

Circular Number: FE 02/26

Date of Issue: 14th April 2026

Subject: SKILLS FOCUS

Target Audience:

- Principals of Further Education Colleges
- Chairs of Governing Bodies
- FE College Finance Officers
- FE College MIS
- Members of Economic Engagement Working Group
- Members of Skills Focus and InnovateUs Steering Group

Summary of Contents:

This circular provides guidance and funding arrangements for the Skills Focus Programme covering the period from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027.

Enquiries:

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Related Documents: FE 03/24 - Skills Focus Coding Guidance Circular

Superseded Documents: FE 03/25– Skills Focus Circular

Expiry Date: 31 March 2027

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Aid provided to deliver this programme is granted either as State aid in compliance with European Commission regulation (EU) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 or will be a subsidy which complies with the [Subsidy Control Act 2022](#)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The aim of the Skills Focus programme is to provide tailored skills provision to small to medium sized enterprises with fewer than 250 employees, in order to help meet business needs and increase the skills levels of the existing workforce to level 2 and above.
- 1.2 The six Further Education (FE) colleges in Northern Ireland, as Non-Departmental Public Bodies of the Department, (NDPBs) act as the sole delivery arm for the programme.
- 1.3 This circular establishes guidance on the eligibility criteria, funding arrangements, and operation of the Skills Focus programme with effect from the 1st of April 2026.

2. STRATEGIC CONTEXT

2.1 Economic Vision

The Minister has outlined four key objectives as part of her Economic Vision:

- 1) To increase the proportion of working-age people in Good Jobs so that working families enjoy a decent standard of living.
- 2) To raise Productivity, which is the fundamental driver of economic growth and overall living standards.
- 3) To promote Regional Balance, ensuring that everyone shares in the benefits of prosperity.
- 4) To reduce Carbon Emissions, in order to safeguard the planet for future generations.

Skills Focus contributes to these aims and objectives by upskilling employees and providing qualifications which have real labour market relevance and provide access to high-quality jobs, creating a culture of lifelong learning. Skills Focus also aims to deliver projects in each of the priority sectors including the Green Sector, which plays a role in the reduction of carbon emissions in order to meet the Net Zero target. In addition, the Skills Focus Programme is delivered by each of the six FE Colleges to ensure that regional balance and an inclusive economy is achieved across Northern Ireland.

[DfE Business Plan 2025-26 | Department for the Economy](#)

2.2 The Programme for Government draft Outcomes Framework

On 3 March 2025, the Executive agreed a Programme for Government (PfG) for 2024-2027 entitled 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'.

One of the nine immediate priorities identified in the PfG is the need to “Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy” underpinned by skills and

technology. The PfG aims to tackle low productivity, help businesses to thrive, and boost employee wages through trade, innovation, and our key sector strengths. Vital to harnessing economic potential will be supporting employers and workers to build the skills needed both now, and in the future. Skills Focus will contribute to this identified priority by continuing to offer upskilling opportunities for small to medium sized enterprises to increase the skills levels of the existing workforce to level 2 and above.

[TEO website - Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most](#)

2.3 Skills Action Plan

The Skills Action Plan sets out the key agreed actions that the Department for the Economy will focus on, to ensure that everyone has a pathway to enhance their existing skills, and to contribute to the Minister's Economic Vision. The action plan covers three themes:

- 1) collaborating with industry and education partners to develop new ways of working.
- 2) improving the skills systems by building on the success of our institutions, interventions, and programmes.
- 3) creating an inclusive, forward-looking skills ecosystem that empowers individuals and supports economic transformation.

[DfE website - Skills Action Plan](#)

2.4 The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2025 Update

This iteration marks the fifth NI Skills Barometer publication from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) since 2015 and provides a detailed understanding of the skill requirements for the Northern Ireland Economy up to 2033, with the aim of ensuring that skills gaps are identified and addressed. The barometer identifies that skills should remain at the core of economic development policy and highlights how lifelong learning can play an important part in the 'good jobs' agenda, driving innovation and supporting sustainable economic growth. Skills Focus directly

supports the lifelong learning mechanism by contributing to tackling the identified deficit in in-employment training and ensuring that employees remain competitive and capable of meeting new challenges. Skills Focus also plays a role in offering sub-degree level qualifications to the existing workforce, identified by the Barometer as a particular challenge facing Northern Ireland's labour supply.

[DfE Website - Skills Barometer 2023 - 2033](#)

3. SKILLS FOCUS PROGRAMME AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 Skills Focus aims:

- To provide tailored skills provision to small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs), increasing the skills levels of their workforce to level 2 and above, with an increasing emphasis on qualifications at level 3 and above: and
- To support, promote, and facilitate collaborative working between businesses and FE colleges, increasing the role of the FE sector in economic development.

3.2 All projects delivered under Skills Focus must link and contribute to the government policies/strategies outlined above with regard to skills.

3.3 All agreed training interventions delivered through the programme, must include clear evidence of an identified skills need through consultation with businesses and the completion of a skills audit. This information will be captured through a Baseline Audit (**Annex A**) and entered, along with all employer engagement information, to the college's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

3.4 NI Executive resources and DfE priorities have a focus on the delivery of regulated qualifications. In light of this, a ceiling of 20% of each college's financial allocation has been set for non-regulated provision, which, for Skills Focus should only consist of recognised and accredited industry standard qualifications. A minimum of 80% of each college allocation should therefore be focused on regulated qualifications, which are defined within the college enrolment system as those at either level 3 or below on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), or at level 4 and above, regardless of whether they appear on the Framework.

3.5 The findings of the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2025 provide a detailed understanding of the skill requirements for the Northern Ireland Economy up to 2033 with the aim of ensuring that any skills gaps are identified and addressed. One main finding of the report is the oversupply of qualifications at level 2 and below, along with an under-supply of mid-tier qualifications at levels 3, 4, and 5,

and an undersupply of graduates at levels 6 and above. To help address this skills gap, a restriction of 30% of total spend has been set on the delivery of qualifications at level 2, and this target will remain in the 2026/27 financial year. It is envisaged that this restriction will be increased further in future years.

