

An evaluation of the South West Wales Regional Learning Partnership

The Baseline Report – Executive
Summary

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SQW

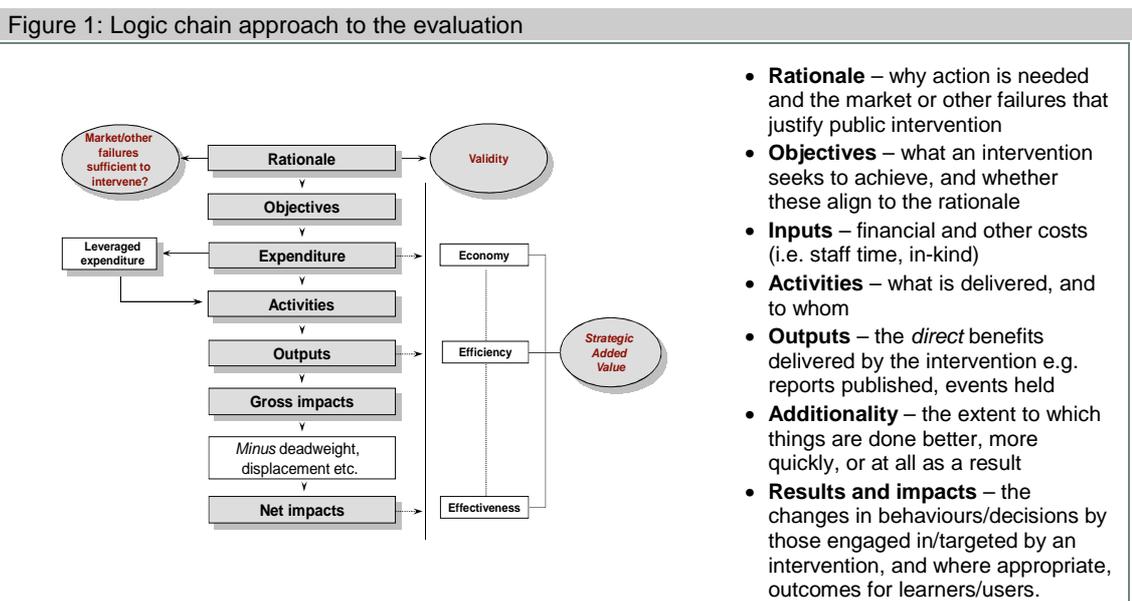
Executive Summary

Study background and purpose

1. SQW Ltd was commissioned in November 2011 by Carmarthenshire County Council, the Accountable Body for the South West Wales Regional Learning Partnership (RLP), to undertake a longitudinal evaluation of the RLP.
2. The evaluation is being undertaken in ‘real-time’ alongside the RLP’s on-going strategic and delivery activities. It is tasked with providing a reflective assessment of the RLP’s progress, covering the 2010-13 period, assessing what it has achieved, and how this compares to the original intent. It is also providing an on-going ‘check and challenge’ to inform discussions on the future of the RLP, as it looks to sustain its work post-2013.
3. The evaluation involves three stages of work: a Baseline Assessment, a Mid-term Evaluation, and a Final Evaluation. The purpose of the initial Baseline Assessment, the focus of this summary, is to:
 - review the RLP’s underpinning logic chain, rationale and objectives
 - establish a ‘baseline’ of partner/stakeholder perceptions, against which subsequent findings can be tracked
 - finalise the evaluation approach, method and evidence requirements.

Approach

4. The evaluation is grounded in ‘logic chain’ thinking. This approach assesses and tests the linkages between the underlying rationale for intervention, objectives, inputs, activities, outputs and impacts. The approach is summarised in Figure 1.



5. Within this framework, a key focus of the work is evidencing if, and how, the RLP has influenced qualitatively the behaviours, performance and activities of its partners, and stakeholders. Three elements of this so-called Strategic Added Value are being explored:
 - *Leadership and catalytic effects* – establishing and communicating needs/opportunities/solutions to regional partners and stakeholders
 - *Influence and leverage* – affecting the allocation of funds and/or resources by stakeholders and/or influencing policy development regionally/nationally
 - *Synergy and engagement* – improving the flow/exchange of information/knowledge between partners/stakeholders, thereby achieving reduced duplication, sharing of best practice, and improved service delivery.
6. As the first output of the evaluation, this Baseline Assessment draws on a desk-review of documents, consultations and engagement with RLP partners and staff delivered through an initial round of scoping consultations and a workshop with the RLP’s Strategy Group, and the findings of a ‘commitment survey’ of 40 RLP partners and stakeholders.

