

Enterprise and Learning Committee

EL(3) 03-11 (p2) : 10 February 2011

Follow up of Inquiry into Structural Funds: Implementation of the 2007 – 2013 Programme.

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

Building the Future Together 80203

1. Purpose

1.1 This report is provided in response to a direct request from the Enterprise and Learning Committee, to update the Committee on the progress of the Building the Future Together (BTFT) project in Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT), since the last evidence session in March 2010.

2. Background

2.1 The Building the Future Together (BTFT) project provides a comprehensive suite of opportunities and interventions for young people aged 11 – 19 in RCT that are at risk of underachieving. The total project value is £13,971,773 of which £6,361,745 is match funding and £7,609,208 is grant money. The intervention rate is 45.54%. The project received approval in July 2009 and has permission to run until September 2012. We aim to engage 8,769 targeted participants during the life of the project.

2.2 The project provides a participant centred approach to raising aspirations, basic skills, social skills, self esteem, confidence and motivation, to stimulate more positive attitudes to education, further learning and employment. Its primary ambition is to improve the educational achievement and employability of young people in RCT, specifically those that are most at risk of disengagement or Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

3. Update on progress to date

3.1 The eighteen months since project approval in July 2009 has been both an exciting and very challenging time for the BTFT project team. The implementation and management of an innovative project of this scale has required tenacity, commitment, flexibility, multi agency planning and collaboration, executive leadership and regular, unrelenting access to support from our Project Development Officer (PDO) at WEFO.

3.2 We feel that it is important to raise the scale of the task facing a Project Manager, post project approval, to put in place the necessary infrastructure, e.g. Internal controls, management information systems, recruitment, staffing, CRB checks, procurement processes, budgetary systems, participant paperwork, risk assessments etc. to make a new, untested project approach 'happen' in practice. This should undoubtedly be taken into account in agreeing the project delivery timeline and, in hindsight, we would have negotiated a less ambitious early delivery profile if the challenges ahead had been more thoroughly considered, both by us and WEFO colleagues at the outset. In our view, we would have benefited from more scrutiny from WEFO pre approval about the intended implementation plan, key project milestones and output targets.

3.3 In consideration of these challenges, we successfully agreed a reprofile of the BTFT project with WEFO in September 2010, which has enabled us to reschedule the spending profile and targeted participant profile, providing a revised project end date of September 2012.

3.4 As at December 2010, BTFT is now well established and on target. We have spent £4.2 million and engaged almost 3,000 targeted young people, within a range of universal and targeted services.

We have almost completed a project led student review, comprising a range of tests, which has enabled us to identify many more young people within our Secondary Schools that have basic skills difficulties and a range of emotional / attitudinal problems that are acting as barriers to learning. We are also forming relationships with Special Schools, Pupil Referral Units and Community groups to ensure a fully inclusive approach.

We are offering a broad range of opportunities and interventions to support targeted young people, including:

A Key worker team, deployed to identify young people that are struggling at school and to work with them to design individual development plans to improve their learning, educational achievement and life skills.

A Youth coach team, deployed to provide one to one and group support to young people, to enable better access learning, to maintain their involvement and to achieve progression through the education system and into work.

A Detached youth work team deployed on the streets of RCT to identify and engage some of our most vulnerable young people and to signpost and support them to access BTFT project activity and other mainstream services.

Non stigmatising out of school hours learning – E3+ programme.

Alternative curriculum.

Environmental and Cultural projects.

Activities for young people in care or at risk of becoming looked after and work placements for care leavers.

Educational support for teenage mothers.

Basic skills and employability skills programmes, with the support of our joint sponsor, Coleg Morgannwg.

Work placements, with a view to achieving much more in the months ahead to improve relationships with the Business Community locally and nationally via the project.

3.5 Now that the project is gaining momentum and we are routinely receiving feedback from our fieldwork staff, young people and the student review, we are striving to continuously shape the project to respond to emerging need. The young people we are working with include many of the most disengaged and disadvantaged in the borough and inciting these young people to participate in a project and to work towards accredited outcomes, qualifications and potential employment, takes patience and time. It is also important to highlight the fact that a large proportion of our participants are aged 11 – 13 years and our key focus for this group has to be raising aspirations and building basic skills and emotional intelligence, in readiness for the challenges of Key Stages 3 and 4, post 16 education and learning and the world of work.

Meeting WEFO's expectations for 'hard' project outputs in the early stages of our project has therefore been difficult as most achievements at this stage are in the development of 'soft skills' as critical foundations for learning and future employment.

We continue to value the support of our PDO to ensure that we capture adequate evidence in this respect to satisfy the Commission and to demonstrate the far reaching added value of the BTFT project.

3.6 It is our view that ESF projects of this nature require time to 'bed in', to enable relationships to be formed with project participants, existing service providers and other stakeholders before such projects can be expected to generate typical ESF quantitative project outputs.