- 3.6 Skills Focus activity should be delivered across all curricular areas, as defined in each College Development Plan (CDP). Best practice dissemination via curriculum hubs, should support this aim and will further support increased delivery and reporting against priority sectoral areas particularly in relation to the Economic Vision.
- 3.7 All colleges must be fully operational on the CRM system. The CRM will be used to extract monthly reports for Skills Focus, to allow the Department to report on delivery of the programme during the 2026/27 financial year.
- 3.8 In recognition of the fact that many social enterprises operate a recognised commercial/business model, the eligibility criteria for the Skills Focus programme enables eligible social enterprises (with fewer than 250 employees) to apply for support.
- 3.9 Furthermore, due to a number of queries regarding eligibility for support through Skills Focus for businesses or social enterprises that also hold charitable status, have a charitable arm to their organisation, and/or are registered as a charity with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, eligibility is now extended to such organisations. It is important to note that participation is only available to employees of the commercial/business side of the organisation and not to volunteers of the charitable arm.
- 3.10 Community groups and charities, that have no commercial or business function as part of their revenue raising activities, will continue to be ineligible for support through the business-focused Skills Focus programme.
- 3.11 For eligible social enterprises and/or organisations with charitable status, a declaration will need to be completed and signed by the organisation (Annex C)

confirming that it is a charity that acts as a commercial enterprise, and/or is a social enterprise within the following definition:

'A social enterprise is a business whose primary purpose is based on social objectives. Any surpluses generated are principally reinvested in the business to further advance that purpose, or in the wider community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners. A social enterprise does however have a business focus and operates as a commercial enterprise.'

Note: It is the social enterprises' sole responsibility to ensure that participation in the Department for Economy's Skills Focus programme does not negatively impact on eligibility for other public sector initiatives, funding, or support.

- 3.12 The Eligibility Checklist for the programme which appears at Section One of the Skills Focus Baseline Audit, has been updated accordingly and is attached in this circular at **Annex A**. The declaration to be signed for social enterprises and/or charities can be found at **Annex C**.

4. FUNDING

- 4.1 The Department is currently awaiting confirmation of the budget to cover the period from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027. Colleges will be notified once this has been confirmed.
- 4.2 An employer contribution of 10% towards programme delivery costs will remain in place for the 2026-27 financial year with the Department again funding the remaining 90%. Colleges must therefore invoice employers for 10% of programme delivery costs as calculated using the Skills Focus Ready Reckoner which accompanies this circular. As before, where Skills Focus learners are embarking on a further year of a multi-year course, where the course was initially fully funded under the post-pandemic funding policy, full funding will continue until the course is complete.
- 4.3 In accordance with the FE NDPB planning and funding model, Grant in Aid payments for Skills Focus will be incorporated within the overall monthly resource block grant payment made to each college. In line with this model, each college agrees an annual College Development Plan (CDP) with the Department, which includes targets in relation to Skills Focus delivery. Performance against CDPs is discussed at college accountability meetings. Performance against agreed work commissioned by the Department will be assessed during the year and at the end of the year, with Partnership Agreements setting out the partnership arrangements between a college and the Department. In particular, they explain the overall governance framework within which colleges operate, including the framework through which the necessary assurances are provided to stakeholders. Roles/responsibilities of partners within overall governance frameworks are also outlined. The link to the Partnership Agreements can be found below.

[DfE Website - Partnership Agreements with FE Colleges](#)

- 4.4 College CRM systems provide the Department with details of planned activity within the Skills Focus programme. These details are extracted monthly and are used for monitoring purposes, as well as a guide for programme spend.
- 4.5 Learners at FE colleges are enrolled on college Learner Management Systems, with Consolidated Data Returns (CDRs), containing student enrolment data, regularly supplied to the Department, as per the CDR Schedule. These extracts are used for a variety of reasons within the Department. For the specific purpose of verifying actual Skills Focus activity within the college in the 2026-27 financial year, the CDR extracts scheduled for the 26th of June and the 16th of October 2026, and on dates in November 2026, January 2027, and March 2027 (yet to be confirmed), will be used.
- 4.6 Information available within the CDR enables calculation of programme spend, using the methodology outlined in the Skills Focus Ready Reckoner. Basic funding is calculated via a formula which, for actual rather than planned spend, is based on timetabled hours for each learner (recorded as Total Student Hours on the Learner Management System). Level and economic weightings are applied based on the level and regulated status of the course, and this is then multiplied by a unit value to determine cost per learner. To help address the demand for higher level qualifications as identified in the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer (Update 2025), learners undertaking regulated qualifications at level 3 or all qualifications at level 4 and above, will receive a higher economic weighting.
- 4.7 For 2026/27 therefore, the economic weighting for enrolments on all courses at level 4 and above and for regulated courses at level 3 will be 2.75. For enrolments on all other courses (courses at level 2 and non-regulated courses at level 3), the weighting will be 2.40. The Ready Reckoner to enable calculation of costings will issue with this circular and will also be available alongside the circular on the Departmental website.
- 4.8 Learners who have transferred from one course to another, will only be counted for funding once, against their new course. Their original enrolment and its

associated hours (coded on the Learner Management System as Student Status 4 – “Transferred”) will therefore be excluded from the funding calculation. In addition, where a Skills Focus learner has withdrawn from their course, the Total Student Hours used in the calculation will have automatically been reduced by the Learner Management System to reflect non-completion. Because of this, it is acknowledged that discrepancies may exist between costs calculated and recorded on CRM systems, and those calculated against CDR data that have been adjusted to reflect actual delivery. It should be noted however, that programme spend is measured using the CDR figures, and it is therefore imperative that Skills Focus enrolments are recorded on the enrolment system and updated in a timely manner.

- 4.9 Colleges are required to complete a monthly budget forecast for the Department. Ongoing monitoring of actual budget spend is expected, and early identification and reporting of realistic and potential overspend and/or underspend should be notified to the Department as early as possible.
- 4.10 The 2026/27 financial year’s final outturn and performance against targets may inform and influence decisions on the funding levels for the 2027/28 programme.

