

London Councils Poverty Programme – Community Life Change
Project Final Evaluation

For Projects funded by London Councils ESF Programme 2016-2020

Organisation name: MI ComputSolutions

Project ID: 8231

Priority: Priority 3 Tackling Poverty through Employment

Period covered by report: September 2016-June 2019

Project delivery starts date: September 2016

Project delivery end date: June 2019

Evaluation conducted by Siobhán Crozier Consultant siobhan@siobhancrozier.london	Name of Project manager: Bola Sobowale CEO, MI ComputSolutions Date Final Project Evaluation signed off:
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For London Councils use only:

Date Final Project Evaluation approved by London Councils:

*Please note that this Final Project Evaluation must be conducted by an external organisation. All procurement requirements for securing the external evaluator and completing this Final Project Evaluation must be adhered to.

Project Aims and Activities

Please describe the aims of your project, how it contributed to the borough/s objectives and its activities.

Please state how your project contributed to The London 2014-2020 ESIF Strategy¹

MI ComputSolutions (MI) is a social enterprise operating in south, east and west London. An independent training provider with experience of delivering a range of education and training, and employment services, MI supports disadvantaged people to access and sustain employment. Established in 2001, it now operates from offices in Brixton and Deptford.

MI runs both accredited and non-accredited courses in fields such as childcare, health and social care, customer service, supervision and management, accounting, business and administration, ICT, and hospitality. It delivers information, advice and guidance (IAG), employability training, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for work training, accredited basic skills and sector-focused vocational training through e-learning.

Through the successful delivery of other publicly funded projects and employer-focused programmes, MI has established close working relationships with employers from the retail, health and social care, childcare, hospitality, leisure, tourism and construction sectors.

MI has attained quality assurance programmes, including Matrix Accredited and Investors in People.

The Community Life Change project targeted workless residents in Southwark, Lewisham, Bromley, Greenwich and Bexley. There was a particular focus on parents with long-term work limiting health conditions; people with mental health needs; members of ethnic groups with low labour market participation (e.g., Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, & Somalis); women facing additional barriers to employment; people with drug/alcohol issues; and homeless people.

MI Initially engaged six partners: Centrepoin; Train2Work Academy; Successful Mums; Royal Mencap; Resource Plus (run by Bexley Council); and Pecan (a Peckham-based charity).

The first four delivered the project with the latter three having to drop out.

¹<https://lep.london/publication/european-funding-strategy-2014-20>

Aims:

Community Life Change targets unemployed and economically inactive residents, providing support to improve their employability skills and help participants into employment, across the south London boroughs of Lewisham, Greenwich, Southwark, Bromley and Bexley.

Activities:

Community Life Change was promoted through social media platforms, taster sessions and at various projects and events that MI and partners are involved with. MI engaged with local DWP job coaches to increase enrolment. It also used relevant communication channels such as a local Job Centre Plus and a housing association publication. Leaflet about the project were distributed to strategic locations and community centres.

The partners in Community Life Change used the following methods to identify and engage participants

- Attending JCPs in each borough including managers' meetings
- Visiting homeless shelters
- Community organisation
- Local Providers Forum to raise awareness of available support for their clients
- Distribution of leaflets to people who are hard to reach
- Web based tool – Eventbrite
- Sharing awareness of the project among in-house learners

Clients were able to access the following support:

- Six and or 12 hours Information, Advice and Guidance, depending on individual's level of need
- Employability skills and presentation
- Basic skills intervention
- Application and intense interview coaching
- Guidance on job search

2014 – 2020 European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and Sustainable Urban Development Strategy for London

London LEP was awarded £745 million for driving development and growth, investments which are managed by the GLA.

The funding is allocated to ameliorate the disparity between London as a wealthy financial centre, yet which has the 20 most deprived boroughs in England and higher than average unemployment by UK standards.

ESIF identifies four key goals of which one was an enhancement of skills and employment, the objective of Community Life Change.

London is the powerhouse of the national economy, accounting for one fifth of the UK's total output. Yet alongside highly successful, agile and profitable labour markets are significant pockets of deprivation, worklessness and economic underperformance. The residents of many London boroughs do not possess the skills or opportunities to share in the successes of local markets.

London's population is polarised in terms of who earns what. As well as containing a high share of the UK's richest people, it is also home to a large proportion of the poorest. After housing costs, 27% of Londoners are ranked in the top quintile nationally, whilst 26% are ranked in the bottom quintile.

Under-employment is linked to a lack of qualifications and a large section of the population is economically inactive.

London is home to a diverse population, with around 3.3m people living in London who are from a BAME background – 42.5% of all people from BAME groups in England live in the capital. The employment rate of BAME groups in London remains below that of the white population.

The Community Life Change project, funded by ESF, aims to support unemployed, economically inactive and otherwise disadvantaged people to develop the necessary skills to avail of, or progress into, job opportunities. The project targets people in groups with particularly high levels of worklessness including disabled people, women, BAME groups, lone parents and disadvantaged families or workless households.

- This section presents the views of your ESF Project participants on the support they have received and the impact of participation (in your project) on their employability and personal development.

Successful Mums' client Melissa shares the story of her return to employment

Before having her daughter, Melissa had worked at the Ministry of Defence for 10 years. She then stayed at home until her daughter, now five, went into reception class. "As soon as she went to school full-time, I knew wanted to go back to work. But when you tell a prospective employer you've had a career break and try to explain, you've been a mum and the skills that come with that, I found it very hard to explain."

The support of Successful Mums changed Melissa's mindset about that. "They gave me the confidence to believe I could do the job I wanted. I don't think I would have applied for my original role as a PA without having done the course. I might have gone for something where I didn't use my brain. As a mum, you forget all about yourself, forget what you enjoy and what you can do."

But finding out about Successful Mums' course, delivered through the Community Life Change project, really did change everything for Melissa. "I did the course in September 2018 and by November, I had a full-time job."

She found a role as a PA, working for part of the NHS, where she stayed for nine months. There was just one drawback, Melissa needed to find something nearer to home and quickly found her second job as a mother returning to the workforce. "I am an accounts payable administrator for an energy recruitment company. My team are really friendly. The company finds specialists for roles in wind farms, onshore and offshore renewable energy installations."

"Finance is quite a new field to me," says Melissa, "But renewable energy is the way forward and I'm interested to have an insight into how it all works." She succeeds in holding down a full-time role, as her daughter goes to breakfast club and an after-school project.

The difference that being employed has made to Melissa is huge, she says. "We went on holiday in the summer – I took my daughter to Spain for a week, she learnt to swim on holiday! I'm also going to buy a new car soon."

And she's not standing still. Melissa is aware that the company she works for has really good opportunities for progression and she's happy to avail of them, when she feels ready. "My finance manager started out an office junior at 16, so I definitely would like to absorb some of the skills they're teaching and build on that for my future," Melissa says.

She had found out about the Community Life Change project through an adviser at

the job centre, “She was told about it by one of the other mums and she thought it would be a good fit for me.”

The Successful Mums’ Back to Work course is obviously designed to fit in around the family, so Melissa attended from 10am to 2pm, just one day a week for three weeks, fitting in with the school run. She found confidence building to be the best thing about the sessions. “I realised that when I walked into a room, there were so many women like me, you just think that everyone has skills except you. There were women from all walks of life, they were lovely, we all went to lunch together.”

Successful Mums follow their clients, keeping in touch for 12 months, says Melissa, “The send job alerts and do catch-ups. They had a WhatsApp group that went on for a good few months, so we knew who had been successful.”

Confidence is a massive issue for women returning to the workplace after being at home with children but for Melissa, it was also some of the small things that really stood out. “Even where they helped with my CV, I just didn’t realise how dated it was. I’d worked at the MoD for so long, I hadn’t had an interview for 15 years. My CV still had my address and home phone number on it – little things like that, I didn’t realise, just aren’t needed any longer but make it appear so out-of-date.”

