



European Union

European Regional
Development Fund

Final Evaluation

October 2018 – December 2020

Sheffield City Region Technical
Assistance Project

European Structural &
Investment Funds (ESIF)
Programme 2014-2020



European Union

European Regional
Development Fund

Glossary

DC	Doncaster Council
MCHLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
MA	Managing Authority
SCR	Sheffield City Region
TA	Technical Assistance
T	Transition
MDR	More Developed
SME	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership

Contents

1. Introduction and Overview	3
2. Context	3
3. Need for the Project	8
4. Project Objectives	6
5. Project Performance	8
5.1 Progress in achieving project objectives	8
5.2 Milestones	8
5.3 Financial.....	8
5.4 Results/Outputs.....	9
5.5 Claims Process	10
5.6 Challenges	11
6. Project Delivery and Communications.....	12
6.1 Project Team	12
6.2 Communications	13
6.3 Database	13
6.4 Online Communications: Websites	14
6.5 Events	14
6.6 Other Notable Actions	14
7. Equalities and Opportunities	15
8. Environmental Sustainability	16
9. Project Outcomes and Impact	16
10. Project Value	17
11. Conclusion	18

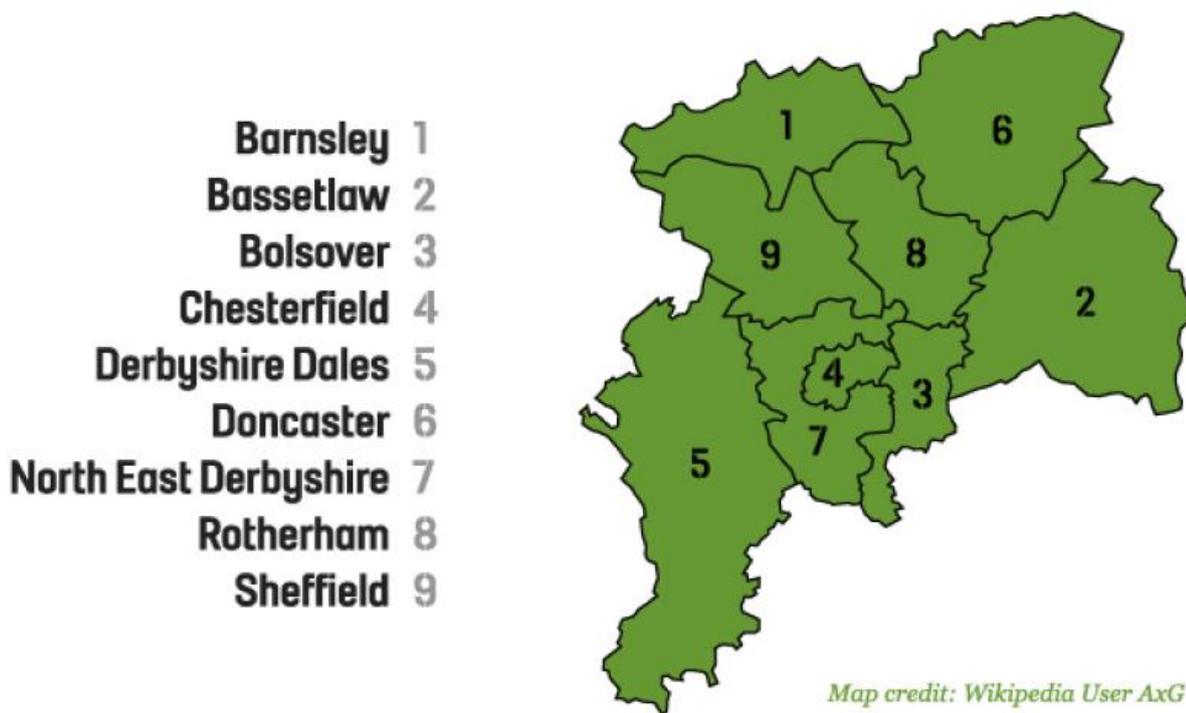
1. Introduction and Overview

Under the European Structural Investment Fund (ESIF) Programme of European Funding 2014 - 20, Doncaster Council and its named partners secured £805,671 from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to deliver Technical Assistance (TA) across the Sheffield City Region (SCR) for a 3 year period commencing in October 2015 up to 31st December 2018. As this project drew to a close, it was evident that there was a sustained demand for Technical Assistance support across the city region.

Doncaster Council submitted a new Technical Assistance application in late 2018. The Council retained its partner organisations, Sheffield City Council and Sheffield City Growth Department to support the delivery of ERDF Technical Assistance across the Sheffield City Region until the end of the ESIF programme on 31st December 2020.

The **Sheffield City Region Technical Assistance (SCR TA) 2018-2020** project was approved for a period of 2 years, 3 months from October 2018 to 31st December 2020. Its sole purpose was to support the successful delivery of the ESIF ERDF programme across the Sheffield City Region, incorporating both Transition (T) and More Developed Region (MDR).

Project delivery covered the whole of the Sheffield City Region area. **Figure 1**



2. Context

The 2014 to 2020 European Structural and Investment Funds bring the European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund and part of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development together into a single European Union Structural Investment Funds (ESIF) Growth Programme for England supporting the key growth

priorities of innovation, research and development, support for small and medium enterprises, low carbon, skills, employment, and social inclusion.

