Longitudinal Evaluation of the Regional Learning Partnership

The Mid-Term Report – Executive Summary

14 January 2013

Executive Summary

Purpose

1. SQW Ltd was commissioned in November 2011 by Carmarthenshire County Council, the accountable body for the Regional Learning Partnership (RLP), to undertake a longitudinal evaluation of the RLP over the 2010-2013 period.

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, over the 2010-13 period, assessing what it has and is being 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 (that reported in March 2012), a Mid-Term Assessment (the focus of this summary, and its associated Main Report), and a Final Evaluation. The purpose of the Mid-Term Assessment is to:

   - provide an update of the progress made by the RLP and actions taken since the Baseline Assessment, including its contribution to the Cross Cutting Themes of the European Social Fund (ESF) Operational Programme

   - update the study's partner and stakeholder commitment survey, which is tracking how the RLP is influencing partners and stakeholders across the region, and how this may have changed over the past nine months (38 responses were received)

   - provide a detailed assessment on the nature of the activity of the RLP, through four case studies of specific RLP components; namely the Regional Learning and Skills Observatory (RLSO), the Higher Education/Further Education Task and Finish Group, the RLP's work in the policy area of Basic Skills, and the E-Portal project.

The RLP's delivery progress

4. The RLP has continued to deliver its core activity over the past nine months. Action has continued across all three Pillars of activity, with sustained effort in Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 that are starting to deliver tangible outputs and benefits. For example, additional funding was secured for the region to research apprenticeships need/demand (Pillar 1), and the analytical capacity of the RLSO has been developed with the purchase and analysis of econometric forecast data, helping to develop an evidence-based understanding of the economic prospects for the region (Pillar 2). Pillar 3, the E-Portal, has also developed significantly, with a team now in place and a pilot of the 'Inform Swansea' portal out to consultation. Although the E-Portal project has been challenging, as evidenced through the case study research, it is now moving forward from concept to practical implementation.

5. Whilst delivery has continued in a largely 'steady state' since the Baseline Assessment, the RLP has witnessed significant developments this last nine months at strategic and structural levels. These developments have largely been framed by the response of the RLP and its Strategy Group, Steering Group and Team, to the recommendations of the evaluation's

Baseline Assessment. The response was significant and positive, most notably with work undertaken to address the recommendation calling for greater clarity on the rationale and overall objectives of the initiative. The RLP formally reviewed its rationale and objectives, providing a more clearly defined statement of the logic chain underpinning the project. This process has been constructive, providing the RLP team and its leadership with a sound basis on which to move forward.

6.   This said, there remain different depictions of the RLP's aims and objectives, as summarised in the revised vision statement and high-level ROAMEF[1] articulation. Some further work is therefore needed, building on what has been achieved, to ensure full alignment and consistency. Ensuring that partners are clear on the objectives of the partnership, particularly as it looks forward to the next phase of activity post-2013 remains a priority. It should be noted that the commitment shown by the RLP Strategy Group and team to undertaking this activity, and doing so promptly and in a structured and comprehensive manner is encouraging.

7.   Two other important developments have emerged since the Baseline Assessment. First, the Strategy Group has progressed discussions regarding the governance model post-June 2013 and is currently taking legal advice on how to put this into practice. Agreeing a formal governance model has been an on-going challenge since the RLP's early days, so progress on this issue is a positive development. Second, Powys County Council and Ceredigion County Council have joined formally the RLP. Helpfully, the geography of the RLP now represents both the Welsh Government's Department for Education and Skills and the regional education consortium (swamwac's) geographical footprint, providing the potential for enhanced engagement and influence on national thinking and policy development.

8.   Operationally the RLP team has also witnessed notable changes in staffing since the Baseline Assessment. The turnover of staff has caused challenges in the continuity of the work of the RLP Team, although the feedback from the research is that it has not substantially impacted on the quality of its work. However, it has meant that the RLP's Manager has needed to play a more substantial role in the day-to-day operations of the RLP than is ideal, given the importance of the role in external partnership-facing activities.

