The G.A.L Project ESF Monitoring and Evaluation Report

Introduction

The G.A.L project was a four-year ESF funded project commencing in April 2011. Unfortunately, it had fallen below projected targets during Years 1 – 3, and a new post holder was recruited in the final quarter of Year 3. Following an ETI inspection carried out by ESF, evaluation of the project showed that redressing the structure and formatting a programme was paramount for achieving the aims and objectives within the final year.

Research into the needs of the target groups showed extreme levels of disengagement from society and from the concept of being economically active. Previous experience of placements and training had created disillusionment amongst the majority of the target groups. Individuals referenced attendance on course after course, with no direction or progression. They were not being supported on a path, as there were rarely future steps or rationale for the courses and placements. Additionally, social isolation was a key factor, based on the stigma and preconceived ideas that remain ingrained within society towards people with a learning disability and those who are long term unemployed.

Objectives and Constraints for 2014-15

Objective 1: To meet and fulfill current ESF funding guidelines under Priority 1 objective by 2015.

Objective 2: 31 unemployed people will be supported to enter self-employment by establishing micro enterprises by 2015.

Objective 3: 16 participants will be economically inactive individuals with a learning disability in order to assist fuller lives and increase social inclusion and well-being; and

Objective 4: 75% of participants will gain and develop basic employability skills as a result of the project.

Summary

The G.A.L project aims and objectives were to promote employment opportunities for both target groups and create choice for people with a learning disability in community service provision. GAL also aimed to support individuals to identify gifts and skills to set up local micro-enterprises. Given the aforementioned disengagement and disillusionment, it was vital in restructuring the project to create a format based on the research and address the significant lack of aspiration and motivation within the target groups. Dialogue with enterprise agencies established the necessity of the project to meet a gap in the mainstream training, and take the learning to introductory level. Future planning was a key concept integrated in the reformatting in order to support individuals on the possibility of establishing their own enterprise or to have clearer ideas on jobs to apply for and seek employment.

" It was a huge step for me starting this course and I was so nervous but the project worker was so friendly and lovely, and put us all right at ease. It was a great way for me to start thinking about getting back into employment and working through a lot of my barriers. I especially liked the idea of "Think Blue" we talked about, and the group support for me starting my own baking business " – Female, Participant who is long term unemployed

Through the restructure, clearly defined learning outcomes to be met were: LO1 Aspiration and motivation; LO2 Self confidence; LO3 Learning; LO4 Making a difference and contributing to the community. Research had shown it was vital to adapt the markers for success to support each participant's individual progress.

Soft skill learning for employment was integral to the G.A.L project. By setting the session time at 4 hours each, participants increased their time of focus and recognized their own capability to remain on task for the equivalent of a half days work, thereby promoting concrete capacity for employment. Structured breaks combined with different activities and learning methods were vital for supporting focus and completion of tasks. Employability skills were built into the activities increasing individuals' ability to listen, focus, standard for conduct as well as teamwork. A key aspect was addressing a "can't do" attitude that unfortunately appeared ingrained in the majority of participants from both target groups. Exploring barriers to employment, training, education and society enabled each participant to recognize what affects them personally and also works to remove social isolation by recognizing similar experiences in others.

" At first I wasn't that keen but if I didn't try I wouldn't know what it was going to be like. I'm glad I tried it, I liked looking at what I've done in life and that I could get a job out of things I like " – Male, Participant with learning disability

High recruitment levels in the final year resulted in the final recruitment number of 46 participants, of which 28 were individuals with a learning disability and 18 were individuals who were long term unemployed. The excellent recruitment rate resulted in reducing the previous deficit of 19 by 16 surplus participants. The project meets a niche gap in current training delivery for people who are furthest from the labour market. The introductory level to enterprise creates an access step for the target groups. Participants were provided with the opportunity to explore their own strengths and barriers to employment, and look to the future based on their own interests and experience. The project served to initiate bridging the gap between the excellent work in public and private sector for addressing unemployment and economic activity, and voluntary orgs work supporting people with learning disability and those who are long term unemployed.

" The participants that I work with really enjoyed the course and they looked forward to it every week. They became more confident, could see their own potential and began to realize they were so much more than mummy or partner. I have seen a huge improvement in their social skills, and engagement with looking for employment opportunities. This was a really successful course and I hope it can run again. " – Mentor for people who are unemployed

The reality of mainstream enterprise training requirements and what was needed to introduce the concept of self employment and enterprise in a tangible format to the target groups meant it was necessary to have exploration of self as the initial sessions before commencing enterprise training. Breaking down who they are and what they are interested in was difficult for the target groups. The pre progress monitoring forms did note higher base levels of confidence and aspiration for those who had previous training/education, reiterating the importance of positive training sessions. The above tables show that post project monitoring levels increased, in particular peoples confidence and skill set for interacting with a group of people and working on a task. The evaluation framework produced high rates for the knowledge, structure, project officer and resources with 17/19 participants requesting further enterprise training.

" A big part of the proof that this course is relevant, interesting and engaging is that the group all kept attending. It is really common for people to drop away but the numbers have stayed and they've taken part in all the activities, chatted about it during the days between sessions and looked forward to the next bit of learning " – Support Worker for people with learning disabilities

Evaluation process also identified areas for enhancing the learning and impact of the project for participants. Easy read formatting and group discussions were regarded well and request for increasing the range of mediums and resources for example utilizing video and more practical exercises. Dialogue with participants, support staff and enterprise agencies has shown that the mainstream enterprise and self employment courses remain too many steps ahead and it is imperative to build further access steps for the incremental learning of participants, who sought a secondary stage to the programme. As such, it was agreed that the programme required a stage 2 whereby participants would put their learning into an Enterprise Challenge. Continuing to build upon the soft and employability skills, participants will work as a team to create an enterprise based on an agreed area of interest.

Accreditation was vocalized as important given participants wished to enhance their curriculum vitae with completion of an accredited course. It will be necessary to ensure alternative methods for gathering the knowledge and data of participants are utilized to support diverse communication needs. It was difficult to arrange evaluation meetings and participants stated a need for more individual planning sessions, including a more stringent completion process and pathways post project with set dates and targets. Key learning from the project is the vital role of support staff and volunteers, as well as the wider public agencies such as community enterprise hubs, to ensure wraparound support for each participant. It is imperative that those in a supporting role recognize the primary function of that role is to support the individual to make choices for their future, including options for employment.

A crucial aspect of the programme is that it remains not just another course, that clear post project progression is planned. Creating a pathway plan based on each individual's own knowledge and experience reinforces empowerment and ownership. This serves for each person to build self esteem and capacity for meeting the barriers they face in regards to economic activity and social inclusion. In order to address the "can't do" attitude and

seemingly learned behavior of Serviceland and benefit culture, it is necessary to examine the transition process and educational support structures that are currently in place for these target group participants who are most at risk of not engaging with employment opportunities or society. Forward planning and "can do" attitudes needs to be an integral part of the system that each individual experiences from starting school to completion and moving into adulthood.