



End of Project Report
2021 - 2023



European Union
European
Social Fund

Springboard was led by Torus Foundation and was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF),
with match-funding from delivery partners and strategic partners



Torus Foundation's Springboard Cheshire was launched in October 2021 to support individuals affected by COVID-19 pandemic-induced unemployment. Despite lower-than-anticipated unemployment rates, the project successfully identified and engaged eligible individuals, exceeding contractual targets.

Springboard successfully navigated challenges relating to participant recruitment, budgeting and gathering evidence of expenditure. This report highlights how Springboard addressed these hurdles, offering valuable insights for enhancing the design and delivery of future employability services.



Introduction

Torus Foundation developed Springboard Cheshire in response to the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership's call for bids in December 2020, aligning with the economic challenges posed by COVID-19. Anticipating a surge in unemployment post-2021 due to the phasing out of the government's Job Retention Scheme and the economic impacts of the pandemic, the project had a fixed timeline until summer 2023.

Torus Foundation lead a partnership which was awarded funding in May 2021 with a start date of October 2021, with ambitious targets to support 2,958 individuals divided equally into under and over 25-year-olds. The project was awarded £1.1m funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) and needed to match fifty percent, giving a total budget of just over £2.2m.

Comprising seven delivery organisations (Torus Foundation, Warrington Disability Partnership, Career Connect, Weaver Vale Housing Trust, Primary Care Cheshire, Making Space, and Blue Orchid) the Springboard partnership aimed to provide comprehensive employment and skills advice across Cheshire. The required fifty percent match funding, which was gained from the delivery organisations and three strategic partners: Guinness Partnership, Plus Dane Housing, and Your Housing Group.

The project offered fast-paced services to job-ready individuals requiring assistance to gain employment. Each participant, guided by an Employment and Skills Advisor from one of the five delivery partners, navigated through core service areas such as Strength Based Assessment, CV development, careers guidance, and application and interview support. Additional support, including subsidised jobs, participant budget, IT skills, money advice, and training was available if required.



Springboard Cheshire

When designing the Springboard project, Torus Foundation drew on its experience from leading the New Leaf (Building Better Opportunities 2016 - 2023) Programme. In contrast to New Leaf's focus on long-term skill development delivered by a partnership of specialist agencies, Springboard prioritised swift job placement and a much smaller number of agencies having an input to each individual.

The project streamlined support options into 'core' and 'flexible' categories. Core support, offered to each participant, included benefits optimisation, mental wellbeing support, career exploration, CV / application aid, job matching, and in-work support. Flexible support, which was tailored to specific needs, encompassed skills bootcamps, participant budgets, enterprise advice, training, digital inclusion initiatives, paid work placements, and referrals to more intensive programmes.

The Springboard project team designed processes to gather and retain the evidence required by funders in a quick and efficient manner, so that unavailability of data did not constitute a barrier to service delivery. Monthly financial submissions from delivery partners were checked line-by-line by the project team, which gave strong assurance in advance of quarterly reporting to the Department of Work and Pensions.



Successful Audits

Delivery partners uploaded all financial evidence, including evidence of spend and defrayment, to shared folders on a monthly basis when reclaiming costs through the project. The Springboard project team checked 100% of evidence before preparing a consolidated claim to Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).

Based on experience from previous ESF-funded projects, Torus Foundation was keen to avoid participants experiencing delays in receiving support caused by requirements to prove their eligibility for the project, specifically their right-to-work in the UK and their unemployment or economic inactivity status. In cases where third-party evidence was unavailable, participant or project worker self-declarations were accepted. This was crucial as third-party documentation was often unobtainable, particularly for proving economic inactivity. Consequently, Springboard's entry forms were structured to facilitate the self-declaration process, ensuring participants were able to start on the project without delay.

Springboard successfully passed all audits, including six end-of-quarter desk-based evidence checks and one Article 125, with no irregularities, ensuring confidence in their high-quality information for future audits.

