REGIONAL PATHFINDERS

Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: How are we approaching learning by doing?

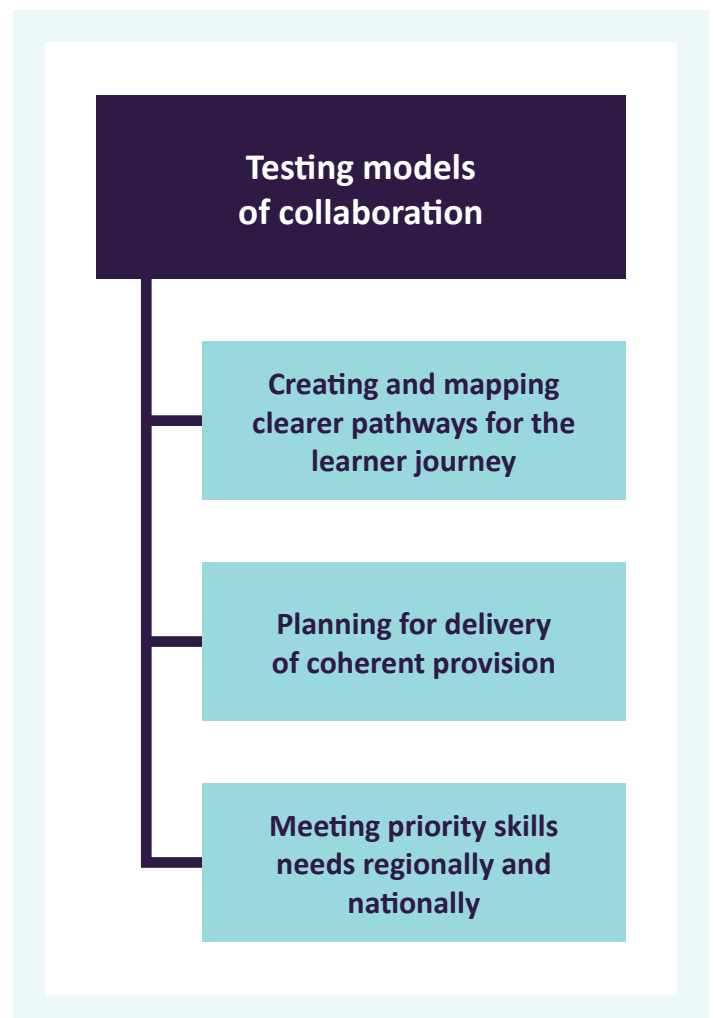Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

Methodology

SFC's Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability highlighted the key role of institutions in ensuring learners can meet the challenges and opportunities of a changing world. Working with local partners, the two Regional Tertiary Pathfinders in the North-east and South of Scotland are considering learning provision in both regions.

The Pathfinders are designed to achieve an improved, evidence-led, understanding of how to support:

• Alignment of provision against societal and employer needs.

• Enhanced coherence and sustainability across provision.

• Simpler pathways and improved outcomes for learners.

Our approach to the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders has been to focus on 'learning by doing'. Together we are identifying underlying patterns, driving forces and the role of structure and agency (people's ability to drive change) in the regional learning and skills planning system, generating insights for practice and policy actors.

We have been:

Testing models of collaboration

Creating and mapping clearer pathways for the learner journey

Planning for delivery of coherent provision

Meeting priority skills needs regionally and nationally

The Pathfinders project consist of several connected work areas:

Data and Analysis

Developing a robust understanding of current skills provision in both regions, identifying unmet demand, and reviewing available data and other evidence.

Regional Priorities

Collaborative pilots in both regions are building on the strong foundations of existing partnerships to assess demand and secure skills provision that balances the needs of students, employers, and their local economy and society.

Process Analysis

Engaging with institutions to consider how provision is planned, who is involved, and how it impacts the learner journey.

Reflections and Recommendations

Using the insights and learning from these pilots to share reflections and recommendations for the wider education and skills system.

Photo: SRUC

We have brought these together in the activities set out below:

Programme Governance

RDBs in SoS and NE (est. Spring 2022) met regularly until April 2024 to guide pilot projects and the Pathfinders programme.

