


# REGIONAL TERTIARY PATHFINDERS PROGRAMME: EXPLORING EMERGING THEMES

STUDY COMMISSIONED BY SFC

DELIVERED BY THE COLLEGE  
DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

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**The fieldwork for this research was completed over July and August 2023  
The report was completed in autumn 2023**

# 1. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

In 2022 SFC launched the Regional Tertiary Pathfinder Programme. The initiative was a direct response to recommendations in SFC's Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability which reported in 2021. It also forms a key action to help deliver aspects of the Scottish Government's [Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#) (NSET). Two regions were identified as Pathfinders for the purposes of this work, the North East and the South of Scotland.

The aim of the Pathfinder work is to explore and understand what further could be done in very practical ways to ensure the education skills system is responsive, joined up and meeting regional skills needs.

The approach builds on the strong foundations of existing partnerships in the two regions. SFC invited key regional education and skills partners to come together in each region to form a **Regional Delivery Board** (RDB) and to have oversight of the Pathfinder work, in particular the pilot project responses. Taking a 'learning by doing' approach, these two Pathfinder RDBs endorsed seven pilot projects to test out changes and new ways of

working regionally which were designed to achieve an improved, evidence-based, 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.

The regional pilots aim to deliver tangible outcomes for learners and industry/employers in addition to informing potential system improvement.

This study explores the experience of a small sample group directly involved in developments in the two Pathfinder regions, with either governance, strategic or operational delivery responsibilities for the pilot projects agreed. At the point the interviews were completed the seven pilots were in the development and testing phase, with the delivery of new course provision, pathways and student guidance expected from September 2023 for some and onwards into 2024 for others.

Questions focus on the emerging themes from the early phase of work and seek to surface a deeper understanding of the issues. This includes the process of coming together in a new regional partnership group, agreeing skills priorities, making decisions on how to achieve these priority regional outcomes through the Pathfinder pilot projects and new ways of working together. It also considers the degree to which a shared understanding of current and emerging skills needs is crucial to inform the planning and delivery of appropriate and successful curriculum responses.



## 2. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This was a small-scale study designed to test out emerging issues across four key themes captured by SFC via early evaluation of delivery across the Pathfinders Programme. The outcomes of this work will inform the next phase of evaluation of the Programme led by SFC.

The three themes identified by SFC were:

- Partnership/collaboration
- Use of, and sharing of, data and intelligence
- Planning and developing curriculum to meet regional needs

Alongside these themes, *key learning from the work to-date* was an important focus of this study.

Eleven participants from the two RDBs were approached by SFC and agreed to participate in the study. This included five partners from the North East and six partners from the South of Scotland. The participants had varying roles across education, skills and industry. In addition, two members of the SFC Pathfinder Team were

interviewed. The Researcher allocated 90 minutes for each interview.

The preparatory work, interviews and analysis were completed over a three-month period, ending in September 2023:

- June 2023 – desk research to identify participants, agree interview questions and to set up interviews.
- July 2023 – carry out and transcribe interviews.
- August – September 2023 – thematic analysis and reporting.

The research adopted an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. Appreciative Inquiry is a co-operative, co-evolutionary search for best practice and ideas to take a group, organisation, or partnership 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 thus crucial to the process. Appreciative Inquiry questions are designed to focus on what stakeholders value, want 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).

Appreciative Inquiry was selected as it is:

- An assets-based approach that is uniquely suited to large-scale organisational or system change;
- Forward-looking for future planning and, while it has a focus on the positives, it also has the potential to capture the less positive experiences and challenges, and to identify pointers for change.

Interviews were transcribed and a 6-step thematic analysis of the dataset (survey plus interviews) undertaken to identify key themes across the

dataset which related to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved: familiarisation with the data set; generating initial codes to identify a feature of the data and collating the data by code; searching for themes; reviewing and refining themes; defining and naming themes, counting the number of participants who mentioned and provided evidence for each theme (recognising the scale of the research in this case) and writing up the analysis by theme with reference to the research questions.

Specifically, an inductive or 'bottom up' analytic approach to thematic analysis was used whereby analysis was guided by the themes that emerged from the data, rather than by prior theoretical accounts.



## 3. EMERGING ISSUES BY THEME

Emerging issues are reported across the three identified themes:

- Partnership/collaboration (including role of SFC)
- Use of, and sharing of, data and intelligence;
- Planning/developing curriculum to meet regional skills needs;

Key learning points are highlighted as subheadings and illustrated by exemplar quotes from interviews with research participants.

As outlined above, it should be noted that the research study involves only a small sample of participants across the two RDBs. The findings and quotes provided are, therefore, indicative not substantive.

### 3.1 Partnership/Collaboration

During the interviews participants talked about their experiences of partnership at the regional level, via the two RDBs, but also at the project level (strategic and operational). The points illustrated below outline, where possible, which aspect of the Pathfinder collaboration they refer to.

#### Bringing key stakeholders to the table with a shared aim

Participants reported that the main difference in the approach taken by the Pathfinder Programme is it brings key stakeholders in the region round the table, via the RDBs, to jointly agree at a regional level the emerging, and existing, priority regional skills needs/gaps. Then to endorse a joint institutional response which will develop and implement the appropriate educational provision (via the seven pilot projects)

This approach was reported by some as a departure from previous ways of planning for regional skills needs. Existing practice typically involved some of the same stakeholders meeting in

different regional groups but with no overarching coherence, or consensus on actions. Some participants also emphasised the Pathfinder meetings as a move away from a 'talking shop' where the conversation can sometimes 'go around in circles' to deeper collaboration based on a shared view of the task in hand and agreed actions:

**“ Everybody shouts about a skills gap but it's coming together and the specificity about the skills gap that is different. We're asking: What are employers actually looking for, at what level and where specifically, what particular areas? Because of the recognition of the needs from the regional skills assessment, Pathfinder work is quite defined and specific, and the areas of work have been clearly linked to the employers' skills gap.**

What was deemed different about the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders approach was an opportunity to move from talking about what needed to happen at a regional level, in terms of skills planning and delivery, to having the opportunity to collectively

drill down on available data and intelligence, decide on a collaborative response and delivery plan via the pilot projects. These pilots were brought to life by collaborative partnership working across institutions and organisations and with dedicated seed funding:

“ When resources are tight this is a driver, so we have to do things differently. And we can do things differently for learners. Here we had an opportunity to act.

