

Embracing Diversity

Equal is a European Social Fund transnational initiative that funds developmental projects working around the area of disadvantage and equality. Key points to note are:

- It is a transnational initiative and will require a high level of cooperation between projects in at least 3 member states.
- Funding is available at up to 50% of total project costs.
- There is an emphasis on monitoring and evaluation of projects.
- Projects have 3 stages (known as Actions). Each Action is funded separately and must be applied for, and approved, before it can begin.
- Action 1 is the formation of a Developmental Partnership (DP) to firm up project plans and budgets in readiness for Action 2. It is a partnership-building phase running from 15 November 2001 to 15 May 2002. Projects must be clear how they are to involve all the key agencies, disadvantaged people etc in the planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of Action 2.
- Action 2 contains the actual project delivery. Measures can be funded from 15 May 2002 until 15 May 2005.
- Action 3 will fund dissemination activity and this can begin from 15 May 2002.

Our application for funding under Action A was submitted at the end of July 2001. We were notified on 15 October that it has been approved.

Objectives:

Our aim is to learn and share strategic lessons leading to a more integrated, robust and cohesive supported employment sector.

The Partnership will serve all areas of disadvantaged people: disabled, ethnic minorities, lone parents, care leavers, ex-offenders, and drug misusers. We will pilot new ways of working to facilitate recruitment, job retention and reintegration, working with national employers such as Whitbread, B&Q, IKEA and House of Fraser, but also linking into SME networks.

During Action 2 we will test a new supported employment model together and develop a 'model district service' for supported employment. We want to prove the benefit of the place/train model over the train/place model, developing supported employment through a more refined human resource management approach rather than a job coaching approach. The Development Partnership will write an agreed template or 'model district service' for welfare to work and test our new model of supported employment.



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A specific number and range of companies will sign up to new ways of working with specific people from target groups previously seen as excluded from work. Working with employees and employers, we will address recruitment and selection, job design, job retention and re-integration in the workplace of excluded groups and communities.

Context:

Supported Employment remains a minority option as mainstreaming of the model is virtually non-existent. Many employers remain passive spectators and or recipients of support rather than drivers or equal players in this field. Mainstream Government funding remains targeted primarily at work preparation and pre-vocational activity. The established model has consistently failed many people who are excluded because they are not "job ready". In England there is no district or regional template that shows how to utilise supported employment effectively. Our local partnership will address this and will impact on national policy makers.

We will work with local, regional and national employers and their organisations to mainstream new ways of recruitment, diversity management, human resource management and job retention within commerce, tackling the barriers faced by the hardest to reach target groups in relation to employability. By working with employers, we aim to increase their capacity as lead change agents and challenge long-standing assumptions about assessment methods and employability.

We have carried out extensive research with disabled people including those with physical, sensory and learning disabilities, mental illness and also drug and substance misusers. This has identified very similar barriers to those experienced by lone parents, ethnic groups and homeless people: child care needs, inflexible working hours, low attainment levels, low literacy and education levels are all real barriers in them accessing employment opportunities. These groups will be part of the Partnership and we will address all barriers of social exclusion. This project will also address the need for more research in these areas.

Monitoring & Evaluation:

We will develop networks that will enable agencies and professionals to learn about diversity management together. We will test innovation with a wide variety of district agencies. We will share experience through Action-Learning and use the networks to measure progress, identify good practice and capture new methods of working.

Dissemination:

Our links to the Association for Supported Employment will enable mainstreaming to all supported employment agencies as we test a way of enhancing the existing supported employment model beyond the job coaching stage, into a more refined HRM support model that can be owned and used not just by specialist agencies but by employers themselves.



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The project will develop a model that is transferable to other districts and target groups not normally associated with supported employment techniques. We will test a model that will challenge the assumptions of current mainstream providers of vocational assessment and training have about vocational preparation and assessment.

The project will impact on disadvantaged people and communities who will be able to influence local, regional and national policy decision makers, such as Dept for Work & Pensions, through the Thematic Network Groups (TNGs). These TNGs will consist of policy makers from the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Action 1:

The core Development Partnership is Stockport MBC and Bury MBC. Together they will build on innovative work with employers begun under the previous Horizon project funding.