4. Sustainability

4.1 We believe that BTFT could make a significant long term impact on young people's life chances and influence learning approaches both in schools, the FE sector and wider community if the project were able to run for at least another academic year, on a gradually reducing basis – giving a total project life span of 4 years. We would hesitate in suggesting a 6 year life span as this could create project dependency as opposed to skills transfer, cultural change and positive service transformation. We firmly believe that the BTFT project has a clear role to play in gradually changing the way we offer services to disengaged and disadvantaged young people and we proactively involve Secondary Schools, Careers Wales, 14 – 19 Pathways colleagues, Statutory Youth Services, the Voluntary Sector and a range of other professionals in designing and evaluating project activity for this very reason.

We aim to achieve a project legacy of respect and positive achievement for the young people we have encountered and a longer term refreshed, energised, collaborative approach to engaging future generations of young people in RCT.

4.2 We are concerned about the potential impact of public sector cuts as our match funding is primarily sourced from discretionary services within the Council, including specific grants. However, as 'Educating young people out of poverty' is a key priority of the RCT Local Service Board, to which BTFT makes a substantial contribution, at present the project continues to receive full support. We have discussed this situation with WEFO and we will manage this risk together. We have not benefited from any uplift in our intervention rate to date as BTFT was one of the first projects approved. However, this may need to become an option should we lose any match funding contributions.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

5.1 Achieving a common understanding of the definition of project participants, project outputs and positive outcomes has been challenging and has required much dialogue with WEFO, to ensure that we are capturing the right data about the right young people.

More prescriptive, easily understandable, written guidance for project sponsors to help interpret Commission expectations in relation to eligible participants, outputs and outcomes would be beneficial.

5.2 We have also encountered anxiety and some hostility locally amidst other ESF project sponsors about the risk of 'double counting' participants and outcomes. There still appears to be an opportunity to improve the strategic co-ordination of ESF projects in Wales, to improve communication between projects and to create pathways to enable participants to access all appropriate projects.

5.3 A universal data collection system, prescribed by WEFO, which could have been used locally to manage participant level data, would have been an asset to our project and would have eliminated some of our early project delays. We sourced our own management information system and we transfer summarised data and participant lists to WEFO on a quarterly basis. It is likely that cross project reconciliation of priority one projects will prove difficult as young people aged 11 – 16 do not have National Insurance numbers to serve as unique identifiers.

5.4 We intend to procure an independent, project evaluation in September 2011 to consolidate our experiences to date and to properly inform any case for a further extension of the project timeline. We agree that project evaluation needs to be regular and endemic throughout the project term.

6. Procurement

6.1 RCT reached an agreement with WEFO in 2008 that we would be able to use our own Contract Procedure Rules for procurement processes rather than the general WEFO guidance which stipulates different levels. This was on the basis that we are a public sector organisation which operates different thresholds under a Welsh Assembly Government approved financial memoranda. This agreement has worked well for over two years and has avoided a lot of confusion and additional work. The key principles established by RCT have been adopted by several other Councils in Wales.

BTFT has procured services from both the voluntary and private sectors to support the delivery of project objectives.

7. Support from WEFO

7.1 We continue to have regular and positive contact with our PDO and the local WEFO team. This has become more intense since the summer of 2010 whilst we have sought support and guidance to reprofile the project and to respond to emerging needs. Our reliance upon the WEFO team to help interpret Commission rules, regulations and expectations cannot be understated and we would like to stress our appreciation of their ongoing endurance and understanding.

WEFO support during the implementation phase is as critical as support received pre business case approval.

8. Summary & Recommendations

8.1 The implementation of the BTFT project in RCT to date has been a challenging but wholly worthwhile and rewarding experience, which is now delivering a host of positive outcomes for young people across the borough. A strategic approach to managing and commissioning services via a central project team has undoubtedly added value and continues to drive collaboration between a ranges of service providers to achieve common goals.

8.2 To improve the delivery of ESF programmes, we would recommend that:

WEFO should ensure that project delivery profiles take due account of the early project implementation phase, to ensure that agreed targets are realistic and achievable.

Projects should be supported to capture and report upon 'soft skills' and that demands for quantitative outputs should take due account of the necessary lead time required to engage vulnerable and disadvantaged young people.

Project life spans should include at least a year at the end of full scale delivery to downsize project activity, to transfer skills and experience and to influence longer term change in mainstream services.

The impact of public sector funding cuts on the availability of match funding should continue to be monitored.

More precise guidance should be provided to project sponsors to clearly define an eligible project participant, project outputs and positive outcomes and the evidence required to substantiate claims made, early in project development.

Opportunities should be sought to ensure greater strategic co-ordination of ESF projects in Wales, particularly where these are operating in the same geographic locations but being hosted by differing project sponsors.

Better communication channels between individual projects should be established to enable sharing of knowledge, expertise and best practice.

Consideration should be given to prescribing an appropriate, universal participant information system for all projects to use locally.

Suzanne Scarlett
February 2011