Feedback from the auditors' appreciation of the processes that the Springboard team were using to prepare for the visit: *“[Torus Foundation] were very co-operative and provided a comprehensive response with all required evidence to agreed timescales for this A125 OTSV. There is a comprehensive and robust audit trail to support the sampled costs claimed and [Torus Foundation] has procedures in place for documentation to be retained for any future commission audit activity.”*



Project Targets

The project was targeted with working with 1179 people aged over 25 and 1179 people aged under 25. Of the 1179 people aged over 25, the target was for 174 people to be unemployed when joining the project and start employment, and 128 people to be economically inactive on joining the project and to start employment or job search.

Of the 1179 people aged under 25, the target was for 507 people to move into employment or training.

In August 2022, Springboard was invited to submit a 'Project Change Request' (PCR) to modify project targets, given the recruitment challenges faced.

With 486 participants aged over 25 (91% of the target) and 154 participants aged under 25 (29% of the target) already recruited, Torus Foundation highlighted factors such as economic conditions, increased local competition for example Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) launched in October 2020 and Kickstart programmes working with short-term unemployed people, and ongoing COVID-19 restrictions affecting direct contact with potential participants.

The PCR requested a reduction in the target for under-25 participants from 1179 to 400, citing improved performance with participants aged over 25. The 'result' target for under 25s was adjusted proportionally, while result targets for those over 25 remained unchanged.



Marketing and Publicity

Torus Foundation built marketing and publicity into Springboard's programme design phase. With the short lead in time, the length of the programme, the challenging targets and uncertain referral pathways from stakeholders, it was recognised that the project would need to undertake direct marketing to potential participants to bring people into the project who were not in contact with other support agencies.

Prior to project launch, a marketing company was engaged by Torus Foundation to develop the brand identity and key messages. These marketing assets were incorporated into a 'partner pack', which was given to delivery and strategic partners to ensure consistency and provide marketing content for their networks.

In summer 2022, a specific recruitment campaign was delivered to target young people leaving education and looking at their options. Over the lifetime of the project, the following social media metrics were achieved:

Facebook 'Reach'	100,149 of which 31,792 'paid'
Facebook 'Likes'	174
Linkedin Followers	128
Twitter Followers	174

Analysis and Recommendations

Direct marketing to potential participants supported the strong levels of self-referrals into Springboard and complemented other outreach and engagement activity undertaken by delivery teams. A relatively small budget was stretched to achieve high levels of 'reach' through a social medial strategy based around both organic and paid-for posts. A marketing budget that allows for paid social media advertising is recommended for future projects that needs referrals from outside of the project.

Referrals

During the early months of the project, when referrals to Springboard were running behind target, Torus Foundation formed a working group 'Increase Referrals Into Springboard' (IRIS). This group, comprising representatives from delivery partners and the project team, focused on generating referrals from key stakeholders including schools, Job Centres, and housing associations. The group also oversaw specific strands of recruitment activity, such as attending and arranging events, with a specific focus on young people, and monitoring the processes for starting participants on the project, to ensure these were optimised.

The IRIS group operated until February 2023, successfully guiding Springboard to meet its participant recruitment targets. This collaborative approach proved effective, fostering shared responsibility, and facilitating the exchange of contacts and best practices among partners.

In recognition that recruiting participants to the project was going to be the most significant challenge for Springboard, a forecast of potential referrers had been developed during the design phase.

Comparing the pre-project forecast to the number of referrals from each source noted on project sign-up forms shows major differences in some areas.

Referral Source	Pre-project forecast*	Noted on sign-up forms	Difference
Housing Associations	354	120	-234
Staff Referrals	402	463	61
Businesses	120	0	-120
Healthcare	162	10	-152
Community Partners**	156		-156
Other Programmes**	141		-141
DWP / job centres	134	781	647
Schools / college / uni	112	8	-104
Other**		152	152
Springboard partner**		117	117
Total	1580	1651	71

* Predictions for IP 1.2 are reduced in line with PCR reduced targets

** Some options on the Entry Form did not match the categories shown in the predictions, and vice versa

Referrals from Job Centres and self-referrals significantly surpassed expectations for the project, accounting for 75% of all referrals compared to the initially predicted 39%. The successful collaboration with Job Centres was a key achievement, enhancing future joint work with the DWP.

Conversely, referrals from housing associations, businesses making redundancies, healthcare providers, and educational institutions fell short of predictions. Overall Springboard was much more dependent on referrals from Job Centres than had been predicted, which meant that the risk of not meeting participant targets was much more concentrated on relationships with a single set of stakeholders.