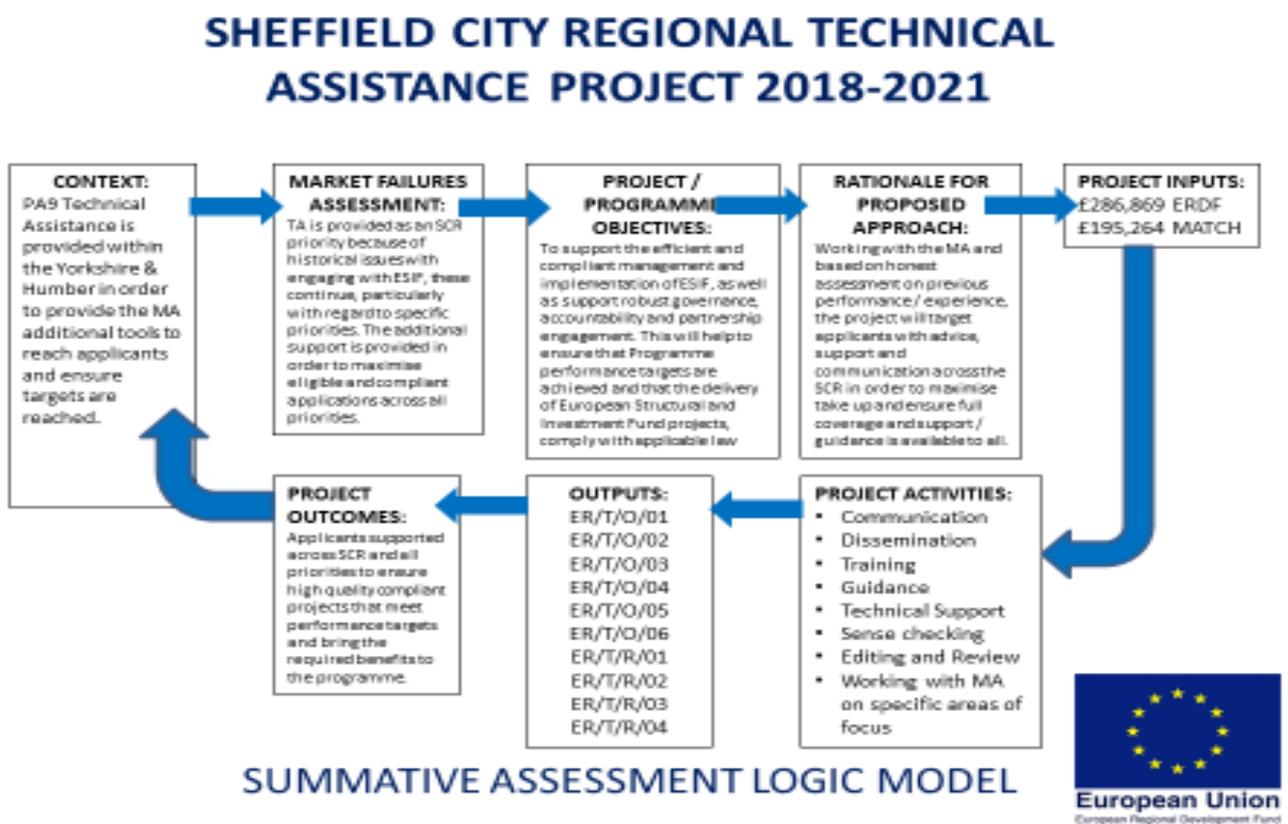
The regulatory framework for Technical Assistance is set out in both Article 59 of the Common Provisions Regulations (European Union No 1303/2013) and Commission Delegated Regulation 240/2014 (Chapter 6, Article 17).

Although the TA call for projects is undertaken on a national level, the Local SCR ESIF Sub-Committee was responsible for ensuring close alignment to the priorities identified in the Sheffield City Region Local Enterprise Partnership's (LEP) Strategic Economic Plan and ESIF strategy.

The objective of Technical Assistance is to support the efficient and compliant management and implementation of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) Programmes, as well as support robust governance, accountability and partnership engagement. This helped to ensure that Programme performance targets were achieved and that the delivery of European Structural and Investment Funds projects, complied with applicable law.

The subsequent ERDF TA Full application form, submitted by DC described the knowledge transfer process. This informed the development of the SCR Technical Assistance Logic Model for the SCR (please see Figure 2 below). Activities were well defined and beneficiaries are clearly linked to activities - SCR TA team being the single point of contact.

Figure 2



3. Need for the Project

The project sponsor Doncaster Council was chosen to deliver the ERDF Technical Assistance (TA) project in the SCR, not just because the organisation had the expertise and experience to deliver the project, but had the financial capability to manage the financial requirements of ERDF funding, an understanding of the area and established networks with the key stakeholders.

The need for the project was defined as:

The project supported the development of ERDF applications including guidance on eligibility, process and the responsibilities and requirements needed in terms of management, compliance, publicity and accountability. It helped build capacity within the region, and feed important local intelligence to the managing authority. The project engaged across all sectors and geographical areas within the region, providing support and advice to all and ensuring quality submissions that have the greatest possible relevance and the most impact in delivering key European, national and local priorities.

Technical Assistance support ensures a strong pipeline of achievable proposals that have reached a point where they are ready to discuss detail with the Managing Agency (MA). In addition, instead of numerous much smaller proposals, this project facilitated the development of partnerships and consortia to prevent duplication and increase the number of eligible projects.

Our target beneficiaries were businesses and organisations within the SCR. Within these wide parameters, DC did not distinguish between our beneficiaries, providing each and every one of them a full range of structured support, although this was, of course, tailored to suit their individual requirements.

The Sheffield City Region Technical Assistance project was conceived to address three areas:

Imperfect Information

Community groups, institutions and SME's lacked awareness of the ESIF programme and the monetary advantages to be gained from incorporating ESIF funding into their evolving schemes. This led to eligible organisations experiencing difficulties in engaging and collaborating with MHCLG.

Because they lack awareness, there was little understanding of how ESIF could improve 'products' and processes, the knowledge of how to approach and navigate knowledge support organisations, and resources to seek out expertise from the SCR knowledge base.