Thinking about the skills she had acquired as a mum helped Melissa to gain confidence and gave her good material to add to the CV. “The course helped me to put down what I’d done while I was at home, there’s more to being “just a mum” than I’d really thought about. My time management is now the best it’s ever been. Having worked in one place for so long, I would have felt nervous about going into a new job, getting to know new people.”

But the course helped Melissa to focus on aspects where she didn’t realise she already had confidence: “I’d gone into mum and baby groups, a room of people I didn’t know. But I didn’t think of it as a skill. Without the confidence I gained on the course, I’d probably have gone on the tills in a supermarket. But the ladies at Successful Mums really did teach me, why not try for something better – if they say no, what have you lost?”

Looking towards her future, Melissa feels she has very different opportunities ahead of her now. Beyond time management, Melissa has also developed good financial management skills. “I’m saving to buy my own home, these are all big things, we do things now we couldn’t do before. I’ve got about year to go before I can buy a place.”

Joanna's story



Town planner Joanna went to Successful Mums, certain she was unlikely to find local, flexible work in her chosen career. We set out to prove her wrong! Joanna shares her story here.

Planning is quite a small field, so not that many jobs are available. I also had a lot of requirements because my children are still small. I wanted part-time hours and I didn't want to travel too far, so I was looking for something in Bromley or Victoria.

My CV was really out of date and I felt I'd lost my drive. My last job was in Singapore but I'd been at home full-time with my children for about six years. I joined the Successful Mums Back to Work course because I almost needed someone to give me a kick – I needed some motivation.

Georgina, my tutor, knew exactly how to help. She's very passionate about her job and, with her background in HR, she has so much great experience to share. Georgina gave me lots of little tasks to complete each week and then kept checking up on me to see how it was going, which was very useful. She helped me sort out my CV and do things like put together a LinkedIn profile.

When Bromley Council advertised for a part-time planner, the timing couldn't have been better. My CV was ready, so it was easier to do the application form, and Georgina helped me prepare for the interview during our one-to-one session. We talked in quite a lot of detail about the interview structure and the sort of the questions that might come up, which really helped my confidence.

I got the job! It was my first interview for eight years, so I didn't really imagine I'd get it – I just went in thinking it would be good experience. It still feels a bit unreal...

I'm enjoying the challenge of being back at work: I'm learning new things, the job is interesting and the money always helps. I'm working two and a half days a week, so

it's perfect for me. I can walk to work and my husband shares the school runs and the workload at home. My new colleagues are really helpful and my manager is very supportive, which makes my work-life balance so much easier.

Sarah's story



As a busy executive assistant, Sarah relished her 24/7 lifestyle and loved being in the thick of things. After a career break, the mum-of-three wanted to recapture that buzz but didn't want to work around the clock. Here, Sarah explains how Successful Mums helped her find the perfect flexible role.

Being an exec assistant was my ideal job but it was full-on and, once I became a mum, I couldn't make it work without compromising how I wanted to parent. So when it came to returning, I didn't know what I was going to do.

The Back to Work course gave me time to think intentionally about my choices. When I sat down and thought about it, I realised I was looking at the main stretch of my career, so it was really important to pin down what I wanted to do and how it would work for my family, and to find a role that would let me flourish in all those areas. Successful Mums gave me the confidence to make a plan that worked for me.

I had kept busy while I was at home with my children, as a volunteer, doing youth work and organising community events. I was keeping up a lot of the skills I used at work but I don't think I fully appreciated that until Georgina, my tutor, pointed it out. She helped me see what I'd been doing in a different way.

It was also great to talk with other women and realise that the way I was feeling was the way everyone was feeling! Sometimes, they couldn't see what they had to offer but I could... and they could do the same for me, so that was really affirming. I also found the job I'm doing now through a website I might never have discovered without the knowledge of the other mums in my group.

I was asked about my USP at interview, which was something we covered on the course. Having really focused on what I bring to the table, I felt able to answer that fully, honestly and confidently. It's never easy selling yourself like that but I think the preparation we did on the course was key, especially since as mums we always sell ourselves short.

I'm now working flexibly as an events and executive assistant for an organisation that supports and promotes higher education in London. It took a while to find a role that ticked all the boxes but I knew it was out there. It incorporates all the things I love doing, including the events side of my voluntary work.

They have an amazing attitude to flexible working, not just for mums but for everybody. The CEO is a mum-of-three herself and very much a champion of finding a way to make it work. It's a bit of a juggle but I love being back in the middle of things at work and, with the hours I'm doing, I can still be at school pick-up four days a week, which is brilliant. It really feels like the start of a new season for me and my family.

Viviana's story



When Viviana made the decision to return to work last year, the prospect of job-hunting and interviews was a daunting one.

I previously worked in the hospitality industry as a receptionist and concierge but I have two young children, aged six and four, and had been off work for a long time. After five years, I needed to regain my confidence and get professional advice on how to approach the workforce again. The Successful Mums Back to Work course was just right.

I was guided every single step of the way, was given examples of how to rebuild my career and had the fantastic opportunity to hear other Successful Mums' stories.

Special thanks goes to Georgina, our trainer, for her patience and time spent

helping me with my CV. Rebuilding your confidence and self-esteem is hard work and it was probably my biggest challenge. I'm glad I wasn't alone in that process.

It was an experience that changed my life and I walked away from the course with confidence, determination and my "invisible crown" back! I would definitely recommend Successful Mums to anyone who's been in my situation.

Going out to work is like a breath of fresh air and I'm now happily employed as a part-time admin officer for Bromley Council. The things I missed most when I wasn't working were my independence and having time for myself – but this is my space and I feel like I have both of those back.

I love my colleagues and it's been great meeting new people and chatting with adults about things other than baby food and tantrums.

Mustafa Muse, managing director of Train2Work Academy, describes the journey back to work of his client, Maz

When a client is fired from a job, the lack of a reference can seem like a huge barrier preventing them from getting back to work. For the adviser, uncovering the hidden and sometimes complex issues faced by the client can be the key to progression back into employment.

(The client's name has been changed.)

The last time Maz was employed he lost his job because of anger, having hit the wall with his fist, he smashed the wall and was fired. Then this young man couldn't obtain employment for a long time, he couldn't get a reference and faced other problems in his life. His mum had cancer and passed away and Maz didn't have a good relationship with his father.

Losing his job began to have other negative impacts for him. Maz lived with his girlfriend and baby son but without an income, he had to move back in with his father. Soon they were having constant arguments at home.

When he came to us, initially we thought, this guy is young, he speaks the language, he has skills and can do things – but we recognised there was an underlying issue, not just simply the lack of his CSCS card. [The Construction Skills Certification Scheme, essential for employment in the construction industry].

We referred him and paid for his CSCS card, so he was doing job search, but he complained about his distress with the job centre and problems with his father. Constantly, he would ring me and talk about his dad. I said, it's not only about your dad, this is about your own reactions, don't always be defensive. Maz recognised his anger issue and the GP referred him to NHS counselling services. He was able to talk about the loss of his mum, his job and the break-down of the relationship with his girlfriend. Maz was taking anti-depressants. He'd say to me, I can always ring

you when I need you.

He was able to get on with his life and understand when I said, maybe your father wants the best for you, maybe hear him and come on to common ground. He started giving some support to his son, normalising the relationship with his former girlfriend. I explained that he needs to be cool with his child's mother to have access, it doesn't have to be contentious.

We provided him with a reference, we knew he had good time-keeping and he was motivated; employers want to know that people have these qualities. Clients find out that there are different ways they can obtain a reference, they don't realise they have other ways to get references through voluntary work or their adviser.

Maz found a job, working as a sprinkler fitter on tall buildings, he was quite happy to be employed again.

Partnerships

Essential to the Project's effective delivery was the management of working relationships between the lead partner and sub-partners.

How effective was the partnership at delivering the required services. (Please include any feedback on the project/project delivery/ the partnership arrangement). This information may also be available within partnership meeting minutes.