5. SKILLS AUDIT

- 5.1 Funding for completion of the Baseline Audit equates to £600, where engagement leads to a Skills Focus intervention. Where it is clear from the initial engagement that Skills Focus is not the most appropriate route for the business, a Baseline Audit should not be completed, and the business immediately advised of or signposted to other relevant provision.
- 5.2 Following completion of the Eligibility Checklist, and if Skills Focus is determined to be the most appropriate route, the College must carry out a Baseline Audit with the business (**Annex A**). **It is imperative that colleges complete the Baseline Audit with the business in person, or alternatively via a video call. Businesses should not unilaterally complete it themselves. The Baseline Audit must be signed by the business owner, or a designated representative of the business with the authority to do so. It should not be signed by the course participant unless that happens to be the owner/representative.**
- 5.3 **Colleges must also save to the relevant area in CRM, evidence that the Baseline Audit has been completed and signed by both the college and the business. This could take the form of a scanned copy of the completed document (or at least a scanned copy or image of the signature page), or screenshots of an e-mail communication between the business and the college (which clearly shows the e-mail address of the sender) confirming that the document has been signed.**
- 5.4 For three years following the completion and payment of a Baseline Audit (for either Skills Focus or the InnovateUs programme) any subsequent Baseline Audits completed for either programme with the same business, will not attract a further £600 payment. College staff must therefore sufficiently question the business to determine if they have previously worked with other colleges on either InnovateUs or Skills Focus, as a Baseline Audit payment may have been made to another college within that three-year period. The Department will

periodically check throughout the year for ineligible payments, notify colleges, and adjust spend figures where required.

5.5 The purpose of the Baseline Audit is to:

- Establish detailed background regarding the business and the context within which the business is operating;
- Identify skills gaps and agree a project plan including aims and expected impact of the qualification;
- Identify the skills requirement including an assessment of current skills levels and experience;
- Identify college delivery for the Skills Focus project;
- Identify the appropriate level of qualification required; and
- Identify future progression routes.

5.6 Baseline Audits will be monitored monthly by the department. Claims will be generated automatically on the CRM system when:

- The college completes all relevant sections of the Skills Focus Baseline Audit,
- The appropriate indicator is selected at the end of the Client & Author Agreement, to confirm the Baseline Audit has been completed, and
- Details of each training intervention are updated on the system (there is no need for the College to use the generated invoice function).

5.7 The Department will extract the claim data from the CRM system after the last calendar day of each month.

- 5.8 Following compliance checks, details of the monthly claim, along with a list of the projects funded will be sent to the College Accounting Officer and Business Engagement Team for information.
- 5.9 In circumstances where the College identifies discrepancies in the claim information provided by the Department, it is the responsibility of the College to investigate and update/amend CRM accordingly.
- 5.10 As a result of the recommendations of the 2023 review of the programme, a post-training impact evaluation needs to be conducted by the College with a sample of employers, 12 months following completion of training. This is to enable the Department to assess the effect that participation in the programme has had on businesses. An Impact Assessment template is attached to this document at **Annex B**. This survey will only need to be completed for courses that started from the 1st of April 2024 onwards when the baseline audit questionnaire was amended to accommodate additional questions in anticipation of the impact analysis.
- 5.11 Due to the large number of projects undertaken through Skills Focus, a sample size of 20% has been set for each college meaning that assessments need only be conducted for this proportion of completing projects. Each completed survey will attract a payment of £250 which will be claimed through the CRM system in the same way as other elements of project costs.

6. STATE AID / SUBSIDY CONTROL

- 6.1 Now that the United Kingdom has left the European Union, the Subsidy Control Rules that apply depend on whether the enterprise¹ being supported falls within the scope of the Windsor Framework. Since 4 January 2023, all subsidies² provided by public authorities in Northern Ireland must comply with either the European Union's State aid Rules³ or the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022⁴.

Note: The Windsor Framework details that the European Union State aid Rules still apply when financial assistance measures have a material effect on trade between NI and the European Union. UK Government and European Commission guidance on Article 10 of the Windsor Framework can be accessed via the links below.

[UK Government Guidance on the scope and application of Article 10 of the Windsor Framework](#)

[European Commission Notice to stakeholders on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom and EU rules in the field of state aid 2023/C 202/04](#)

- 6.2 If the enterprise engages in manufacturing or trades goods, including the production of and trade in agricultural products, or is involved in the production of electricity for the wholesale market, the EU's State aid Rules will apply. The UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 applies to all other subsidies to enterprises that provide services on a market.

¹ An enterprise (which also known as an 'undertaking' in EU State aid law) is defined in [Section 7 of the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 - UK legislation website](#) and is a person (or group of persons) who is engaged in an economic activity that entails offering goods or services on a market, to the extent that the person (or group of persons) is engaged in such an activity.

² A subsidy provided by a UK public authority (which is commonly referred to as State aid under EU law) is financial assistance that satisfies all four 'limbs' of the UK's or the EU's subsidy test. See [Section 2 of the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 - UK legislation website](#)

³ [The Windsor Framework - GOV.UK website](#)

⁴ [UK subsidy control regime - GOV.UK website](#)

6.3 When a participating business is within the scope of the Windsor Framework (i.e., the business manufactures goods or potentially could trade goods into the EU's Single Market), Skills Focus support must comply with the applicable EU 'de minimis' aid Regulation⁵. It is expected that most of the Skills Focus projects which are within the scope of the Framework will fall within the scope of the general / industrial *de minimis* Regulation - [European Commission Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023](#).

6.4 When a participating business is not within the scope of the Windsor Framework, legal cover for the Skills Focus support is provided by a Subsidy Scheme that has been registered on the UK's Subsidy Database. This Scheme (Reference Number SC10888⁶) complies with the seven principles of the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022⁷.

6.5 To ensure compliance with UK and EU Subsidy Control requirements, Colleges must first determine which regime applies, by determining whether the business:

- manufactures or trades in goods that could be traded into the EU Single Market (if so, the EU State aid Rules and the *de minimis* regulation applies); or
- is operating in the service sector (then the UK Subsidy Control Regime applies).