As a result, many eligible organisations fail to complete their innovation journey to get new 'products' to the city region, often because the barrier to engagement is the complexity of navigating multiple regulations and the lack of joined up approach to UK and EU requirements.

Externalities

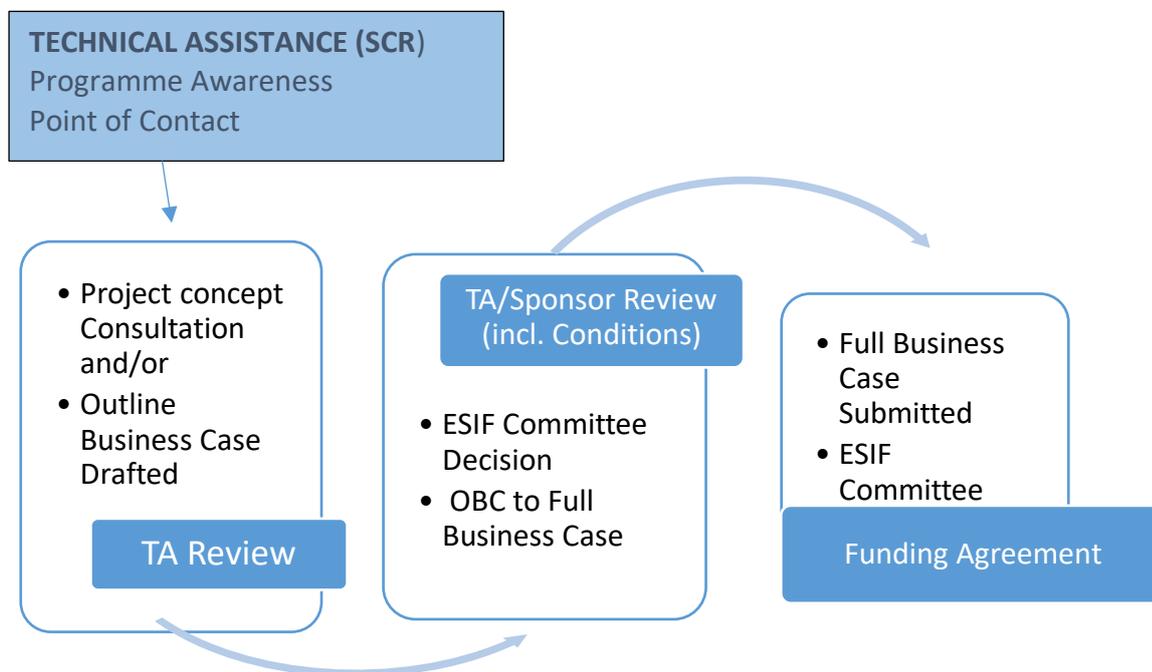
Resources for completion of a robust ERDF Outline and Full Business Plan is highly specialised, costly and requires a high degree of expertise to design, conduct and interpret EU regulations. This can be beyond the financial and operational capability of some SMEs.

Overcoming Market Failure

SCR TA sought to overcome the market failure by:

- Offering a strong brand and clear message to local (SCR) stakeholders;
- A managed and logical application journey;
- A holistic approach to overcoming problems, improving the rate of project development and, subsequently, the delivery of the ESIF Programme;
- A value for money solution which brings together technical assistance expertise together in SCR.

Figure 3



4. Project objectives

Three **SMART Objectives** were identified:

1. Accelerate the process between concept and full business case across sectors in the Sheffield City Region – principally by harnessing expertise via a dedicated team resource;
2. To establish a single point of contact which is recognised for innovation and delivering positive impacts to the wider management of the ESIF programme by the Managing Authority;
3. Deliver a smarter TA ‘product’ resulting in the improvement to the quality of businesses cases submitted to MHCLG.



European Union

European Regional
Development Fund

The project has been managed by Doncaster Council, and delivered with the experience and knowledge of its two partners Sheffield City Council (SCC) and City Growth Department, thus ensuring both sectorial capability and the capacity to ensure full geographical coverage. The objectives were as follows:

- Targeted promotion of the ESIF Programme across the SCR with a strong emphasis on generating engagement and quality projects. Trustworthy communication of essential information to an extensive partner and stakeholder network built through collaboration and exploiting influential networks.
- Early identification and engagement with applicants, as well as those connections made via the managing authority and/or communications issued either by the project or MA.
- Strengthening working relationships between TA projects in close proximity to SCR – seeking to identify innovative approaches to private sector and engagement with multi-sector applicants, as well as sharing best practice and lessons learned.
- Maximising major business portals, including those administered through the SCR and Business Doncaster, including all newsletters, publications and other communication tools, including social media e.g. Twitter and Facebook. This will ensure the greatest possible reach for communications, as well as increasing the routes to support from the project for applicants queries.
- Exchange of best practice with applicants including robust governance, compliance and risk assessment. Exchange of consortia models and partnership frameworks to enhance the programme and individual projects.
- Advisory support to project applicants on an organisational, or sector led basis, to promote the design and development of compliant projects. Nurture of eligible and innovative projects. By early engagement at pre-application level, and by supporting applicants through the process to submission, it is possible to ensure that ineligible and/or unsuitable projects are aware of their ineligibility/unsuitability prior to application. By ensuring that only strong projects go forward. Technical assistance support ensures a strong pipeline of achievable applications that have reached a point where they are ready to discuss detail with the MA and are then subsequently able to support them to develop these plans as required by the MA.
- Supporting the development of a strong pipeline of quality projects, including technical assistance and support at key stages to help generate and design compliant projects, as well as structured support during the application process and signposting of guidance on management, publicity, compliance, procurement and state aid.
- Where appropriate, offer continued advisory support for projects which have passed the outline application stage and are moving to the full application stage of the business process, where it can be clearly demonstrated that the activities to be undertaken would not duplicate the functions of the managing authority, be eligible for funding and add value.
- Special emphasis on engaging the private, civil and public sector in SCR areas not capturing ESIF opportunities, increasing the take up of ESIF through greater collaboration and innovation.
- The project will actively foster the ambitions of the ESIF Programme, but also provide an element of management control in ensuring that they are compliant and provide appropriate, robust and

manageable solutions to achieving the unsecured output and outcomes of the ESIF programme in the SCR.