The discrepancy between expected and actual referral sources highlights the unforeseen reliance on Job Centres and the effectiveness of self-referral marketing strategies. These elements, particularly robust partnerships, collaborative task and finish group and strategic marketing efforts should be integral to future project planning.



Budget

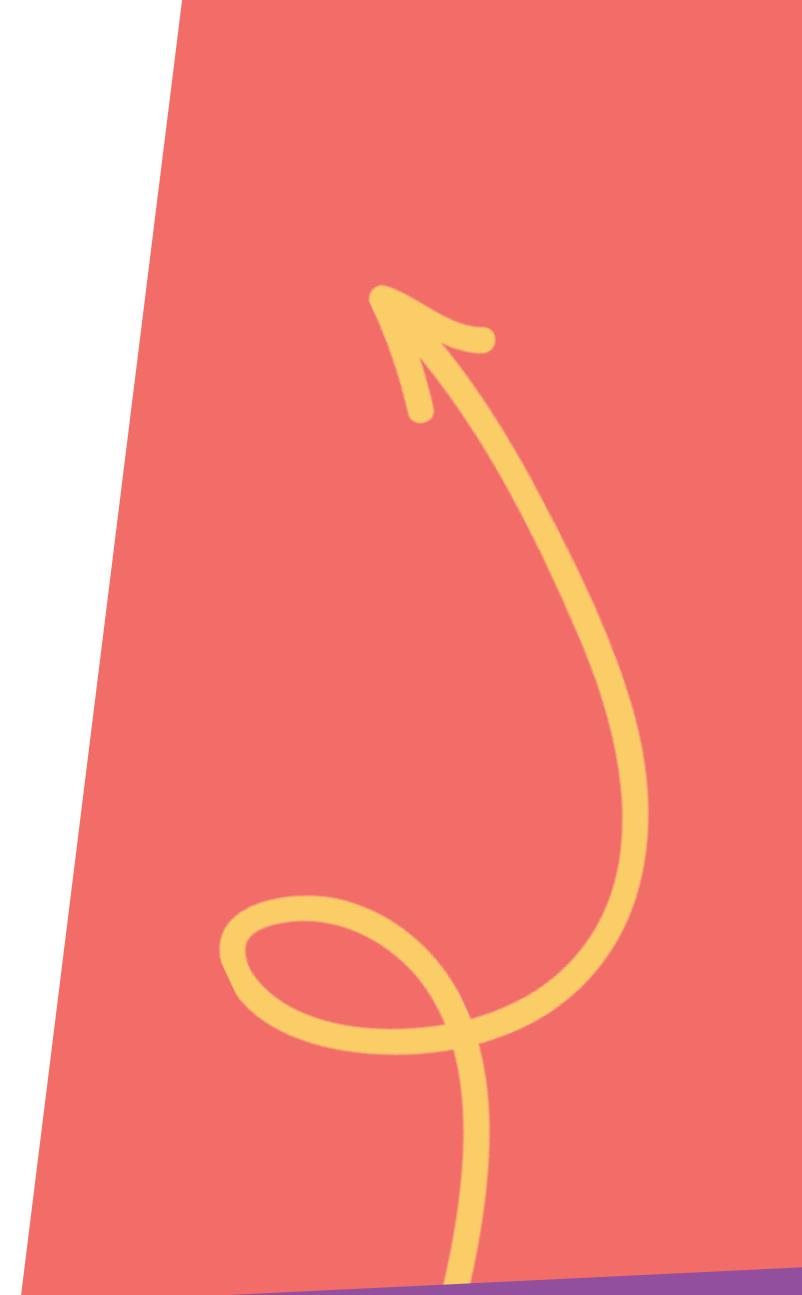
The Springboard project had complex funding mechanisms, due to the requirement for ESF-grant holders to provide 50% match funding. This was achieved by a combination of cash match from partner agencies, staff match (a portion of existing staff salaries from partner agencies allocated to project costs), and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) match (salaries paid by SMEs to Springboard participants). SMEs provided salary evidence for a £750 grant per placement.