6.6 If the EU State aid Rules apply the College must:

- Write to the business and inform them that the Skills Focus offer is EU *de minimis aid* (and detail the applicable European Union *de minimis* Regulation

⁵ The EU has four de minimis Regulations. A [general \(€300k\) de minimis Regulation - EU law website](#), [a primary agriculture de minimis Regulation](#), [a fisheries and aquaculture de minimis Regulation](#) and [a Services of General Economic Interest de minimis Regulation](#).

⁶ BEIS website - UK transparency database - scheme [SC10888](#)

⁷ [UK legislation website - Subsidy Control Act 2022](#)

Number and date of publication) and detail the value of the *de minimis* aid that is being offered⁸.

- Ask the business to inform the college (in writing*) how much other *de minimis* aid⁹ it has received in the last three years.
- Check that, in granting the business this new *de minimis* aid, that it will not exceed the applicable three-year aid threshold – which in the case of the ‘general / industrial’ *de minimis* regulation is currently €300,000.
- Once the *de minimis* aid has been awarded, the College should write to the business to advise it that, if required, within the next three years, it must declare this *de minimis* aid to any public authority that is considering awarding it further *de minimis* aid.
- Also, from 1 January 2026, as detailed in [Article 6 of the de minimis Regulation](#), specified information on *de minimis* aid granted must be registered on the EUs eAid register (eAIR), within 20 working days following the acceptance of the aid. To facilitate this, if a *de minimis* declaration/acceptance form has been completed with a business as part of the Baseline Audit process (Annex C), it should be uploaded to the CRM system on the same day and the Department notified by email that the grant offer has been made. Notification e-mails should be sent to both stephen.buchanan@economy-ni.gov.uk and michael.finlay@economy-ni.gov.uk.

⁸ *de minimis* aid must be offered as a gross grant equivalent - see Article 4 of the industrial *de minimis* regulation - [EU law website - Commission Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023](#)

⁹ Note, as *de minimis* aid, only cumulates with other *de minimis* aid, the business only needs to inform the College about *de minimis* aid it has been awarded in the three-year period. This should be clear from the aid award documentation. Other types of State aid, that are not *de minimis*, should be identifiable by their State Aid Scheme or EU decision reference number (e.g. SA.123456). These other types of State aid do not cumulate with *de minimis* aid. If the business is not sure whether the other aid awards are *de minimis*, it should start by asking the public authority that provided the aid.

- If the business is engaged in primary agricultural activities, fisheries, or aquaculture, the general / industrial *de minimis* Regulation does not apply and the Colleges will need to comply instead with the relevant agricultural or fisheries/aquaculture *de minimis* Regulation. For example, the business is also a farmer or connected to a family farm or a fish farmer or operated a trawling boat. If so, the Colleges should be aware that the *de minimis* rules for primary agriculture and fisheries have lower maximum ceilings¹⁰ and, to complicate matters further, the fisheries *de minimis* Regulation has a different (3 fiscal year) cumulation period. Skills Focus support can still be provided, but this must be provided in accordance with the applicable *de minimis* Regulation for primary agriculture¹¹ or fisheries and aquaculture¹². If this situation occurs, as the *de minimis* rules for primary agriculture and fisheries differ from the industrial rules, the College may wish to contact the Economic Analysis and State Aid Policy team in the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) for further advice.

***Note** - A combined form for declaring previous *de minimis* support in the last 3 years, detailing the value of support being offered for the proposed Skills Focus project and confirming the business acceptance of that offer is included with Annex A and should be completed as part of the Baseline Audit. That combined State aid form should be retained by each College for 10 years for audit purposes, from the last date of payment of Skills Focus grant support.

6.7 When the UK Subsidy Control Regime applies (i.e., the business operates in the services sector only), if the business is eligible, no further Subsidy Control checks should be required. The Skills Focus Scheme has been assessed against the UK Subsidy Control Act 2022 and has been found to comply with Part 2 of the Act and, in particular, the seven principles in Schedule 1 of the Act. The scheme

¹⁰ €50,000 for companies involved in primary agricultural production, and €30,000 if they are involved in the fisheries or aquaculture sectors which can be increased to €40,000 if the Member State has in place a national central register in accordance with Article 6(2).

¹¹ [EU law website - *de minimis* in Agriculture Commission Regulation \(EU\) No 1408/2013](#)

¹² [EU law website - *de minimis* in Fisheries and Aquaculture - Commission Regulation \(EU\) No 717/2014](#)

has been registered on the UK's Transparency Database, and its reference number is SC10888¹³.

6.8 The Skills Focus support to services sector businesses is NOT being provided on the basis of the Act's Minimum Financial Assistance (MFA) exemption. Consequently, there is no requirement to check what other *de minimis* or MFA subsidies have been received by the company previously, unless these are seen as being related subsidies¹⁴.

6.9 However, the College must still advise the company that the support they are receiving is a Subsidy, as defined in section 2 of the Subsidy Control Act, and that should detail that the Skills Focus Subsidy Scheme reference number is SC10888.

6.10 Finally, in determining whether a business is eligible for Skills Focus support, the colleges must also check that none of the prohibitions and other requirements in Chapter 2 of Part 2 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022 apply to the Subsidy¹⁵. In particular, the College must check and confirm that:

- The Skills Focus Scheme is not providing support to ailing or insolvent enterprises (see Sections 19 to 26 of the Act).
- The Skills Focus scheme has no conditions that relate to 'export performance' as detailed in Section 16 of the Act and paras 5.11 – 5.13 of the Statutory Guidance¹⁶)

¹³ BEIS website - UK transparency database - scheme [SC10888](#)

¹⁴ See Section 5 of [the Subsidy Control \(Subsidies and Schemes of Interest or Particular Interest\) Regulations 2022](#)

¹⁵ [UK Legislation website - Subsidy Control Act 2022](#)

¹⁶ [Department for Business and Trade Guidance for UK Subsidy Control Regime](#)

- The Skills Focus scheme does not have any conditions that require the businesses to use domestic over imported goods or services as detailed in Section 17 and paras 5.14 – 5.22 of the Statutory Guidance.