The partnership for the Community Life Change project is led by MI ComputSolutions (MIC) and initially included:

MI engaged six partners: Centrepoin; Train2Work Academy; Successful Mums; Royal Mencap; Resource Plus (run by Bexley Council); and Pecan (a Peckham-based charity). Community Life Change was to be deliver across the south London boroughs of Lewisham, Greenwich, Southwark, Bromley and Bexley.

Royal Mencap, Resource Plus and Pecan all dropped out of the partnership. Centrepoin, Train2Work Academy and Successful Mums delivered Community Life Change with MI leading the partnership.

Community Life Change is MI's fourth project for London Councils. MI ComputSolutions' chief executive, Bola Sobowale, states that in previous projects, MI has no experience of losing partner organisations and indeed, has been successful in exceeding its targets.

Centrepoin has worked with young homeless people since 1969, helping vulnerable people to find a job and live independently, through the practical and emotional support they need.

Train2Work Academy is a voluntary, non-profit, community-based training provider with extensive experience of training, subcontracting and managing projects within

welfare-to-work programmes.

Bromley-based **Successful Mums** was founded in 2014 and is an award-winning service that provides training courses to support mothers in preparing to return to work, finding a new job or beginning a career. It works closely with local employers to connect its clients to job opportunities.

Royal Mencap, Resources Plus and **Pecan** all discontinued their engagement in Community Life Change. This is MI's fourth project with London Councils and it has had no prior experience of losing partners.

For the purpose of this evaluation, we spoke with executives from Successful Mums and Train2Work Academy.

We received no response to requests for an interview with a representative of Centrepint.

The views of Royal Mencap, one of three partners to withdraw, are recorded elsewhere in the report. (See page 33)

Mustafa Muse, managing director, Train2Work Academy

We engaged with clients for the Community Life Change project through local community events, awareness workshops, covering south London and having an outreach adviser, engaging with the community through local job centres.

There was slow implementation from London Councils, we didn't get clear guidance on eligibility and the goal posts kept changing in terms of eligibility. It felt as if things kept changing all the time, they seemed to be making the rules as they go along, asking the clients more things – but then clients were disengaging with the project.

The main challenge was, once we found a client, it was hard for them to provide evidence of their eligibility – ID, proof of address, proof of employment status – this was the biggest challenge. If they'd been out of work for a long time, they didn't have a P60 or a P45, they might not have a birth certificate or a driving licence. If someone had been out of work for 10 years, they sometimes don't have a bank account. We could not spend money on them until their files are accepted. The whole emphasis was on eligibility, not the needs of the client. They had to provide proof of their employment status for the last three months. The job centre would refer a client to us, with proof in a letter that the person had been unemployed for 12 months, but if we registered them a week later, then we have to prove to London Councils they were unemployed for that time as well. We have never experienced this before. A referral letter from a job centre was never an issue in the past. Having to register the person on the same day as the letter is issued is very impractical, for these clients, they made it really impractical.

On this project there were clients who have been out of work for a long time. Most are lacking motivation, some lack practical issues eg tickets to work in their industry, qualifications they need for work in catering, care, construction, security. Once you

overcome the soft skills and practical aspects, they were able to gain employment. The biggest issue is to help change their mindset, once they can obtain their ticket. The biggest challenge is to keep them motivated, even if they get knocked back, it's part of the recruitment process, managing their expectations. (See page 10 for Mustafa's account of one his client's, who needed support to work through issues other than employment – but succeeded in doing so.)

If a client needed training for this project, London Councils said we had to refer them to a third-party organisation, not any of those in the partnership delivering Community Life Change. Previously we could provide training, so we had complete control [to follow the client's pathway]. Once we refer them on, we didn't have control and we don't know whether they have completed the course. The other training provider's interest is different to ours, while the client is just wanting to finish course and get out of the door. There was a group of training providers in the partnership but we couldn't even offer the training within the group, we have to find someone who is not part of the group. If MI offers certain courses, I could refer my client to MI, MI could reference that the person has started and completed training – but this was no longer allowed.

We used to do the training ourselves, then evidence the person's qualifications, put their certificate in their file. Another trainer will only say, they started the course, it's very difficult to track clients and follow up on what they're doing. We lose the relationship, once they walk out and go to another organisation. Understandably, they feel they've done with us – but then we don't have the evidence [to claim for outcomes].

MISDC were trying their best, they did a good job, they called London Councils and held a meeting, trying their utmost to mitigate any difficulties. They were trying to communicate and manage the project very well. But we found it really annoying, constantly London Councils would evaluate when we sent the file, we'd start working with that person, then six months later they want you to provide this, this and this evidence. At this stage, we might not be in touch with the client. We were expected to apply eligibility criteria, which they had never told us about at the beginning, it was new rules being applied later.

At the end, as an organisation, we had incurred costs on outreach advisers and advisers. We couldn't protect the income and invest in the client. At the end most organisations had to minimise their costs – but it also minimises a positive outcome. If I knew someone needed a passport for ID purposes, I could spend £150 to get that done. But this time we couldn't confidently commit, so minimised the cost which had a major impact on the employment outcomes, the costs of travel and supporting people to get to interviews.

Once we don't know how much cashflow will be available, that has a major impact. We didn't have an office in south London, we had to rent one, now we have an office with overheads – new equipment, telephone bills and advisers. Previously we had a full-time recruitment adviser, working with clients on motivation and the outcome, to progress to employment. We had to minimise the fixed costs. At the end of the project, there was no recruitment adviser, so there were less outcomes in

terms of people getting into employment.

Claire Stringer, head of operations at Successful Mums

Successful Mums runs Back to Work courses with cohorts of 12-15 per group. I was responsible for promotion and establishing eligibility of the clients, submitting paperwork – the main administrator for our part of the Community Life Change project.

We connect with potential clients mainly through word of mouth and we have quite a big presence on social media – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn – as well as various forums. We have a partnership with Mummy's Gin Fund [a lively resource for sharing advice on parenting, child development and things to do].

We also attend networking events and hold taster sessions in partnership with local councils. We worked with the boroughs of Bromley, Lewisham and Greenwich for this project.

For clients who are all mums looking to return to work, the main challenge is the lack of confidence and motivation, not having a direction about their next steps and not knowing where to start. The majority of ladies we work with have had careers – maybe high-flying ones – but didn't want to go back to that type of work as it's not flexible enough now that they have a family. It was very much about looking at their transferable skills and focus on what they could do now.

There were many issues with the management of the Community Life Change project. There was constant changing of the eligibility requirements, even from month to month, a submission would be accepted, then the following month, suddenly they would not accept it. We would get evidence for outcomes, then suddenly, we would have to go back and get more evidence because it suddenly wasn't sufficient.

They changed the paperwork part way through the course, about 40 clients were suddenly not eligible, so we lost out significantly in the early part of the project. There was a lack of clarity from London Councils when we would raise queries. We're used to being monitored but we have experienced nothing like this, we worked on another ESF project, experienced the same, that was with London Councils again.

I've been in work-based learning for 20 years, I have never, ever worked on a project where goal posts shifted so much. It made us look incompetent as a provider, I can't stress this enough. Our clients didn't understand why we were chasing them, it just became a paperwork chasing exercise, it completely detracted from the good work we were doing with these women. It was difficult to remain professional; it was absolutely crackers. It was almost a case of, what are they going to ask for next? The error report would come in and we'd say, when did that come into play?

From an admin point of view, I think the MI Comput staff were as responsive as they

could be in the set of circumstances they were in. Adrian Bascombe took over towards the end of the project and was extremely helpful and did his best to get responses from London Councils, but he struggled as well, but I fully understand, his hands were probably tied. We did have an issue when an admin lady who worked on it left in March or April and there was a handover period. There were things that we submitted to MI but they weren't submitted to London Councils, frustrating but maybe that happens maybe when you have a changeover of staff. We had a bit of catching up to do at that point.