- Capacity building, working across sectors and geographical areas to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to support local growth opportunities that could be enhanced by engagement with ESIF funding.

5. Project Performance

5.1 Progress in achieving project objectives

The TA activity did not duplicate any other activity in the region, the applicant looked to offer a ‘bigger picture’ approach and a clear commitment to the SCR Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to work collaboratively.

Despite the number of calls being less than anticipated, DC TA has made good progress in trying to achieve the objectives of the programme and has been proactive and flexible; adding significant value to both TA work and access to the ESIF programme. It has also been responsive to the programmes needs and trying to respond to challenges namely by :-

- Providing direct and indirect support to potential project applicants at all times.
- Continuing to provide a service, maintaining awareness and momentum of the programme for potential applicants by holding communication events and delivering 1-2-1 advanced sessions on how to apply and giving direction to key topics concerning compliance such as State Aid, Publicity Requirements and Procurement and E-Claims.
- Despite an uncertain and complex environment due to political changes, Brexit and a global pandemic we have continued to publicise calls and support applicants through the application process.

5.2 Milestones

Project Milestones were achieved and we worked closely with MCHLG to ensure the project plan was timely and relevant.

5.3 Financial

The total SCR ERDF Technical Assistance funding approval for the period October 2018 to December 2020 was £482,133. The following table (Figure 4) sets out how the project actually spent against its forecast:

Figure 4

Overall Totals			
Cost Category	Forecast	Actual	Variance
Salaries	419,051	415,775	3,276
Overheads	62,857	62,366	491
Other Direct Costs	225	0	225
TOTAL	482,133	478,141	3992



Transitional Area Totals			
Cost Category	Forecast	Actual	Variance
Salaries	405,343	401,597	3,746
Overheads	60,801	60,239	562
Other Direct Costs	214	0	214
TOTAL - Transitional Area	466,359	461,836	4,523

More Developed Area Totals			
Cost Category	Forecast	Actual	Variance
Salaries	13,707	14,178	-471
Overheads	2,056	2,126	-70
Other Direct Costs	11	0	11
TOTAL - More Developed Area	15,774	16,305	-531

As indicated by the above table the Project overall was slightly underspent against its profiled forecast. A slight overspend was incurred under the More Developed Salary Cost Category.

A budget of £225 was approved under the ‘Other Direct Costs’ cost category primarily to fund any necessary travel, event room hire and refreshments. This budget was not required as no expenses were incurred under this budget heading.

5.4 Results/Outputs

As can be seen from the table below (Figures 5 and 6) the overall outputs and results achieved came short of the forecast amounts. The very nature of a TA project requires events be held in order to draw attention to the MA’s calls for projects. Due to the onset of the Pandemic in March 2020 and a lack of funding calls from the MA there has been little opportunity to host relevant TA events.

Having said that we have continued to offer TA guidance and support by working with any applicants applying for funding.

Figure 5: ERDF Original Profiled Results and Outputs

RESULTS / OUTPUTS	TOTAL
RESULTS	
ER/T/R/01 Number of TA projects supported applications that are approved	20
ER/T/R/02 Number of evaluations where the results are used to inform future projects	5
ER/T/R/03 Number of attendees who found the training useful	80



ER/T/R/04 Number of attendees who found the dissemination event useful	64
OUTPUTS	
ER/T/O/01 Number of projects supported to submit an application	32
ER/T/O/02 Number of training events held by the managing authority and or partners	8
ER/T/O/03 Number of attendees at training events part funded by Technical Assistance	80
ER/T/O/04 Number of dissemination events held	8
ER/T/O/05 Number of attendees at dissemination events part funded by Technical Assistance	80
ER/T/O/06 Number of evaluations undertaken by applicants	5

Figure 6: ERDF Actual Results and Outputs Achieved

RESULTS / OUTPUTS	TOTAL
RESULTS	
ER/T/R/01 Number of TA projects supported applications that are approved	0
ER/T/R/02 Number of evaluations where the results are used to inform future projects	0
ER/T/R/03 Number of attendees who found the training useful	3
ER/T/R/04 Number of attendees who found the dissemination event useful	16
OUTPUTS	
ER/T/O/01 Number of projects supported to submit an application	16
ER/T/O/02 Number of training events held by the managing authority and or partners	1
ER/T/O/03 Number of attendees at training events part funded by Technical Assistance	4
ER/T/O/04 Number of dissemination events held	1
ER/T/O/05 Number of attendees at dissemination events part funded by Technical Assistance	18
ER/T/O/06 Number of evaluations undertaken by applicants	0

5.5 Claims Process

Due to the extensive knowledge and expertise in delivering ERDF Programme, the Doncaster TA Team have managed the claims process well in conjunction with invaluable help from the Managing Authority. A successful On the Spot Verification Visit was held in November 2020 whereby the verification of claims and expenditure was thoroughly checked and confirmed to be in line with current procedures. The project closed formally on 31st December, 2020. Final claims were submitted promptly in January, 2021.

5.6 Challenges

Delays, external political changes, Brexit and the Pandemic have provided a series of challenges for the project during the past few years. These challenges have tended to create an environment of uncertainty and as such had an impact on the number of open calls released.