7. SKILLS FOCUS PARAMETERS

7.1 Colleges must ensure that:

- 100% of qualifications delivered through the Skills Focus programme fall within one of the priority and emerging sectors as listed in the baseline audit;
- the programme is only available to businesses with fewer than 250 employees;
- provision should align with the Departments' strategic aims as detailed in section 2 of this circular. To this end, only employees and businesses based in Northern Ireland are considered eligible to participate in the programme, as Departmental strategies apply only within the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland;
- delivery is at level 2 and above, with an expectation that a minimum of 70% of each college's funding allocation is for upskilling or re-skilling at qualification level 3 and above; This will be monitored throughout the year;
- there is an expectation that an individual upskilled or reskilled through Skills Focus on e.g. level 2, will progress to level 3 if they are undertaking a second skills focus intervention, however this is not essential and multiple interventions at the same level are eligible for funding. It is however expected that interventions at the same level relate to different courses and do not constitute repeat enrolments on the same course for those learners who failed to complete their course and/or achieve their target qualification;
- A minimum of 80% of each college allocation should be focused on regulated qualifications, defined within the college enrolment system as those at either level 3 and below on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), or at level 4 and above, regardless of whether they appear on the Framework. The remaining 20% should be on recognised and accredited industry standard qualifications;

- Skills Focus activity should be delivered across all curricular areas, as defined in each College Development Plan (CDP). Best practice dissemination via curriculum hubs, should support this aim and will further support increased delivery and reporting against the priority sectoral areas particularly in relation to the Economic Vision;
- in line with Ofqual regulations, a participant enrolled on a Skills Focus course at an FE college, must have reached the official school leaving age on the first day of the start date of the Skills Focus qualification;
- training must not be delivered under the programme where such training relates to an employer's statutory or legal requirement, and any compliance training including a renewal of a qualification. This includes training which displaces an employer's modus operandi and any internal staff training., It does not however exclude particular subject categories in their entirety, for example food hygiene, but generally lower-level qualifications that would constitute basic training in these areas and therefore be regarded as compliance.
- charities and community groups, unless they have a commercial or business function as part of their revenue raising activities, are not eligible for Skills Focus funding;
- activity generating funding through this programme should not displace or be a substitute for any other public or private funded programme; and
- Skills Focus should be determined to be the most suitable option for the company before proceeding.

8. AUDIT TRAIL AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- 8.1 As a requirement of delivering the programme, colleges will need to ensure appropriate mechanisms are put in place to capture ongoing progress against the aims, objectives, and targets of the programme. This will be facilitated through the capture of all employer engagement activity on CRM. All enrolments will be recorded on the college Learner Management System, and all procedures relating to student enrolments, retention, achievement, and withdrawals should be applied in line with existing guidance.
- 8.2 The Department will use reporting mechanisms from the CRM system. This will entail the ability to count and analyse the number and nature of employer engagements across sectors, and the identified skills needs. The reporting from CRM will provide management information across a range of variables as reflected in the Baseline Audit. The Department requires a standardised approach to CRM reporting across the sector and compliance with the system is essential.
- 8.3 In respect of projects delivered, the Consolidated Data Return will include all Skills Focus enrolment records to allow for full analysis of Skills Focus activity and performance against targets. Skills Focus will continue to be coded on EBS as either Source of Funding 63 for any remaining fully funded enrolments, or 23 for part funded enrolments, as set out in Skills Focus Coding Guidance Circular FE 03/24.

9. COMPLIANCE PROCESS

- 9.1 Claim data held on the CRM system will be lifted after the end of each calendar month to assess the volume of activity, and the breakdown of planned spend on the programme that month. Data will be subject to 100% compliance checks to detect information that is incomplete or missing, specifically those data items that confirm a project's eligibility, or are used to calculate delivery costs.
- 9.2 Delivery costs recorded by colleges for each project will also be subject to 100% calculation checks by the Skills Focus team, based on the same formula set out in the Ready Reckoner which accompanies this circular. Discrepancies outside a 10% tolerance (to account for any rounding) will be notified to colleges for further investigation.
- 9.3 In addition, a sample of 30% of projects will be checked for compliance in relation to the satisfactory completion of the Baseline Audit, in particular the provision of evidence that the audit questionnaire has been signed and dated by the business. If a college does not pass this sample check, an immediate compliance check of all Skills Focus Baseline Audits carried out by the College that month, will be performed. The Department will consider implementing 100% compliance checks for all further Baseline Audits carried out by the College until it is satisfied that a return to 30% compliance is justified.
- 9.4 When the Department is content that the programme information provided via the claims data sheet is complete and that the compliance checks for the calculation of programme costs and completion of baseline audits have been satisfactorily addressed, a letter will issue to each College Principal, reflecting the monthly activity.
- 9.5 The Department has the right to make further changes to the programme, if it deems appropriate, throughout the period of the agreed circular. The Department will consult with the College Accounting Officer if any issues arise and if further changes to the programme are required.

- 9.6 It is the responsibility of the College to ensure that the Skills Focus projects undertaken comply with the requirements of the programme as set out in this circular, Eligibility Checklist and Baseline Audit.
- 9.7 The compliance process does not require the Department to consider or approve project proposals prior to delivery or on completion.
- 9.8 In addition, within office hours, the Department will carry out quarterly vouching visits on Skills Focus delivery, whether offered within colleges, on business premises, or online. The purpose of the visits is to ensure that training is being carried out as scheduled and to the declared number of learners. The Departmental representative will complete a form which the lecturer will be asked to sign for audit purposes.

10. INSPECTION

- 10.1 Colleges shall permit duly authorised staff or agents of the Department or the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), to examine the accounts, and other records, at any reasonable time, and shall furnish appropriate oral or written explanation if required. The Department reserves the right to permit such staff or agents to carry out the examinations into the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness with which the College has used Departmental resources in the performance of this Agreement. The College shall have regard to the need for economy in all expenditure.
- 10.2 The Department may also carry out inspections which will include, but are not limited to, the practical application of the Programme's aims and objectives, recording and retention of information pertaining to individual project proposals and delivery of training and project proposal to businesses engaging with the colleges throughout the course of this Programme.

11. PROVISION OF INFORMATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

11.1 As a requirement of delivering the programme, the College will need to ensure appropriate mechanisms are put in place to capture ongoing progress against the aims, objectives, and targets for the overall programme. The College is expected to achieve the targets within the overall Skills Focus Programme delivered by the College – not on a project-by-project basis.