NAB established in Autumn 2022. Met three times, with members providing ongoing advice.

Regional Pilot Projects approved by RDBs, with Project Delivery Groups set up in December 2022.

Engagement

SFC Pathfinders team attended pilot steering/working groups (SoS & NE: Nov 2022 – May 2024).

RDB meetings held regularly until Spring 2024. RDB members joined learning and evaluation workshops (Spring – Winter 2023) led by Pathfinders team and ESS.

Collaborative Sense Making

Reflections from the RDBs on creating the conditions for change and understanding systems (March 2023)

Data and intelligence workshops for RDBs and project partners (Autumn 2023, NE & SoS) explored how data and evidence on skills needs are shared across institutions.
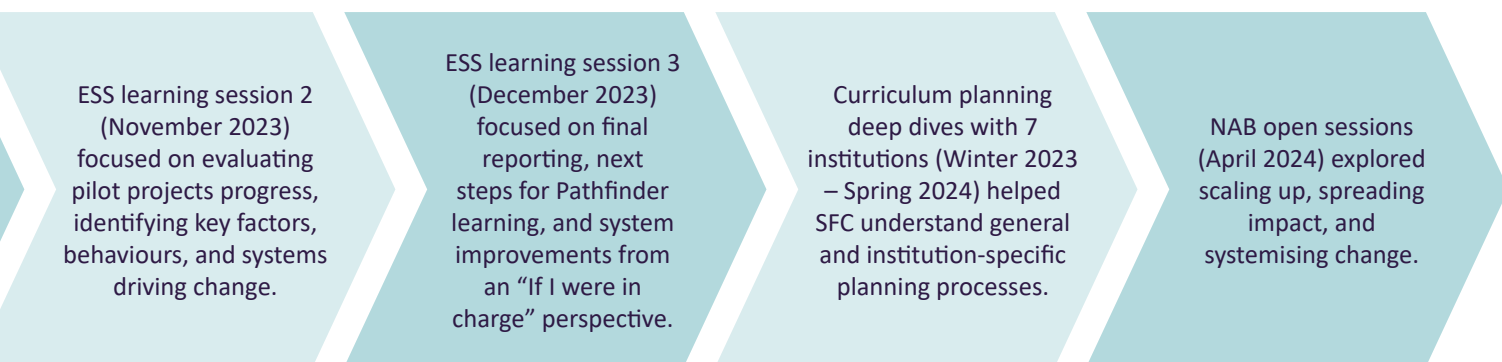
ESS learning session (October 2023) – First regional partner session on "doing things differently" to address regional skills needs, focusing on successes, and challenges.

Photo: University of the West of Scotland

RDB: Regional Delivery Boards
NAB: National Advisory Board
SOAG: Shared Outcome Assurance Group