We will consolidate the Development Partnership by making alliances with a wide range of multi-disciplinary agencies, employers and beneficiaries who want to work together on creating a more cohesive and diverse workforce. As part of the DP Agreement, recruited employers will be required to pledge to develop and implement plans to improve recruitment selection and job retention procedures that currently discourage disadvantaged people from accessing employment. In joining the project, partners will agree to the ethos of the project; in particular to participate in the action-learning and networking elements. By learning together these agencies and professionals will create a high quality Action-Learning Partnership that will focus on embracing diversity.

We will hold seminars to target suitable local partners such as disability organisations, agencies, employers, networking groups, and partnership boards who support the long-term goal of creating a more diverse employment structure. We will visit individual companies, agencies and organisations locally, regionally and in some cases nationally to establish working sub-groups and working networks which will contain different expertise in different and challenging areas around diversity. This structure will enable smaller organisations to have influence over project development. Once these groups are formed we will work with them to establish working protocols and an action-learning plan. We will work with these groups to identify and agree the major challenges, and the impact that the project could have on disadvantage.

We have extensive experience of working transnationally and will want to be assured that any partnership is effective and focussed. The Transnational Co-operation Agreement will ensure added value to domestic objectives and will be closely monitored.

Action 2:

In Action 2, the Partnership will work towards testing innovative support programmes as a means of combating the barriers identified in Action 1. This work will be informed by the experience of stakeholders and beneficiaries. Through our development work with service user groups we will empower people and communities that are the most at risk.



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Action 2 will focus on labour market inclusion and equality in the workplace. We will work with a specific number of key employers to test a HRM driven model of support to a range of disadvantaged groups. We will test a new employment officer role where officers work exclusively with companies on supporting them to adopt a supported employment approach throughout their company. This will mean testing new vocational assessment tools and methods and support requirements. The companies will recruit a range of disadvantaged people and learn together from the experience how to integrate disadvantaged people effectively.

In addition we will test the best ways to influence company cultures and procedures so that they can learn how to invest in diversity and play a leading role in managing diversity effectively. Over time we aim to build the capacity of employers to incorporate supported employment as good HRM practise. We want to explore the role of supported employment in changing company cultures and policies. We feel this will lead employers to be more able and willing to drive supported employment locally, regionally and nationally.

Alongside these specific actions we will use an action-learning approach with networks of key stakeholders including the key employers who will meet together to share the learning from the companies and actions. These groups will feed into project development so that the project has continuous reference to the day to day barriers and experiences of disadvantaged people and the range of agents who are meant to help them. Stockport M.B.C. will concentrate on recruitment and selection actions and Bury M.B.C. will concentrate on retention and ethnicity actions. The experiences will be brought together through the action-learning networks and will form the basis for developing a model district service for supported employment and welfare to work.

The Development Partnership:

The Development Partnership contains Bury MBC and Stockport MBC, who will act as the main sponsor of the project and take overall management responsibility for the success of the project. This has become possible following collaboration by our two second round HORIZON projects where the partners linked up successfully during the dissemination phase. Both partners has proven capacity to successfully place people, who have been written off by other agencies, into open employment. Both partners have a great deal of experience of project management, including the running of WORKSTEP schemes. Stockport works through SRB funded programmes.

The partners have ample experience of joint working; for instance they have co-organised two major regional conferences and a European Laboratory in Milan, taking participating employers. Both partners will share the evaluation and report writing elements of the project and have established experience of doing this. Both will be responsible for establishing action learning networks to monitor progress in their respective areas. We will bring together representatives from these networks in order to develop a framework for a model district service.

Stockport MBC will take the lead administration role as they did in the previous partners project and the two partners have well established protocols for documenting and sharing essential information.



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Both Bury and Stockport's service managers have the lead role for the welfare to work Joint Investment Plans for their respective Local Authorities. Both managers work on strategic groups crossing council responsibilities such as health improvement, Connexions, and social inclusion strategy groups.

Our services are linked into established networks and have stimulated the development of wider networks and contacts, both regionally and nationally. Both partners were responsible for developing and maintaining the North West Supported Employment Initiative group. Both were key players in establishing and maintaining the North West HORIZON group and are key members of the National Executive of the Association for Supported Employment (AfSE). Both services have developed contacts with DWP and DoH at a senior national level.

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