



Eich cyf/Your ref P-04-577  
Ein cyf/Our ref JH/00416/15

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### **Petition P- 04- 577: Reinstate Funding to the Real Opportunities Project**

Thank you for your letter of 5 August 2015 regarding the petition and further correspondence the Committee has received from Mr Aled Davies about future funding for the Real Opportunities project.

As highlighted by the Minister for Finance and Government Business in previous correspondence on the issue, the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) is the designated 'Managing Authority' for the development and delivery of EU Structural Funds programmes in Wales. WEFO is responsible for the implementation of programmes agreed with the European Commission and is operationally independent of Ministers in terms of the funding decisions it makes. These decisions are made on the basis of selection criteria agreed by the Wales Programme Monitoring Committee and in accordance with EU legislation.

EU Structural Fund programmes in Wales place a strong emphasis on increasing the employability and employment of young people. This includes reducing the number of young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) or who are at risk of becoming NEET. Amongst these young people are those with a range of learning disabilities and difficulties.

As part of a portfolio of projects aimed at supporting young people under the 2007–2013 programmes, WEFO awarded EU funds for the Real Opportunities project. This project helped

young people aged 11–19 with learning disabilities, including those with an Autism Spectrum disorder, to make the transition from school into further learning or training. The £9m EU



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funded project delivered across 9 local authority areas in south Wales from October 2010 to September 2014, providing work experience placements, vocational training, mentoring and advice and support for families. The project helped support over 1700 young people, with 1000 of these training as peer mentors and 246 gaining a recognised qualification. The primary purpose of the project was to support transitions between school and learning, rather than to deliver employment outcomes, although a small number of young people were transitioned into employment with the project's support. Otherwise most of the outcomes achieved were defined as 'soft outcomes' (confidence building etc).

With the 2014-2020 EU funding Programmes now underway, there is a stronger emphasis on delivering qualification and job outcomes for young people who are NEET or at greatest risk of becoming NEET. This is very much in line with the expectations of the European Commission that we should maximize impacts from our Structural Funds investments. WEFO will therefore be focusing and integrating resources to support those at greatest risk, including young people with learning difficulties and others with multiple barriers to engagement and participation. We also want to ensure that this support is available in all parts of Wales. The Welsh Government, through its Youth Engagement and Progression Framework, has set core standards for the early identification of those most at risk of becoming NEET and in the delivery of services to those who are NEET. The 2014-2020 programmes reflect these standards and are very much in line with Welsh Government policies for tackling poverty, placing employment, employability and skills at the center of our strategy for implementation.

EU funds are not intended as a permanent source of funding for individual projects. We expect all projects to have sustainability or exit proposals in place when the period of funding comes to an end. These in turn can help to inform and influence future mainstream provision or projects under subsequent EU Programmes. For example, the Real Opportunities project itself evolved out of the earlier Trinity School ESF project funded under the 2000-2006 Objective 1 Programme, which provided support across the Caerphilly local authority area.

WEFO has been working for a number of months with interested stakeholder organisations, including those who participated in the Real Opportunities project, to encourage the development of collaborative proposals which integrate the type of activity delivered through Real Opportunities with other interventions as part of a broader package of support. The aim is to better respond to the often complex and multiple barriers facing some young people and to reduce their risk of becoming NEET. I am pleased that Caerphilly County Borough Council is working with other regional partnerships in Wales to develop proposals which build on the lessons learned in Real Opportunities and which have a stronger focus on qualifications and job outcomes. The aim is to also extend the breadth of provision available throughout Wales for those at greatest risk of becoming NEET, including those with learning disabilities/difficulties. This provision will be geared to the needs of young people and will include life skills as appropriate. It is my expectation that these regional proposals will come forward for funding decisions in September or October of this year.

I can assure you that the Welsh Government is committed to meeting the educational needs of all children and young people in Wales in order that they reach their full potential. As part of this commitment it is currently undertaking a review which identifies arrangements for transition from school to further and higher education and training for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD). This review is intended to provide information on current arrangements across Wales for transition from school to FE, HE and work-based learning (WBL), in order to identify what works and where improvements can be made. The

findings, case studies and recommendations should provide local authorities and post-16 providers with a benchmark for their own transition arrangements and inform discussions with the Welsh Government.

In addition, you may be interested to know that the Welsh Government is seeking to introduce new legislation on Additional Learning Needs (ALN) that will replace the current legislative framework for special educational needs and post-16 learners with learning difficulties/disabilities. A draft Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill has been published for consultation and an early draft of a new ALN Code and outline of our plans for implementation will also be published in the autumn term. Consultation on the draft Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill was launched on 6 July and can be accessed at the following link.

<http://gov.wales/consultations/education/draft-aln-and-education-tribunal-wales-bill/?lang=en>

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D O'Brien', is written over a light grey rectangular background.

**Damien O'Brien**  
Chief Executive  
Welsh European Funding Office