PSR: Project Summary Reports
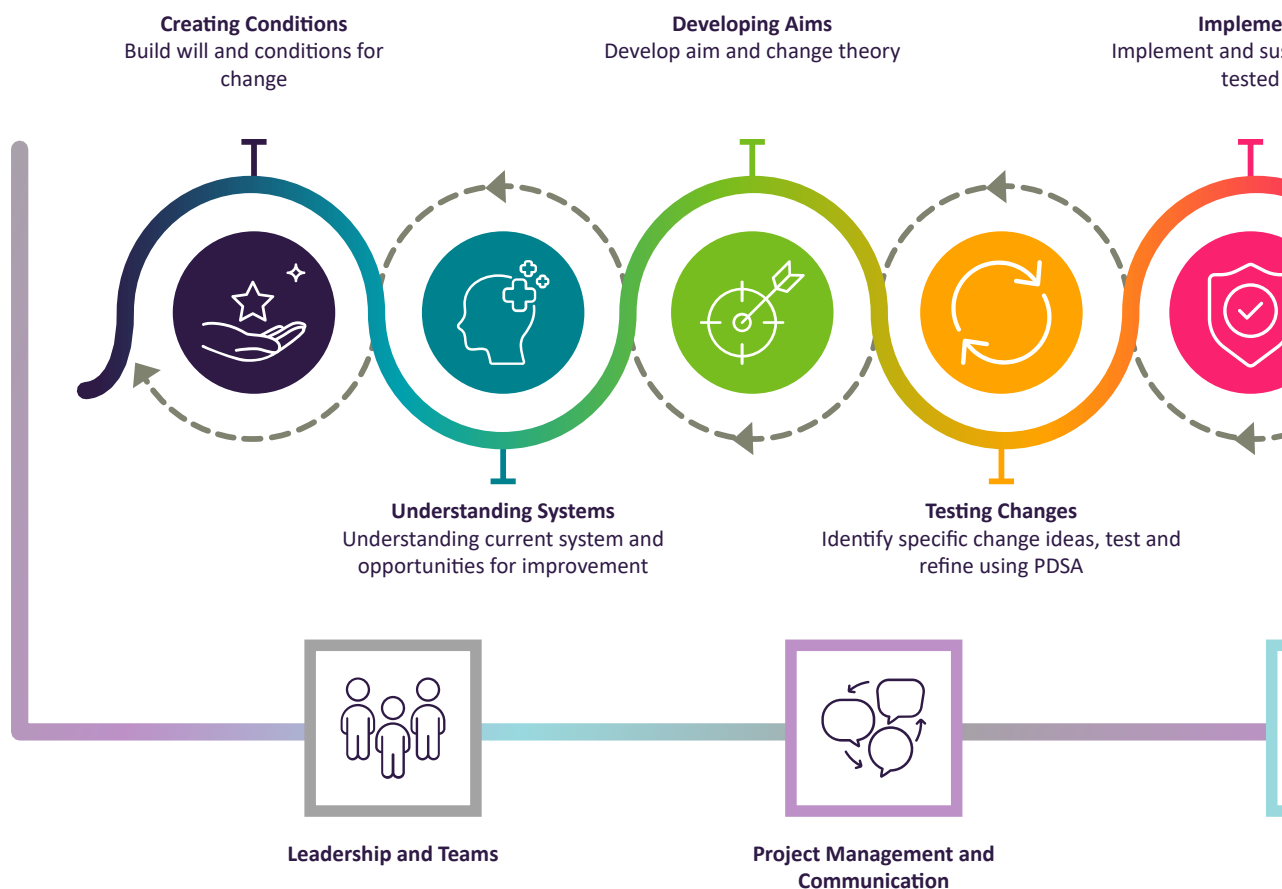ROSI: Report of Strategic Investment
ESS: Evauation Support Scotland

SOAG met every 2–3 months from February 2022 to March 2024.

All 7 pilots submitted PSRs every 2–3 months from Nov 2022 to Jan 2024.

All 7 pilots submitted final project reports (April 2024). ROSI deliverables completed by June (SoS) and September (NE) 2024.

Final NE RDB: April 2024, SoS RDB: May 2024.

Regular meetings with NAB (Autumn 2022 – Spring 2023). Members joined ESS learning session 3 (Dec 2023) and open sessions with Pathfinders team (Spring 2024).

In SoS, the Pathfinders team attended the land-based prospectus launch, BC & SRUC strategic statement signing, Meet the Learner sessions, and provided Digital Skills Provision Map feedback (Jun 2023 – Dec 2024).

In NE, Pathfinders team attended NESA employer engagement event, NESCol & DWY FA event, RGU & NESCol marketing and curriculum planning sessions, and the Grampian Interprofessional Simulation Group launch.

ESS learning session 2 (November 2023) focused on evaluating pilot projects progress, identifying key factors, behaviours, and systems driving change.

ESS learning session 3 (December 2023) focused on final reporting, next steps for Pathfinder learning, and system improvements from an "If I were in charge" perspective.

Curriculum planning deep dives with 7 institutions (Winter 2023 – Spring 2024) helped SFC understand general and institution-specific planning processes.

NAB open sessions (April 2024) explored scaling up, spreading impact, and systemising change.

This work is also a key action of the Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) and contributes to creating a skilled workforce.

The role SFC is playing in the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders represents a test of change in relation to our role in supporting institutions to engage in strategic planning and skills alignment and institutions' role in driving work to respond to priority learning and skills needs identified through regional economic planning.

