

Longitudinal Evaluation of the Regional Learning Partnership

The Final Report – Executive Summary

5 March 2014



SQW

Executive Summary

Context

1. The Regional Learning Partnership (RLP) brings together education and regeneration partners across the South West and Central Wales (SW&CW) region. It is intended as a strategic and facilitative body to help publicly funded learning providers and associated organisations work collaboratively on education and regeneration issues, and thereby to meet better the needs of the learners and the regional economy.
2. SQW Ltd (SQW) was commissioned in November 2011 by Carmarthenshire County Council, the Accountable Body for the RLP, to undertake a longitudinal evaluation of the partnership at its resourcing over the 2010-2013 period. The evaluation was undertaken in 'real-time' alongside the RLP's on-going strategic and delivery activities, providing both formative and summative assessments of the partnership's activity over the 2010-2013 period.

Purpose

3. This is the Executive Summary of the evaluation's Final Report, the third in a series of outputs across the evaluation period. The specific purposes of this final stage were to:
 - assess the extent to which the original rationale for the RLP remained in place, how this had changed over time, and whether there remained a continuing rationale for public investment in the partnership and its activities
 - update the progress on delivery activity since the preceding Mid-Term Report, and provide an overall assessment of the contribution of the RLP in terms of its outputs and outcomes
 - provide a closing assessment of the extent to which the RLP had influenced the behaviours and activities of partners and stakeholders across the region
 - comment on the extent to which added value ('additionality') had been delivered – that is the degree to which the RLP had enabled things – quantitative or qualitative - to happen that would otherwise have been of lower quality/scale, later , or indeed not occurred at all
 - identify the key lessons and messages from this final evaluation stage to inform the functions and form of the RLP looking forward.

The Evolving Context and Rationale

4. **The strategic and policy context within which the RLP operated evolved significantly over the 2010-2013 period.** Notably, there was an increasing policy push from the Welsh Government on regional working within Skills, Education, and Economic Development, linked to planning for the next round of European Structural Funds. This had had significant implications for partnership working on the ground, not least in providing opportunities for mergers and consolidations in the educational landscape. In this particular context, the RLP had

worked steadily throughout to create trusted and trusting environments in which such new ways of working could be explored and agreed.

5. More recently, the **RLP had worked on scoping a new regional approach to skills/employment delivery in the form of a Single Adult Employment and Skills Programme (SAESP)**. The commitment to a regional approach was being further strengthened in early 2014 through the **RLP's leading of a Regional Delivery Plan for Employment and Skills (RDPSE)**. Concurrently, the **development of the Swansea Bay City Region (SBCR) agenda provided an important further imperative for partnership working**, with the RLP starting to lead efforts on the Skills front; this alongside parallel support to developing the emerging Ceredigion Regeneration Strategy, and progressing the established Powys Regeneration Strategy. Whilst much of the RLP's activity generally had been in response to requests from the Welsh Government, **the RLP was now at a stage of development where it's primarily responsive mode could tip naturally and effectively into a more proactive and self-directing stance**.
6. In terms of the economic realities of the region, and allowing for the turbulence of recession and downturn, in relative terms **the underlying socio-economic challenges in the SW&CW region had remained largely unaltered**. Significant deficits to national levels remained across a range of economic, skills and employment indicators, with economic projections indicating that overall employment levels in SW&CW would not return to their 2012 levels until at least 2019. In a tangible sense, there is a risk that the region will experience a lost decade of employment growth.
7. Across a period of significant policy change, **the evaluation's finding was that the cases for the RLP originally, and for it continuing, were well made and sound**. Partners and stakeholders reported consistently that an organisation to coordinate, broker, and provide a regional perspective continued to be required. Increasing financial pressures added to the need for a forum that could pilot new things, and seek to test-out opportunities for operational efficiencies. And, crucially, significant economic, skills, and employment challenges remained to be addressed. Indeed on this latter point, **the need for the RLP to develop a clear lead role in depicting and understanding the nature of the region's socio-economic challenges (alongside encouraging better process behaviours amongst its partners), was identified by the evaluation as a key change**.
8. These findings were counterpoised with a balancing call **to ensure that the RLP remained an agile and flexible initiative to address specific issues, rather than drifting into becoming a long-term part of the institutional fabric**. At the same time, it was important for the RLP to remain focused on addressing proactively the evidential 'needs' of the region, not simply responding reactively to the 'wants' of policy agendas. Maintaining a commitment to logic chain thinking in defining objectives and activities would be important to maintaining this balance.

Activities and Outputs

9. **Activity against the RLP's three 'Pillars' of activity, namely Partnership and Brokerage activity, the Regional Learning and Skills Observatory (RLSO), and the E-Portal, progressed (albeit at different rates) over the duration of the evaluation period**. In 2013, key developments included the completion and rollout of the E-Portal, and a range of tangible

outputs and publications under Pillar 1. In late 2013 and early 2014, these existing activities were augmented with 'new' work on the SAESP and RDPSE.