The RLP’s genesis and development

7. The development of the RLP has been a long-term process. The RLP was first discussed by partners across the South West Wales region in 2007, drawing in local authorities, education providers (FE/HE), the voluntary/community sector, work based learning/private sector actors, as well as representatives at a national level from the Welsh Government. The RLP evolved steadily over the next three years, with European Social Fund (ESF) support secured in late-2009 to provide resource for the partnership to deliver a ‘pilot’ phase of activity.
8. The initial development of the RLP was a direct response to, and well aligned with, the national policy agenda focused on promoting enhanced collaboration and partnership working in public service delivery. This policy context included the *Making the Connections Strategy*, the *Skills and Employment Strategy and Action Plan*, and the *West Wales and the Valleys Convergence Operational Programme 2007-13*. Therefore, there was a strong policy justification for an intervention to enhance collaboration and joint working across the region.
9. Alongside this policy-push, the South West Wales region faced (and continues to face) significant challenges. The region was (and is) underperforming economically, and parts of it experiencing learning and skills deficits, alongside wider productivity and labour market challenges. These issues varied substantially across the region, particularly between its urban and rural areas, requiring a targeted response and a clear identification of what and where ‘regional’ activity could be best focused to address cross-cutting challenges.
10. So, there was a socio-economic challenge to fix, as well as a policy imperative to respond to. However, looking back now with an evaluation perspective, the underpinning rationale for the RLP at its outset appears somewhat open to question. There was not, in the view of the evaluators, as well-developed a depiction of what the core problem, or problems, it was that the RLP was seeking to put right as there ideally could have been.

11. Specifically, whilst there was wide engagement with partners, no detailed evidential work was undertaken to characterise why a *'learning and skills'* emphasis was the appropriate policy response, as opposed to other place-competitiveness domains such as innovation or enterprise. Further, why a 'new' partnership was required, rather than building on and flexing existing arrangements, was not established clearly, and the evidence on the demand-side (from learners, potential learners, and employers) was light.
12. As a result, over four years into the RLP 'project', there remains some uncertainty on the RLP's underpinning rationale. This was evidenced in the 'commitment survey' of 40 RLP partners/stakeholders where multiple ex-post rationales for the RLP were imparted. This is an important issue for the RLP now to 'get right'; with no accepted rationale for intervention, the RLP 'project' will remain uncertain as to its core purpose, and its success in achieving its intent will be difficult to prove.
13. Recognising that the rationale could have been more clearly defined, the anchor point for the development of objectives was not as firm as it could have been. Therefore, whilst a range of objectives have been established for the RLP – including an overarching Vision of *'A Region where equality of opportunity and access to high quality opportunities are guaranteed'* – there is no single and focused depiction of what the RLP is seeking to achieve, flowing logically from a well-developed rationale.
14. Given the potential for these issues to pose problems for the RLP down the line, as it evolves from a 'test-bed' phase to a mature partnership with an established role in the region, the RLP should revisit, as a priority, its underpinning rationale and objectives to provide a clear and agreed statement of its purpose and intent. This will provide a stronger logical foundation for the RLP, its activities, and their subsequent assessment.

The RLP in action

15. The RLP's delivery is organised under three Pillars of activity: Partnership Brokerage and Development, the development of a Regional Learning and Skills Observatory, and an E-Portal involving the piloting in Swansea of an online portal as a 'live' tool for the planning and delivery of learning and education services.
16. At this Baseline Assessment Stage, we have not looked in detail at each set of activity. However, encouragingly, the initial 'commitment survey' of partners and stakeholders suggested that those engaged with the RLP perceive that the activities it has progressed, and elements of the work of the Regional Learning and Skills Observatory in particular, are appropriate given the challenges/opportunities that South West Wales faces. Further, the RLP has clearly delivered a significant scale of activity over the past two years since its formal establishment in 2010. These are firm foundations to build on.
17. That said, the RLP appears, from an external perspective, to be organisationally complex, relative to its scale, budget, and strategic nature. This has implications for the extent to which there is clear accountability for the delivery of the RLP's specific activities, and the overall success of the RLP 'project'. Greater clarity on who is ultimately responsible for the RLP, at the level of its individual activities and for the venture overall would be helpful. In

so doing, this would help to clarify the responsibilities, not just the roles, of the broad range of partners that the initiative has drawn in.