In addition, we found potential applicants becoming more cautious about applying for EU Funds which can be attributed to a number of factors including match funding, financial risk and potential clawback.

Match Funding continues to be an issue as the percentage of match funding required is difficult for some smaller providers to achieve.

Project sponsors have frequently raised concerns about the inflexibility of the system, the amount of time it takes for projects to be approved (having the finance to proceed at risk) and the individuals' interpretation of the complex European Union rules.

The level of governance in this programme is off-putting to many applicants. Moving forward, any future shared prosperity funding should arguably be simplified to allow projects to 'get on and deliver' as opposed to spending time resolving complicated process and bureaucracy.

However taking into account all of the above and despite the changing landscape we have continued to signpost, provide expertise and be a bridge between funders and applicants which has been flexible enough to deal with outline influences and changes and the demand of ERDF.

We have also offered advice, guidance and support to Projects to enable them to navigate their way through the TA funding process. The focus has been to ensure that projects which have passed the Outline Business Stage are able to meet current deadlines and complete a robust and complete Full Business Plan before the window of opportunity closes to ensure a funding agreement before 31st December 2020.

While the TA project has been successful in attracting new applicants to the ERDF programme, this comes with difficulties as these applicants have to undertake a steep learning curve in terms of meeting the regulations and conditions of the ERDF Programme. This is very time consuming – but yields results in the number of successful applications.

Covid has brought unprecedented challenges to the delivery of the Technical Assistance project. While there will be greater need in the economy of SCR for the type of projects supported by ERDF, the ability of organisations to work within the Covid pandemic and develop new projects which meet the ERDF criteria significantly reduced and the expected number of applications fell as a result. This is not something we could have anticipated.

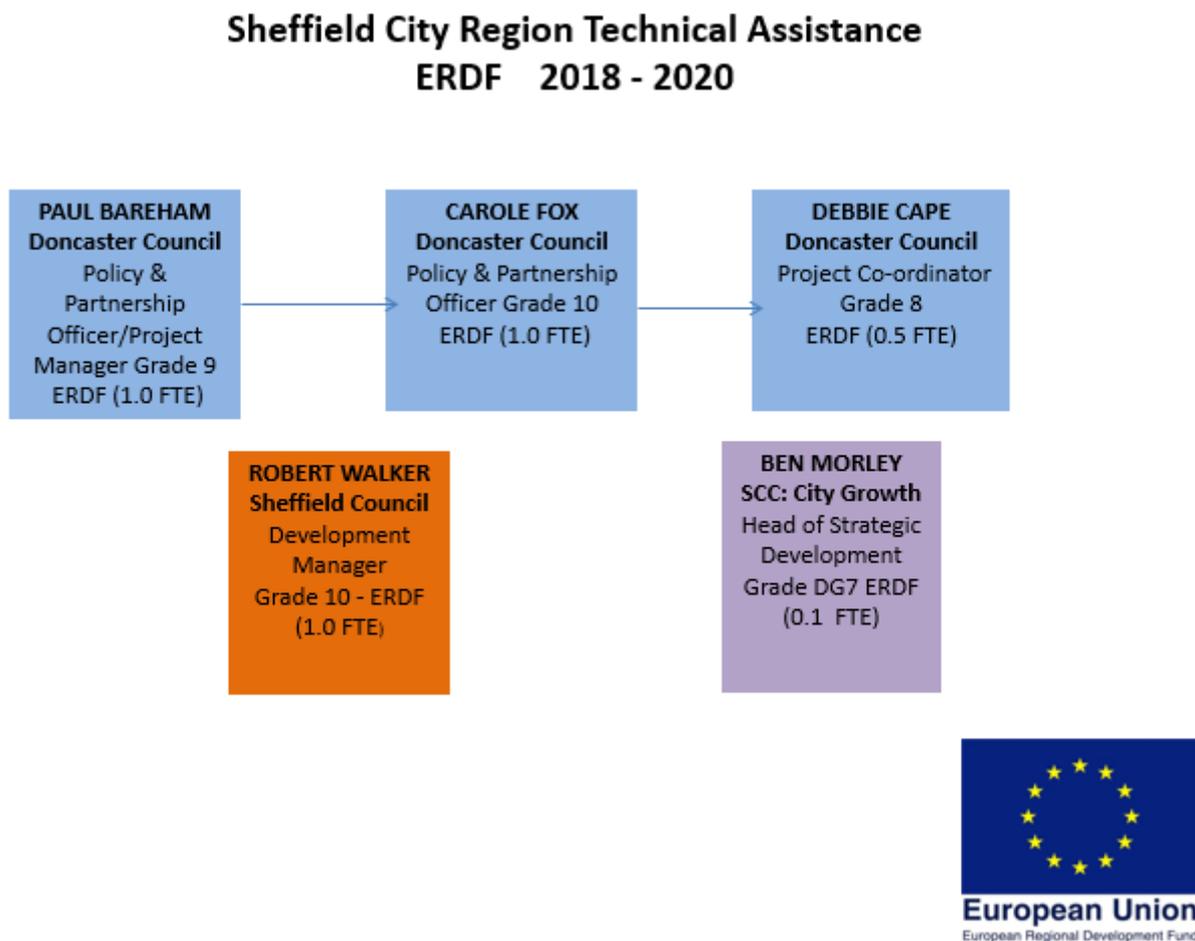
The removal of the expected Reserve Fund put the brakes on many potential applications in 2020. While it is appreciated that this was due to the focus on Covid recovery, it has had a significant impact on the numbers of applications forthcoming since March 2020 and it is unlikely that these projects will now emerge as outline business plans.

