants with disabilities. However, there were exceptions in the convergence area. The proportion of female participants was above the target level for Priority 5. This was explained by the provision of a project specifically targeted at women in employment. The proportion of participants with a disability was above the target level for Priority 4, which was explained by targeting engagement with disabled individuals and providing a project specifically targeted at disabled participants.

The programme missed most of the targets for demography and for inactive participants, young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and those employees without basic skills. A mitigating factor for this performance was identified as the economic climate. This led to a large increase in the number of unemployed individuals, who were predominantly male. Providing support for these participants made it more difficult to engage with individuals from the other target groups.

A total of 32 reports were reviewed as part of the evidence synthesis. The quality of evaluations was assessed to be generally good, and appropriate for the study aims. The majority of evaluations were process evaluations, using qualitative research and an assessment of Management Information (MI). These studies were generally successful in reporting what had worked well and what could be learned from the evaluation.

A limited number of studies (11) assessed the additional impact of the project or programme being evaluated. Two of these used formal quasi-experimental approaches. A further seven assessed the impact of the project or programme using a comparator group analysis. All of these studies used administrative data to conduct the CIE. Two further studies estimated the net impact of the project or programme by assessing the ‘additionality’ of the programme.

A significant weakness of the research reviewed was that only a few studies (five) analysed the Value for Money (VfM) the project or programme represented. VfM is an important factor when deciding whether a project or programme has been a success. Where VfM was assessed, different approaches were used. Two studies estimated the additional Gross Value Added (GVA) the project or programme generated and compared this to project or programme expenditure; a further two conducted cost benefit analyses by monetising the results achieved by the project or programme and comparing this to expenditure; and one study estimated the unit cost of provision and compared this to the unit cost of provision in similar projects or programmes.

The good practice identified across multiple evaluations was not new or innovative to the evaluation community, but has been highlighted as working well. The good practice includes:

- Involving local or specialist organisations in the engagement of participants and delivery of the project or programme;
- Using partnership working between different organisations to bring in specialist knowledge and allowing organisations to learn from each other;
- A key worker approach to provide wraparound support from a single point of contact;
- Providing work placements and activities tailored to participants needs;
- Commissioning projects through correctly specified Payment by Results (PbR) contracts to ensure a focus on sustained results; and
- Recognising soft outcomes, particularly for hard-to-reach groups.

### 6.1.2 Evaluation strategy

As Section 5 described, the evaluation strategy was widely considered by the individuals interviewed to be fit for purpose, comprehensive in coverage and providing a good basis for monitoring and understanding the performance of the programme between 2007 and 2013.

The rolling programme approach, and the mid-programme update, reflected the flexibility within the OP itself, and provided an opportunity to revise and update to reflect current circumstances. The strategy also provided a useful management framework for identifying areas of operational and strategic need, with the Price Monitoring Committee (PMC) and the Evaluation Sub-committee setting clear parameters for inclusion and often taking a steering role. Although the majority of the studies reviewed (commissioned under the strategy or otherwise) were found to be of good quality, the use of more structured approaches could have avoided the few shortcomings identified in studies commissioned elsewhere.

However, in the second half of the programme implementation of the strategy was less effective, crucially with the strategy not providing the nature and level of input into the development of the new 2014–2020 programme. There were a series of reasons for this, including the impact of the change of Government in 2010, but primarily concerning the availability of staff resources within the ESF Evaluation Team and the inability to secure additional staff at key points in the process.

Overall, for the second half of the programme, we conclude that while fit for purpose, challenges in the implementation of the strategy meant that its overall objectives of addressing the operational and strategic needs of the programme (and of the 2014–2020 programme) were not met. Putting the contribution to the development of the 2014–2020 programme aside, we also conclude that weaknesses in the mechanisms for actively sharing

learning resulting from the strategy and discussing their implications in detail are also areas for improvement. Potential steps to remedy this are set out in our recommendations below.