“ It’s about the offer being more coherent across the region.

## Recognising political drivers and sectoral context

Most participants referred to the current political climate where institutions are operating on reduced budgets as a driver for a changed approach to regional skills planning and delivery. Many also cited the Hayward Review’s imperative that, in future every learner leaves education with a sense of achievement, linked to a positive future pathway. Cognisance of the political drivers and tertiary sectoral context were stimuli for seeking new ways of working together for many stakeholders:

“ A small number of us have been working on this agenda for a long time, this was an opportunity to make something happen. From our college’s perspective, we want to provide courses that feed into progression to other opportunities. I can see it’s going to work. Its time has come; the collaboration is timely. We’ve also got the Hayward Review telling us things have to change and the wider reform of SQA so it’s timely.

*The following set of issues and responses refer mostly to the experience of setting up and delivering the pilot projects*

## Emphasising the common goal – what’s best for learners

The shared goal of doing what’s best for current and future learners was seen as the catalyst for trying out new ideas and doing things differently in terms of the collaborative approach to planning and delivery of course provision to meet regional skills needs:

“ There’s a willingness to understand how others do things differently. Everyone has the one goal really, the learner at the centre, employer needs and new or improved pathways. There’s no dispute that that’s the starting point.

“ Be clear about our outcomes and use action plans to get buy in; don’t be afraid to look at the current eco system and ask, how can we do things better? It has enabled us to take a step back as a group of stakeholders and look at how the whole system operates.

“ Pathfinders is a mini coalition of the willing.

“ Successful collaborative regional working ensures maximum value efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of skills and educational provision for learners. Who benefits? All stakeholders and the economy.

## Defining joint aims

Defining joint aims in response to priority skills needs and delivery to meet these needs, provided the necessary clarity of focus for collaborative working, fostered the necessary willingness and commitment to encourage the sometimes-difficult conversations and engendered trust among partners:

“ **Collaboration is really key, but it needs to have a purpose; where things are undefined it's a talking shop. The purpose and aim are defined here which is why it works and because we've built trust and because you can have frank conversations.**

“ **Defining what is different about the approach is important, it's not just a talking shop; it's about getting things done and meeting the needs of our young people and industry and for the region.**

“ **Colleagues see that the Pathfinder work is really clear and focused. There was a lot of wasted time before.**

## Selecting the 'right people'

In addition to involving all stakeholders in regional skills planning to address a defined aim, selecting the 'right people' was deemed key to the success of the collaborative approach, especially in terms of selecting pilot projects and working together to develop and implement these. Having the right people 'round the table' or 'in the room' was frequently mentioned as a means of generating and sustaining the necessary willingness and commitment for a regional partnership approach:

“ **It's getting people in the room who have the relevant experience and knowledge; decisions being made at the right level. Also, people who are involved in the actual delivery of the programme have to be part of the early discussion to make it work.**

## Building on existing relationships

Many participants noted that initially the pilot project work gained momentum through building on existing relationships. While novel partnerships have also emerged through the pilot projects, stakeholders have used existing personal connections with individuals in other organisations, and existing partnerships, to plan and develop joint

delivery of the pilot programmes. This approach has helped to sustain and further develop the willingness and commitment of key participants to collaborative working to delivery on regional skills:

“ **A lot is down to personal connections – working successfully with likeminded people, taking a different approach to what's been done in the past, trying something new. And we've done it without much resource. That in itself tells you how committed people are to this work.**

“ **There's a willingness and commitment to come together, to build on existing relationships and get momentum from that.**

“ **There is a real sense of colleagues coming together to carve out some time and take forward this work and they're not being paid for it. They are all bought into it.**



## SFC as convener/ providing an authorising environment

Most participants interviewed recognised SFC's contribution to the Pathfinders work in two ways: as a convener of the RDBs and as provider of an authorising environment for college and university partners as they develop responses to regional skills needs. The SFC contribution to the Pathfinders Programme, and particularly the role within the RDBs was viewed as instrumental in allowing a new collaborative approach to responding to regional skills needs (including all stakeholders and seed funding for pilot projects):

“ Their role as convener was essential to get things off the ground. Providing seed funding was important too. They are trying to implement key recommendations of the SFC review. They are part of the steering groups for the RDBs. We need to be around the table to understand what works. They have brought everyone together.

“ They have been a good convener.

“ The SFC can bring learning from the other board. For example, they can say, ‘The North East region is doing this, and you could respond in this way.’ They have skin in the game, which counts.

At the same time *one participant questioned the validity of the approach and SFC's role:*

“ All we really needed was the money. Some pilots were either in discussion or in development or already running and it was an extension. Only one project is new but was possibly under discussion already. It possibly would have been just as effective to have been given the money. SFC are there but they've always had the option to be there.

The view that SFC was at the centre as a catalyst for a new approach, providing structure as well as funds and an authorising environment to try out new ideas and approaches, was not a unanimous view, but it was the majority view.

## Providing structure for a common aim

SFC's role was seen as providing a structure for the Regional Pathfinders work where collaboration was very much emphasised and supported. A key aspect of SFC's role was the emphasis on addressing a common aim: understanding regional skills needs and ensuring the appropriate curriculum and course responses with the learner at the centre. This emphasis was considered to facilitate joint working and delivery where in the past some stakeholders were deemed to be protective of their provision:

“ From SFC perspective, they have provided an authorising environment for partnership working. It needed the structure to collaborate on the joint goals to address regional skills needs. This was about, ‘Go away and do this, be collaborative, you're allowed to do this.’ Breaking down boundaries in terms of ‘this is our area and we've always done it this way.’