The recent publication of reviews and announcements about the redesign of the learning and skills system mean that the Regional Pathfinders are operating in an uncertain context but offers an opportunity to apply the learning within a redesigned landscape.

Skills planning has a bearing on many seemingly unrelated policy areas. Understanding challenges and making the most of opportunities involves

Quality Improvement Journey

Creating Conditions
Build will and conditions for change

Developing Aims
Develop aim and change theory

Impleme
Implement and sus
tested

Understanding Systems
Understanding current system and opportunities for improvement

Testing Changes
Identify specific change ideas, test and refine using PDSA

Leadership and Teams

Project Management and Communication

numerous people and organisations with competing priorities. The success of an intervention often relies on collective action taken across organisational, administrative and geographic boundaries. No single individual, organisation or part of government can tackle learning and skills provision planning alone. The Pathfinder team in SFC recognise that where you set boundaries for the system, and how far you zoom in or zoom out, depends on the problem you are looking to answer and the goal that you want to achieve. Consequently, our approach has been to consider national,

regional and project level learning, taking a systems thinking approach to tease out the relevant structures and interconnections in the current system. We have used the NHS Education Scotland Quality Improvement Journey as an organising framework for our learning as it works effectively at all levels, from macro to micro.

With an ambition to understand how to support the:

- Alignment of provision against societal and employer needs;

- Enhanced coherence and sustainability across provision; and

- Simpler pathways and improved outcomes for learners

SFC started the Pathfinders work with a couple of questions in mind:

- What needs to be done to make collaboration worthwhile?

- How can we minimise the tensions which seem to accompany attempts to enact change?

SFC and projects put governance and delivery structures in place to enable institutions and partners to work collaboratively on Pathfinder activity. We also took the purposeful decision to focus our shared learning about how Pathfinder partners were working together, as this is as important as the structures through which work is being done and the things we are collaboratively achieving.

Through collective evaluative reflection amongst those involved in Pathfinders, we used a triple learning loop approach to explore emergent barriers, tensions, or ways of working which may need to be adapted, and recognised and built on ways of working which deliver the greatest positive impact. We paid attention to collaborative group-working: the need for a listening culture of sharing power; the value of peer support for people leading groups; and the potential opportunities offered by co-working and independent facilitation.

In developing our approach we have drawn from the material set out by the New Philanthropy Capital (NPC).