9.   Staff turnover is not unexpected given the time-limited nature of the funding of positions, and uncertainty over the RLP's form post-2013. However, such turnover comes with the inherent danger that expertise and knowledge are lost: going forward, it is important to ensure systems are in place to codify formally individual's knowledge to the greatest extent, ensuring this is not 'lost to the system' when people naturally move on. Further, the potential need for additional capacity, in particular to lead on external and partnership development, rather than management and operational matters, was raised as an area for consideration by a number of senior consultees.

10.   The RLP is tasked with contributing to the achievement of the Cross Cutting Themes of the ESF Operational Programme of Equal Opportunities, and Environmental Sustainability. It is not within the remit of this evaluation to undertake primary research to monitor the performance of the RLP against the Cross Cutting Themes. However, the evidence provided by the RLP suggests that a range of activity has been undertaken that contributes directly to

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[1] Rationale, Objectives, Activities, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback

the Cross Cutting Themes. For example, the collation of RLP Partner Equal Opportunity/Diversity Policies informing an on-going a review of commonalities in Partner Policies is underway to look at best practices, and the RLP is working with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David to develop a sustainability impact audit to underpin a regional vision around sustainability development issues.

Commitment Survey Update

11. Wave 2 of the study's Commitment Survey indicated that the RLP retains the engagement and commitment of partners and stakeholders across the region. The survey suggests that the past nine months have seen a period of consolidation in the status of the RLP in the region, as perceived by its partners and stakeholders: its presence has not substantially increased, but neither has it lost ground.

12. Beneath the aggregate position, there is evidence that partner buy-in to the specific Pillars of activity, rather than the RLP as a whole, may be falling away. Notably, the scores for partner/stakeholder understanding of, engagement with, and commitment to the RLP overall, and the extent to which the activities it is pursuing are the 'right ones', were higher for the RLP overall than its individual Pillars – both absolutely in Wave 2, and relatively in terms of the trend since Wave 1. Average scores (out of a maximum of four) for responses in Wave 1 and Wave 2 on these factors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Average scores (maximum of 4) on levels of Understanding, Engagement and Commitment of/with/to the RLP in Wave 1 and Wave 2

	RLP overall		Pillar 1: Brokerage		Pillar 2: RLSO		Pillar 3: E-Portal	
	Wave 1	*Wave 2*	*Wave 1*	*Wave 2*	*Wave 1*	*Wave 2*	*Wave 1*	*Wave 2*
Understanding	3.6	**3.6**	3.6	**3.4**	3.7	**3.7**	3.2	**2.8**
Engagement	3.1	**3.0**	3.0	**2.8**	2.9	**2.5**	2.2	**1.9**
Commitment	3.3	**3.2**	3.4	**3.2**	3.3	**3.1**	2.9	**2.6**
Extent to which activities are the 'right ones'	3.2	**3.2**	3.3	**3.2**	3.4	**3.0**	2.9	**2.3**

Source: Commitment surveys Note: Data based on 40 responses in Wave 1 and 38 responses in Wave 2

13. So whilst buy-in to the RLP as an initiative remains, the commitment survey indicates partners and stakeholders are becoming increasingly detached from the specific Pillars of activity. This has potentially important implications for the RLP as it looks forward; the RLP needs to ask whether the 'siloed' Pillar approach remains appropriate as the operating model of the organisation, and if so, whether the specific Pillars remain the correct ones to pursue over the longer term?

