
Pathfinder National Advisory Board

Emergent findings from the Pathfinder activity phase 1

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to inform and engage the National Advisory Board on emergent findings from the Pathfinder activity to-date to prompt discussion, expert advice, framing and understanding at the NAB meeting on 28th March 2023.
2. These findings were drawn together during the early evaluation phase of the programme, between January and March 2023. Further illustrations will be provided during the meeting through facilitated engagement with Pathfinder pilot project leads and Regional Delivery Board (RDB) members. The format of the meeting is outlined at Annex A.

Where are we now?

3. The Pathfinder Regional Pilot projects were agreed and endorsed by the RDBs between September and December 2022. The pilots are currently in the development and testing phase with delivery of new course provision and pathways expected from August 2023 onwards. The regional pilots will inform potential system improvement and shape expectations, guidance, and good practice for the tertiary education system around skills planning and delivery.
4. The endorsement of the regional pilot projects allowed SFC to make formal offers of funding to support all seven pilots by early January. The funding is being used predominantly for interim project coordinator roles to support the development of each of the pilots. A news story on the SFC Website highlights the innovative regional responses to meeting priority skills needs. The [news story](#) linking to the [Pilots web page](#) can be accessed here. This was a significant milestone in the Pathfinder programme.
5. With all seven Regional Tertiary Pathfinder pilot projects agreed by the end of December 2022, and development work underway, the focus during the early part of 2023 was to reflect on progress with partners and evaluate our learning to-date.
6. We were keen to explore how the Pathfinder partnership working is contributing to the identification of, and response to, regional priority skills needs and improved regional planning. Our approach to this early evaluation/reflection included the following:
 - We gathered early feedback from the pilot Project Leads in December and January through arranged meetings with the SFC Pathfinder Team to discuss the evaluation process and active learning or “learning by doing”.

- Individual meetings with RDB members in January, led by the Deputy Director of Coherent Learning Provision, were followed by reflective workshop sessions with each of the RDBs in February.
- RDBs for the South of Scotland and the North-East Scotland took place on 20th and 23rd of February respectively, with a facilitated discussion around roles, partnership working and emergent themes.
- This was followed by a workshop with Project Leads on 2nd March focusing on their experiences on the ground, planning and delivering the early work of the pilot projects, and what this could mean for potential future roles and relationships for the SFC, RDBs and institutions.

Framing the Pathfinder activity

7. During these reflective sessions with key partners, SFC introduced the **Improvement Journey** as a tool to help frame and evaluate the Pathfinder work to-date; and the **six lenses of Coherent Learning Provision**, which is being developed by SFC to understand the challenges for our education and skills providers more widely and has resonance for the Pathfinders work.

The improvement Journey

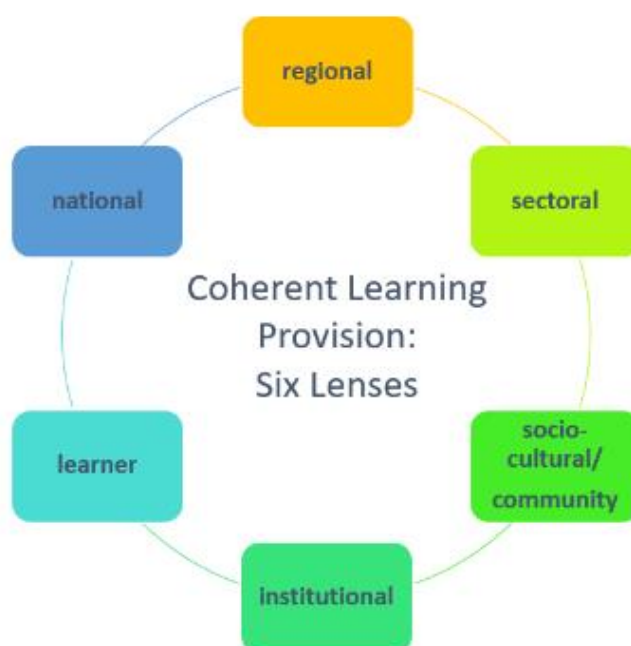
8. Throughout the reflection process, we have used the [NHS Education Scotland \(NES\) Quality Improvement Journey](#) as a helpful and relevant tool to explore our learning from the Pathfinder work; introducing it as an organising framework at the recent meetings of the Regional Delivery Boards and the cross-region workshop with Pilot Project Leads.