6 Project Delivery and Communications

6.1 Project Team

Doncaster Council were the lead partner in two TA projects that ran simultaneously, supporting the ESF and ERDF allocations in the area. The delivery partners for the ERDF project were Sheffield City Council and SCC City Growth Team. Each organisation had a dedicated lead officers for ERDF.

Figure 7: Structure of the ESIF TA projects team (ERDF).



Doncaster TA has developed the project’s partnership role by enabling partners to provide an effective and informative TA service to potential applicants, stakeholders and colleagues. The project continued to signpost, provide expertise and be a bridge between funders and applicants which has been flexible enough to deal with outside influences and changes and the demands of ERDF.

Technical Assistance partners were invited to attend and support at call launch events, and regular meetings between the ESIF Technical Assistance project team were held to discuss the progress of both ESF and ERDF projects. We have also maintained regular and successful contact between the Project Officer and multi-agency partners.

The lead TA partner is a member of the South Yorkshire ESIF Sub Committee as part of the continued reporting role in partnership with the MCHLG Growth Delivery Team. There were 6 ESIF Sub-Committee meetings during the project period 2018-2020 (with numerous written procedures as a result of the Covid pandemic which started in March 2020).

6.2 Communications

Publicity is an integral part of the programming strategy and the Managing Authority highlights this in the ERDF Communications Strategy and in turn, in the TA funding agreement to ensure that the benefits of the funds are communicated to the wider public.

All projects were required to comply with the publicity requirements of the European Union regulations. TA was used to support Programme information and publicity through:

- Supporting partners in raising awareness and communicating programme and project activities through in-person network exchanges, newsletters, case studies other means of communication and across Local Enterprise Partnership area boundaries;
- Promoting cooperation, networking and exchange of best practice which could include sharing of best practice between Local Enterprise Partnership areas as well as other European Union funding programmes and
- Use of promotional events such as seminars, conferences and road shows to publicise bidding rounds, showcase ERDF and ESF achievements and disseminate best practise.

Throughout the delivery of this Project, we have actively communicated the purpose of TA, its relationship with the ESIF programme and the support and guidance service it offers. We have used a variety of communication methods to help the project deliver at a strategic and operational level. These methods have been used to ensure that the communications have focus, that messages remain consistent, and that the widest possible audience is reached – examples of the communication methods are detailed below :-

6.3 Database

Doncaster Council already had an established database to communicate opportunities through Grant Finder (funding search database), this stores information about contacts to make it easy to search and reach out to people with regards to funding calls. TA constantly updated the database, adding and removing customers as and when required in line with the mandatory General Data Protection Regulations.

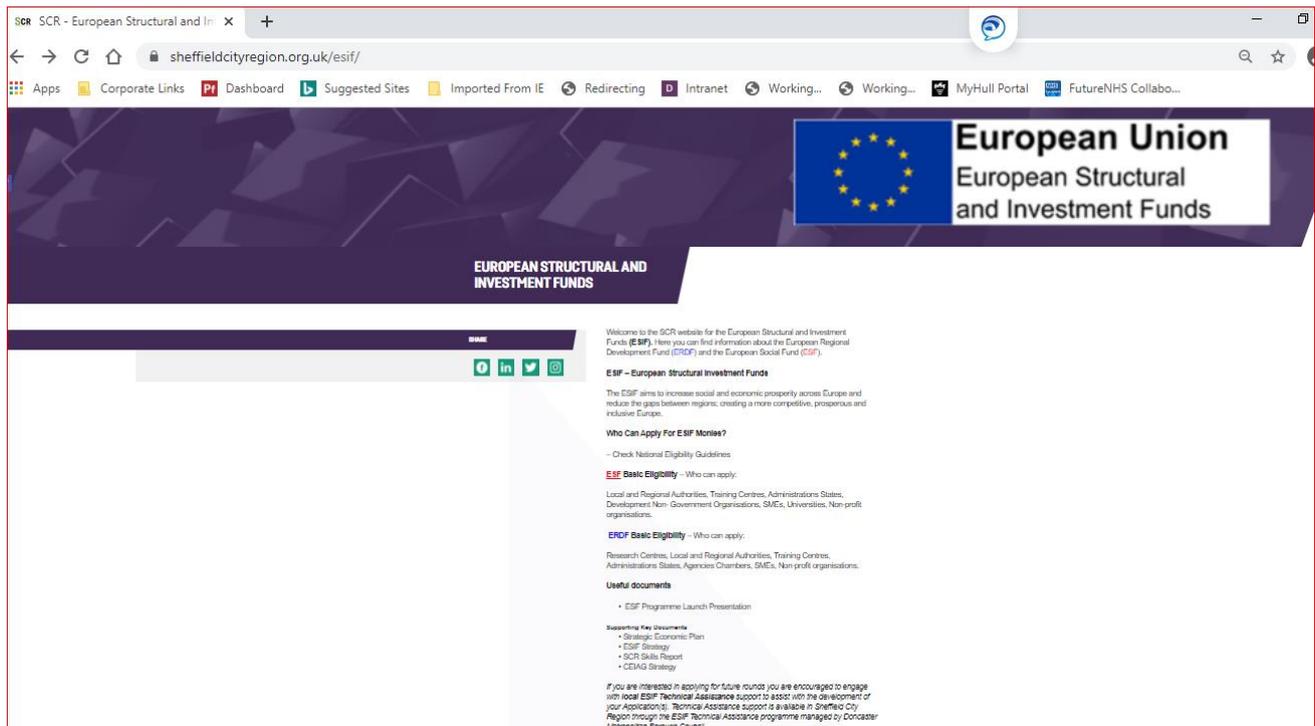
To date there are more than 1000 contacts included on the database. The database has been used to communicate information about TA ERDF events. The ability to search and select contracts meant that targeted mailings could be sent out to specific customers based on their preferences and specialisms. Recipients have been able to receive:-

- Information concerning call launch events including booking hyperlinks.
- Open calls released;
- Information circulated by MCHLG regarding ESIF updates and other relevant information.