14. Wave 2 of the commitment survey also indicates that the influence of the RLP on partner/stakeholder behaviours has remained generally consistent since the Baseline Assessment. The RLP continues to have a perceived strong influence on partnership working and in helping to define organisational priorities. However, this perceived influence on other factors, for example, on the allocation of resources or operational delivery has not increased over the past year. Whilst this is somewhat disappointing, the influence of the RLP is recognised consistently across the region, and changing behaviours is a long-term play. The

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key challenge will be to test at the final evaluation stage how influence has, in the round, been exerted by the RLP.
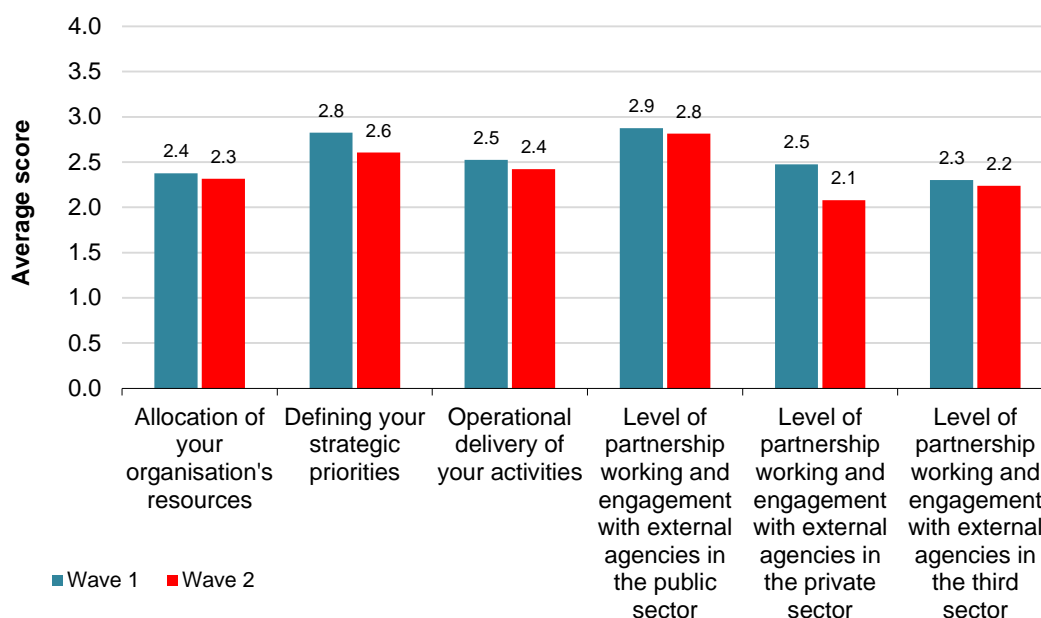
15. Based on the commitment survey responses to the extent to which the RLP has met its overarching objectives, which have remained largely where they were at the baseline stage, a challenge remains to translate improvements in partnership working, and information provision facilitated by the RLP, into more intensive forms of collaboration, efficiency savings, better calibre of thinking, and in time improved outcomes and opportunities for service users. Re-doubling efforts over the final phase of delivery to achieve against these objectives will be important, capitalising fully on the opportunity that the improved co-ordination and intelligence that the RLP has generated.

16. In summary, the Wave 2 of the commitment survey suggests that the RLP remains a well-regarded and credible player in the regional learning and skills arena. However, perceptions 'now' are broadly where they were at the Baseline Assessment stage: given the nine month interval this is perhaps not entirely surprising, if somewhat disappointing.

Messages from the Case Studies

17. The case studies of four specific areas of the RLP's activities undertaken as part of the Mid Term Report demonstrated the range and diversity of the work that the partnership has delivered and facilitated. The research identified strong evidence of important outputs and outcomes being generated by the RLP's work, both through tangible deliverables and outputs (such as the HE/FE Strategy and the work of the RLSO), and in providing a forum and institutional framework in which effective partnership working can happen.

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18.   The case studies also identified tangible examples of where the RLP has delivered important changes in behaviours, and helped to broker strategically important and high-profile developments e.g. the case study on the HE/FE Task and Finish Group suggests that this forum played a helpful enabling/encouraging role in facilitating the recent merger of universities in the region.