Project Strengths/Areas of Improvement/Added Value

This section should summarise your views on what you feel are the:

- Project strengths
- Main project challenges (include how many participants enrolled on the project and how many participants disengaged)
- Areas of improvement: from the perspective of the project staff, sub-partners and participants, what improvements do they believe should have been made, if any?
- Added value (how do you feel your project has added value to the ESF Programme and objectives)

Project strengths

When the project started it had lots of vigour and we had eligible beneficiaries who accessed the project. Provision of intensive IAG, Support with career and monitoring including further job search were all the strength of the projects. But the requirements to access provision was a challenge both for us as a partner and for beneficiaries as it creates another layer of barrier. We had many progressions into positive outcomes as barriers were been tackled. Until 2017, the changes and eligibility criteria revised, which invariable means majority of previously eligible beneficiaries became none eligible. The challenged faced were huge but the ethos and mission of the organisation kept it going.

Main project challenges

A member of staff was taken on to co-ordinate Community Life Change but when the project was under way, London Councils changed a number of criteria: the definition of the target group; client enrolments; job search and the type of benefits eligible. Due to six months during which payments were delayed, MI had to let go its staff member who had been taken on for the project. Responsibility for leading the project moved to Bola, supported by an administrator. Adrian Bascombe, head of business development and commercial services at MI, joined MI to pick up near the end of the project in December 2018.

Issues with London Councils' database caused problems for MI, and it is claimed that there was no management information system (MIS) supporting it, so that entries were having to be counted manually. Bola and her finance manager were

having to work on it to complete the information, still without payment from London Councils. As the expectation of the project had changed, it was felt strongly that this was unfair and unrealistic. Bola says: “We work with our partners on trust. With the ongoing delay in payments, some partners believed we had the funds and were not passing it on to them. This created a breakdown in trust in their relationship with us.”

The changes in proof of identity resulted in driving licences not being accepted. To be confirmed with evidence of entitlement to job seeker’s allowance (JSA), the client had to return to the job centre to register on the same day. For many vulnerable clients who were unemployed in the long term, this was more than they could manage in a day, so were ruled ineligible. This resulted in MI being unable to claim for work that had already been carried out with the client.

“People who are unemployed in the long term have their own barriers to work,” Bola says. “It does not help them to engage if we put further barriers in front of them.”

As the challenges escalated without resolution, the issues were raised formally in a letter to Mayor Philip Glanville of Hackney Council, who is chair of the London Councils Grants Committee. The signatories were the executives of MI ComputSolutions, Paddington Development Trust, London Training and Employment Network and Redbridge CVS, organisations which are all leading partnerships in London Councils ESF priorities programme.

Responses to some of these issues are covered in an interview for this evaluation with Yolande Burgess, director of strategy at London Councils. (See page xx)

Feedback from MI staff

The project has encountered the following issues

1 Changes in paperwork

The project experienced a lot of confusion and delays due to the change in paperwork after the project had already started. For example, a new enrolment form was introduced and MI staff were asked to get all participants previously signed up to complete the new form. This resulted in claims that could not be made for any participants who could not be reached to complete the new forms. This led to a number of files where participants had received support, but payment would not be made for the work that was done with them.

2 Issues with the database

We have encountered issues with the database provided by London Councils for recording participant achievements and making submissions. For example, the database freezes frequently when entering information. When this happens, the database needs to be restarted meaning that it takes longer to complete data entry.

The database was also meant to be a way of tracking and monitoring participants, such as how many people on the project are female. However, the information captured by the database is not accurate.

Due to these issues, we were informed that London Councils would be looking into getting a new database.

We were told in February 2019 that the new database had been finalised. However, after asking London Councils for training, we were later told it is not ready.

We have continued to use the old database which still has issues. Furthermore, we used to receive a new version of the current database after every submission, however, we have not received one since July 2018.

3 Discrepancies between quality assurance and final

Monthly quality assurance (QA) visits were introduced by London Councils to help minimise the number of queries and rejections, once final checks had been made.

However, we have found that even though a file might have been approved for submission after the QA, visit a different query will come up once it has been submitted.

4 Delays in feedback

There have also been delays in the turnaround of feedback from London Councils, which means that we are unable to provide feedback to the sub-partners we work with.

These delays have an effect on us and our sub-partners, both financially, as well as hindering the ability to correct queries as in some cases, by the time the feedback arrives, the participant can no longer be reached. For example, feedback for participants submitted in October and November 2017 was not received until July 2018.

5 Changes to acceptable evidence

London Councils provided eligibility guidance to be used to make sure the correct documents were collected for evidencing. However, this information has constantly changed.

For example, we were originally told that a proof of benefit letter could be used as proof that a participant has been out of work, provided it is dated within three months of the participant enrolment date. We were then told that the gap should be no greater than two weeks. In September 2018, London Councils started to query gaps of as little as two days which contradicted the guidance previously given.

We were then told at this point that the benefit letter needed to be issued on the same day as enrolment.

Another example of this is the eligibility guidance states that a driving licence can be used as proof of address. However, in April 2018 we started to get queries that the driving licence could not be accepted as proof of address. We were later told by London Councils that if the driving licence is more than 12 months old it would no longer be accepted. We were led to believe this was introduced because of a personal experience the auditor had with her council. We were not informed of these changes prior to making submissions and instead of London Councils applying the changes to future submissions, it was applied to current submission made as well.

Due to these changes the guidance provided for the project no longer reflects the standard now required.

The project has made it difficult for the targeted audience to access the programme.

The project was meant to help participants who are homeless, economically inactive, long term unemployed, have a disability or are facing other barriers to employment. These participants needed support to overcome their barriers but due to a stringent approach to evidencing by London councils it has made it difficult for them to access the programme.

6 Areas of improvement:

Project staff and sub-partners are in accord with their questioning of London Councils' management of Community Life Change. The biggest issue appears to stem from the changing of eligibility criteria throughout the project. All those spoken to are accustomed to being accountable to funders and being monitored. They state that clear guidelines issued at the beginning of a project and adhered to throughout would overcome some of the issues.

They also refer to some criteria setting unrealistic challenges for particular client groups. Those who are very distant from the labour market, have a disability or who are homeless may feel daunted by the expectation to organise a referral letter and enrolment on the same day, if this involves travel between different locations.

Technical failures with the database supplied by London Councils need to be resolved and any management information system operated from the project outset.

Partnerships with employers

This section should sum up the views/comments/feedback from a sample of employers who have provided work placements, volunteering opportunities or employment to your ESF participants.

All of the organisations engaged in the delivery of the P3 project have a long history of successfully supporting people into employment and further education; they therefore relied on their networks of contacts built through previous engagement in employability programmes to engage with employers and recruit participants to the project. Through other programmes, MI ComputSolutions and its partners had well-developed links to more than 500 employers and 150 voluntary and community organisations. They also work directly with employers such as Schools, Nursing Homes, Greenwich & Bexley Hospice, Aspire care, All bar one, NHS Lewisham Hospital, Sainsbury's, Royal Mail, Peachtree Care and local hospitals. The extensive network of employers engaged in the project has enabled the project to offer a wide spectrum of careers for participants, depending on their level of education, distance from labour market and personal goals.

For those participants who had no work experience or did not have relevant work experience (in the field where they wished to work) the project offered voluntary placements. To ensure that the voluntary work provided a useful experience for the participant, the P3 project staff performed regular checks on the quality of voluntary placements to clarify which activities the participants were responsible for and whether they were receiving constructive feedback on their performance/behaviour from manager. Some voluntary placements took place in organisations with whom delivery partners have already established relationships making it easier to guarantee the quality of the placement.

Additional Target Group

The London Boroughs that fund the Poverty Programme were keen to make stronger links between funding targeted at tackling unemployment and homelessness, reflecting the interdependence of these two areas. With this in mind we, London Councils, funded organisations to work with homeless participants. The suggested strategic partners were projects funded under Priority 1 (Combatting Homelessness) of the London Councils Grants Scheme. Please summarise:

- How effective was partnership working
- Main challenges
- What could have been done differently
- Please also feedback on the support your project provided to participants recovering from drug and/or alcohol addiction or misuse.