9. Discussions with the RDBs and Project Leads focused on the first three areas of the improvement journey shown in the diagram above. Future sessions will look at the full journey as the work to deliver pilot projects develops.
10. **Creating conditions** for successful improvement has seen SFC and partners consciously ensuring that approaches and ways of working required for collaborative partnerships are being developed and maintained in each region, to allow for the greatest impact for the Pathfinder work. Given the range of partners, interests, and differences in each regional context, will and commitment to shared aims are key to the success of the work. Through our collective evaluative reflection, we have explored any emergent barriers, tensions, or ways of working which may need adapted, and recognised and built on existing impactful ways of working, these will be further developed through the pilot projects.
11. **Understanding systems** is key to ensuring a common understanding of the improvements and changes required for system improvement and the processes and approaches which will lead to coherent learning provision in priority areas and improve outcomes for learners. Using data, insights, experience and evidence, regional partners are working together to understand how planning processes connect/disconnect and where collaboration and coordinated activity could deliver regional benefits. For example, this includes looking at areas such as institutional approaches to curriculum planning, wider system approaches to career guidance and the senior phase activity.
12. **Developing aims** is concerned with clearly describing the improvements the teams are working towards. In the context of the Pathfinder work this has meant articulating a small number of shared regional priorities and translating these into pilot projects which the RDBs have determined will lead to impactful change.
13. **The improvement journey** is supporting our understanding of system change within the Pathfinder regions and framing our learning and has proved helpful in providing a sense of trajectory to our work.

Six lenses of Coherent Provision Planning

14. Given the range of partners, the six interdependent lenses of Coherent Learning Provision are being iteratively developed through Pathfinder work and used with partners to consider the nature of system changes required for Coherent Learning Provision. They help us to explore what coherent provision might look like in different contexts and provide an opportunity to recognise and discuss the inherent tensions within the education and skills system when determining provision.



15. The descriptions below represent our thinking at this point, and we would welcome further suggestions from NAB members to help us to sharpen our articulation of the factors driving planning decisions

Defining the lenses – with recognition of overlaps

National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision in subjects at all levels is available somewhere in Scotland. • National priorities for the provision of learning and research opportunities are met. • Impactful continuation to national recovery.
Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional employer involvement. • New approaches to skills and provision planning to meet regional need.
Sectoral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherent planning for key sectors of the economy and public services • Sectoral curriculum planning which makes sense at an institutional level
Socio-cultural / community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socio-cultural role of learning provision – thriving communities • Community wealth building • 20-minute neighbourhoods • Anchor institutions • Place-based approaches
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional sustainability • Staff as stakeholders • Tertiary sector development • Schools, colleges, and universities as partners and providers

Learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of opportunity for learners of all ages and stages • Clear, unbroken pathways • A voice in quality and planning
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What have we learned so far?

Using the Improvement Journey to frame our understanding

Creating the conditions - build will and conditions for change

16. SFC invited regional stakeholders to come together in a new space, the Pathfinders Regional Delivery Boards (RDBs) in the South of Scotland and the North-East, to share intelligence, create a new debate on the needs of the region, and collaborate on regional skills planning. SFC has taken a leadership role in these meetings, chairing each of the RDBs, preparing papers and initiating strategic discussions.

17. We were keen to learn how the Pathfinder partnership working could improve regional planning and the identification and development of priorities. Our early evaluative work suggests the following:

- There has been a **significant impact of combined energy, resources and investment** via the RDB to deliver a shared outcome for the region.
- The **RDBs were seen to have an authorising role for the education institutions** to come together in a joint response and to support the emerging collaborative pilots.
- The **role of SFC in this space was considered crucial**: this included strategic and data input, setting timelines to deliver, providing seed funding for the pilot projects, bringing greater clarity on regional needs and wider education and skills policy. SFC's role was also about facilitation, support, and developing partnership built on trust (scaffolding). However, some partners were still not clear about the role SFC was taking as it was different from the traditional role of funder; and they identified tensions between SFC's role in scrutiny and in support.
- **Role of education providers**: all education providers involved are supportive of developing a deeper regional, collaborative relationship but there are sometimes tensions in moving to intensive collaboration, partnership and shared decision making. (The six lenses of Coherent Learning Provision bring some greater understanding of these tensions.)
- **Role of other regional stakeholders round the RDB table**: all regional stakeholders have come together to participate in the Pathfinder work. There was agreement that all the right people are in the room. However, some stakeholders indicated

they were not 100% clear about their role in this regional forum (vs their role in other regional groups).