Progress and Strategic Added Value

18. The ‘commitment survey’ of 40 partners and stakeholders provides the evidence base for a ‘baseline’ assessment of the contribution of the RLP in terms of delivery progress and Strategic Added Value. Overall, the findings were constructive and encouraging.
19. Partners and stakeholders perceive that good progress has been made by the RLP in improving the level of partnership working, and the collation and sharing of knowledge and information across the region. More remains to be done, perhaps understandably, in increasingly intensive forms of collaboration, improving the accessibility of learner services, and securing efficiencies in service delivery. The ‘now’ challenge for the RLP is to transfer the good progress in partnership working and information sharing into tangible changes in behaviours and service delivery over the coming months.
20. Helpfully in leveraging this change going forward, partner engagement and commitment to the RLP appears to be strong, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Partner and stakeholder engagement and commitment to the RLP in late-2011/early 2012

	Engagement with the RLP	Commitment to the RLP
Very engaged/committed	16	21
Engaged/committed	15	14
Limited engagement/commitment	7	3
No engagement/commitment	1	1
Don't know/NA	1	1

Source: RLP Partner Commitment Survey (n=40)

21. Commitment also appears to be improving, with over a quarter (12 out of 40) respondents stating that their commitment to the RLP had increased since they first became involved with the partnership. Importantly, the level of participation across the region is strong; senior representatives from key organisations provide significant time inputs on the RLP’s various governance and operational groups. A ‘virtuous circle’ appears to be emerging – partners and stakeholders regard others are becoming more committed to the RLP, they in turn are enhancing their own commitment.
22. Perceptions of commitment were strong across the public, education and voluntary/community sectors. However, the ‘private sector’ cast in broad terms is, appears less heavily engaged in the work of the RLP. Further work may be helpful to engage private sector players in the work of the RLP. Yes, business engagement can be hard, but if the RLP is in part about improving the economic performance of the region, then active engagement by wealth-creators should be core business.
23. Based on the survey findings, and the wider primary evidence and feedback generated in the research, the Baseline Assessment suggests that the RLP is a well-regarded and credible player in the regional learning and skills arena. Partners and stakeholders are increasingly

committed to, and confident in, its work. The RLP is now embedded effectively in the regional infrastructure, and well-placed to develop and progress.

24. There is also evidence of the RLP influencing partnership working, strategic planning and operational delivery in particular. However, the strength of this influence up until this point is generally quite modest. There remains manageable scope for the RLP to do more over the next 12 months, and beyond, in changing partners' and stakeholders' behaviours and decision making.
25. Taking the Strategic Added Value of the RLP in the round at this stage, the position appears positive, particularly in terms of Synergy and Engagement. The piloting and subsequent launch of the RLSO is an important factor here, demonstrating what can be done. The RLP has made good progress in 'bringing people together' and laying the foundations on which other forms of strategic influence and impact might be built. An integrated assessment of Strategic Added Value at this Baseline Assessment stage is set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Strategic Added Value of the RLP at the Baseline Assessment stage	
Leadership & catalytic effects	
Mixed evidence of SAV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The RLP has provided a forum for progressing specific 'regional projects' including strategies and funding bids, delivering regional leadership and enhanced partnership working. The presence of the RLP, and the engagement of senior individuals, provides an important overall statement of regional intent and partnership working. The RLSO has helped to generate improved insight into the nature and extent of the region's challenges, complexities and priorities. However, uncertainty over the core rationale and objectives of the RLP (underpinned by a sound evidence base) and the need to keep all sectors and policy agendas engaged (which is what the partnership imperative requires), has arguably reduced its potential to provide focused leadership on the key issues that 'really matter' to the region, with a proliferation of priorities and interests for the RLP in its work to date. Going forward, a rationale-driven focus is required.
Influence & leverage	
Mixed evidence of SAV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence from the 'commitment survey' is that the RLP has influenced the development of organisational strategic priorities, the operational delivery of activities, and partnership working with both public sector and private sector organisations. Feedback from the Strategy Group suggests that the RLP has influenced national government thinking in terms of regional collaboration and partnership working in a service delivery context – testing this external influence will be an important issue for the final evaluation. There is some evidence from the 'commitment survey' of the RLP influencing the allocation of resources by partners and stakeholders, although this influence has been less pronounced than the other forms, noted above. The RLP has helped to facilitate a number of regional funding bids and secured funding for the region i.e. additional funding for the E-Learning Portal and the Adult Community Learning regional project.
Synergy & engagement	
Strong evidence of SAV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 'commitment survey' suggests there is strong evidence of enhanced partnership working and collaboration through the RLP and its internal and external activities. Partners and stakeholders appear to be becoming more committed to the work of the RLP over time, and recognise this increased commitment in others – the 'commitment survey' suggests that partners and stakeholders perceive that commitment to the RLP is strong across all levels of partner organisations, although this varies spatially. The RLP has enabled constructive dialogue between partner agencies, both at strategic and operational levels with high levels of buy-in from across the region – a wide range of organisations and individuals are engaged on the RLP's various groups and sub-groups. The development of the RLSO has led to recognised improvements in the collation, sharing and dissemination of data and intelligence across the region, and specialist elements of its work are seen as adding significant value.