11.3 In addition to the information required by the Department as part of this circular, and set out herein, the College shall furnish the Department, upon request, with any additional financial and other information as the Department may require.

12. OBSERVANCE OF LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

12.1 The College shall comply with all applicable fair employment, equality of treatment, and anti-discrimination legislation, including, in particular, the Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Orders 1976 and 1988, the Equal Pay Act Northern Ireland) 1970, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, and the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, and shall use its best endeavours to ensure that, in its employment policies and practices, and in the delivery of the services required of the College under this agreement, it has given due regard to the need to promote equality of treatment and opportunity between:

- a) persons of different religious beliefs or political opinions;
- b) men and women, or married and unmarried persons;
- c) persons with and without dependants (including women who are pregnant, or on maternity leave, and men on paternity leave);
- d) persons of different racial groups (within the meaning of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997);
- e) persons with and without a disability (within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995);
- f) persons of different ages; and
- g) persons of differing sexual orientation.

12.2 The College shall take all reasonable steps to ensure the observance of the provisions of the above clause by all servants, agents, employees, consultants, and sub-contractors of the College.

12.3 Colleges must ensure that all information collected and handled in the delivery of Skills Focus is done so in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018.

Skills Focus

Client Baseline Audit

April 2026 – March 2027

Aid provided to deliver this project is granted either in compliance with European Commission regulation (EU) 2023/2831 of 13 December 2023 or in compliance with the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

Business Name:

Project Title:

Project Ref:

Date Baseline Completed:

Author:

College:

The Skills Focus programme is financed by the Department for the Economy (DfE). Skills Focus activity should be delivered across all curricular areas, as defined in your College Development Plan (CDP). Best practice dissemination via curriculum hubs, should support this aim and will further support increased delivery and reporting against the priority sectoral area particularly in relation to the Economic Vision.

IMPORTANT: A College representative *must* complete this form with the business

Contents

- 1. Eligibility Checklist**
- 2. Project Summary**
- 3. Project Plan**
- 4. Subsidy Declaration**
- 5. Client and Author Agreement**

1. Eligibility Checklist

Please ensure that all questions are completed correctly.

1a. Does the company have fewer than 250 employees?

- Yes
- No (not eligible to participate in Skills Focus)

1b. Is the company in receipt of any other government funding for this upskilling activity?

- Yes (not eligible to participate in Skills Focus)
- No

1c. Has a check been made to ensure that the company is not in receipt of government funding for this activity already?

- Yes
- No (if not, do not proceed until checks have been completed.)

1d. Are alternative forms of funding available through another, more appropriate source?

- Yes (Not eligible to participate on the programme - If yes, which other source has been identified?
_____)
- No

1e. Is the company a charity or community group that has no commercial or business function as part of its revenue raising activities?

- Yes (not eligible to participate in the Skills Focus programme.)
- No

1e. Is the company a charity or community group that does have a commercial or business function as part of its revenue raising activities?

- Yes (College must ensure that the company meets the definition of an eligible charity outlined at Annex C and sign the accompanying declaration).
- No

1f. Is the company a Social Enterprise?

- Yes (College must ensure that the company meets the definition of a social enterprise outlined at Annex C and sign the accompanying declaration).
- No

1g. Is the planned qualification any of the following (see Skills Focus Circular (02/26) – section 7.1):

- Legal requirement,
- Compliance training,
- Statutory requirement, or
- Renewal.

- Yes (Project is not eligible for Skills Focus Funding)
- No

1h. Is the planned qualification within one of the following sectors? If so, please indicate which.

Financial, Business & Professional Services

(including: Fintech / Financial Services - developing the Fintech skills base, and working to explore any emerging training and skills requirements of the Fintech sector).

Digital & Creative Industries*

(including:

Software and Cyber - growing the numbers of people obtaining computing-related skills and qualification, including computational and coding skills.

Screen Industries - identifying skills shortages and co-ordinating skills and training opportunities for crew in Northern Ireland).

Agri-Food

(including Agri-Tech - developing a talented workforce with the right skills to support the Agri-Tech sector at all levels, with good jobs and increased productivity across the sector).

Construction & Materials Handling

Advanced Manufacturing, Materials & Engineering

(including Low Carbon/Net Zero: developing a Green Skills Delivery Plan to provide the skills that businesses need to deliver a net zero future).

Life & Health Sciences

Tourism & Hospitality

Other – (not eligible to participate in Skills Focus)

2. Project Summary

2a. Individual/Organisation Details

Business Name _____

Individual's Name _____

Job Title/Role _____

Date _____

2b. Company Details

Address _____

Telephone _____

E-mail Address _____

Website _____

2c. Describe the business's day to day operations.

2d. What Sector does your business operate in? Tick One

- Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing
- Mining & Quarrying
- Manufacturing
- Electricity, gas, steam & air conditioning supply
- Water Supply, sewerage, waste management & remediation activities
- Construction
- Wholesale & retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles
- Transportation & storage
- Accommodation and food service activities
- Information & Communication
- Financial & insurance activities
- Real Estate Activities
- Professional, Scientific, and technical activities
- Administrative and support services activities

- Public administration and defence; compulsory social security
- Education
- Human health and social work activities
- Arts, entertainment, and recreation
- Other service activities
- Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies
- Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods and services producing activities of households for own use

2e. In which market(s) does your business currently operate?

- | | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Northern Ireland | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| GB | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Republic of Ireland | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Europe | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please specify _____ |
| International | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please specify _____ |

2f. How long has the business been trading?

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Less than 1 year | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 1-3 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3-5 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More than 5 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2g. How many employees are in your company at present?

| | Number |
|-----------------------|---------------|
| Permanent – Full-Time | |
| Permanent – Part-Time | |
| Temporary – Full-Time | |
| Temporary – Part-Time | |
| Total | |

2h. Have you previously worked with any FE College in Northern Ireland?

*Before recording this form on CRM, the College representative must check if the previous engagement included the payment of a Baseline Audit.