## **Elevating regional skills development through delivery of appropriate course provision**

Research participants felt that the approach which involved SFC being part of the development rather than a 'distant observer' meant the Pathfinder work was given a certain kudos in the sector:

**“ SFC being round the table elevated our work and gave it more credibility and importance.**

Project participants felt that it was important that the respective regional groups had a manageable number of pilot projects to deliver, that the RDBs were overseeing the work, and that the pilot projects were delegated to project leads and project co-ordinators. This structure was believed to work well.

At the same time some participants were critical of SFC for being slow to allocate the seed funding. This was one reason given to explain why progress at the outset of the pilot projects was slower than some stakeholders would have expected. One interviewee described how this delay led to unrealistic expectations of what the project could or should achieve when the funding became available:

**“ It was a bit slow to start; there were not enough resources in terms of SFC staff involved; it took too long to get projects off the ground; appointing project managers took time; project managers were recruited whereas secondments might have been quicker.**

SFC participants confirmed that the staff resource allocated to the Pathfinder Programme had a dedicated team that had remained constant throughout the work. However, across those participants who commented on the slower than ideal start to the development of the pilot projects, there was recognition that this was inevitable given the complexities of bringing all the stakeholders together and ensuring a partnership approach.

SFC was complimented by all participants on their ability to maintain focus on collaborative work through the Regional Delivery Boards:

**“ They were a wee bit slow out of the blocks to get the funding allocated and it was quite small budget, but the Funding Council have been very good at keeping us focused on what we're trying to achieve. They have been very supportive and kept us to time on a on task.**

## **Respecting existing information and relationships**

An aspect deemed to facilitate the success of the Project was SFC's recognition and respect for existing relationships between stakeholder institutions from which enhanced relationships for collaborative working could be developed for regional skills planning. SFC was an equal partner 'at the table'. It was also noted that SFC was respectful in acknowledging existing intelligence and data:

**“ SFC were really good at listening, and they wanted to use what information we had rather than re-gather intelligence and data. They came with a real respect for the information and relationships we already had. They joined relationships rather than re-establish relationships.**

## 3.2 Use of, and sharing of, data and intelligence

### Intelligence and data sharing is key

There was a strong message from participants that sharing intelligence and data, as well as reaching a joint understanding of key messages relating to regional skills needs, was crucial at the outset to identifying and agreeing regional priorities and then in the development and delivery of the pilot projects (responses to identified skills priorities). The key issues identified include the volume and complexity of external data available, who owns it, how to access it, and timeliness.

Some participants pointed to a lack of useful, up to date data at a granular level for understanding specific regional skills needs while others suggested that data sharing among wider, regional partners could be enhanced:

“ This is a big issue. Some of the data that we’re using to plan programmes is pretty much out of date – some of the data that comes from SDS (Skills Development Scotland). The last time our regional plan was published is 2019. So, we use our own tools that we have access to as a college.

Most colleges have a workaround for this issue. For example, we do our own data mining and have systems for this but that, in itself, takes a lot of energy and it’s only one partner. We’ve not had data to share across all partners.

“ This data sharing element isn’t working. It should happen if everyone pulls together. (across the region)

Those participants who were closest to the pilot projects were able to share examples of where intelligence and data sharing among partners was happening and proving useful in the understanding of employer asks/needs and student interest/demand. This was then used to guide the development of the regional, collaborative projects:

“ We’ve used our Skills Development Scotland data for joint planning of the Pilot. We’ve done a lot of work with this data. Our second- and third-year school pupils will have told us where and what young people want to do. We can work together to target and market new provision through the pilots where there is a skills gap.

“ The first lesson is that there’s a huge amount of data out there at a school level. So, our first level of analysis is to say, this is what we’ve got, then question who has access to it, how could it be useful, how might we use it? And don’t assume it doesn’t exist.

Feedback suggests that participants mostly had a positive experience of sharing data between institutions, particularly where it was relevant to understanding their learner needs, pathways and learner choice. This was then able to guide and influence the decisions they were making in delivering the pilot projects. A key challenge was the volume and accessibility of timely, regional data and intelligence. One stakeholder suggested that the way forward to enhance access to this data would be to locate all relevant regional and national economic and skills needs data within a single portal and make it available to all for the purpose of regional skills planning and to provide the right evidence base to guide regional course offer:

“ We can share information on who our student population is but there isn’t a single portal that is available in one place. So, the data is out there, it’s just not in one easily accessible portal. That would require a project in itself. We need a project to develop the kind of data sets we need.

### 3.3 Joint planning, development and delivery of curriculum responses and pathways to meet regional skills needs

#### Agreeing aims and outcomes

The emphasis on a collaborative approach to responding to and meeting regional skills needs, involving all relevant stakeholders from the outset, was considered important. This way joint aims and outcomes could be agreed:

“ **What makes the approach successful is being really clear about what we’re trying to achieve; using action plans for delivery means people own the actions and the outcomes; They can see that the outcomes will make a real difference to learners, college staff, employers and employees and make life easier for business providers in the region.**

#### Formalising joint working

Formalising joint working ahead of delivering the pilot projects also encouraged a commitment to collaborative working:

“ **Projects are joint endeavours with agreed aims and outcomes with all partners present. Institutions have volunteered themselves for this collaboration and have signed up for it.**

Some education participants commented on the fact that the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) framework provided a shared language that facilitated joint curriculum development among partners:

“ **Having a shared language, the SCQF language, to describe levels is helpful for co-creating a new curriculum.**

Participants were all agreed on the need to provide those in education, with the relevant skills to meet regional employer and industry needs, and to provide pathways for local learners to develop relevant skills for the jobs available in the region.

There was a shared view that keeping young people in the area was important for the local economy as well as for the learners themselves:

“ **Through this project we can show young people the pathway to a particular job with particular earnings locally because we are rural, and people don’t want to move away re. geography and distance/travel issues. We can provide the right thing in the right place. It’s on a plate.**

University stakeholders, however, pointed out that while meeting the needs of the regional economy was important, their institutions operate in the global context, and they recruit and deliver skills for learners who are expected to be able to contribute in a global economy wherever they happen to be employed regionally, nationally or internationally. One interviewee also pointed out that learners who start out on college courses may, through articulation and pathways, progress to university and that such routes should encompass the notion of the global citizen. This was not, however, viewed as barrier to their (universities) involvement in regional skills development.