- **Fit of the RDB within existing planning landscape** – Part of the rationale for bringing regional partners together in this space was to step out of the already crowded landscape of regional skills planning. Annex B includes a view of the structures in place in the two regions and illustrates the range of groups that currently exist. There needs to be clarity moving forward about the future role of the RDBs alongside existing groups and where most impact can be achieved. A mapping exercise is underway to understand SFC representation, participation, and role at these regional forums across Scotland.

Understanding systems – understand current systems and opportunities for improvement

Curriculum review, planning and development

18. SFC led some early collaborative work with the sectors to better understand how curriculum review, provision planning, and course design happens across the sector. This highlighted the significant lead in times required for a full-scale change of the curriculum in any given subject. This is particularly significant where partners are coming together to plan the development of new joint courses, programmes of study, qualifications and aligned and sustainable learner pathways. This co-designed and co-led approach, which responds to future skills requirements, is likely to have a longer lead in time. It may also have structural implications.
19. The timescales outlined for delivery of the pilots reflect the required educational process for a full-scale change of curricula and pedagogy and new collaborative ways of working. For other pilots, the initial focus will be on adaptation of existing curricula and pedagogy (including learner support) and this will allow the developments to be implemented within a shorter timeframe and the new provision to be available sooner.
20. SFC is curating an initial report and exemplars from our work over the Autumn with the sector on provision planning and curriculum design. This will require further work in the next phase.

Use of data for skills planning and decision making

21. The Pathfinder data and analysis work completed in Autumn 2022 and the report was subsequently published. The output included reporting and analysis of education and skills provision across the two regions and how this has changed over time, in response to the needs of learners and the economy.
22. As we outline below, the RDBs endorsed the Pathfinder pilot projects based on their current understanding and awareness of the current priorities in the two regions. It was

clear in discussions that stakeholders access a variety of data, evidence and reports to make decisions around skills provision. The Strategic Working Groups established to deliver the pilot activity are making full use of available data, quantitative and qualitative, as they develop the pilot activities and ensure full engagement with all stakeholders. SFC has been invited to attend these groups and will observe the process of sharing of data first-hand. Further analysis will be completed on the use of data in regional planning and delivery of skills in the two regions.

Using the Coherent Learning Provision lenses to understand systems

23. Using the Coherent Learning Provision lenses helps us to understand the inherent tensions and challenges that impact and influence the position of key stakeholders in the regional education and skills system depending on how they prioritise.

- National, regional and institutional
- Regional collaboration across institutions
- The role of competition between collaborators – individual autonomy and sustainability vs collective interest
- Tertiary landscape vs institutional autonomy
- History and the way things happened in the past still impact views and ways of working now

Developing aims (and change theory)

24. How did the RDB's approach the task of establishing priorities and identifying the pilot projects?

- The RDBs started from a strong position of already “knowing” what priority skills were required for the regional economy based on regional intelligence and data. In some cases the activity/tests of change outlined in the pilot projects were already in train and the RDBs and the Pathfinder framework provided the catalyst to accelerate the development work and strengthen partnerships.
- New collaborative, strategic working groups have been established to ensure continued partnership working on development and delivery of the pilot projects. These working groups will be critical to delivering on the aims and objectives of the Pathfinders.
- A new understanding of, and approach to, the education and skills pathways into work and into further and higher education is emerging through the pilots.
- We will want to explore what new analysis of regional evidence and data is happening at the project level.

25. Common issues and themes emerging from the early work of the pilots for consideration in the next phase:

Working with employers

- In wider discussions relating to the skills needs of the region, the work tertiary institutions undertake with employers of all sizes, public and private, as part of their curriculum planning and review process is not always visible outside of the institutions. SFC needs to work with pilot project leads and RDB members to highlight and document their engagement with employers to plan for and respond to labour and skills shortages and meet economic need. Further SFC work to understand work-based learning offer at national and regional level is also planned. We should build on this to consider effective approaches to generate and sustain positive and productive education and employer partnerships for the future.

Need for enhanced careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG)

- Partners report a clear need to address CIAG and school/college and school/university links (SFC, SDS, Local Authorities, colleges and universities). Enhancing perceptions about specific career or job choices (eg health and social care) is also crucial as is the right advice on the impact of subject choice on future course and career options. We are mindful of the work over the last year leading to the recently concluded Careers Review: [Final Report](#), delivered by SDS, which seeks to address the needs for enhancing CIAG across the tertiary sector. We will want to engage with and learn from this and other work and expertise available to address concerns raised.
- The SFC's National Schools Programme focuses on supporting transitions between school and college/university for senior phase learners and contributes to our work in widening participation in higher education.
- We will also need to ensure that qualifications are up to date, and quality assured. Co-operation and joint solutions will be required between SFC and a range of bodies to respond to emerging systems/structural issues.