Yes (If Yes, please describe what the engagement was)

No

2i. Are you aware that the NI FE sector provides the following services to industry?

| | Yes | No |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Training courses | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Technical mentoring | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Business plan support | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Support for R&D projects | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Support for business start | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please specify _____ |

2j. What are the skills gaps currently within your company?

| | Yes | No |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Technical Skills Gaps | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail: _____ | | |
| Management Skills Gaps | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail _____ | | |
| Operative Skills Gaps | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail _____ | | |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail _____ | | |

2k. Assessing the potential business impacts of engaging with the FE College through the Skills Focus Programme.

(i) What is your annual Business Turnover?:

| |
|---------|
| £ _____ |
|---------|

(ii) On the scale below, how would you currently rate the following aspects of your business:

1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Very Good 5 = Excellent

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Customer Service: | 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mentoring: | 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Leadership and Management: | 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Productivity: | 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

(iii) As a business, what improvements are you expecting to see following your participation on the Skills Focus programme? (please tick all that apply)

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Development of New/Improved Lean Processes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cost Savings | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Securing New Finance | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Decarbonisation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New Waste Reduction and Management | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Strategy and Planning | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Increased Sales | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Safeguarding Existing Jobs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Creation of New Jobs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Increased exporting capacity | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More highly skilled staff | <input type="checkbox"/> |

3. Project Plan – Skills Focus

What is your company's skills requirement? (What specific training, skills and/or qualification is required?)

(Please specify qualification and RQF reference, where applicable)

Number of staff to be trained.

Proposed mode of delivery:

Online On-Site College Clustered

Other (please specify) _____

Training start date:

Proposed end date:

Number of hours per Participant

Project Cost – DfE (90% Contribution) _____

Employer (10% Contribution) _____

4. State Aid/Subsidy Declaration

A) Declaration of previous *de minimis* aid

NOTE: THIS DECLARATION OF PREVIOUS AID AWARDED IS ONLY TO BE COMPLETED BY BUSINESSES THAT MANUFACTURE OR TRADE GOODS THAT COULD BE TRADED INTO THE EU SINGLE MARKET (i.e. WHEN THE WINDSOR FRAMEWORK (FORMERLY THE NI PROTOCOL) APPLIES).

IT SHOULD NOT BE COMPLETED BY BUSINESSES OPERATING IN THE SERVICES SECTOR).

As required by the EU's *de minimis* Regulation your business must provide the Department with details of all other *de minimis* aid received in the last three years. A false declaration by you, resulting in the EU *de minimis* maximum amount of €300,000 being exceeded, could later give rise to the aid being recovered with interest.

Please note there are lower *de minimis* aid ceilings for the primary agriculture sector¹⁷ and the fisheries and aquaculture sector¹⁸. There is also a different cumulative period for the fisheries and aquaculture sector.

The Agricultural *de minimis* Regulation¹⁹ (ADMR) applies to aid provided in favour of the primary production of agricultural products. Agricultural products refer to those products listed in Annex 1 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union [\(TFEU\)](#)²⁰. **Primary production refers to production by way of soil and livestock farming without the performance of any further operation changing the nature of resultant products.**

If you think your business may be involved in primary agricultural or primary fisheries and aquacultural activities, please discuss with the College before completing this *de minimis* declaration.

Please therefore provide any relevant details in the table below including the Name of the Grant/Aid scheme, the Awarding Body, the Amount(s) Received and the Dates received. Please note only EU *de minimis* Aid subsidies need to be declared. If you are not sure whether the award is EU *de minimis* Aid, please check with the Awarding Body.

¹⁷ [EU legislation website - *de minimis* in the agriculture sector](#)

¹⁸ [EU legislation website - *de minimis* in the fisheries and aquaculture sector](#)

¹⁹ [EU legislation website - *de minimis* in the agriculture sector](#)

²⁰ [EU website - Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union - Annex 1](#)

| Type of <i>de minimis</i> aid ²¹ approved and Awarding Body | Amount £/€ | Date |
|--|------------|------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| TOTAL: | | |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Is the business active in any of the following industry sectors:</p> <p>Fishery and Aquaculture or Primary Production of Agricultural Products*? These sectors have specific lower ceilings of <i>de minimis</i> aid.</p> <p>*Please note: The industrial <i>de minimis</i> Regulation allows aid for the processing and marketing of agricultural, fishery and aquaculture products, providing the aid does not benefit a primary processor. If the business is active in the Primary production (as defined above) of agricultural or fishery products, then the college must contact the Department before proceeding with the project to ensure the ADMR limits will not be exceeded.</p> | <p>Yes / No</p> <p>(if yes please specify in the box below and indicate the end of your accounting (fiscal) year)</p> |
| | |
| <p>If your business is active in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, what is the date of the end of your accounting (fiscal) year (dd/mm)?</p> | |

B) Acceptance of new *de minimis* aid offered

The costs payable by the Department for the Economy to the college for delivery of the training/support outlined in the Baseline Audit document constitute new aid offered to your business under *de minimis* rules. It is important to note that as part of new *de minimis* protocols, the Department is obliged to upload details relating to the aid you are accepting, to the online EU eAid register. The eAid register will retain records of all *de minimis* aid provided to a business by any awarding body under a unique Beneficiary ID number for that business. IDs can include a Company Registration Number, sole trader's National Insurance Number (NINO), Charity Number, National VAT Number or Other Country Number such as or Unique Tax Reference (UTR). Any personal data used as an ID (such as a NINO or UTR)

²¹ The type of *de minimis* aid is either (1) industrial (2) primary agriculture (3) fisheries or aquaculture or (4) Services of General Economic Interest. This should be explicit on the letter of offer from the aid awarding body.

will be masked upon upload, meaning these will not be visible on the public-facing side of the register.

Please see also the College Privacy Notice (see College website) which will explain in more detail how personal information is handled, and to the Department’s Privacy Notice at [DfE-Privacy Notice](#).