## 6.2 Recommendations for 2014–2020 programme

The key worker approach, where a single point of contact provides holistic or wraparound support for participants throughout service delivery was identified as being an effective way to engage with, and support sustained relationships with participants with the greatest need in multiple evaluations. This was particularly the case for individuals who were a long way from the labour market (for example those with multiple problems, and young offenders). For programmes providing support to hard-to-reach individuals this approach should be considered where possible, as it has been assessed to work well. If this approach is adopted, it is important that the support from the key worker does not stop when a participant achieves a result. The support needs to continue to ensure the participant stays in employment or training and the result is sustained.

Within the UK and the European Union (EU), there has been a move towards more robust assessment of the impact of projects and programmes in recent years. This includes more demand for Counterfactual Impact Evaluation (CIE). The findings from a correctly specified CIE are more accurate than other forms of assessing impact. However, there are difficulties with carrying out CIE, most commonly access to appropriate data and a suitable comparator group being available. It is recommended that more evaluation studies attempt to measure the impact of projects and programmes using CIEs.

However, commissioners should be aware of the difficulties in carrying out CIEs. If they decide that a CIE is necessary for the evaluation of their project or programme, this decision needs to be made prior to the start of the project or programme, and consideration of what data is required and potential comparator groups should be built into the design of the project or programme. If this is not considered at the outset of a project or programme, the likelihood of an evaluator being able to conduct an accurate CIE is significantly reduced.

Few evaluation studies in the ESF 2007–2013 programme assessed the VfM of a project or programme. The VfM assessment is an important factor when deciding whether a project or programme has been a success, the potential replication costs and to provide useful data on unit costs to support preparations for the next programme period. The process evaluations are helpful in explaining if something works, but without an assessment of cost effectiveness is it difficult to conclude if the project or programme has been a success. It is recommended that all evaluations include an assessment of the VfM of projects and programmes in the 2014–2020 programme.

## 6.3 Recommendations for the 2014–2020 ESF evaluation strategy and plan

Our recommendations regarding the 2014–2020 evaluation strategy are divided into two areas – finalising the strategy, and its implementation.



### 6.3.1 Finalising the strategy

The opportunity exists to influence the content and delivery of the 2014–2020 evaluation strategy prior to the submission of the final version to the commission. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Continue to follow the ‘rolling programme’ approach from the previous strategy, with a mid-point update to allow changes and the implications of change in the wider environment to be considered.
- Involve Co-Funding Organisations (CFOs) and other recipients of ESF funding in finalising the strategy and identifying the operational and strategic needs to be addressed in detail. Active engagement should be secured to help foster understanding of and commitment to the strategy, as well as leading to a document fit for implementation. Involve Commission representatives to ensure their requirements are met.
- This should include providing clear information to CFOs and other actors on the requirements of the strategy and their role/inputs to it. This should include detailed requirements for data provision (i.e. for the cohort survey and other studies) and particularly plans for any CIEs and the development of comparison groups, including timetabling.
- Ensure that the strategy is sufficiently resourced and that the necessary number of appropriately skilled analysts are in place in the ESF Evaluation Team, to deliver the strategy effectively. Explore opportunities to ‘ring fence’ staff in the Evaluation Team, or more realistically given the duration of the programme ensure good handover processes are in place for when staff move on.
- Include specific reference to, and timetable in, support for the successor programme within the 2014–2020 strategy. While the ‘finer detail’ can be added as part of the mid-programme update, this would help emphasise the importance of ensuring that sufficient staff resources are available.

### 6.3.2 Implementing the strategy

Our recommendations are:

- Following the recommendations for finalising the strategy, ensure that responsibilities are understood across all parties – with any changes in CFO and partner staff being followed up to ensure continued participation and contribution.
- This should be supported by the provision of clear guidance on evaluation requirements for recipients of ESF funding, and the offer of advice on specific issues from the ESF Evaluation Team. This should include establishing expected standards for evaluation reports produced, and establishing an understanding of the evaluation plans of the main CFOs and other recipients of funding, including when results will be available, to allow progress in their implementation to be monitored (although not policed).
- Improve the process by which the learning resulting from the strategy is shared, and most importantly the implications of the findings being discussed are taken forward. This could be achieved through:

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- Continuing to publish reports produced by ESF Division (ESFD), and encouraging CFOs and others to do the same. In addition, any successor to ESF Works could also be used to communicate key findings, perhaps with a specific section dedicated to evaluation matters;
  - Changing the focus of the evaluation sub-committee to allow for more detailed discussions, potentially with different attendees depending on the focus of the discussions;
  - Considering special events/workshops to allow detailed discussion of findings and their implications – led by the ESF Evaluation Team, but with inputs from ESFD policy colleagues. Such events could be particularly useful at the mid-point of the programme and towards the end, to inform planning for the successor programme;
  - As appropriate, ensuring that evaluation reports produced, and presentations made, by external contractors include the implications of their findings for the programme going forward;
  - Ensure that action plans are produced to take the recommendations from evaluation studies forward, and that progress with their implementation is monitored and reported to the Evaluation sub-committee.
- Having established a staffing complement as part of finalising the evaluation plan, take steps to ensure this complement is maintained throughout the programme. This will be particularly relevant in the latter stages of the programme, to ensure resources are available to meet the planning requirements of the new programme.
  - Ensure that the Evaluation Sub-committee monitor the implementation of the strategy to ensure that the operational and strategic needs identified in its development are addressed, while also allowing additional unforeseen requirements to be included over the programme period.

# Appendix A

## Data extraction template

**Table A.1** Template for assessing relevant literature

Category	Information
Title	
Author	
Research Centre	
Year	
Commissioner	Institution who commissioned the work.
Budget	Would be useful to get, even if only a range to protect commercial interests, to provide scale?
Coverage – spatial	The area covered by the research – e.g. national coverage, Convergence or Competitiveness areas, region/city etc.
Coverage – ESF Priority	ESF Priority – 1, 2, 4, 5, or combinations e.g. 1 and 4, 2 and 5; cross-cutting themes, separate ‘interventions’ e.g. Innovation, Transnationality and Mainstreaming.
Programme design	Brief description of programme.
Study aims and objectives	Summarise what the study aimed to achieve, including differentiating by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process evaluation – aiming to see what worked well and what worked less well;</li> <li>• Impact evaluation – aiming to estimate the additional impact of the investment;</li> <li>• Economic impact – aiming to compare the money spent and the monetary value of the impacts, or the efficiency of the investment.</li> </ul>
Study design and methods	Describing the methods used, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature review;</li> <li>• Qualitative research;</li> <li>• Surveys of participants;</li> <li>• Impact evaluation (multivariate analysis, qualitative research for additionality, RCT, quasi-experimental design);</li> <li>• Economic impact – CBA, Cost Effectiveness, VfM, Return on Investment;</li> <li>• Analysis of Management Information.</li> </ul> <p>In each case, record key features including sample sizes and sampling methodologies used. NB – please ensure any datasets used in the evaluation are stated here.</p>
Review of methodology	Provide comment on the methods applied, in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriateness;</li> <li>• Strengths;</li> <li>• Weaknesses: and</li> <li>• Any evidence of bias?</li> </ul>

Table A.1 Continued

Category	Information
Study findings	<p>The reports will vary in terms of their focus, scale and depth of analysis. In extracting the information please use the following headings to group the information – although all will not necessarily apply to each report reviewed.</p> <p><b>Overall findings</b> An overview of the key findings of the report.</p> <p><b>What worked well?</b> Was the intervention, or any aspects of it, particularly effective? This could range from the overall approach to any specific learning about recruitment, delivery to specific groups, etc.</p> <p><b>What worked less well?</b> The reverse of the above! Important to identify what not to do in the future, so useful learning.</p> <p><b>What was the impact of the investment?</b> As covered in the report, e.g. qualitative/.self-reported, quantitative, economic impact etc as expressed, are the results statistically significant?</p> <p><b>Value for money/cost effectiveness etc.</b> Any findings if included – especially in comparison to other interventions.</p> <p><b>Good practice</b> Examples cited as actual or potential good practice (with any evidence offered).</p> <p><b>Key success factors</b> Any information on key success factors, i.e. what makes a particular approach effective – e.g. what works well for who, in what circumstances, etc.</p> <p><b>Inhibitors</b> The reverse of key success factors – i.e. any factors inhibiting the effectiveness of the intervention.</p> <p><b>Lessons for the future</b> Any wider lessons for the future – could be at activity or programme level, and which could usefully inform the future programme period.</p>
Conclusions and recommendations	List the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