## Promoting a joined-up approach to curriculum planning

Many stakeholders were keen to emphasise the benefits of a more joined-up approach to curriculum planning and delivery to meet identified regional needs (a key strategic aim of the Regional Pathfinders Pilot Projects). For example, a participant commented:

“ It’s a vehicle to bring cross-institutional delivery. We’re now able to plan the curriculum jointly where this didn’t happen before. We have lots of agencies: colleges, universities, DYW (Developing Young Workforce), third sector, economic partnerships, community organisations and partnerships, but they weren’t connected together before.

Additionally, participants welcomed the higher profile assigned to joint curriculum development through Regional Pathfinders:

“ It’s given a higher profile to co-development of curriculum and the sharing of these developments between two (or more) institutions. Mainstreaming this concept across the whole curriculum would mean this can become common place.

## Smoother, shorter pathways and reducing duplication

Stakeholders agreed that one of the key benefits of joint curriculum planning and delivery is to ensure a smoother more direct pathway/learner journey and reduce duplication which can be confusing for learners. Participants working on the Regional Pathfinder Pilot Projects cited examples of where joint curriculum planning would help to deliver clearer, shorter pathways for learners through a programme of study into work:

“ It’s critical to remove duplication of offers which will benefit young people in making sustainable post school choices, and that there is a planned and co-ordinated streamlined pipeline to help young people make choices. e.g. if there are four different computing courses in one town this can be addressed. This is about shortening their learner journey and getting them into the world of work.

“ Curriculum planning has certainly been facilitated through Pathfinders. This region has previously not done joined up curriculum planning – the schools do their planning and tell us what they need, and the universities offer their portfolio, and

there’s no joint planning. Nobody has sat down and said let’s offer this degree or whatever. But now, through Pathfinders, we’ve sat down with the local authority and others and said let’s create this pathway, one that is linked to job shortages, and we have sat down with the university and created a joint curriculum. This has been one of the biggest successes.

“ One of the great benefits of the Pathfinder project is that from the outset we agreed to take a coordinated and coherent approach so we’re not duplicating effort or provision. The learning from the approach is that there is currently overlap in provision and we can remove that duplication.

## Increased value for the public purse

Some participants suggested that joint planning and delivery of regional skills through Pathfinders can be seen as increasing value for the public purse, as well as an opportunity to better align with the regional economic strategy and meet agreed employer needs.

“ I think we’ve been better able to demonstrate value for the public purse because of the more joined up approach through Pathfinders which means less overlap of provision. And we’ve been nimble, we’ve worked at pace without the bureaucracy of what can often happen in such groups which is just meeting, having coffee and talking without actually doing anything.

“ One of the themes from the new regional economic strategy for our area is ‘skilled and ambitious people.’ We’ve been able to respond directly to what our regional strategy sets out, through Pathfinders.

## Pathfinder Pilot Projects: new and innovative or safe?

A few participants questioned the extent to which the collaborative, regional, Pathfinder pilot projects endorsed by the RDBs in each region were new and innovative. The view expressed by some was that the projects had in some shape either already been in the pipeline or possibly would have developed anyway without the impetus given by the SFC seed funding. There was therefore scepticism among some participants as to whether some of the projects were ‘a bit safe’ in terms of the likelihood that they would be successful and were perhaps brought forward to the RDBs on this basis. At the same time, these same participants recognised that the RDBs, of which they were active members, had endorsed all the pilot projects selected.

Other participants noted that while some projects were designed to be entirely new and innovative, there was no requirement in the guidance that pilot projects had to meet such criteria. It was for the pilot project partners to make the case in their proposals as to why the particular project and the particular partnership would best deliver for all stakeholders and the region. The criteria for the Pathfinder pilot projects focused on three

aims: alignment of provision against societal and employer needs; enhanced coherence and sustainability across provision; and simpler pathways and improved outcomes for learners.

## Measuring success: Planning evaluation of project outcomes

All seven pilot projects are working to a different timeline for delivery. When questioned how they will know if the outcomes of the regional pilot projects deliver for students, employers and wider stakeholders, participants were able to provide examples of pilot projects that have already delivered outcomes for learners, and which are currently being evaluated. A key focus has been on gathering evidence to show that joint curriculum planning is delivering benefits for learners and the region as a whole:

“ Some projects are already working with great feedback, one is ‘ground-breaking’.

“ One of our projects is offering a pathway to two degrees from the senior phase. We have shortened the learner journey in this way. We can also, through this pathway, keep the learners in the region and they can contribute to the local economy.

Other interviewees outlined their plans to evaluate pilot projects which had not yet fully delivered. Some participants pointed out that for particular projects more longitudinal tracking of learners through to their post-delivery destinations would have to be in place to fully understand the impact of the pilot projects. This would, in some instances, take years. It was suggested that this had not been fully considered in terms of the timeline for the pilot projects, the short-term funding made available, and the impact on evaluation plans.

Those participants who had yet to begin evaluating the pilot project outcomes commented that, in hindsight, it might have been better to have had more of a focus on the evaluation of pilot projects from the outset of the development rather than starting to plan for evaluation nearer the middle and end of the funding period:

**“ We need to get together and decide about evaluation and how we do it and how we mainstream our offer after the end of the year.**

**“ It would have been great to have started earlier and have project teams in place earlier to drive things forward at a faster pace; if we would have had some plan for evaluation in place initially for the projects. It was only mentioned in the action plans but just thinking about it now, we should have planned this in from the beginning. It's down to time.**

SFC participants in the study clarified that evaluation of project outcomes (what was delivered) was factored into the design process for the planning of joint projects but reflected that this aspect could have been emphasised more at the outset of the wider project. SFC has built in ongoing evaluation around the process (how the pilot projects have worked in practice and lessons learned).

Those participants from colleges and universities who had insight into the detail of the projects 'on the ground' were able to comment on how they would know when the pilot projects had been successful, that outcomes had been realised and were able to discuss plans for pilot project evaluation. This was not the case for other participants who were more distant from the projects. Indeed, several interviewees declined to comment on any questions relating to the pilot projects as they felt that they did not have this oversight.