The Community Life Change project targeted workless residents in Southwark, Lewisham, Bromley, Greenwich and Bexley. There was a particular focus on parents with long-term work limiting health conditions; people with mental health needs; members of ethnic groups with low labour market participation (e.g.,

Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, & Somalis); women facing additional barriers to employment; people with drug/alcohol issues; and homeless people. The geographic coverage reflected the areas of London in which the contracted organisations operate on everyday basis and have had strong links with the local community.

This very diverse target group required a robust approach in promoting the project, so that all members of the target communities had a chance to take part. Outreach was carried out in libraries, community centres, high streets, youth clubs, school gates etc., to help the project reach those not currently receiving publicly funded employment support.

The changes in proof of identity resulted in driving licences not being accepted. To be confirmed with evidence of entitlement to job seeker's allowance (JSA), the client had to return to the job centre to register on the same day. For many vulnerable clients who were unemployed in the long term, this was more than they could manage in a day, so were ruled ineligible.

This resulted in MI being unable to claim for work that had already been done with the client. "People who are unemployed in the long term have their own barriers to work," Bola Sobowale says. "It does not help them to engage if we put further barriers in front of them."

Soft Outcomes

In this section please note any soft outcomes achieved. Soft Outcomes are outcomes from training, support or guidance interventions, which unlike hard outcomes (such as qualifications and jobs), cannot be measured directly or tangibly. Soft outcomes may include achievements relating to:

- Interpersonal skills, for example: social skills and coping with authority
- Organisational skills, such as: personal organisation, the ability to order and prioritise
- Analytical skills, such as: the ability to exercise judgement, managing time or problem solving,
- Personal skills, for example: insight, motivation, confidence, reliability and health awareness

ENROLMENT	530
SUPPORT 6HRS	519
SUPPORT 12HRS	27
VOLUNTEER/WEX PLACEMENT	44
PARTICIPANTS IN EDUCATION OR TRAINING UPON LEAVING	69
INTO EMPLOYMENT	100
SUSTAINED EET FOR 26 WEEKS OUT OF 32 WEEKS	55

LEFT PROGRAMME 171
Grand Total 1517

Project Achievements

Target Groups. Output and results.

Please complete **Table 1** with the profiled number of target groups and actual number of target groups supported. Additionally London Councils is required to particularly report on how the ESF target groups below were supported through project activities. Therefore, please explain how the project has addressed barriers faced by the following target groups:

Please provide information under the following headings:

- **Disabled people** including those with mental health needs (e.g. adaptations to buildings, equipment, websites, software, transport provision, innovative recruitment procedures, extra efforts to consult with community-based disability groups, etc.)
- **Lone parents** (examples of activities to promote participation in employment by lone parents)
- **Older people** (50 years and over. Examples of activities to promote access to provision by older people, actions taken to retain older people in employment and/or re-engage them in the labour market)
- **Ethnic minorities** including women from ethnic groups with low labour market participation rates (examples of activities to actively promote equality for people from ethnic minorities and provide access to provision for people from ethnic minorities)
- **Women** (e.g. training for women to enter non-traditional occupations)

In **Table 2** complete figures for the profiled number of ethnic minority groups and actual number of ethnic minority groups supported. As well as providing figures for the number of ethnic minorities supported, include how these groups were engaged, and what specific barriers they faced. It may be that your project found it difficult to engage with a particular target group, if so please tell us why you were not able to engage or it was not appropriate to do so. Please complete **Table 3** to show how well you met your profiled outputs and results.

In a detailed interview for this report, Yolande Burgess commented on the overall performance of the equalities profiles across the projects, which MI's data confirms. "In terms of equalities measures, the whole partnerships are wiping the floor, this is really good stuff," she says. "In terms of people who are homeless, people with

disabilities, the BAME communities, single parents, jobless families – absolutely beating the targets, so all of the partners are demonstrating they're doing what they were asked to do in reaching people that are furthest from the labour market. I see this through the data but it tells me these are individuals who need the most help."

Disabled participants

The figures show 64 people who declared disability were enrolled, representing a little over 15% of the cohort. Additionally, 32 people had a mental health condition and 41 were recorded as having a health condition that limits work.

It could be the case that in failing to identify themselves as disabled, people are interpreting disability as a physical restriction and not citing, for example, ongoing back pain, dyslexia or severe depression as disability.

Lone parents

Of those enrolled on the Community Life Change project, almost 70% were lone parents, a total of 286 people, mostly women. While all parents face challenges in sustaining employment, this is potentially, a more acute issue for lone parents.

Older people – 50 years plus

The project enrolled 96 older people, just over 23% of the total cohort. Older people are under-represented in employment, although in London, they are more likely to find work than in other parts of the country.

In both London and the UK only around 10% of the over-65s are employed (ONS December 2017). This is possibly a group which is more likely to seek support and advice to lead them back into work.

Ethnic minorities

Just over 50% of those enrolled on Community Life Change were from BAME groups, amounting to 206 people, demonstrating the effectiveness of the project in recruiting clients from these groups.

Women

Almost 69% of those enrolled were female, 282 women. This is against an original target which was just above 50% of participants who were women. The difference in performance against target may, in part, be due to Successful Mums being one of the partners, as it works solely with women who have been at home with their families and who are wanting to return to work. Women are motivated – it is known that they are more likely than men to seek work and also, they are more likely to take on multiple jobs.

Table 1: Target Groups Supported:

Target group	Profile		Actual	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Total number of participants enrolled	418	402	282	127
Parents with long-term work limiting health conditions	29	28	39	2
People with mental health needs	38	36	28	4
People from ethnic groups with low labour market participation rates	167	161	144	62
Women facing barriers to employment	303	0	282	0
Homeless people	29	28	20	8
People recovering from drug and / or alcohol addiction or misuse	29	28	4	19

Table 2: Ethnic Minority Groups Supported:

		Number (Profiled)	Number (Actual)
Asian/Asian British	Indian	8	
	Pakistani	41	
	Bangladeshi	41	
	Chinese	8	
	Other	66	

Black/Black British	African	370	
	Caribbean	123	
	Other	16	
White	English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	33	
	Irish	8	
	Gypsy or Irish traveller	0	
	Other	33	
Mixed	White and Black Caribbean	25	
	White and Black African	16	
	White and Asian	8	
	Other	16	
Other	Arab	8	
	Other	0	

Table 3: Performance Table: Outputs and Results:

Employment status		Greater than 3 years
Long-term unemployed	315	209
Economically inactive	95	75

Borough spread

The Poverty Programme is a Pan London Programme divided into six borough clusters. Please complete **Table 4** to show how well your project achieved against your profiled Borough starts.

Table 4: Performance Table: Borough starts: Project 4

Borough	Starts	Achieved
Southwark		
Lewisham		
Bromley		
Greenwich		
Bexley		
Total		

Programme Manager Feedback

This section presents the views of your ESF Programme Manager.

Yolande Burgess, Strategy Director, London Councils

Before the project

What was this new work designed to achieve?

We were asked to commission projects that tackled poverty through unemployment. The key target audiences were long-term unemployed and those who were economically inactive. Particularly single parents, ex-offenders, those who were recovering from drug and alcohol misuse – or indeed still battling, people who were homeless, genuinely, those who were furthest from the labour market. It's a programme that wants to see people in jobs at the end of it. But equally so, fairly unusually, things like work experience was paid for, partly in recognition that some people will start on a journey but you won't get them into work and we need to factor in the costs of that. Education as an outcome was built in.

On the pan-London grants programme, Priority 1 is Tackling Homelessness, Priority 2 is Combatting Sexual and Domestic Violence, Priority 3 is Tackling Poverty through Employment. Another aspect of the project is to make sure there were interrelationships between Priorities 1, 2 and 3.

How did London Councils select the lead partners?