# Appendix B

## Topic Guides

### **B.1 Topic guide for ESFD**

#### **B.1.1 Introduction**

Please describe your current/previous role within the ESF Division, and responsibilities for/ links with the programme evaluation strategy.

#### **B.1.2 Aims, objectives and context**

What in your view are the aims and objectives of the ESF Evaluation Strategy?

What were your expectations of it – in terms of:

- Meeting the requirements of the ESF regulations?; and
- Providing learning to influence development and implementation?

#### **B.1.3 Developing the strategy**

How was the strategy, and accompanying plan, developed?

- Who was responsible for developing the strategy, and how was it produced?
- Were stakeholders (particularly CFOs) involved, if so who and what did they contribute?
- How were the individual tasks/studies within it decided upon?

Can you describe the process by which the initial strategy was updated in 2013? Who was involved (incl. partners/stakeholders), what were the key influences/drivers?

In your view, what were the main changes resulting from the strategy update?

#### **B.1.4 Delivering the strategy**

Once the initial strategy framework was developed, how were the specific research studies selected?

What roles did partner and stakeholder organisations, particularly the CFOs, play in the implementation of the strategy?

In your view, did the strategy deliver its intended outputs, in terms of the areas of activity listed and more specific studies?

Were there any activities proposed that were not completed, and if so why and any implications?

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What were the main issues and challenges faced in delivering the strategy? Probe, including for:

- Resourcing issues – financial
- Resourcing issues – personnel/capacity/capability
- Commissioning – e.g. procurement processes and external contractors
- Methodological – e.g. with reference to CIE
- Collaboration/partnership issues

Overall, what worked well, and were positive enablers, for implementing the strategy?

Conversely, what were the inhibitors?

### **B.1.5 Management and governance**

Are you involved in the management and governance of the evaluation strategy? If so, please describe your role

Please describe the management and governance structure for the strategy – including reporting lines and including reporting to the Evaluation Sub-committee, PMC and the Commission (as flowchart).

What is your view of the effectiveness of the management and governance arrangements?

To include:

- clarity of leadership and roles within the structure;
- effectiveness of the Evaluation Sub-committee in guiding implementation (and more widely); and
- effectiveness of the overall management and governance?

Are there any lessons from the 2007–2013 programme regarding the management and governance of the ESF evaluation strategy?

### **B.1.6 Sharing learning internally and with stakeholders**

What measures were in place to ensure the learning from the evaluation strategy was shared within the Division and with external stakeholders?

- Describe, probing for mechanisms including publications, ESF Works, Evaluation Sub-committee meetings, etc.

In your view, how effective were these measures? What represented 'effective practice' in sharing lessons from the strategy?

What could be improved in terms of sharing learning from/to inform the delivery of the 2014–2020 programme?

### **B.1.7 Influence and Impact**

The aims of the strategy are to:

- Ensure that the ESF regulatory requirements are met; and

- To inform decision makers and influencers on a range of strategic and operational issues, including the contribution of the programme to EU and national policy priorities and strategies for employment and social inclusion.

To what extent do you consider that these aims have been achieved?

To your knowledge, what are the Commission's views on the extent to which these aims have been achieved, particularly in terms of meeting regulatory requirements?

Are there any areas where these objectives may have been met more effectively, or where there have been any gaps in the coverage of the strategy?

Do you think that the outputs of the strategy influenced the delivery of the 2007–2013 programme, and/or preparations for the 2014–2020 programme?

- (Identify examples of learning which have had an influence, collectively or from particular studies. What difference have they made?)