In general, participants from institutions were most knowledgeable and forthcoming about the nature and detail of the pilot projects and what stage each of the respective projects were at in terms of outcomes or predicted outcomes. They were also more able to describe the evaluation strategy or proposed strategy for the outcomes of collaborative projects.



## 4. KEY LEARNING FROM THE PATHFINDER PROGRAMME

### Testing new ideas and new ways of working

Participants view Pathfinders as a test bed for the collaborative approach to better understanding and responding to regional skills needs.

Partners talked of the current economic and political context of a reduced public purse and an associated increased emphasis on the need for getting regional skills responses right for learners. Their responses indicate that they embraced the opportunity to discover and report what currently works and what does not work or could work better through a more joined up approach.

The Pathfinders approach allows, and indeed encourages, the testing of new ways of working to jointly identify skills priorities and new ideas for educational responses to deliver these skills. This was seen by all participants as a positive aspect. The approach provides an opportunity to take risks without incurring blame if pilot projects for some reason are unable to deliver their expectations.

The key aspect was learning from the process. The opportunity to test out new ideas was seen by many participants as a means of encouraging collaborative working and trust:

“ We have to be able to take risks, try things without blame, recognise that something might not work, appreciate one partner might need to bear more of the burden of the work than another, it needs trust and to recognise the constraints on the other partners.

There was a view expressed that collaborative working in this way supports an appetite for innovation and trying out new things while sharing the risk across a number of partners. Interviewees viewed the Pathfinder work as a chance to test out collaboration between stakeholders across the region, some of whom already worked relatively closely while other partners were less familiar in terms of planning and developing provision jointly:

“ I see it as a test bed for the collaborative approach to regional skills planning; it's a chance to see what works and doesn't work and to share good practice.

“ For the first time in a development of this kind involving pathways, we got the head teachers round the table and asked, 'How would this work for you?' They were partners, a genuine partnership in planning.

### Navigating the current regional skills planning landscape

Some participants described the current regional skills landscape as “cluttered”. In addition, the approach taken by institutions to understand and respond to identified skills needs is not well understood. Institutional partners have worked to better understand the regional economic and skills partnerships. The Pathfinders Programme is facilitating deeper collaboration between institutions and other regional partners.



“ This has been really useful. We have a group with schools and the college, but this project has taken skills planning to another level by looking at regional needs and map across who is offering what, so we have been able to take a targeted focused approach and not duplicate effort to where the jobs are, and qualifications are needed.

“ What was there previously was fragmented. It’s allowed us to build a scaffold for skills development regionally. It’s a clear example of knitting together all the agencies.

Some of those interviewed noted that part of the success of the Pathfinders programme has been ensuring the right people are round the right tables in the region and that this is simplified as much as possible.

## An enhanced role for colleges and universities

The two RDBs established to provide oversight of the Pathfinder activity in each region, provided a mechanism through which all parties were brought ‘to the table’, where the college and university

representatives feel they have an enhanced role in terms of decision making in responding to regional issues, and governance of the emerging work:

“ The college previously was not part of regional skills planning in this region. We are now in the driving seat here and are very much focused on outcomes.

## Closer working with employers and industry

Involving industry and employer engagement through the curriculum planning, development and delivery phases of the Pathfinders pilot projects was highlighted as critical, and noted by some participants, as a way to contribute to national skills planning:

“ One of our projects has a digital focus – it’s a linked project involving a close relationship with SDS, DESAP. In term of the digital skills action plan, we are effectively creating a blueprint for what that action plan could be nationally. We’re linked in nationally through this project, for example, with the innovation centres and with the university we have not previously worked with. We developed a regional

strategy from this work.

“ Regional Pathfinders encourages responsive regional planning and alignment to national planning. It’s a bridge from regional to national skills planning.

The Strategic Groups set up to oversee the delivery of the individual pilot projects also provided the opportunity to bring employers round the table and work in partnership:

“ We have had an employer representative feeding into each project and so help to define the projects. And we’ve had businesses from within the region in to ask them for their views and input on local skills issues and what skills HNC and D students need to contribute in the region.

“ Industry has also been involved in delivery of parts of the curriculum to students on placements. Businesses have sense checked some of the outcomes from the projects e.g. to look at the skills map.

## Summary of key learning points

The table below summarises the key learnings points from this research, by research theme, in terms of implementing Regional Tertiary Pathways, for the wider education and skills system. This learning should inform the development of the scheme moving forward.

**Figure 1 Summary of key learning points from the initial phase of the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders Programm**

Theme	Key learning points: what works	Theme	Key learning points: what works
<b>Partnership/ collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bringing all stakeholders to the table</li> <li>Recognising political drivers and sectoral context</li> <li>SFC as convenor/ providing an authorising environment</li> <li>Pathfinders provides structure for a common aim</li> <li>Regional skills responses and delivery are elevated through Pathfinders</li> <li>All stakeholders benefit from the partnership approach</li> <li>Keeping the learner at the centre of the educational response</li> <li>Focus on increased value for the public purse</li> <li>Selecting the 'right' people to be involved</li> <li>Maintaining momentum at the regional level</li> <li>SFC maintaining focus throughout the development</li> </ul>	<b>Planning/ developing curriculum to meet regional skills needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Pathfinder pilot projects promote joint curriculum planning and development and address duplication and smoother pathways for learners</li> <li>Defining and agreeing joint aims and outcomes</li> <li>Clarifying the operational criteria for joint projects</li> <li>Formalising joint working across institutions and partners</li> <li>A joined-up approach to curriculum planning to ensure a smooth learner journey</li> <li>Planning evaluation of pilot projects from the start</li> </ul>
<b>Use of, and sharing of, data and intelligence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respecting and building on existing information and relationships</li> <li>Sharing intelligence and reaching a shared understanding is necessary/crucial</li> <li>Emphasising the shared goal – collaborative regional skills planning with the learner at the centre</li> </ul>	<b>Key learning from the Pathfinders Programme (so far) and who benefits</b>	<p>The Pathfinders approach was an opportunity to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Test collaborative working</li> <li>Be innovative in planning and delivering projects</li> <li>Develop a shared understanding of regional skills needs and priorities and delivery of educational responses</li> <li>Provide an enhanced role for colleges and universities at a regional level in thinking about skills needs and responses</li> <li>Build a bridge between regional and national skills planning</li> <li>Benefit learners and the communities they serve by delivering skills to meet the needs of the region, promoting smoother transitions and shorter learner journeys</li> </ul>

## 5. WHY TAKE A REGIONAL, COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO SKILLS AND WHO BENEFITS?

In concluding the interviews for this study, participants were asked to outline their understanding of why a collaborative approach to understanding and responding to regional skills needs, as exemplified through the approach of the Pathfinder programme, is critical and who benefits.