It was an open bid arrangement – organisation made applications and advised us of the partners they wanted to work with, relating to the specification that was put out. MI Comput works with Successful Mums, an organisation that works with mother returners, not necessarily single mums but somebody who's been economically inactive, potentially for a very long time and would need some help to get back into the labour market. The bidders would have come with their partnerships in tow.

What were you looking for in selecting the partnerships?

Was it based on previous success; ability to cover homelessness/alcohol/spread of their work geographically and in terms of their ability to hit particular target groups?

Say we want to purchase a service through the grants programme, ESF programme, we identify target groups, in this instance long-term unemployed economically inactive, then highlight some priority groups – single parents, people with disabilities. Those who are furthest from the labour market and therefore, likely to be in financial difficulties because of that – how can they better their own position through employment?

How were the targets for this work set, given this is a long-term unemployed group?

We have the contract with the GLA to deliver ESF and that's how the targets are set. Within the specification that we wanted to meet for London, there were also targets that we had to meet around ESF, principally long-term unemployed and economically inactive, so the splits around ethnicity, gender, disability, they are all targets within what we're required to meet around ESF. I had discovered that our projects had been non-compliant and faced a massive fine, which meant we needed to completely change it so that it reflected the ESF requirements.

At the start

Could you talk about changes in the way things were funded, as London Councils was no longer a co-financer. What was the impact of this?

London Councils was a co-financer for the old ESF programme, for the 2014-2020 round of ESF, London Councils was no longer a co-financer, it was a direct bid organisation, a bit like us being the prime deliverer. From a funding agreement perspective, we're the lead partner, so it's literally like we are a delivery organisation. I think some people think there are more flexibilities than there really are when you're a co-financer. But there are certain things you can do slightly differently. As a direct bid organisation, you've got no flexibility.

Why and in what ways did the paperwork and eligibility criteria change within some months of the start? What impact did this have?

It had significant impact. For a start, one of the key issues I identified straight away was that nobody in the team had realised that we were using the ILO definition of economically inactive – the International Labour Organisation definition of economically active is, you're not available to start work immediately or within the next two weeks and you haven't been seeking work within the last four weeks. So, if someone will say, of course I can't start work, I've got childcare to sort out, they're economically inactive. There was significant misinterpretation of that and people thought it was the DWP rules for economically inactive, they thought you could include short-term unemployed people who were on JSA, so we uncovered significant non-compliance. That was the tip of the iceberg.

Partner organisations would say they lost significant numbers of outputs. You visited the various partnerships at this stage, which was appreciated. Did this have an impact?

When we'd uncovered some of this, I went out with a colleague to the lead partners' sub-partner meetings and made it really clear this isn't them [lead partners] tying you up in knots, this is the way it has to operate, this is what we have to do, this is the guidance, this is what you need to do. I effected some changes in the team to try and help with this, I brought in quality assurance administrators to try and help people understand what it was that we needed them to do.

In fairness to MI ComputSolutions and all the partners in Priority 3, they did go through an extraordinarily difficult moment in time. And they had been told things that were incorrect. They stayed the course. We've tried to weather the storm together – we've not always agreed – but we're still here. I've sat in front of grants committee meetings to say, some of those early efforts were nothing short of heroic, to try turn the programme around.

MIC say they took on a member of staff but had to let her go, as after six months, they still weren't being paid. This then put pressure on their existing staff to deliver.

One of the first things I sorted out when I came in was to pay people. When I first came in, I hadn't realised that none of them had been paid for four months, which is why I had to move really fast to get a payment system in place. By the time I came in, most of them hadn't had any money, apart from their advance.

They say it also caused a breakdown in trust with their partners, who believed they had the funds but were withholding it.

Driving licences were not being accepted as proof of identity, people with residency permits were being asked for evidence that they had to provide in their dossier to get the residence permit.

I have to follow the guidelines. [We might disagree] but we signed a funding agreement and so did [the bidders]. Certainly, the compliance regime for ESF in this round is significantly more burdensome. But if somebody has gone through UK residency and has got their documents from the Home Office, we can accept that.

As a direct bid organisation, the penalties are severe in terms of audit. If an auditor comes in and does a Section 125, looks at a sample and identifies a 5% error rate, in actual value is £100 – but they apply the 5% against the entire contract, so it's 5% of £10 million. So, the actual penalties are really severe, we have been, under my direction, very down the line in terms of compliance.

We have also pushed back against the GLA, we asked them to look at these groups of individuals and how they come into a programme like this, they're not going to be long-term unemployed. We used the example of how the prison service operates with the Job Centre, for someone who has had a fairly lengthy custodial sentence. Job Centre advisers go into the prison four to six weeks before they are released to do their paperwork for Universal Credit. The day they walk out the door, they are

unemployed. Technically, they are actually economically inactive because they haven't worked for years, the best they've done is work within the prison. The vast majority with long custodial sentences are homeless or have very volatile housing, up to 60 or 70% of the prison population, particularly men, have significant literacy and numeracy issues, their skills are going to be out-of-date. All of that implies they are economically inactive, but the guidance clearly states if an individual is in receipt of JSA because they are mandated to be available and actively seeking work, they are therefore unemployed, so they're not eligible.

Demonstrating a perversity in the system helped us get some short-term targets, so we've used that with the projects to say, if somebody has been cycling in and out of really horrible employment, they just need a bit more support to help them stabilise their employment. Or the initial assessment and needs analysis demonstrates this person has significant needs and is going to need [additional] help.

The actual outcome for ESF is moving someone into employment or job search. We tried to separate that out to give organisations the opportunity to do more into job search rather than employment, because it's about moving people who are furthest from the labour market. It's just so difficult to prove it, we tried everything and I know the projects were really disappointed about that as well. We genuinely tried to make something work in a better way but we just couldn't get it to work. The easiest way to prove it, perversely, would be somebody who is economically inactive and then ends up on Jobseekers' Allowance. That's easy to prove but proving it any other way just turned into this gargantuan battle to the point at which, we had a S125 audit, they've got a job to do. But I was trying to point out to them was, this is a project that is supposed to reach out to individuals who are furthest from the labour market. We've got a set of rules here that are hindering our ability to do that, to prove the added value an organisation has given to somebody, in terms of moving them forward.

*Were there changes in staff and structure at London Councils at this stage?
I ask this because people have identified a culture shift, they describe as being from project management – including reports, case studies, interest in qualitative issues as well as data – to data scrutiny alone with a really anxious stress on issues of eligibility. Is that fair?*

Interviewees have said they felt some of it was beyond the bounds - trying to 'catch people out', 'hostile environment', 'felt distrusted', even that they felt they were being asked to be the Border Force.

It's not unfair but it's not entirely accurate. The fact that it moved from a team that was interested in qualitative data and case studies – actually, I moved in to find a team that wasn't doing very much at all – which is why most of that team is no longer here. We have moved over to significantly much more focus on compliance but at the time I came in, the GLA was ready to take back these contracts because it was a totally non-compliant programme and we were at risk of having to pay massive penalties.

I'm neither happy nor unhappy about it – but we have a compliance-based programme. While we have a very compliance-driven programme, the sort of

conversations I have in front of grants committee – also include the fact that, I'm showing you a set of numbers, which looks a bit disastrous, when those numbers are people who were far from the labour market and have been supported and given quality interventions by partners like MI ComputSolutions, [who have worked] to make sure that people are closest to the labour market or actually in jobs. What is being delivered is quality.

After the previous ESF programme the massive evaluation that was undertaken revealed a significant amount of fraud, so we've now got this compliance-heavy programme. If we set it up properly and [organisations delivering projects] know what they can and can't do, they've got to have systems and processes in place. The challenge here was we had a group of organisations that were told one thing, that should have been doing another. This was a group of organisations that were delivering in previous rounds, they knew the people here, they didn't think there was any change at all. Then four months later, amid delivery, they were asked to [make significant changes], and that was always going to be the challenge. That left all of us in the situation where some of this was never going to be quite resolved.