Spread
Share learning and spread where relevant

Measurement
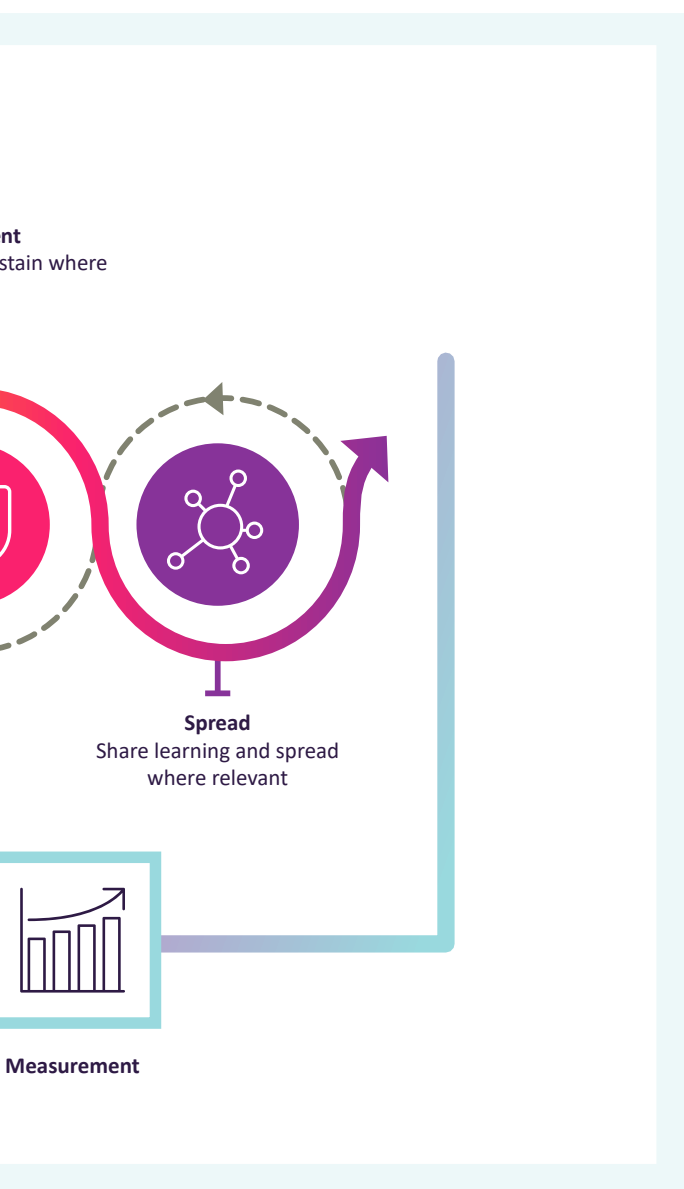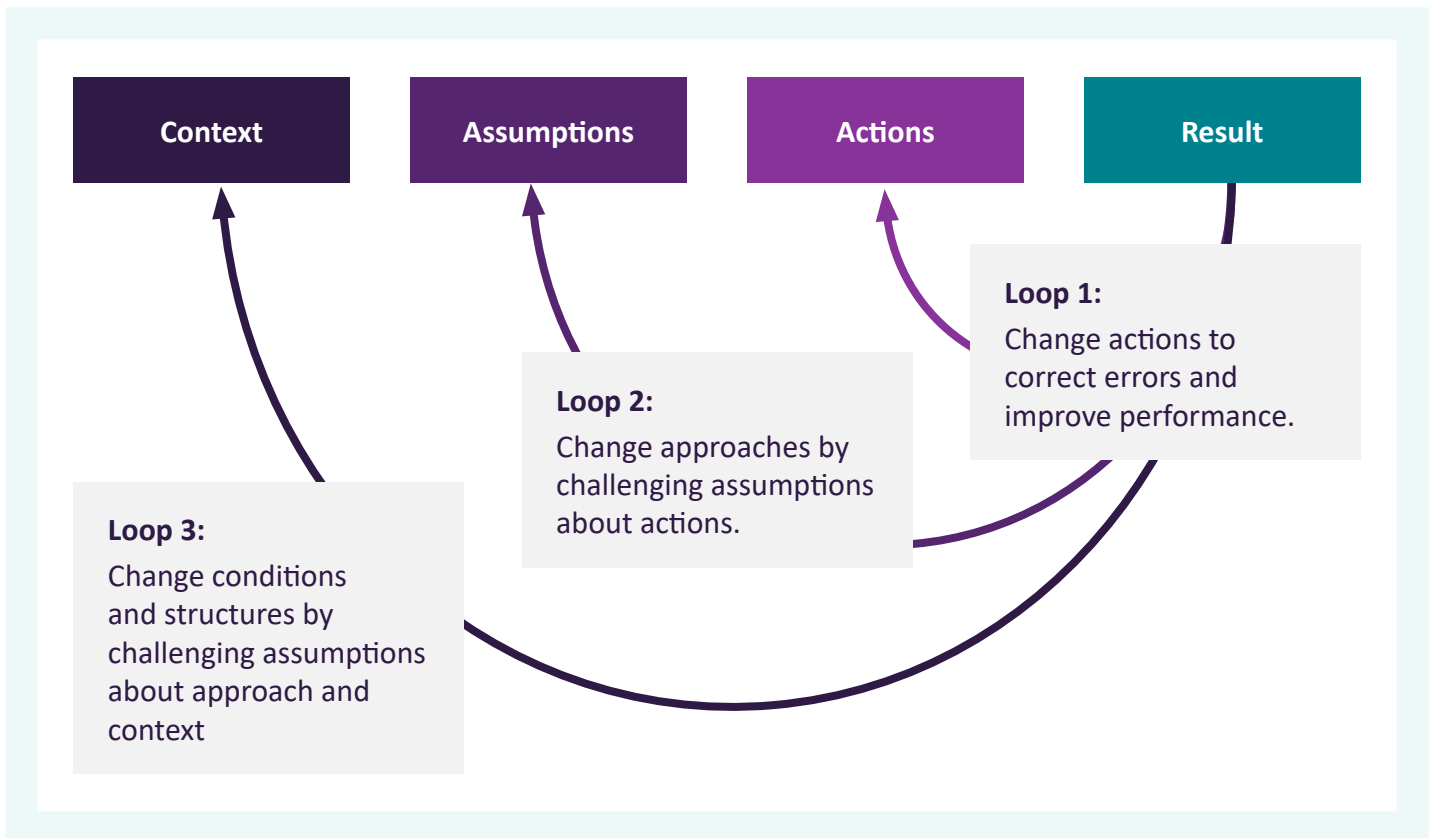
The diagram illustrates the type of changes which can come from each learning loop:

Loop one:

Participants use data and intelligence to review actions and identify the causes of errors in existing processes, identifying improvements – this results in a change in actions which can improve performance.

Loop two:

Participants use data and intelligence to challenge assumptions which lie behind existing processes and actions this results in changes in approach which can improve performance

Loop three:

Participants use data and intelligence to challenge assumptions about the context in which approaches and activities are undertaken – this results in changes in perspectives and can increase opportunities to change the context and conditions in which activities are undertaken, leading to improved performance.

Findings and insights are drawn from several sources. These include workshops with the Regional Delivery Boards and project leads, and engagement with the National Advisory Board, which was established to support the programme. Additional inputs came from a small-scale qualitative research study and a series of learning events run by Evaluation Support Scotland. These events brought together partners participating in the Pathfinders for both cross-region and within-region discussions. Additional work on curriculum planning and design and regional pathways has also been carried out. All evaluative activity has provided the opportunity to drill down on key themes and gather the evidence to support our understanding and analysis. Much of this has been qualitative but quantitative data has also been used in project reports and thematic reports.

Integral to this methodology was involving members of the SFC Pathfinder Team in the regional working groups, both operational and strategic. From these meetings we were able to hear firsthand the learning, the challenges and the successes.

Focusing on learning

Pathfinders National Advisory Board	The Pathfinders National Advisory Board (NAB) consists of experts from across tertiary education, academic and civil society, key employers, and beyond. Drawing on their experience in Scotland and elsewhere; individually and collectively they played a key role in shaping Pathfinder work as it progressed.
Reflective sessions with RDBs	Reflective practice is a conscious effort to think about the work you've done and develop future plans. These sessions provided an opportunity for team members to come together and evaluate their progress, identify areas for improvement, and celebrate their achievements, and to reflect on any challenges or setbacks the team has faced. We encouraged the group to analyse these challenges and identify the lessons learned from them and discuss how these lessons can be applied to future projects or situations.
Commissioned qualitative research	The research was completed over a three-month period ending in August 2023 and comprised: • June 2023 – desk research to identify participants and research questions and to set up interviews. • July 2023 – undertake and transcribe interviews. • August/September 2023 – thematic analysis and reporting.

Thirteen participants took part in individual interviews lasting up to an hour and a half. Participants included: SFC x 2 partners; North East x 5 partners; South of Scotland x 6 partners. The research cohort comprised 6 representatives from colleges; 2 from universities; 2 employer/industry representatives and 1 member of staff from a local authority. Participants included RDB members, project leads and project co-coordinators. In some cases, participants had a dual role of RDB oversight as well as project lead. Some interviewees, therefore, had more of an operational role than others.

The research adopted an Appreciative Inquiry approach. Appreciative Inquiry is a co-operative, co-evolutionary search for best practice and ideas to take an organisation forward, underpinned by a belief that the questions we ask contribute to the world we create (Preskill and Catsambas 2006). The Appreciative Inquiry interview is a crucial part of the process. Appreciative Inquiry questions are designed to focus on what stakeholder's value, aspire to grow, and are willing to take responsibility for making happen. The purpose of framing questions in this way is to focus on creative solutions that move the focus away from a blame culture and toward a shared vision for the future. The aim of Appreciative Inquiry is therefore to build on the root cause of success, not of failure, to build on strengths, not weaknesses (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Further details of the method are available in the Final Report from the study.