In their responses to this question participants highlighted the necessity to reach a shared understanding of the demand for skills (from employers and from prospective students), the importance of sharing key data and intelligence, identifying a place-based response, agreeing priorities for regional skills responses, removing duplication of offer, maximizing value in terms of efficiency and effectiveness in provision of skills, smoother transitions, shorter learner journeys and an enhanced role for education partners recognising their contribution to the process.

### **Sharing data, intelligence, and local knowledge is critical to understanding demand and needs**

- “ We can only get the skills we need by understanding the demand and the opportunity and can only plan to meet that together. Sharing intelligence is really key.
- “ SFC is promoting the work of our education providers in a way that didn't happen before in this context.
- “ We have to work in collaboration so we can get the right knowledge of the skills that are needed; it's imperative. SFC is promoting the work of our education

providers in a way that didn't happen before in this context.

- “ This collaborative work gives a clear line of sight to the regional strategies; having the right data to evidence outcomes and we can show shorter learner journeys. The Pathfinder projects need to have the right baseline evidence.



## Jointly agree the skills priorities for the region

“ Because you do need all the stakeholders around the table to understand what the skills needs are, what the challenges are, what the long-term workforce requirements are, you need to have industry and the private sector there too, you need the different voices, and you need to listen to these. That way, you can identify any duplication and the gaps.

“ Because without collaboration across partners you can't agree the priorities. We are aligning to the Regional Economic Strategy; we recognise what is coming out of this strategy and want to work together to address that as a collaborative for the learners and the local economy.

## Ensuring a place-based response to meet the skills needs of the local population

“ The Pathfinder approach has been of benefit to the wider regional economy which is made up of employers and individuals and the work is critical because it ensures that all the education and skills stakeholders are maximising that benefit for the communities they serve.

“ We're doing this to develop the economy so that the employers get the employees with the skills they need. We're doing it for industry and for people.

“ Collaboration through Pathfinders is of benefit to the wider regional economy which is made up of employers and individuals.

“ We need to look at what we can do to keep people in the region. We need to promote place, and this is part of that.

## A co-ordinated regional approach to delivery of courses, qualifications and pathways (the pipeline)

“ It's critical to remove duplication of offer which will benefit young people in making sustainable post-school choices. For example, if there are four different computing courses in one town. There should be a planned and co-ordinated streamlined pipeline to help young people make choices. It should shorten their learner journey and get them into the world of work.

“ It's about smooth transitions and shorter journeys.

## Value for the public purse

“ You have to know where the priorities are as you only have one pot of money.

“ Successful collaborative regional working ensures maximum value efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of skills and education provision for learners. This benefits all stakeholders and the economy.

## Who benefits

A clear message emerged on who benefits from a collaborative, regional approach to meeting skills needs: learners, employers, communities, the local region and the economy.

- “ Our graduates have transferable skills and can end up in any part of the world. So, there are benefits beyond the region.
- “ We benefit as education providers because we understand the needs of industry, students benefit because they are more employable, and employers get the people with the skills they need.



## 6. CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

The study adopted an Appreciative Inquiry approach where the key focus was what is working well across the delivery of the Pathfinder Programme so far. At the same time participants also surfaced concerns and challenges that suggest there are issues which need further exploration and understanding in the next phase of the Programme. They would certainly need to be addressed in any future iteration of the Pathfinder approach. The challenges fall into three categories including understanding the Pathfinder approach and role of SFC, the focus and outcomes of the pilots (success) and sustainability.

### Understanding the process and the role of SFC

Some participants were frustrated by a perceived delay in the allocation of SFC funding for pilot projects. However, most understood the need to ensure due process, including the submission of robust project proposals to, and endorsement from, the RDBs in their governance role.

While most participants were supportive of SFC being 'round the table' as an equal partner, at least one participant questioned the motives and efficacy of this arrangement while another suggested that all that was necessary for the pilot projects to be implemented was the seed funding from SFC.

**SFC should consider ways to address the sometimes-negative perception of their multifaceted role in Regional Tertiary Pathfinders; convenor, authoriser, funder and educational planning partner (of coherent learning provision).**

SFC was complimented by all participants on its convening role of the RDBs and ability to maintain the focus on delivery. However, maintaining momentum and partner engagement was challenging. This is evidenced by the reporting of a fall off in attendance at RDBs by regional partners as the Pathfinders activity progressed beyond the early planning stages. One regional partner reported feeling somewhat distant from the process, having not been engaged in any aspect of delivery of the pilots.

“ I've only seen very basic plans for the project, just brief outlines and who the lead is but that doesn't give us a lot of info and I only saw this after the projects were set up. Don't feel I have a role; I've just gone to meetings and fed back to [name of industry/employer agency] what they are saying. I'd have liked to have been involved in the development of the projects. That would have been useful and would have given me a role.

**SFC and regional skills and education partners should address ways to ensure that all regional partners are fully involved/ apprised throughout the work, including the key phase of development and implementation of responses to identified regional skills needs by institutions (in this case the work of the pilot projects).**

Another participant, while generally supportive of the collaborative approach, questioned whether it was legitimate for SFC to both design the Pathfinder Programme and then appoint someone to evaluate it as a process?

**Clearer guidance could be prepared to ensure a shared understanding of SFC's role across the Programme (with RDBs and pilot projects).**

## **Data, intelligence and insights**

Further work is indicated around data gathering, sharing and accessibility.