How were quality issues managed – was there anyone at London Councils who was looking at the 'added value' of the GOLD project? They are saying qualitative reports were not asked for – was this a policy shift – or was London Councils not staffed for this?

Quarterly reports are asked for, we ask for case studies, we ask for added value. I think what you're hearing, and I totally get this, is that all they are feeling is the compliance.

During the project

It seems there were phases where achievement picked up a bit. Why was this?

We've got a 70/30 split for economically inactive to long-term unemployed; we've never met that and haven't pushed it. [We asked the partners to do what they can], irrespective of whether clients are long-term unemployed or economically inactive, the point is, they are working with people who are vulnerable, furthest from the labour market, and they are supporting them.

From a financial perspective, we completely revised the payment model, which helped a bit in terms of pulling money in per participant earlier on, it simply enabled organisations to be more flexible about how they enrolled people.

When we talked to the partnership about extending the programme, it was clear, we are not really extending anything, we are simply stretching it. There's no more money, no more targets, that's got resource implications for all of us, that was a joint agreement with the partnership.

But the project was never where it should be, in terms of what it was achieving. Why was this and what did London Councils do to address it? Also, the payment structure changed, which made it easier to achieve. And the time period for the work

was extended, things that people saw as helpful. Introduction of 'transition to job search' criteria that never worked.

It was combinations of things, so, changing the payment model – extending the programme – definitely, trying to see where we had any room [for flexibility] at all – not very much, really. There never was going to be a silver bullet, it was just trying to do different things. Even the failed separating out into job search and into employment [transition to job search], I bitterly regret that we didn't pull it off – but I don't regret trying.

Why do you think some partnerships do better than others?

I think some partnerships are probably more embedded in their communities, some are bigger than others and had a bit more reach. Particularly because we're talking about partners delivering in a programme that was already very difficult, it genuinely comes down to, who are they reaching? Some things I look at on a quarterly basis are where's everybody in terms of equalities measures, the whole partnerships are wiping the floor, this is really good stuff. In terms of people who are homeless, people with disabilities, the BAME communities, single parents, jobless families – absolutely beating the targets, so all of the partners are demonstrating they're doing what they were asked to do in reaching people that are furthest from the labour market. I see this through the data but it tells me these are individuals who need the most help.

It's been such a difficult journey for everybody, they've all made heroic efforts to try and rescue the programme – nobody *didn't* do that. There were some minor differences in that organisations were genuinely far better embedded in their local communities, probably had programmes that they were delivering for some time, that always does make life a bit easier because word of mouth has been done.

As we're aware, a number of complaints were made:

To you in a meeting with all lead partners

To some London Councils (Redbridge and Westminster) who were co-funding the work. Eventually to the chair of the grants committee in a letter from all lead partners. You'll know the nature of the complaints: no database; long delays; shifting rules about data; rules that did not correspond to ESF guidance and went beyond it; data that was accepted and then later rejected; what's been described to me as 'punitive and capricious monitoring'.

Can you talk through those a bit? Did these meetings have any impact?

They were never shifting rules. In terms of the response from the chair of the grants committee, there were always going to be things we agree to differ on. This was definitely one.

It's untrue that it went beyond ESF rules. One of the reasons why I asked for a member of the GLA to be in the meeting, I asked the officer from the GLA, following an internal inspection we'd had, a Section 125 audit, are we doing anything that is above ESF rules? We were accused of gold-plating but I can pick up the guidance and show chapter and verse. While it's not a comfortable place to be, that was my job, to protect this [ESF rules].

It was coming up to Christmas, we'd done some quality assurance and I was already having serious concerns internally about our database. Somebody sends us a submission, we value up the submission, it might be worth £35,000 if the whole lot was approved. We do quality assurance and we go back and say £20,000 is fully approved, we've queried £5,000 but we'll pay it because they're simple things to deal with. But these are query-rejected and [we told the partners] to resolve them and bring it back.

I wrote back to all the partners and said we are accepting the value you're giving us for the submission because it's just before Christmas and will pay everything without quality-assuring it. That does mean that later on, it might then be rejected, as we didn't do the quality assurance. As those were quite big submissions, we've still had that discussion with several organisations and had to remind them, that was in the submission we simply paid, because it was just before Christmas.

And also, in fairness to them, I'm not going to say we haven't made mistakes, sometimes, it's genuinely been in an error.

People have described to me staff in tears; huge levels of anger and frustration; working in an environment of hostility and combat; feeling got at and unsupported; clients upset at redoing paperwork; people dropping out as a result. Masses of time wasted chasing extra evidence. The experienced it as a culture of looking for things to use to dismiss evidence that should have been acceptable; things feeling out of control; emails not being answered.

Remember I've worked across an entire partnership – that's one or two members of staff, with one or two partners.

They had the rules, they knew what was eligible and what wasn't, if it wasn't eligible we'd have to tell them. I'm not disagreeing – is this difficult when you're working with a sensitive client group? Absolutely it is – but these are the rules, unfortunately, that's the compliance regime we've had to work with. They are on the frontline and they really feel it. So, I get that they're absolutely frustrated with it. But I can't draw down ESF if they don't have the right paperwork.

Were the complainants just being a pain or did they have a point? These complaints were quite formal and accompanied by documented evidence. Were they taken seriously? Did anything change as a result?

Of course, they had a point but unfortunately, we had a point too. That was the challenge. I spent the first year [acknowledging] mistakes I hadn't made but that was also my job. Yes, they were told something else but unfortunately, now it looks like this. Some things changed but everything that people asked for? No, that they didn't get.

How has this project worked from London Councils' point of view? Painful? Unrewarding? Overly labour intensive? Did you allocate more staff to speed things up?

I couldn't allocate more staff, we had to run the project at a third of the original staff because we'd spent so much money running a non-compliant programme, that when I picked it up, we already had a staffing deficit, so had to reconfigure what we did with a smaller team. I know that financially, this has not [been successful] for our partners, but it hasn't for us either.

What learning has there been – what would London Councils do differently next time?

Set it up properly. Explain that if partners want this funding agreement, they have to do all of these things; they need to understand, they can't come to us and say can we change this.

With more recent rounds, we do workshops at the point at which the specifications go out, so we talk about compliance then, during pre-agreement meetings, they get a compliance pack, we then do a compliance workshops, quality assurance staff go out when the first set of enrolments take place. They work with staff in projects and explain, when they've got the client, just ask them the question now, don't say, we think that will do and then find two weeks later, we're saying, it won't do because that's not what it says on guidance. That certainly helps.

Yes, it's been painful it's difficult to say unrewarding because all experience is learning – and therefore, good! But the bit that I was never going to be able to fix is that it wasn't set up properly, and the way a thing starts is critical and incredibly important. And yes, our partners feel really burnt by that – and I completely get why, I totally understand.

What good things have come out of the work?

I've been working with a group of organisations to develop the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and I can tell them what not to do. ESF just happens to be a very compliance driven type of approach. Would I want to do more heavily compliant-based type of programme activity? No, I'd want something that allows more flexibility, gives people the opportunities to do the work they need to do in a slightly less compliance-based manner.

But equally so, it's public money and we have to be accountable for it. But I think we can be accountable for it in different ways.

Towards the End

Was any innovative practice reported or useful examples of good practice?

Some of the work particularly through the more specialist sub-partners, about how they've worked with individuals who have just been released from prison, some of the innovative work has been happening across the priorities. Where Priority 3 partners have identified individuals who are at risk of losing their home, [they have been able to] immediately put them in contact with the Priority 1 partner, helping

them to stabilise their leasehold and support them in talking to their landlord.

It's about people doing their jobs in a way that gets the right results, it sometimes does require them to move their head five degrees. A lot of this is about getting the basics really right – very robust, strong partnership working, understanding who the partners are, how people can help, thinking about how you can create a team around the individual, not being competitive when it comes to a particular individual. All of those things, I've seen in the programme.

What will happen to the underspend?

The underspend is about a million pounds, the grants committee will decide what to do. The ESF part will never have been drawn down, so that sits with ESF at the GLA. The match-funding element goes back to the [London Councils] grants committee for a determination on what they want to do with it.