Source: SQW

In summary . . .

26. The Baseline Assessment concludes that the RLP has made good progress in enhancing partnership working across South West Wales, and delivered helpful and value-adding benefits, especially in terms of intelligence sharing and wider strategic alignment. This is noteworthy given that the RLP's focus to date has explicitly been testing forms of partnership working and collaboration.
27. However, on the developmental journey that has been made since 2007, some important steps in the logic chain have been missed. Notably, although there was a policy and economic justification for 'doing something' in South West Wales, the hard thinking on a well-formed and evidenced rationale for the RLP specifically, and the crisply defined and unambiguous objectives that go with this, was not progressed, or articulated as well as it might have been. These issues are now correctable.
28. In the next phase of the RLP 'project', clarifying and evidencing transparently what its core justification is should be a priority. Doing so will crystallise what the RLP is about, enabling it to evidence better in future the difference it is making.

. . . and going forward

29. Informed by this Baseline Assessment, the following recommendations are made to the RLP:
 - i. **As a priority, over the next two months, the RLP – led by its Strategy Group – should undertake a formal re-assessment of its rationale and objectives to inform the final year of the ESF programme and subsequent phases of activity.** Evidence based, and articulating explicitly the problems that the RLP is seeking to achieve, this should include generating a single, crisp and coherent set of objectives to frame the initiative's strategic and operational purpose. The RLP's rationale and objectives should then be communicated fully and effectively to partners across the region and in the Welsh Government.
 - ii. **With the development work on the rationale and objectives complete, the RLP Strategy Group and RLP Team should subsequently map out explicitly accountability mechanisms and lines.** This should operate at two levels: first, at the level of *activity* (who/what group is accountable formally for delivering against each Pillar), and second at the level of the *RLP overall* (who is responsible for the overall success of the Partnership, and how this accountability will be exercised) i.e. once the function of the RLP has been defined and agreed, identifying the most appropriate form for the RLP in terms of governance and operating-models will be required.
 - iii. **The RLP – led by its Strategy Group – should look to enhance levels of direct private sector engagement with the Partnership.** This should include approaching relevant business representative organisations to become involved (i.e. the South Wales Federation of Small Business, South and West Wales Institute of Directors, and CBI Wales), and targeting major local private sector employers. The proposition should be two-way i.e. what business can add to the RLP, and what the RLP can add to business activity.

- iv. **The RLP's focus this next 12 months should be on targeting its activity to influence partner and stakeholder behaviour and decision making, including resource allocation.** To take this forward, SQW recommends the development of a concise 'action plan' identifying a (select) number of specific activities to be progressed by the RLP and its groups/team over the next year.
- 30. Further details on SQW's work, and the RLP more widely, are available from Elid Morris or Sara Harvey (EMorris@carmarthenshire.gov.uk/sara.harvey@wlga.gov.uk).

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