6.4 Online Communications: Websites

In order to maximise reach, SCR is used to promote technical assistance. The website-landing page takes customers directly to TA programme managed by Doncaster Council. Contact details for ESIF Officers are listed clearly on the website. Figure 8 shows a snapshot of the page.

Figure 8: Screen shot of SCR webpage



ESIF Page. Available at: <https://sheffieldcityregion.org.uk/esif/>

In addition, MHCLG Webpage has named contact details for Sheffield City Region Technical Assistance:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/european-structural-and-investment-funds-technical-assistance>

6.5 Events

A programme of events/workshops to promote the aims and objectives of the programme were held during the course of the Project but in some instances take up was low. The onset of Covid-19 in March 2020 did not help our cause either as we were unable to host any public events in addition there were very few open calls from the MA.

6.6 Other notable actions:

6.6a Disseminated information on the new State Aid flexibilities (including amended guidance on supporting companies in difficulty).

6.6b New procurement rules were implemented on 1st January 2021 when the UK transition period ended, however ERDF project officers were advised to retain EU procurement rules during the continued delivery of their projects.

6.6c Branding and publicity - latest guidance issued regularly to projects completing applications and those with ERDF contracts.

6.6d Disseminating information and opportunities that arose from the ERDF programme Partnership to partners and stakeholders remained part of the work of the TA team e.g. presenting to the Doncaster Town Board on 31.07.20 about the ESIF programme and opportunities currently available in ERDF.

7. Equalities and Opportunities

The project continuously promoted equality and worked to prevent discrimination in the support given through projects which sought ERDF funding. As the applicant, equality and diversity is already embedded into Doncaster Council's processes and procedures, as well as our professional ethos, with regular checks of performance against equality and diversity impacts through the monitoring and reporting procedures.

The widely promoted marketing and publicity material used media or methods appropriate to varied audiences. Care was taken to ensure that the ERDF programme is advertised using approved promotional materials and in languages other than English (Where Appropriate) and alternative formats will be made available when requested and where practical.

Working with voluntary and community organisations (that reflect Sheffield City Region communities), the project promoted equality and equality through the advice and support that we gave, and was always a factor in our assessment of pipeline projects and eligibility and ambition for ESIF funding.

Doncaster Council is experienced in dealing with equal opportunities, disability, discrimination issues from a policy and procedural perspective. It has a robust Corporate Equality Policy that informs all aspects of delivery of all externally funded projects. The Corporate Equality Policy provides a framework for developing equality within services delivered. The policy seeks to ensure compliance with relevant legislation and operate within the Local Government Equality Standard and Best Value Performance Indicators.

Doncaster Council and its partners ensure that no one receives less favourable treatment for reasons relating to: -

- Race, ethnic origin, colour or national origin
- Gender
- Marital status
- Sexual orientation
- Disability
- Religion or belief
- Age
- Trade union activity or political belief
- Social class
- The rehabilitation of former offenders

The policy applies to all those that come into contact with the council including: -

- Customers accessing services
- Employees
- Potential customers, residents and job applicants
- Contractors and partners and any areas of procurement
- Elected members

In addition, this project supports intervention on equity grounds.

The project will promote equality and equality will inform the advice and support that we give, and will be a factor in our assessment of pipeline projects and eligibility and ambition for ESIF funding. Given the nature of our organisations, equality and diversity is already embedded into our processes and procedures, as well as our professional ethos.

It was extremely notable that the TA team did not come across any cases where equal opportunities were not already embedded into the organisations seeking ERDF. Projects were advised on the capture of benefits in relation to equal opportunities and that they must ensure that projects remain inclusive and responsive to need.

8. Environmental Sustainability

The SCR TA project is fully committed to the principles of environmental sustainability, which underpins its approach to this cross-cutting theme. Applicants are advised to provide practical examples to demonstrate how environmental sustainability measures have been integrated into the delivery of projects, for example:

- How does the project respect the principle of sustainable development?
- How does the project maximise positive environmental impacts or mitigate potential negative impacts?

9. Project Outcomes and Impact

Capture of funding opportunities in deprived areas remained challenging, but many groups did not initially know where to seek the necessary information about how to access support. Many did not have the background, social cohesion and networks to engage, in particular found it difficult to make the transition from interest in finding an innovative solutions to networking and starting the application process for funding to delivery their proposals. A local (Sheffield City Region) single point of contact through the ERDF TA team helped to overcome this barrier.

In terms of the outputs, these did not always reflect the reality of the work done. For example, engagement with potential applicants did not always result in an application and events (dissemination, training, etc.) are very much reliant on changes of policy and processes, new calls, etc. and the lack of these within the programme, and the disruption caused by Covid-19, had a major impact on the facility to hold events and achieve the associated outputs.

10. Project Value

It is to be noted that where we have engaged with applicants, we have tended to provide support for an extended period of time in an expanded way and this kind of activity is not reflected in the outputs.

The project has been well managed by Doncaster Council. We have delivered to a high standard providing an ongoing level of support across a broad range of topics and made excellent progress towards achieving the objectives of the programme and adding significant value to both TA work and access to the ESIF programme. As lead applicant Doncaster Council has the correct structures and governance procedures in place and the project has been managed by a team who are experienced and fully understand the importance of ensuring that the project runs smoothly in a compliant and transparent way. The onset of the Pandemic and Brexit has also seen a detrimental effect on interested parties engaging with the ESIF Programme but we have endeavoured to continue to provide a service, maintain awareness and momentum of the Programme and give advice on ensuring compliance including State Aid, Publicity Requirements, Procurement and E Claims.