Budgeting was very complicated and needed to be managed very closely. Operational funding was reclaimed quarterly. Blue Orchid initially managed the Employer Subsidy element, aimed at generating SME match funding. However, by mid-2022, this element was underperforming, leading to Blue Orchid's contract termination and the project team managing a reduced subsidy scheme.

The shortfall in expected SME match funding created a budget gap, filled by increasing staff match funding, reducing the ESF-funded portion, cutting other areas, and reallocating indirect cost contributions.

The revised budget included with the Project Change Request was for a total of £2,3m of which ESF funding will be £1,15m. This was £340,185.27 lower than the original agreed budget.

Budget allocations for participant costs, premises costs, and consumables were decreased due to lower-than-expected spending. Other expenses, including staff expenses, telephony, and licenses for mental wellbeing services, were reduced based on actual spending. However, the marketing and publicity budget was increased to enhance self-referral rates.



Results and Achievements

Outputs and results achieved

Investment Priority 1.1 (over 25s)	Original Target	Amended Target	Achieved	% target
Total Participants	1179	1179	1183	100%
Result R1 – unemployed participants into employment	174	174	355	204%
Result R2 – economically inactive participants into employment or job search	128	128	209	163%
Investment Priority 1.2 (under 25s)	Original Target	Amended Target	Achieved	% amended target
Total Participants	1179	400	461	115%
Result R5 – participants into employment or education	507	181	205	113%

Springboard Cheshire achieved the original participant targets for Investment Priority 1.1 and the amended participant target for Investment Priority 1.2. Results were much better than targets for Investment Priority 1.1, and proportionally marginally better than target for Investment Priority 1.2 (the original target was for 43% of participants aged under 25 to go into education or training and the project achieved 44%). The economic context in which Springboard operated was helpful in this respect, as there was a buoyant labour market and employers willing to engage with the project's staff to offer opportunities to participants.



Data from the management system showed that participants moved quickly through the Springboard project, thanks to a small number of key Information, Advice and Career Guidance interventions. Due to the job readiness of some participants the project prioritised flexibility and speed over completion of a rigid participant pathway.

Help to develop a CV was the most recorded intervention after the mandatory Strength Based Assessment, followed by participants using their personal budget for bespoke training, work wear and initial travel to get to work. Support to develop a cover letter, a referral for an employer subsided job opportunity, referral for mental health support and referral for support outside of Springboard were each recorded for less than 5% of participant records.

Outcomes for strategic partners

When Springboard launched in October 2021, it included a referral source field in its Entry Form, listing the three strategic partners in a drop-down menu to track participant referrals. Initially, direct referrals from these partners were low, prompting the addition of a second field in June 2022 to capture data on participants who were customers of these partners but not directly referred by them.

This revealed a significant increase in engagement with these organisations' customers compared to direct referrals.

Springboard achieved very positive outcomes for the participants that were customers of its strategic partners, with 44% of customers starting employment and 6% starting education and training.

Strategic Partner	Customers supported by Springboard (June 2022 onwards)	Customers starting employment		Customers starting education	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Guiness Partnership	13	5	38%	0	0%
Plus Dane Housing	14	7	50%	2	4%
Your Housing Group	25	11	44%	1	2%
Total	52	23	44%	3	6%

Partner Experiences



In May 2023, six delivery partners and three strategic partners were surveyed about their experiences, summarised as follows:

Motivations for becoming part of Springboard

Partners joined Springboard to support local communities, addressing unmet needs with a unique service.

Partners also pointed to a desire to develop and strengthen their working relationships with other organisations who were involved with the project.

Were expectations met?

Springboard reached different populations than anticipated due to economic shifts. While four delivery partners adapting their services reported positive outcomes, others faced challenges with lower engagement levels than expected.

Strengths and comparisons

Torus Foundation was praised for its management and communication, offering a less bureaucratic experience compared to other ESF-funded projects.

Partners recognised the project had achieved excellent outcomes. Employment advisor teams reported that they had enjoyed working with a client group that was motivated and receptive to support.

Improvements and challenges

- Partners felt that the employer wage subsidy element of Springboard had not met their expectations. Due to the buoyant job market, recruiting newly-unemployed people into the roles that attracted an employer subsidy was a challenge.
- The mental wellbeing provider had fewer referrals than expected.
- Some partners found it difficult to recruit project staff in the buoyant job market.