Need for upskilling and reskilling opportunities

- While there is a focus on schools as critical to the skills pipeline, we also need to focus on those looking to reskill or upskill and pathways for those furthest from the labour market. The pilot projects in both regions are exploring this area and we may want to consider any implications for our broader funding approaches.

Role of the RDBs

- We continue to work with regional partners to shape the future role of the Regional Delivery Boards for the lifetime of the Pathfinders and to consider a future role for them to ensure institutions and key partners:
 - take responsibility for oversight of the delivery of the pilots;
 - support SFC in gathering lessons learned;

- retain ownership of regional planning and interaction with skills planning fora and delivery and;
- sustain future collaborative working.

Considerations for SFC in the next phase of the Pathfinders:

26. We will want to engage with other agencies and institutions and research initiatives to feed into the Pathfinder work and learn from others' work and experience.
- Consideration of scalability and testing into implementation in new contexts.
 - We will need to review and evaluate the impact of the pilots and the broader skills planning approach of the Pathfinders to consider the potential to apply the learning to accelerate improved approaches in other geographies and sectors.

Implications for SFC

27. We will need to consider the benefits, and challenges, arising from SFC's active role in the regional Pathfinders and skills planning in the two regions – how transferable is this within given capacity limits? Similarly, we will consider implications for changes to our assurance, accountability, and funding approaches.

Summary of Emergent Themes from Pathfinder Activity

- Deeper collaboration between stakeholders – education and key partner
- Joint curriculum planning and development underway
- Building a talent pipeline and planned pathways for key industry sectors
- Joint skills planning across the sector and institutional alliances
- Influencing demand and the role of careers advice and guidance

Questions for the NAB

28. Questions for the NAB members

- Does the learning emerging from the Pathfinder work resonate with your own research and experience?
- What is it telling us about further change required at institutional, regional or systems level to improve regional skills planning and delivery?

Recommendations

29. **The NAB is invited to consider:**

- How we take what we have learned so far to influence and shape the next phase of the Pathfinders programme? (Consider the role of SFC, the role of key stakeholders and the regional fora that exist to influence regional skills planning.)

and
- What key messages, or asks, from the early Pathfinders evaluation we will want to take to the SFC Board in May to influence next steps.

Further information

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Annex A

Format of the NAB meeting on 28th March 2023

The aim of the meeting is to tap into the experience and expert knowledge of NAB members to deepen our understanding of the learning from the Pathfinder activity to-date, and to guide the future work of the Pathfinders programme.

1. Introduction

The Pathfinder Team will share key messages from the early evaluation of the regional collaborative work to-date as outlined in this paper and emergent issues and themes. They will introduce how the **The Improvement Journey** has been helpful in providing a sense of trajectory to the work we are collectively undertaking and as a way of framing the Pathfinder activity. It will also include an outline of **the six lenses of Coherent Learning Provision** to understand the position of stakeholders and consider the nature of system changes required for Coherent Learning Provision.

2. Breakout sessions

NAB members will join two separate breakout groups to focus on early work of the pilot projects from the North-East (NE) and the South of Scotland (SoS).

Invited Project Leads and other key stakeholders will share an update on key activity and early learning from the regional pilot projects. The Pathfinder team will facilitate the discussion and NAB Members have been approached to lead the feedback in the plenary.

The two breakout groups are:

- Enhancing the Senior Phase (NE with input from the SoS)
- Focus on two industry focused projects
 - National Energy Skills Accelerator (NESA) Energy Transition Skills Interactive Pathways (NE)
 - and
 - Developing a joint prospectus for learning and innovation in the land-based sector (SoS)

The discussion will be mainly focused on the following:

- Creating the conditions - Bringing regional stakeholders together in a new space to collaborate on regional skills planning.
- Understanding systems - The factors that currently drive provision planning at an individual and collaborative level.

- Developing aims - a new analysis of the education and skills pathways into work and into further and higher education.

3. Plenary

Designated NAB members will act as rapporteurs for each of the break-out groups and feedback in the plenary session. This will allow the expert framing of the issues based on the knowledge, insights and experience of these NAB members.

All NAB members will hear directly from the regional pilot project leads in the break-out group they attend, alongside insights from the designated rapporteurs during the plenary session. We will also hear an overall summing up from the NAB Chair. We would hope that as a result the NAB will be better placed to help us shape the next phase of the Pathfinder programme and to guide us on key messages to report to the SFC Board in May.