Has there been any impact on relations with the boroughs or with community delivery partners?

I won't say that we've not had problems in terms of partnership, not just with the agencies we work with directly but with their sub-partners as well. I'm sure that some of them have simply seen us as the devil in this. And we just have to live that. It's also my job to protect the reputation of this organisation. But I'm not going to say, we did this perfectly, we didn't get anything wrong. We did things wrong and it had an impact and for that, I am truly sorry because that was clearly never the intention. But unfortunately, that happened.

Do you think that because of what you uncovered in terms of compliance, is that regime going to be the way forward?

Not as far as I'm concerned. We've got a programme until the end of 2020, the Treasury has underwritten ESF until the end of 2023, that's a good thing because people have contractual arrangements and they need to know they have some surety, irrespective of what happens in terms of exiting the EU.

We have to be accountable – but we can build accountability into systems in a different way. Match-funding is important, it's about matching commitment, not just matching money.

London Councils has some of the most sophisticated governance. We are a membership organisation for 32 local authorities and the City of London, with responsibility for thousands of statutory requirements. We have two different types of internal audit, we have two types of external audit, we're open to scrutiny by central government.

So, if [organisations are] making an application for funding, don't give [them] new governance arrangements – trust ours. Immediately that takes out a massive piece of bureaucracy, for us as a grantee and for the grantor. Also, we then don't have pass that bureaucracy on to anybody else who gets grants to deliver provision. We

can take different approaches to things. This is not an issue around with ESF, it's a broader comment. Particularly with setting up something new, let's do the hard work of people getting their heads out of confusing outputs with outcomes and outcomes with impacts. Don't measure it just because you can measure, measure it because that's what needs to be measured. And then help us think how we actually do build in impact measures that we go back to after the lifetime of a project and after the lifetime of the funding. Let's do the difficult stuff and then let's not make it difficult for people to deliver.

They've been brilliant. They've put up with so much and they've continued to deliver. And every single one of them could have pulled out and they didn't. That says something about the calibre of the individuals in the organisations and the intentions and the values of the organisations themselves.

Working with London Councils

This section should detail how effective you feel your partnership with London Councils was.

Throughout the report, a range of issues related to monitoring by London Councils are recorded in detail. MI ComputSolutions and its partners in Community Life Change consider that this resulted in a focus on paperwork and less successful outcomes for many clients. MI, along with its partners, is frustrated that this means many clients of its clients were supported and progressed to training or employment, but the data shows under-performance against targets because submissions were not accepted and therefore, neither recorded nor funded.

On behalf of London Councils, Yolande Burgess states that when the projects began in September 2016, the client eligibility guidance issued to partners was incorrect and did not comply with ESF rules. She also comments that, in an audit of a previous round of projects, significant fraud had been uncovered. This situation required a stringent monitoring regime and ESF-compliant guidance to be issued to the partners. It is accepted that getting this right from the start would have enabled partners to adhere to the guidance from the outset – or decide whether or not to engage in the contract.

Yolande explains the risk of significant fines which would have been imposed for non-compliance. This meant London Councils had to act while projects were under way to bring them into line with ESF rules. This is outlined in detail in a lengthy interview with Yolande in the previous section.

However, all the partners have reported that guidance was never clear nor consistent throughout almost two years, the duration of Community Life Change. While issues arising from this are documented throughout this report, MI and its

partners assert the high levels of satisfaction expressed by their clients, some of whom are featured in the participants' section.

However, some issues highlighted by the partners appear not to relate to non-compliance with ESF rules. The timeliness of response to the submission of client records, long delays to payments and the late provision of a database which turned out to be non-functioning, are among the problems raised and indeed, Yolande acknowledges that errors were made.

The perception of the partners about working with London Councils is documented in some detail throughout the report and therefore, is not repeated here in other than general terms. However, national charity Royal Mencap was one of the original partners in the project from September 2016 and its managers took the decision to withdraw from the partnership in March 2019. It may be useful to consider how this situation arose and here, two of Mencap's managers outline the issues which led to their decision to withdraw from the Community Life Change project.

Royal Mencap: "Everything we did didn't seem to be right"

Dee Napier, regional manager, Royal Mencap and Dennis Shattell, locality manager for London, Kent, Suffolk and Essex Royal Mencap

Royal Mencap must be accustomed to working with funders and their monitoring of programmes – are there specific issues you wish to highlight in relation to Community Life Change?

Dee: We were working on a number of different European-funded projects but this was the most challenging. We couldn't seem to get it work and lost a lot of money on it. That's why we pulled out. It was September 2016 when we originally went into it. We had various people working on it, but we pulled out in March this year. Out of two years' work, we got about £20k, so it cost us a lot of money. There's still a discussion about whether we're going to claw back more.

ESF contracts have been difficult; it feels like so there are so many different people and layers involved, that everybody wants different bits of paper, and they change the bit of paper it's a nightmare to try and get it agreed. I'm the regional manager, Dennis is the local manager, at the beginning we felt we had a lot of support but then that person left and we just were stranded with it. Everything we did didn't seem to be right.

Dennis: Our partners were in the same situation, they were not getting paid and putting loads of work in and not getting paid for the work, the paperwork changed. Communication at the beginning was great, then it just died out and there were just problems after problems, we'd submit a file, it gets agreed, then they'd say it's not been submitted and we've got to work on it again. If clients have moved on you can't

get the paperwork from them and a lot of our clients don't have the documents they were asking for. They wanted passports and on other programmes, if there was loads of money, we could pay for their passports but on this one we just couldn't do that for the small amount of money we were getting.

Do you have experience of other ESF programmes and if so, has this project differed from them?

Dee: We're still working with a couple of ESF programmes, they're all a challenge because the ground changes all the time – but nothing like it has on this one. We were plodding on but 21 getting nowhere. It was a very small contract and all we could have claimed was 59k. We didn't have full-time workers on it all the time but we had significant amount of input into it. What we've got back wouldn't even have paid for a full-time member of staff even for a year, let alone the two years this ran for.

Are you able to outline the circumstances which led to Royal Mencap's decision to withdraw from the partnership?

Dennis: We withdrew in March 2019.

Dee: We just weren't getting anywhere, files were going back and forth, files were lost, we just weren't getting anywhere and there just didn't seem to be a way of getting through it. Every time something was submitted, it came back with something different. We were having a restructure anyway, we said we need to end this when we can't put another member of staff on this when we've got no money to pay them.

How did Royal Mencap managers feel about MI's management of Community Life Change?

At the beginning it was really good, we were really happy with Paul and he was very supportive, but people changed, we got mixed messages, then we didn't get any messages.

Dennis: We talked in beginning about setting up regular meetings with all the partners, then that didn't happen. Adrian came in late on in the project around December 2018. At that meeting we talked about the finances and not being paid and he said the other partners were in the same situation.

Dee: We're a big organisation and to an extent, we can withstand cashflow. Because it was a relatively small project, it not exactly passed us by but we kept being told, this may come through – but we finally just said, nothing is coming through. They're still saying there may be some clawback.

Dennis: We could only invoice for folders that could be agreed and now they want to

claw back another six grand from us. There were many checks, MI did a file check to send it off to London Councils. I was chasing them all the time to find out whether we could actually get payment.

How successful was Community Life Change for your Clients?

We have many good stories, because of the way we work is so person-centred, all our clients would have grown in confidence over the time, and there are many went on to do work experience or did find a job. I would say that every person we worked with has benefited.

Dee: We didn't quite meet the target to work with 52 people but it was getting the evidence. We had some examples of people who had gone into education but because they couldn't get the right bits of paper, it wasn't accepted so we couldn't get paid for it. Virtually everybody would do work placements or work experience but actually providing the evidence that was acceptable, that was the problem.

Submitting your completed evaluation

The evaluation should be submitted electronically to your London Councils Performance Manager. Signed hard copies should only be submitted once the report has been approved.