



REGIONAL
PATHFINDERS

Regional Tertiary Pathfinders: A System Level Report

ANNEX A



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoinachaidh na h-Alba

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Cover Photos:

University of Aberdeen

Borders College

SRUC

University of Glasgow

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North East Skills System

“These partnerships predominantly existed in siloes – with the College communicating with or working on a project with one partner at a time. What the Pathfinder project aimed to do was bring all of the partners together to work towards a common goal.” (PP Final Report - NE Senior phase)

The new Regional Economic Strategy (RES) builds upon its 2015 predecessor and sets regional skills priorities. Influenced by the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET), this strategy addresses a broad spectrum of priorities, including objectives from the City Deal, Just Transition, and projects funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), while also reflecting specific local needs. The colleges and universities in the North East are members of the REP, which oversees the RES.

Opportunity North East (ONE) plays a significant role in the North East REP, focusing on economic development and diversification across key sectors, including tourism, life sciences, food, drink, agriculture, and digital technologies. Previously, ONE’s remit included energy, but this shifted with the creation of the Energy Transition Zone (ETZ). As part of the business case for ETZ, a section on skills development led to the creation of the National Energy Skills Accelerator (NESA). NESA, a collaborative effort among all the institutions, acts as a one-stop shop for meeting the energy sector’s skills needs.

A refreshed Regional Skills Action Plan (RSAP) is currently in development and will address the employability and skills priorities outlined in the RES. The Regional Learning and Skills

Partnership, which includes representatives from the North East institutions and is co-chaired by NESCol, will oversee this plan.

The Aberdeen City Region Deal served as a delivery mechanism for the previous RES and was governed by a joint committee from the two local authorities. The governance approach for these deals involves a collaborative local authority committee framework to ensure effective planning, implementation, and monitoring.

With a focus on capital projects, the deal indirectly impacted skills development. For example, many of the capital projects funded by the deal, particularly in construction and engineering, required a skilled workforce, thereby creating demand for apprenticeships and training programmes. The region tracked apprenticeships linked to City Deal construction projects which highlighted its influence on skills training.

The North East has been designated as an Investment Zone, building on the work of the REP to identify sectors and locations and is poised to benefit from an £80 million investment over the next decade. The institutions in the region participate in the Strategic and Operational Groups of the Investment Zone.

Regional alignment with local skills projects is largely facilitated by the same actors participating in both regional and CPP groups, however Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs), which operate as part of Community Planning Partnerships and attempt to align with REPs, are involved in planning and funding activity related to skills. In both NE areas, the LEPs report on progress towards Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) objectives to the CPP through a LOIP group. Both the Aberdeen City and Shire LEP Delivery Plans are linked to CPP and wider city region strategies.

Aberdeenshire Approach

In Aberdeenshire, the ‘Reducing Poverty’ group, associated with the LOIP, plays a notable strategic role. This group aims to align the LEP Delivery Plan and Action Plan with regional strategies, while also serving as a reporting forum for the LEP within the CPP. This alignment aims to optimise funding allocation and enhance the integration of employability services with other support mechanisms.

According to the LEP Delivery Plan, Aberdeenshire’s focus is on developing and implementing pathways into emerging regional employment opportunities. The goal is to assist those affected by labour market shifts in reskilling or upskilling.

NESCol actively participates across Aberdeenshire’s CPP subgroups, including the LEP and Community Learning and Development (CLD) Partnership. The University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University (RGU) have also been involved in Aberdeenshire CPP projects, and SRUC is also involved due to its role as a key skills provider in the North East, especially in sectors such as food, drink, and agriculture, including agritourism.



Aberdeen City Approach

The ‘Aberdeen Prospers’ group in Aberdeen City, associated with the LOIP, serves as a key reporting group for the LEP. Tertiary institutions are involved in this group which plays a strategic role by aligning the LEP Delivery Plan and Action Plan with regional strategies, including the RES and Regional Skills Action Plan.

As outlined in the delivery plan, the vision for the Aberdeen City LEP is to develop employability success through collaboration and collective ownership. The LEP looks to leverage the strengths of existing national and local services to better align funding and integrate employability services with other support.

There is mixed institutional membership of CPP groups, perhaps understandably given their areas of focus, NESCol participates in the LEP and CLD Partnership. As an example of an institution utilising LEP funding sources, NESCol recently secured a UKSPF contract to deliver green skills training.



Photo: Borders College

South of Scotland Skills System

The RES is overseen by the South of Scotland REP (SoSREP). This document serves as the cornerstone of skills planning, specifically focusing on the theme 'Skilled and Ambitious People'. The regional Education and Skills Strategic Coordination Group (ESSCG) is responsible for delivering on this theme and reports progress to SoSREP.