Thematic approach to learning

A more focused approach was key to gaining a deeper understanding of elements of the pathfinder activity across two themes:

Access to and use of, data, intelligence, and analysis to make evidence led decisions on course offer/curriculum

Understanding the curriculum review, planning, and design processes within colleges and universities that support regular course and pathway reviews, enabling timely and effective responses to emerging skills needs.

Photo: North East Scotland College

Curriculum review, planning and design

The focus of this strand of work was to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that are in place in colleges and universities to ensure appropriate curriculum review, planning and design and to respond appropriately to emerging skills needs. This included the evidence base and intelligence used to make decisions about the curriculum, how planning and design is influenced by key stakeholders, and the impacts of curriculum change for learners, employers, industry, and others. SFC adopted a partnership approach, working with a range of institutions across the sector, but particularly with those in the two Pathfinder regions. The work has been approached as outlined:

- Scoping and gathering initial evidence through engagement with the sectors.

- Curriculum planning experts, self-selected via the Heads of University Planners Group and College Vice-Principal Curriculum/Learning and Teaching Group, joined short life working groups convened by SFC. Members of these two groups worked collaboratively with SFC to discuss and share individual institutional approaches and examples to highlight issues which impact on the planning process.

- This first stage of scoping and gathering of information provided SFC with an understanding of the process, highlighting what is working, recent transformations, key issues, considerations, and challenges related to curriculum planning and design.

- Analysing and collating the examples provided to inform development of an overarching mapping of the key elements and stages of curriculum planning.

- Informed by the work of the short life working groups and the examples provided, identifying the shared elements and features of the process to create a common framework. This mapping was tested with the National Advisory Group, the Regional Delivery Boards and the sector and curriculum experts. An interim report captured the work completed at the mid-point in July 2023.

- Participating in 'deep dive' sessions with curriculum and planning experts from seven institutions across the Pathfinder regions. Hosted by institutional teams, these sessions included a range of specialist input from the institutions, including planning and teaching staff, quality, marketing, and recruitment teams etc. SFC gained a deeper understanding of key issues around the curriculum planning process highlighted in the earlier short-life working groups. This included use of intelligence and data, employer and stakeholder engagement, and approaches to planning around regional, national, and local priorities etc.

- The final report builds on the initial mapping, materials, and discussions, collates the information, and details the key features of the process with case studies and examples from the deep-dive sessions and from the collaborative Pathfinder pilot projects.

Data, intelligence, and analysis

This thematic work aims to clarify what data and evidence are made available to institutions, from which sources, and how they are interpreted and used across institutional partners and national agencies to make sense of the current and future regional skills needs and to inform decision-making. By focussing on the two Pathfinder regions, and the work of the seven pilots, it looks at how unmet demand is identified, how available data, intelligence and information is used to inform priority provision planning. We heard examples of how the regional pilot projects have accessed and shared data and intelligence to enable planning of work, establishing priority areas for the region, supporting effective joint decisions and delivery, and measuring, evaluating, and evidencing impact of their work. The work has been approached as follows:

- Desk research and engagement with partners to frame an overview of the typology of the NE and SoS economies

- Focusing on the skills landscape in each region, how regional and local economic and skills strategies are integrated, how they link into existing planning structures and how and what information is used to identify the emerging skills needs within the region.

- One-to-one interviews, and group sessions, with key members of the Regional Delivery Boards.

- Identifying the key challenges in accessing and utilising regional data and intelligence on skills needs and demands and responding appropriately, and providing evidence of how sharing and use of data and intelligence between institutions and partner agencies works in practice.

- Facilitating workshop sessions with the NE and SoS RDBs including Pilot Project Leads.

- Focusing on data and intelligence from two perspectives: directly from the Pilot Project Leads around their experience and reflections on emerging data issues, how they accessed and shared the data and intelligence that supports their work on the pilot projects, and a session with RDB members to understand how data, intelligence and evidence are made available across the two regions to inform skills decisions and priorities.