For example, some participants asked how universities and colleges might access the regional skills data flowing from SDS and other sources more easily and in real time.

**The feasibility of developing one data portal to ensure sharing of intelligence, information and insights to support regional skills priorities might be explored.**

**Examples of good practice in intelligence and data sharing from pilot projects could be disseminated across the regional partners and beyond.**

## **The focus of the pilot projects**

Some participants questioned the extent to which pilot projects were new and innovative and suggested that some of the pilot projects were 'a bit safe' in terms of the likelihood they would be successful. Some suggested that the institutions took funding for projects that were already being planned and they otherwise may have funded themselves. (although not substantiated in this study)

In addition, some wider, regional stakeholders round the RDB table appeared to be more distant from the Pathfinder process than college and university partners. One solution posed by a participant to the issue of maintaining partner engagement throughout the process is to select new pilots from each sectoral area identified within the regional economic strategy and delivery plan:

**“ We should select a project from each of the sectoral areas within our regional plan rather than use/build on projects that are already up and running or would be likely to happen anyway. That way you'd engage the employer and industry representatives more. Sometimes it's all the public sector bodies talking to each other in one Regional Board meeting. The industry and employer representation at meetings has fallen off. Doing it by selecting different projects according to the regional economic strategy would keep them engaged.**

**If similar arrangements are taken forward in the future SFC and partners should provide greater clarity about the focus and criteria for regional, collaborative projects and the requirements for accessing any available SFC funding.**

**On completion of the Pathfinder Programme, regional partners might want to collectively agree where these discussions with industry and employer representatives take place and who is round the table.**

## Measuring success

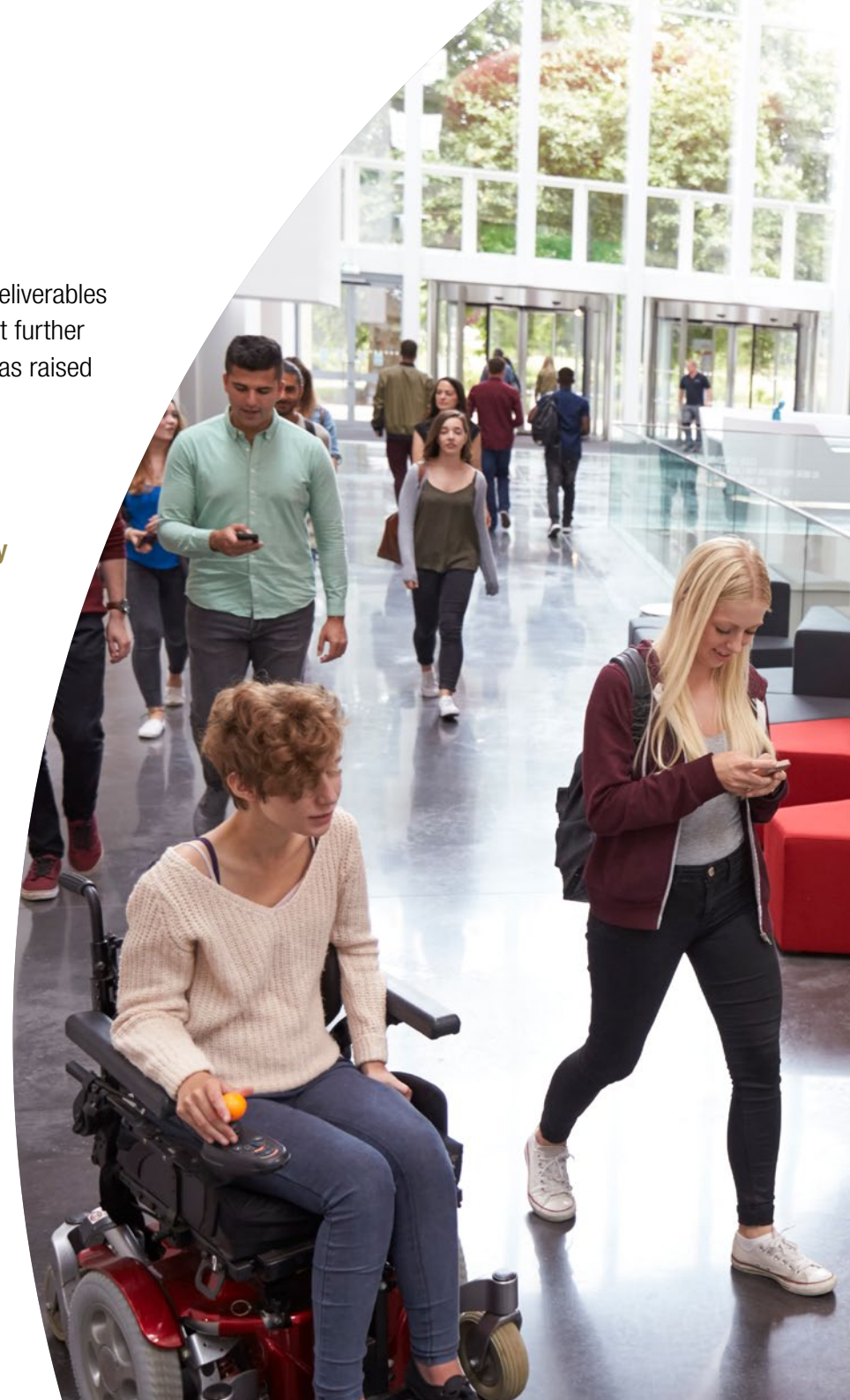
Participants confirmed that authorising and formalising partnership working is useful in the early stages as is planning the evaluation of pilot project outcomes from the outset. Planning evaluation early is particularly important in those projects where evidence of outcomes would involve tracking learners into and through education and into employment. **(Participants were aware that SFC has built in evaluation of the overall Pathfinders approach and have committed to reporting on this at the end of the Pathfinders Programme.)**

**SFC and educational partners have a role in emphasising the importance of building in evaluation (of the effectiveness of the pilot projects in responding to skills needs) from the outset and it should be built into project plans. This is key to measuring success of what works.**

## Sustainability

How sustainable are the projects and deliverables beyond the initial funding period without further resource? This issue of sustainability was raised by more than half of the participants.