Are there any other areas/partners where learning from the outputs of the evaluation strategy have influenced strategy or operations?

Are there any areas of specific need/requirement that were unmet by the previous strategy?

Are there any specific areas which the 2014–2020 strategy could usefully concentrate on?

## **B.1.8 Looking forward**

What are the key lessons from the 2007–2013 evaluation strategy that have been/should be considered in developing the strategy for the 2014–2020 programme?

What do you consider the key foci of the strategy should be – thematic and practical?

How could the 2014–2020 strategy improve upon the 2007–2013 version?

## **B.2 Topic guide for stakeholders**

### **B.2.1 Introduction**

Please describe your role within your organisation, and your responsibilities/interests regarding ESF. Check for membership of ESF Evaluation Sub-committee.

### **B.2.2 Aims, objectives and context**

What in your view are the aims and objectives of the ESF Evaluation Strategy?

What were your expectations of the strategy – in terms of providing learning to influence development and implementation, and illustrating the contribution of ESF to EU and national policies and strategies?

### **B.2.3 Developing the strategy**

Were you, or your organisation, involved in the development of the initial or updated ESF evaluation strategies?

If so, please describe your experience of the process.

## B.2.4 Implementing the strategy

What role/involvement did you have in the implementation of the ESF evaluation strategy? Please describe. (NB – discuss role in ESF Evaluation Sub-committee under Management and Governance below).

If able to comment, what were the main issues and challenges faced by ESFD in delivering the strategy?

## B.2.5 Management and governance (if involved in the Evaluation Sub-committee)

What are your views on the operation and effectiveness of the ESF Evaluation Sub-committee? Please describe to include:

- Clarity of leadership and roles;
- Effectiveness of the Evaluation Sub-committee in informing of progress, guiding implementation, etc; and
- Effectiveness of the overall administration and governance role of the sub-committee?

Are there any lessons from the 2007–2013 programme for the management and governance of the 2014–2020 ESF evaluation strategy?

## B.2.6 Sharing outputs and learning

What measures were in place to ensure the learning from the evaluation strategy was shared within the Division and with external stakeholders?

- Describe, probing for mechanisms including publications, ESF Works, Evaluation Sub-committee meetings, etc.

How effective were these measures? What represented 'effective practice' in sharing lessons from the strategy?

What could be improved in terms of sharing learning from/inform the delivery of the 2014–2020 programme?

## B.2.7 Influence and impact

The aims of the strategy are to:

- ensure that the ESF regulatory requirements are met; and
- to inform decision makers and influencers on a range of strategic and operational issues, including the contribution of the programme to EU and national policy priorities and strategies for employment and social inclusion.

To what extent, and as far as you are able to comment, do you consider that these aims have been achieved?

**If member of Evaluation Sub-committee** – To your knowledge, what are the Commission's views on the extent to which the outputs of the strategy meet regulatory requirements?

Are there any areas where these objectives may have been met more effectively?



Were there any areas of specific need/requirement that were not met by the strategy?

What are your views of the outputs of the Evaluation Strategy (i.e. the research and evaluation studies produced), in terms of their:

- Relevance, focus and appropriateness – were the ‘right’ issues and areas being explored? Were there any gaps?
- Overall quality – in terms of providing robust and relevant learning?
- Timeliness – in terms of providing information at the relevant time compared to ESF planning cycles?

Have you used any of the lessons/data from any of the outputs of the Evaluation Strategy to:

- Inform or prompt change in your organisation’s policies or strategies?
- Influence your operational activities? – e.g. by applying lessons or good practices identified?
- Inform your organisations’ plans for the 2014–2020 programme round?

Are there any specific areas which the 2014–2020 strategy could usefully concentrate on?

## **B.2.8 Looking Forward**

From your perspective, what are the key lessons from the 2007–2013 evaluation strategy that should be considered in developing the strategy for the 2014–2020 programme?

How could the 2014–2020 strategy improve upon the 2007–2013 version?

Are there any ways in which the dissemination and sharing of learning could be promoted in the 2014–2020 programme

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