- This interactive session explored questions such as:

  - How are data and intelligence on skills needs made available and used across institutional partners and national agencies, and how can this be improved?

  - Are there gaps in the data?

  - Is it relevant and up to date?

  - Who supplies/owns it?

  - Where is it discussed and shared?

  - What is working well/not so well?

  - What would we want to hold on to in any new emerging skills and education planning system?

- Insights and learning from Pilot Project Leads

- Through regular update meetings, pilot project leads provided their insights and understanding on collaborative approaches to accessing and using data and intelligence to inform skills responses. Through involvement in pilot project working groups and meetings focusing on data, SFC colleagues gained an understanding of approaches within each pilot on the sharing and use of data to support the successful delivery of the project.

Understanding the Skills Planning System

This research, included within our overarching system report, aimed to explore the interplay between national, regional, and local bodies and partnerships in Scotland, focusing on their collaboration in skills planning. The goal was to illustrate the planning structures educational institutions must engage with to tailor their curricula to meet national and regional skills needs.

To gain insights from those directly involved in the planning and implementation of skills development strategies and funding mechanisms at various levels, this research engaged key people operating within Pathfinder regions:

• Skills Development Scotland (SDS) Regional Skills Planning Leads in the North East and South of Scotland.

• Local Employability Partnership (LEP) Leads from Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, and Scottish Borders.

• The SDS North East Area Manager and the Regional Foundation Apprenticeship (FA) Lead.

• The North East City Region Deal Manager.

• Pathfinder Partnership leads from NESCol, SRUC, and UWS.

Questions for regional colleagues focused on the strategic composition of Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) and associated regional skills groups, their connections with local Community Planning Partnership (CPP) structures, and the institutions that are members of these groups.

Questions for local colleagues were designed to identify the various CPP sub-groups in which institutions participate; their perspectives on how CPPs connect with the Regional Economic Strategy; and the implications for skills planning and delivery arising from locally administered government funding.

To ensure a comprehensive perspective, this research included discussions with institutional colleagues to understand, in practice, what engagement with the system looks like for these institutions. This work has informed recommendations regarding the roles of SFC and institutions within regional planning fora.

Photo: University of Aberdeen

Evaluation Support Scotland learning events

Evaluation Support Scotland was commissioned to work with the SFC and Pathfinder partners to gather insights and generate key lessons from the Pathfinder programme.

Learning was collected over three sessions. The first (30 Oct) and the third (12 Dec) were for both pathfinder regions and took place online. We intended that the second session be in person in each region. This happened in the North East (16 Nov) but in the South of Scotland the sessions were online, and one pilot project met on 22 Nov while the others met together on 24 Nov. The sessions were planned and facilitated by Evaluation Support Scotland and SCF, except 22 Nov, which was SFC only.

The format was directed discussions around learning questions. Participants' reflections were captured in electronic and written formats and summarised in a report of each session that was shared with participants to check for accuracy. The first hour of the final session also involved discussion and engagement with four members of the National Advisory Board.

In total, 35 people from the pilot projects attended at least one session. Of the 35, 11 attended all three sessions, 9 attended two and 15 attended one. Across the 35, 9 participants were from colleges and universities, along with some other project partners such as NESA, SDS and some local authorities.

The sessions were designed to enable participants to identify learning for themselves, share their learning for wider use and network with other pilot projects. Further details of the method are available in the ESS Final Report.

Photo: Borders College

Bringing the strands together

Learning from the Pathfinders has been brought together in a suite of reports.

Programme Level report

• <u>System Level report</u>

Thematic reports

• <u>Data and Intelligence report</u>
• <u>Curriculum Thematic Report</u>
• <u>Curriculum Process report</u>

Progress reports

• <u>Pilot project reports</u>

Reports from our activities to generate insights are also available:

Context

• Professor Ewart Keep Skills paper

Data Reports

• AAB Provision Data report
• SFC Regional Pathfinders Learners Journey Mapping report

Learning by Doing approach

• Methodology paper
• Evaluation Support Scotland: Learning Sessions reports
• CDN: Exploring Emerging Themes from the Pathfinder Pilots

Programme Governance

• Regional Tertiary Pathfinders National Advisory Board papers

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