**This is a key question and one that should be picked up with the pilot projects in the next phase of activity and reporting.**





## 7. IN SUMMARY

Throughout the interviews there was a clear message from all participants that there was a need for new ways of working regionally, to include all key stakeholders working in collaboration, to understand and respond to emerging and current skills needs. They noted the following drivers:

- The focus on place-based solutions to regional skills demands and closer links with employers.
- The political push for change and potential regional and sector reform.
- Reduced public purse, including institutions operating on reduced budgets.
- The Hayward Review's imperative that in future every learner leaves education with a sense of achievement, linked to a positive future pathway.

### **The regional, collaborative approach, via Pathfinders, promotes the following:**

- Increased value for the public purse compared to previous approaches.
- An opportunity to better meet regional economic needs in a strategic way.
- All partners (learners, employers, local

communities and regions) benefit from the collaborative approach.

- The learner remains the focus of the educational response via new curriculum pathways and delivery.

### **Key learning from the operation of the RDBs and the Pathfinder pilot projects**

- The sharing of intelligence and data is deemed essential for regional partnership working to address skills needs and understand what success looks like. Some of the challenges identified included accessing appropriate, real-time data and tracking learners beyond the pilot projects.
- Respecting and building on existing regional relationships is important. This has helped to generate trust and sustain a commitment to ongoing collaborative working.
- The RDBs were viewed as instrumental at the outset of the Pathfinder Programme as the mechanism which oversees this new collaborative approach to understanding regional skills needs and piloting innovative

educational responses; one that includes all stakeholders with a shared aim. However, maintaining momentum is critical.

- Selecting the 'right' people to be involved both at the RDB level and in the regional, pilot projects is central to ensuring success and effective collaboration and partnership working.
- SFC's role, both as the convenor of the RDBs but also in providing an authorising environment to test out new forms of delivery, is deemed useful by most participants. However, SFC could do more in future to clarify the various roles it has in regional skills discussions and delivery to meet identified needs.

In the view of participants, the collaborative approach of the Pathfinder pilot projects provides an opportunity to address duplication and promotes joint curriculum development which works for learners in terms of providing more seamless transitions and shorter learner journeys. As well as Pathfinders being an opportunity to test innovative ideas on skills alignment and delivery via pilot projects, the new approach is also viewed as a means of testing deeper collaborative working between different education, industry/employer and

other key partners at a regional level. Demystifying how regional skills priorities are agreed and then how institutions plan curriculum to meet these needs are motivations for collaborative working. It is the belief of all research participants that such collaboration maximises the benefits for learners, employers and the communities they serve.

Education partners, specifically colleges, perceive an enhanced role for their institutions in regional skills alignment as a consequence of being involved in Pathfinders work. This may reflect the fact that colleges very much see their role as anchor institutions within their regions whereas university participants stressed the importance of their offering in their respective regions whilst being cognisant that they are recruiting learners in a more national and global context.

Overall, the collaborative approach that underpins the work of the Regional Tertiary Pathfinders is seen as critical by those education and regional partners interviewed as part of this research. The RDBs provided a mechanism for a new joined-up, inclusive approach with SFC providing an authorising role to test, develop and learn from new ideas and ways of working, (although recognising that attendance did drop following the set up of the pilot projects).

Factors influencing the success of the collaborative approach include emphasising the regional context and shared aims for their regions; understanding the need to work in partnership to respond to regional skills in the context of reduced budgets; the tertiary sectoral context and political drivers for new ways of working; identifying opportunities for collaboration; selecting the 'right' people; building on existing relationships; the sharing of intelligence and data; agreeing priorities, outcomes and working arrangements; a shared desire to remove duplication of offer; an opportunity to maximize value in terms of efficiency and effectiveness in provision of skills for smoother transitions and shorter learner journeys; and an enhanced role for education partners, especially colleges.

The beneficiaries of regional skills planning are deemed to be learners, employers, communities and the local region. The economy was also referenced as a beneficiary.

Finally, a more joined up and collaborative approach to identifying and meeting regional skills needs was seen by some participants as necessary beyond the life of the Pathfinder Programme and necessary to provide a bridge to meeting national skills needs.

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# APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions, developed around the Appreciative Inquiry model aligned to the four key Pathfinders themes:

Research theme	Questions
<b>Partnership/collaboration</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is different about the approach taken by the Regional Delivery Boards in the two Pathfinder Regions compared to other groups in the region that focus on regional skills planning and delivery?</li> <li>2. What has worked well?</li> <li>3. What are the most positive things about the approach taken by the Pathfinder pilot projects in your region so far?</li> <li>4. What factors contribute to or indicate a willingness and commitment across stakeholders in the North East/South of Scotland to engage in the Pathfinder pilot activity?</li> <li>5. What makes this collaborative approach successful?</li> <li>6. What role has SFC had in the Pathfinders Programme and to what extent has this contributed to the success of the approach?</li> </ol>
<b>Use of, and sharing of, data and intelligence</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. How has the sharing of data and intelligence been facilitated as part of this partnership working?</li> <li>8. Where is this happening?</li> <li>9. What lessons have been learned about data and intelligence sharing?</li> </ol>
<b>Planning/developing curriculum to meet regional skills needs</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. What is different about the approach of the pilot projects to other institutional responses to meeting skills needs in the region?</li> <li>11. What has worked well?</li> <li>12. How have the Pathfinder pilot projects enabled joint curriculum planning and/or the development of smoother learner pathways.</li> <li>13. How will you know if the outcomes of the pilot projects deliver for students, employers and wider stakeholders?</li> <li>14. In one sentence what is your understanding of why the collaborative approach to regional skills planning is critical and who benefits?</li> </ol>
<b>Key learning points</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. What have been the key learning points from your experience of participating in the Pathfinder Programme in your region?</li> <li>16. What would need to change/what would you do differently to make regional skills planning and delivery more effective in your region?</li> <li>17. What learning can be shared with others/other regions who are considering collaborative approaches to planning and meeting regional skills needs?</li> </ol>



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