NAB members are asked to reflect and respond on the specific questions outlined earlier in the paper.

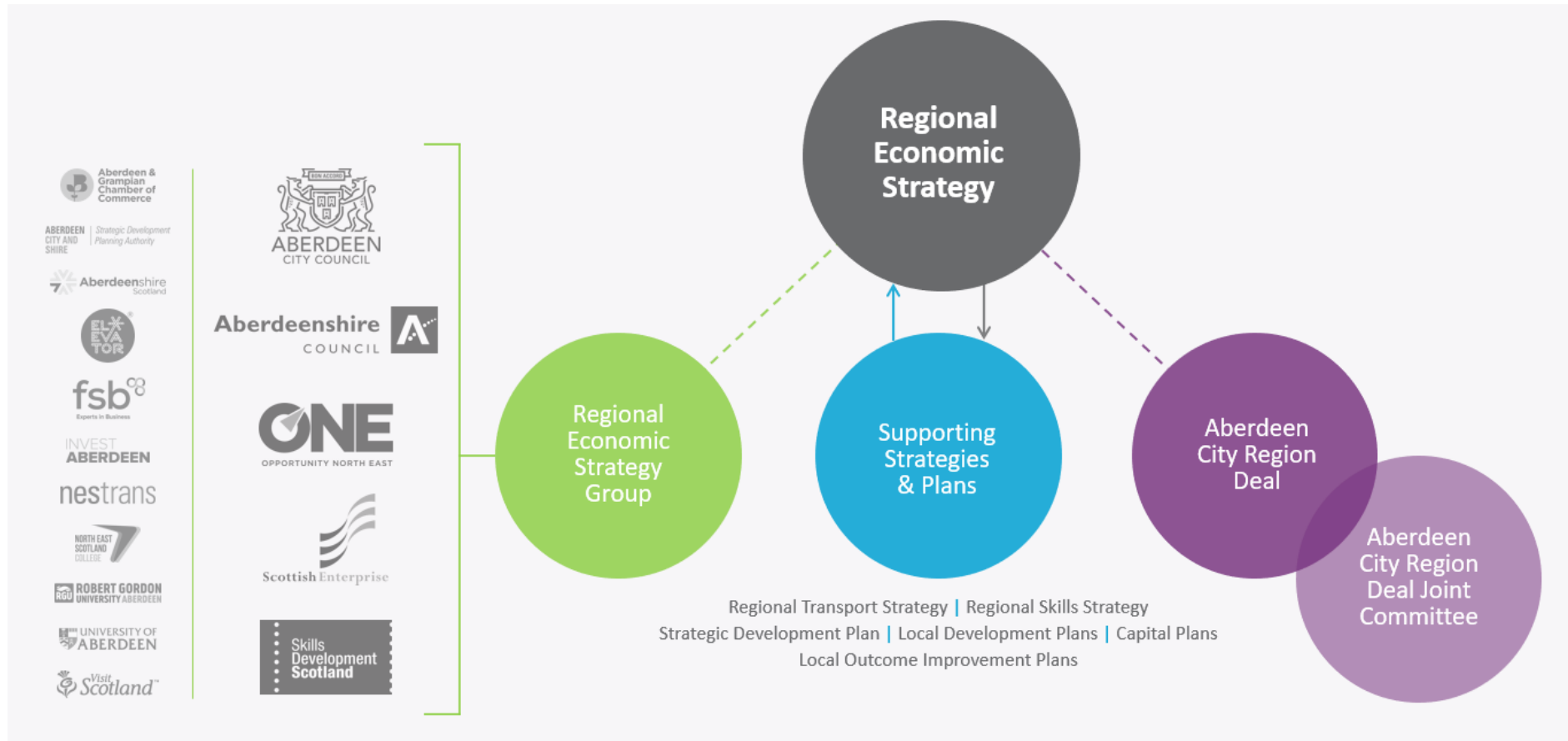
- Does the learning emerging from the Pathfinder regional skills projects resonate with your own research and experience?
- What is it telling us about further change required at institutional, regional or systems level to improve regional skills planning?
- How do we take what we have learned so far to influence and shape the next phase of the Pathfinders programme? (Consider the role of SFC, the role of key stakeholders and the regional fora that exist to influence regional skills planning.)

Finally, SFC will invite NAB members to work with SFC to explore specific themes emerging from the early evaluation and shape future analysis and reporting.

Annex B

Landscape of Regional Skills Planning

Aberdeen City Region Economic Development Partnership



South of Scotland Stakeholder Map



*Direct link with National Policy
 * Borders College Only