The amount of aid offered on this occasion and the Beneficiary ID of the business must be completed in the table below. It is critical that the business uses the same ID type and ID number when applying for or accepting all *de minimis* awards and that the aid detailed below is declared on any *de minimis* applications made in the next three years. Furthermore, where a business forms part of a group of companies, the *de minimis* award is recorded at the level of the *parent company*. As *de minimis* aid is cumulative, all companies within the same group (under the same parent company) draw from a single *de minimis* ceiling.

| Type of <i>de minimis</i> aid approved and Awarding Body | Amount £/€ | Type of ID Used to Record Claim (e.g. NINO, UTR, Company Registration Number) | ID Number |
|--|------------|---|-----------|
| | | | |

C) Signature

I confirm that the details provided at Section A above in relation to previous aid awarded are current and accurate to the best of my knowledge.

I accept the new offer of aid as set out in Section B above and I understand that the Department is required to upload details of the award, including ID details, to the EU eAid Register.

I am authorised to sign on behalf of the business.

| | | | |
|---------------|--|------------|--|
| Signed | | Print Name | |
| Position | | Date | |
| Business Name | | | |

5. Client and Author Agreement

This project has been financed by the Department for the Economy's Skills Focus Programme which the College has been contracted to deliver. Please refer to the College Privacy Notice (see College website) which will explain in more detail how personal information is handled, and to the Department's Privacy Notice at [DfE-Privacy Notice](#).

By signing this document, we, the signatories, confirm that the information contained herein is an accurate representation of the project, its objectives, and outcomes and that the accompanying training is proportionate to these, and has been agreed by the College and the participating business.

| |
|--|
| College Representative Signature _____ |
| College & Position _____ |
| Date _____ |

I understand that by signing this document I am providing confirmation that I am content for the Department and/or College to contact me or any participants of this project directly and use information for programme management, monitoring and evaluating purposes. I can confirm that the participants have been informed accordingly.

I understand that I may be contacted approximately 12 months after training ends to complete an Impact Assessment.

I also understand that the Department and/or College may wish to use details of the intervention in future marketing or promotional material and will liaise with me about this beforehand.

Please note – this form must be signed by the business owner or designated representative of the business with the authority to do. It should not be signed by the course participant unless that happens to be the owner/representative.

| |
|---|
| Business Representative Signature _____ |
| Company & Position _____ |
| Date _____ |

Skills Focus

12 Month Impact Assessment

| |
|--|
| Business Name: |
| Project Title: |
| Project Ref: |
| College: |
| College Representative completing the Assessment: |

IMPORTANT: A College representative *must* complete this form with the business

Twelve months ago, your business completed an upskilling opportunity with this college through the Skills Focus programme. The college received funding from the Department for the Economy to run the course and the questions on this Assessment Form are designed to help the Department understand and measure the impacts this intervention has had on your business. It is also an opportunity for you to engage again with the college and raise any further skills and development needs you may have.

1. Company Contact Details

Address:

Telephone:

E-mail Address:

Website:

2. Assessment of the Business Impacts of participating in Skills Focus

2(a) Have you entered into any new markets following your participation in Skills Focus?

Yes

No

If yes, please confirm the new market(s) the business now operates in.

Northern Ireland

GB

Republic of Ireland

Europe Please specify _____

International Please specify _____

2(b) Following the Skills Focus intervention, are there any remaining skills gaps within your company and if so, what type(s) of skills gaps?

| | Yes | No |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Technical Skills Gaps | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail: _____ | | |
| Management Skills Gaps | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail _____ | | |
| Operative Skills Gaps | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail _____ | | |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If yes, please detail _____ | | |

2(c) Would you like to be contacted again by the Further Education College about other opportunities for support?

| |
|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No |

When answering the following questions, where required, please use a score from the following scale of 1 - 5:

1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Very Good 5 = Excellent

2(d) Since your participation in Skills Focus, has your business Turnover:

| | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Remained the same | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Increased | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Decreased | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2(e) How would you currently rate the following aspects of your business:

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Customer Service: | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mentoring: | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Leadership and Management: | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Productivity: | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> |

2(f) As a business, what improvements have you experienced following your participation on the Skills Focus programme? (please tick all that apply)

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Development of New/Improved Lean Processes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cost Savings | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Securing New Finance | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Decarbonisation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New Waste Reduction and Management | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Strategy and Planning | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Increased Sales | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Safeguarding Existing Jobs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Creation of New Jobs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Increased exporting capacity | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More highly skilled staff | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2(g) As a result of your engagement with the college, and participation on the Skills Focus programme, did your business progress to undertake any other form of upskilling, innovation, or developmental activity?

| |
|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No |

If yes, please tick as many as are appropriate:

- InnovateUs
- Invest NI Innovation Voucher
- Skill Up
- Connected Programme
- Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)
- Council supported programme
- Other learning/courses with the FE College
- Other Higher Education learning

2(h) Have the employees who participated in Skills Focus continued to use the skills learned during their Course?

- Yes
- No

3. General Comments

5(a) Please provide any general comments or feedback you would like to offer, on your experience of the Skills Focus programme and its impact on your business?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The information you have provided will assist us in our evaluation.

4. Signatures

College Representative Signature _____

College & Position _____

Date _____

Please note – this form must be signed by the business owner, or designated representative of the business with the authority to do. It should not be signed by the course participant unless that happens to be the owner/representative.

Business Representative Signature _____

Company & Position _____

Date _____

Charity/Social Enterprise Declaration

Charities

Organisations with charitable status seeking support from Skills Focus must fall under the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and must also have a commercial or business function as part of their revenue raising activities. It is important to note that participation is only available to employees of the commercial/business side of the organisation and not to volunteers of the charitable arm.

I declare that (insert business name) is a charity which falls under the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, and operates as a commercial enterprise.

Social Enterprises

The following definition should be read by any Social Enterprises seeking Skills Focus support and, where appropriate, the declaration signed:

“A social enterprise is a business whose primary purpose is based on social objectives. Any surpluses generated are principally reinvested in the business to further advance that purpose, or in the wider community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners. A social enterprise does however have a business focus and operates as a commercial enterprise”.

I declare that (insert business name) is a social enterprise within the above definition.

I understand that it is the sole responsibility of (insert business name) to ensure that participation in the Skills Focus programme does not negatively impact on our eligibility for other public sector initiatives, funding, or support.

Client Signature: _____

Business Name & Position: _____

Date: _____