Other thematic areas of focus include promoting innovative and enterprising initiatives, developing a green and sustainable economy, ensuring rewarding and fair work, and celebrating culture and creativity. The strategy also underscores the importance of community wealth building and utilising the region's natural capital and cultural heritage. These efforts align with the overarching goal of transitioning towards a green and fair future.

South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) was established in 2020 and plays a key role in the region. This agency was created to drive sustainable economic growth and development, mirroring the roles played by the other regional enterprise agency in Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE).

Regional funding initiatives like the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal and, for the Borders Council area, the Edinburgh and South East City Deal contribute to the delivery of the RES vision. These initiatives aim to capitalise on growth and diversification opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy, and tourism.

The SoS RES integrates a broad spectrum of regional interests, including the Edinburgh City and South East Growth Deal and the Borderlands Growth Deal. It incorporates strategic insights from local authorities on local needs and also aligns with national priorities.

Regional alignment with local skills projects is facilitated through the same actors operating across regional and local partnerships, largely through the two LEPs. Both CPPs in the SoS have LEPs that report on LOIP progress directly to CPP Strategic Boards or Executive Groups. Both LEP Delivery Plans link to several CPP and wider regional strategies.

Dumfries and Galloway Approach

Dumfries and Galloway's approach is novel in that the LEP takes the form of a thematic LOIP Employability and Skills Partnership. This partnership reports directly to the Community Planning Executive Group, composed of senior officers, on an annual basis.

The LEP's goal is to contribute to the Community Planning vision outlined in the LOIP and the College's Regional Outcome Agreement. To achieve this, the LEP oversees the strategic development of employability and skills provision, supported by shared UK and Scottish Government funding sources. To effectively manage this, the LEP has developed a 5-year Delivery Plan that outlines key actions and performance measures. These measures are informed by the broader SoS RES, SDS Regional Skills Assessments, and a deep understanding of local skills and employment needs.

The LEP holds shared oversight and coordination responsibilities to ensure that the employability and skills strategies of various partners align with regional objectives. This is facilitated by maintaining a Partnership Risk Register, which is regularly reviewed.

In terms of institutional representation, Dumfries and Galloway College are part of several CPP subgroups, including the CLD Partnership and LEP, in which SRUC also participates.

Scottish Borders Approach

The LEP was established in 2021 with the vision of working together to deliver effective and easily understood employability and skills pathways. These pathways focus on positive, person-centred outcomes that lead to sustainable, fair, and rewarding work. The aim is to realise the employability goals outlined in the LOIP while also aligning with regional priorities.

The LEP reports directly to the Community Planning Strategic Board, which comprises a selection of councillors and a representative from each statutory partner, including Borders College. Borders College participates in various CPP subgroups, including the CLD Partnership and the LEP, alongside Heriot-Watt University.

There is a LEP Skills Subgroup, chaired by Borders College and also attended by Heriot-Watt University. This group focuses on skills-related activities and delivery, reporting to the LEP.

Key System Issues

The analysis of partnerships involved in regional and local skills planning has identified several issues:

- **Lack of coordination:** Interaction between partnerships is often managed by the same actors participating in both regional and local groups, rather than through a coherent governance approach. This lack of coordination can result in misaligned skills strategies, leading to gaps and overlaps in provision. Without clear governance structures and defined roles and responsibilities, confusion and inefficiencies arise. Consequently, various local partnerships, and planning bodies within a region, such as CPPs and their subgroups (i.e. LEPs), may work on similar programmes of work without effective communication. This can lead to wasted resources and efforts within a region, highlighting the need for a more joined-up approach.
- **Confusing system to engage with for skills responses:** The number of overlapping partnerships, means that the system can be confusing for institutions and other stakeholders to navigate, creating uncertainty about where best to direct resources to develop skills responses. The same rings true for employers, with single points of access challenging to establish.
- **Complexity and fragmentation of funding sources:** At the regional level, City and Growth Deals can provide substantial targeted funding to drive economic growth. Locally, the availability and competitive nature of numerous separate and short-term funding opportunities make it challenging for institutions to determine where to direct their resources effectively.

Applying for these funds can be challenging and time-consuming, and institutions may also be unaware of potential funding sources available.

- **Suboptimal institutional skills planning role:** Institutions have not typically been driving regional skills discussions and do not always chair regional skills groups. They can be overlooked for regional and local funding opportunities, including skills led projects.
- **Siloed CPP partnerships impact pathway development:** Lack of sufficient join up within and across CPPs can potentially impact pathway development. Within a given region, LEPs can operate differently and may not communicate which can lead to duplicative efforts. Moreover, within local authorities, communication between Economic Development and Education services can be mixed, which can inhibit pathway development. Communication between CLD partnerships and LEPs could also be improved to support pathway planning – as noted by the CLD Independent Review (2024).
- **Limited REP interaction with other regional partnerships:** REPs could have stronger planning links to other regional partnerships i.e. NHS Health Boards, as this limits the integration of health plans with skills planning undertaken in regional economic partnerships.