Covid-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to the delivery of the Technical Assistance project. While there will be greater need in the economy of SCR for the type of projects supported by ERDF, the ability of organisations to work within the Covid pandemic and develop new projects which meet the ERDF criteria significantly reduced and the expected number of applications fell as a result. This is not something we could have anticipated. Overall we have been responsive, flexible and adaptable and performed well considering the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment we have operated in.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for us all. We found ourselves in an unprecedented situation with very wide-ranging impacts across the wider community and those who were considering the development of an ERDF application.

The start of the Covid-19 Pandemic in March 2020 created uncertainty and significant challenges to everyone involved in the delivery of existing ERDF projects and the development of projects in the pipeline.

Government assessed the impact on ESIF programmes and with the European Commission regarding its proposed response to the situation as set out in the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII) and Temporary Framework for State Aid measures.

Following a review of plans for utilising remaining unallocated ERDF funding in 2020 (including plans for an ERDF Reserve Fund and England-wide calls), MHCLG developed a number of investment options in the following areas:

- Available resource, taking account of new COVID-19 commitments such as the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund, and pipeline attrition (which will release money to a variable timescale);
- Ongoing need to manage foreign exchange fluctuations which can have a significant impact as the programme approaches full commitment;
- Addressing emerging recovery funding requirements, such as additional business support, sectoral or thematic needs;
- Alignment with other government initiatives and local recovery plans to support the economy; and

- Capacity to administer and operate calls for proposals (both within MHCLG and potential applicants), as well as timing of approvals.

These circumstances meant that the focus of ERDF and the mechanisms for getting funding out quickly to places changed significantly. As a result, MHCLG no longer launched an England-wide ERDF Reserve Fund calls for proposals in 2020, but instead used a more targeted and rapid way of funding remaining activities, such as through a national commissioning model.

The strength of the project is in the technical expertise and experience amassed by its staff over many years; the weakness of the project is that demand has been inconsistent, especially as the programme has progressed and been impacted by external factors outside of our control.

We have learned a lot from our long involvement with European Funding, not just about the specifics of ERDF but about wider funding issues such as budgeting, procurement, state aid, equalities, publicity and risk. This has been vital in terms of engaging with applicants and giving them the technical assistance they need to fully engage with the process, but it has also helped us gather the necessary understanding to be successful going forward with regard to new funding regimes due to commence in 2022.

The key lesson both for us and anyone applying to external funding is to understand that securing money is dependent on a mutual exchange, i.e. the funder is not just there to further your aims, but have their own ambitions, requirements and needs, some of which may be at a much higher level or larger scale than you are able to see. In order to maximise the relationship, it is vital that you understand what the funder wants, needs and expects in return for their money as not only will this increase the chance of you securing funds, it will also lead to mutually beneficial outcomes.

11. Conclusion

The Technical Assistance provided, in general has been well received and utilised effectively by applicants to maximise access to ERDF across the SCR. Access to technical assistance has helped to bridge knowledge gaps and offered new ideas to improve business cases for those considering applying for ERDF.

Doncaster TA has a good track record of supporting applicants through the outline and full application stages and has worked with applicants flexibly in response to need.

The general operating environment and volatility of the economy has proved to be challenging however, despite all of this DC has delivered an effective, responsible, adaptive and informative TA service that provided technical help and support to potential applicants, delivery partners and stakeholders.

Several external factors presented serious challenges to the performance of this project and the Sheffield City Region 2014-2020 ERDF programme in general, including:

- The continued economic fallout and aftershocks from the UK recession of 2008-2012 - which continued to be felt by the economy through the 2014 -2020 ESIF programme;
- The prompting a re-focus of funding by MHCLG to aid Covid recovery;
- “Brexit” - which began in June 2016, when the UK Public voted to leave the European Union (EU) – up until December 2020, when the UK transitional period ended.

Many key public sector match funders in the SCR area, such as the Local Authorities (Councils), were being more cautious than usual, due to uncertainty around their own funding ruling out their being able to make new financial commitments elsewhere – such as SCR wide projects.

In terms of the level of governance although necessary in this programme, we have found that the rigid governance (assurance and monitoring) processes tends to deter the most organised and engaged organisations as many do not have the resource to spend on a long speculative application process which does not guarantee a successful outcome.

SCR TA has been particularly successful in securing the participation of organisations in traditional areas. In comparison, organisations in MDR have been under-represented in the project relative to the size of the city region base, for example in Bassetlaw and North East Derbyshire, where engagement has been minimal. This can be difficult to achieve as it is not just about the size of the geographical area but also factors such as match, cash flow and ambition, which can all have an impact on the appetite for accessing support. In this particular case, there was also the political issue of the areas included in the SCR that were outside of South Yorkshire, who were reluctant to engage with any processes they saw as coming from a combined authority they did not feel or wish to be part of.

Ensuring projects are appropriately targeted through the use of eligibility criteria has been a sensible approach. However, there needed to be sufficient flex to ensure the project can respond to trends and drivers. For example, SCR TA was sufficiently flexible to work with a variety of sectors. A more narrowly focused project on the individual sectors alone would have limited the potential of the project in its application.

Analysis of future impact of the project is not possible for technical assistance projects – each project supported will go on to contribute to the impact of the ERDF programme through their own outputs and outcomes.

With very little activity planned for calls under the 2014-2020 ERDF Programme beyond December 2020, it was decided not to request an extension to the TA contract. However, as the ESIF programme draws to a close in 2023, the TA team will maintain a receptive working relationships with organisations delivering ERDF in the SCR - in the event that ad hoc support is required and expertise is not lost.