19.   Positively, across the case studies the additionality of the RLP – that is the extent to which it is generating activities and outcomes that would otherwise not be delivered – was positive with evidence of the RLP catalysing other partners, reducing duplication, and improving regional co-ordination and joint working. The case studies suggest that without the RLP, both the RLSO and the E-Portal projects would not have progressed at all; in this respect the RLP has delivered genuinely new and additional activity with regional significance.

20.   However, the case studies also identified clearly where challenges have been faced, most notably in the development and delivery of the E-Portal. The case studies identified the importance of a clear and well-evidenced rationale for intervention, and a strong logic chain, as a key determinant of success: where this was missing less has been achieved.

In Summary . . .

21.   Overall, the Mid-Term Report finds that the RLP has responded positively to the challenges set out in the first stage of the evaluation: its underpinning rationale and objectives are now somewhat clearer, and with governance issues soon to be resolved the partnership is on firm ground looking forward. And the RLP has continued to do good work while these strategic and structural issues have been addressed.

22.   However, the RLP needs to ensure that over the next six months momentum is maintained, and indeed accelerated, generating tangible outputs and outcomes. The overall sense from the partner/stakeholder survey and the wider research is that there is a risk that 'inertia' is setting in. This needs to be avoided. With the 'internal' issues on governance now largely resolved, external delivery needs to be the focus.

23.   One final and important message. As the RLP enters its final six months as a 'pilot' project, it is vital that thinking on the future function and form of the RLP post-2013 is progressed by its leadership. This must not be a process for its own sake, but rather a genuine consideration of the options open to partners. Crucially, this legacy planning must ensure that in considering all options, and identifying the most appropriate route forward, the learning, knowledge, and experience that the RLP has amassed are not lost to the system, enabling the partnership to build on its existing strengths as it looks to its next phase of activity.

. . . and Going Forward?

24.   In light of these conclusions, the following recommendations are now made to the RLP:

i.   **The RLP should review formally the status and appropriateness of the current Pillars model**. This should cover two key questions, both taking into account the spatial expansion of the partnership. First, testing whether the Pillar approach remains the appropriate model around which to organise its activities, and what other approaches

may be possible. Second, dependent on the above, testing, if the existing Pillars remains the 'right ones', if they should be revised, extended or replaced.

ii. **The RLP should align its agreed vision statement and the ROAMEF statement to ensure that the objectives of the partnership are now wholly consistent, and there is an agreed statement of what the RLP is looking to achieve**. This should be explicitly forward-facing – undertaken not for presentational purposes, but to ensure that all decisions on the RLP's future direction of travel are based on an agreed theory of change, understood by partners, of what it is seeking to achieve.

iii. **Developing links with the Welsh Government and securing commitment of the Welsh Government should be a priority over the final stage of the current funding period**. Both strategic consultations with members of the RLP's governance infrastructure and the feedback from partners/stakeholders to the updated commitment survey suggested that to date whilst the Welsh Government have been aware of the RLP's work, real traction with the centre has not yet been achieved. Concerted effort over this final period of 'RLP Phase 1' to engage with the Welsh Government would be worthwhile.

iv. **The RLP should look to secure the involvement of major business representative organisations on one or both of the Strategy Group and Steering Group**. This will provide a clear and public statement of the commitment of the partnership to engaging sustainably with the private sector and ensure that the views of the business community are more fully reflected in the discussions on the future direction of the RLP post-2013.

v. **The RLP's Strategy Group should lead a formal options review for the post-2013 RLP, considering its functions and form, and how this will be resourced**. The starting point for this review needs to be the challenges, issues and failures faced by the region, in its now expanded form. The goal should be to agree an option that ensures both that partners have the optimal model to address these 'now' challenges, and that the learning, knowledge, and experience the RLP has amassed are not lost to the system. Specific forms and organisational structures must flow logically out of these discussions, not pre-ordain them.

25. 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).

SQW Ltd
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