- Partners suggested broader tracking metrics and more integrated roles for strategic partners could have added value.
- Funding requirements of the project restricted who could be supported, preventing Springboard from helping those experiencing in-work poverty or struggling to sustain work due to ill health. It was also noted that the exit outcomes were not the same for under and over 25 this minimised the outcomes reported to funders.

Partnerships and legacy

Partners acknowledged the benefits of improved relationships through Springboard Cheshire, leading to new collaborations. Employment advisors expanded their reach to include diverse groups such as individuals from Hong Kong, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, and enhanced working relationships with local job centres. Partners valued the experience of operating in new areas and learning from working with populations facing fewer employment barriers.

Conclusion

Although the external environment that Springboard operated in was significantly different from the one for which it was designed, delivery teams successfully adapted their offer to serve new populations and meet the needs of different communities.

Delivery teams were proactive, well managed, and made good use of the flexibility and autonomy afforded to them by the project team at Torus Foundation. The Department of Work and Pensions, as Managing Authority for Springboard, were supportive of the project and audits were fair. Springboard also benefitted from good relations and high numbers of referrals from local Job Centres.

Despite its short lifetime, Springboard supported a large number of individuals across Cheshire and Warrington to move into work quickly. The project leaves a legacy of good partnership working and positive reputations for all organisations involved. Learning from the project can inform future employability projects provided by Torus Foundation, delivery and strategic partners.



Examples of impact from Springboard

Beky lost her job after 20 years during COVID-19, but thanks to support found through Springboard, she found work helping people in the local community, which has given her a focus and a purpose.



I am very grateful for the guidance and help given in lots of parts of my life, not just with job searching!



After finishing University, George was referred to the programme to help find work. Support included creating an up to date CV, setting up a LinkedIn profile and help to search for suitable opportunities. George was able to start a graduate role with a civil engineering company.



I'm delighted to have found this job. The support from Springboard was very helpful!



Matt came to Springboard after a period out of work, caring for his mother and was also extremely anxious about returning to work. Through one to one sessions, his job advisor helped Matt consider what jobs would interest him and thanks to the support provided, Matt was invited to a number of interviews.

Being able to draw on his experience, Matt successfully gained a role as a healthcare assistant in a local care home.



Springboard has given me a happier, more confident headspace and helped me to return to work in a much quicker timeframe than I could have possibly hoped for!



With the support of her job advisor, Lisa was able to bring together her work experience, skills and what she enjoyed doing, to find a role much sooner than if she had been carrying out the search on her own. Lisa was delighted to find work in a local luxury hotel as a spa assistant.



The Springboard project really lived up to its name.



Inka had been in the UK for less than a year when she signed up to Springboard. Finishing work in a warehouse, Inka was ready to put her art qualifications to use. Benefiting from the free support, Inka was able to practice interview techniques and build a portfolio of her design work.

As well as signing up to GCSE English and Maths, Inka found work as an assistant in an art studio.



I found my dream job working with children in an art studio.



After leaving her last job of 12 years, Justyna was unsure of her next steps. Attending a number of career events, Justyna was interested in the NHS recruitment event, which opened up new opportunities. Thanks to support with her CV and encouragement from her job advisor, Justyna secured a new role as a clinical support worker for a local NHS Trust and will also be studying to become a qualified nurse alongside her new job.



I am excited about the future and my confidence has been restored.



Our weekly appointments kept me motivated at a difficult time.

Olivia had arrived from Hong Kong and was in need of support and guidance to start her career in the UK. Working closely with her job advisor to develop her CV and cover letters, alongside understanding employment rights and UK culture, Olivia not only secured a new job, but had the confidence to negotiate her contract to fit around her family.



Springboard helped me a lot. It was amazing to start my new life in the UK and to continue my professional career.



Sam was made redundant after 20 years of service and was keen to get back into work as quickly as possible. She had excellent experience and transferrable skills, but needed that extra bit of support with job searching in a modern job market.

Working with Springboard to ensure her applications stood out and practice interview techniques, Sam gained a role as a business support assistant.



The help and support I received from Springboard has been invaluable and is the reason I now have a job.





To help strengthen the positive impact being made or to find out more about the work being delivered across communities, contact the team at Torus Foundation:

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