





Performing Under Pressure:
How Higher Performing Workplaces made
a difference in challenging times

Executive summary

About Higher Performing Workplaces

The aim of the Higher Performing Workplaces (HPW) project is to enhance the skills offer in the region, focusing on the following key objectives:

- improving staff motivation, leadership, communication and teamwork;
- increasing staff retention;
- supporting with longer-term skills planning to help realise business ambitions, diversification, new products, markets or expansion;
- enhancing employee involvement and commitment to the company;
- ensuring higher levels of financial performance;
- enhancing and enabling business strategy and operational planning to achieve growth; and
- promoting high levels of females in leadership positions¹.

HPW project objectives were designed to align closely with the priorities of the Leeds City Region's Strategic Economic Plan 2016-2036, which seeks to promote "good growth [which] delivers high levels of prosperity, jobs and quality of life for everyone." Business growth is the first major priority of the region's Strategic Plan, specifically aiming to "drive up productivity, growth and employment through an

environment that enables businesses to start-up, innovate, trade and invest."²

The HPW project is managed by WYCC with a total value of £3 million, made up of European Social Fund funding of £1.5million and match funding of £1.5million (employer cash contributions). It provided a training and coaching package to businesses in the Leeds City Region between 2019 and 2021.

The HPW offer spans four main categories:

Export and innovation: designed to increase in-house skills and knowledge to access new domestic and international markets to drive export

Innovative working: courses that helped individuals to drive working and employment practices that support operational and employee demands

Empowering leaders: programmes developed to nurture and progress leadership skills with specific activities to support female employees to narrow the gender gap in leadership positions

Effective human resources: training designed to help businesses use effective HR practices to support succession planning, encourage workplace diversity and improve workplace culture

Businesses in the Leeds City Region³ could access 40% ESF funding towards the cost of training. Eligible individuals could also access coaching and Business Performance Mentoring from a selection of coaches/mentors contracted by WYCC.

- WYCC, Higher Performing Workplaces: https://www. westyorkshirecolleges.co.uk/contracted-projects/higher-performing-workplaces
- 2. Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, 2016, Leeds City Region Strategic Economic Plan, 2016-2036.
- 3. See Table 1 for eligibility criteria

About the evaluation

The aim of this end-point evaluation of the HPW project is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact of the programme. The evaluation has been informed by desk-based research, an online survey of beneficiaries (97 responses, equating to a 10% response rate), a workshop and 21 depth interviews with a sample of individuals drawn from the WYCC project team, delivery partners, training providers and Leeds City Region stakeholders.

Key findings

It is important to note that the HPW project has been delivered in **unprecedented and highly challenging circumstances**. The project commenced in 2019 but was significantly affected by two key events outside of the control of the project team – the EU exit and knock-on effects of this, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many businesses in scope of receiving training via HPW faced significant challenges during the pandemic, notably pressures on cashflow and the need to furlough staff. The impact of the pandemic therefore had a detrimental impact on performance, limiting take up and delivery during 2020 in particular when multiple lockdowns were implemented. The WYCC requested an extension to the project because of the impacts of the pandemic; the impact on organisations cannot be underestimated; for most it was a time

to endure, and to focus on immediate protection of their business, rather than a time to consider investment in training. The requirement of a 60% cash contribution was difficult for many businesses at a time when their cashflow was under pressure. Although providers, with sustained support from WYCC, adapted their offer to an online course where possible to do so – this took time and was not suitable for all the provision on offer, notably the bespoke training.

Although the HPW project did not achieve its target numbers of people trained – in light of the challenging circumstances described above - the numbers that were achieved represent a significant achievement. Beneficiaries report highly positive impacts and outcomes as a result of receiving the training and mentoring. One business cited a Return on Investment (RoI) of £130,000 for just one cohort of eight people, while another says the support is expected to add at least 20% to their business income.

One individual beneficiary said:

"It's been transformational. It has made me more self-aware, built confidence and given me the opportunity to make positive changes in how I am in the workplace"

Interventions have been high quality, with very positive feedback from participants. Participants report an increase in both their level of knowledge and their level of confidence after the training. In addition, some participants report a positive, unexpected impact on their quality of life. Training also delivered positive impacts for communication skills, leadership skills

and levels of motivation, as well as improvement to participants' working practices.

The HPW project has supported businesses in the region to successfully navigate the impacts of the pandemic, equipping leaders with key skills.

Multiple rounds of procurement ensured a variety of offerings and that offerings were of high quality. Additional rounds of procurement targeted training providers with the ability to offer training, coaching or mentoring in specific areas where existing provision fell short: accredited training courses and, those covering export and sales. The offer aligned closely with priorities outlined in the Leeds City Region Strategic Economic Plan 2016-36.

Feedback relating to the HPW project team has been extremely positive, pointing to the ongoing support for providers during challenging circumstances. In addition to its core centralised activity, the WYCC marketing team went over and above contractual requirements to try and promote HPW in light of the challenges experienced during the pandemic.

HPW has brought wider benefits than just for beneficiaries, for example the impact on the Skills Brokerage role fulfilled by WYCC. Training providers also benefitted from internal capacity building as a result of delivering this project. Relationships with delivery partners and training providers were markedly strengthened, partly because of the regular contact via contract meetings and the Project Group meetings. This leaves a strong foundation for future delivery of training in the region.

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"The success of this project lies in resilience,
hard work, partnership working and collaboration on
many levels - between the contract manager and the providers,
internally between our team, and between our supply chain and
employers. This collaboration was markedly strengthened by the project.
HPW has connected our delivery partners and providers with businesses
allowing strong long term reciprocal relationships to develop. Skills and
training are identified as crucial areas in the levelling up 'white paper'
- with over a 1000 people taking part in high quality training, HPW has
offered exactly what is needed to deliver a skills boost to local people
and businesses in the region.

West Yorkshire Consortium of Colleges will continue to be dedicated to supporting businesses with the skills to grow, improve productivity and to be sustainable. The project has provided these foundations to help reduce the skills gaps and support economic recovery and growth."

Dr Joanne Harvatt, WYCC Project Manager



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