Interplay between national, regional and local

At the national level, broad policy priorities and strategic goals are outlined, but how these are intended to interact with regional and local actions is often unclear. This lack of clarity can lead to confusion and misalignment.

In the absence of a formal governance approach, the join up between regional and local partnership priorities is largely facilitated by proactive stakeholders on the ground who participate in both regional and local planning discussions. As highlighted by a LEP lead, a critical aspect of this process is attempting to find the right balance between how LOIPs can aid in executing the objectives of the RES and, conversely, how the RES can bolster the implementation of LOIPs. Essentially, both fora attempt to avoid duplication and find areas to add value and specialisms.

The dynamics of skills planning in Scotland cannot be simply categorised as primarily national, regional, or local. Instead, it functions as a highly complex, multi-directional system: local strategies can look to regional priorities, while regional objectives are informed by also take local context and needs.

In this framework, local authorities are crucial players. They play a pivotal role in organising and allocating funding, often due to their facilitative role in CPPs and REPs, as well as their foundation in democratic accountability.

As the interaction between various partnerships is primarily facilitated by the same organisations participating in groups at both levels, rather than through a coherent governance approach, ineffective leadership, communication, or partnership structures can lead to duplication of efforts and a lack of clarity regarding roles and remits. Consequently, as skills planning occurs through this system, it can be confusing for institutions and other stakeholders such as employers to navigate, creating uncertainty about where best to direct resources.

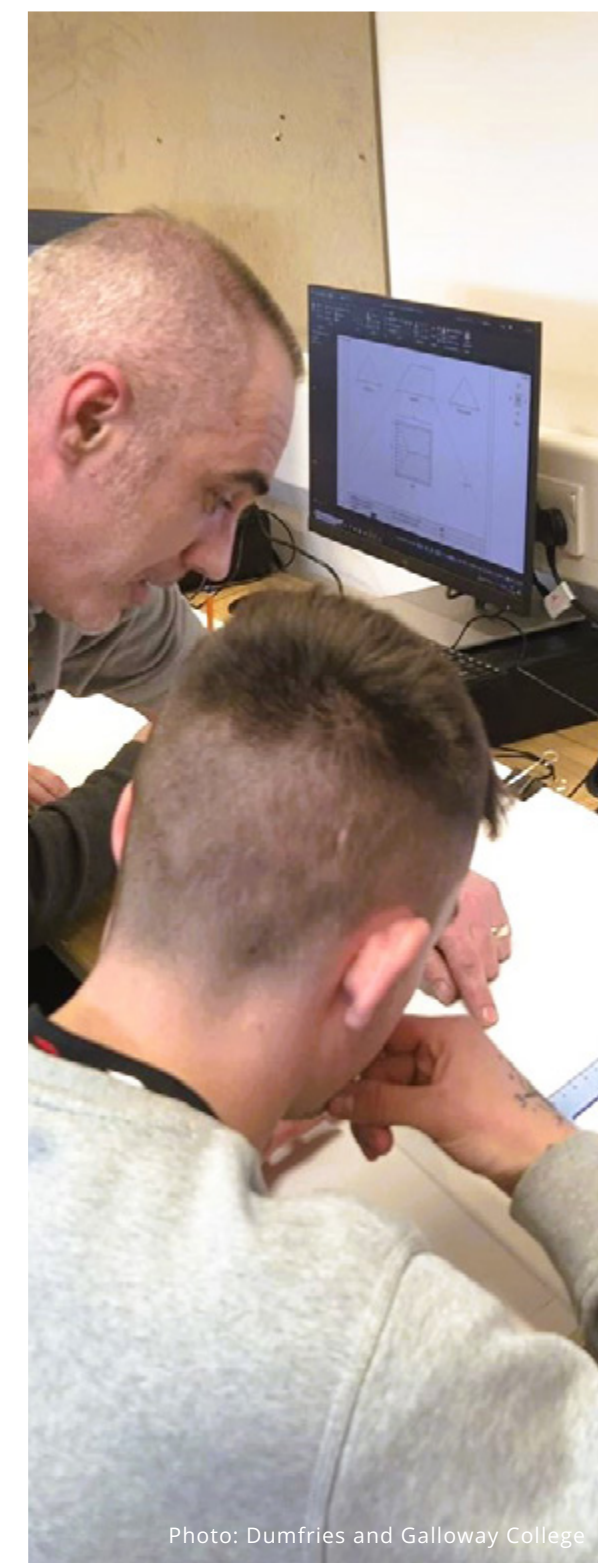


Photo: Dumfries and Galloway College



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