10. Over the evaluation period as a whole, **the activities delivered by the RLP were regarded generally as appropriate, relevant, and aligned to the needs of the region.** This said, the integration of the RLP activities had been limited, both between and within the Pillars, in part because whilst the Pillars had acted as helpful 'focusing devices', they had also introduced 'hard boundaries'. As such, a review of the 'Pillar approach' to the work of the RLP remained a 'live' issue, and one the evaluation recommended for addressing. In addition, with the RLSO and E-Portal projects now essentially complete, with both initiatives established and operational, **the RLP was encouraged to consider how these activities could be 'mainstreamed', transferring their ownership and maintenance to a regional partner.** This would free-up the RLP to re-focus on necessary fresh new activities that others could not, or would not, progress.
11. Beyond Pillar activities, **the work of the RLP to secure and sustain the engagement, of partners had been largely effective, especially amongst the public sector, and in particular the Higher and Further Education communities.** However, **engaging the private sector had been an ongoing challenge throughout the evaluation period, and one that remained for substantive resolution.**
12. Looking forward, with the next round of Structural Funds and Swansea Bay City Region agenda coming into full play, **there would be a need generally for greater clarity in strategic decision-making and the prioritisation of projects for regional (rather than organisational) benefit.** For its part, **the RLP's signalling its intent to become a more assertive and directed body in these roles was welcomed by the evaluation.** This said, going forward the RLP would need to be an organisation capable of, and confident in, saying 'no', that is moving on the modus operandi from a partnership that provides a forum for discussion to one where (hard and right) decisions for the well-being of the region are forged and agreed.
13. **The forward governance form of the RLP remained uncertain at the time of this evaluation's final work.** Without prompt resolution, this represented a significant reputational exposure for the RLP. On a linked point, looking over a three to five year period as the next phase of RLP activity progressed, it was important that **plans be put in place early to manage the transitions in the senior leadership of the RLP, as staff change inevitably occurs.**

Outcomes and Additionality

14. The final round of the commitment survey undertaken by the evaluation indicated that **partner/stakeholder understanding of, engagement with, and commitment to the RLP remained strong.** Indeed, the overall reported level of 'commitment' to the RLP reported by partners/stakeholders was higher than the level of 'engagement', suggesting that even where partners/stakeholders might not be involved actively in its work, they were committed to the principle and concept of the RLP as a regional actor in the skills and regeneration domain.

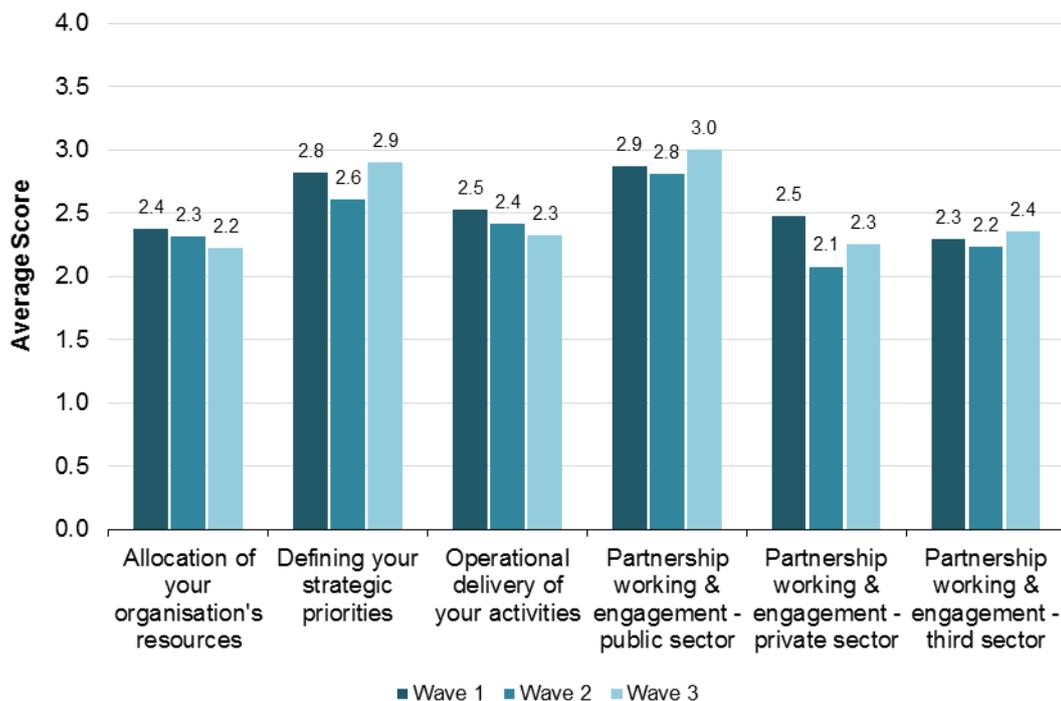
Table 1: Average scores (max of 4) on levels of ‘Understanding’, ‘Engagement’ and ‘Commitment’ of/with/to the RLP in Waves 1, 2 and 3 of the evaluation’s ‘commitment survey’

	Wave 1 Survey (Baseline, 2011)	Wave 2 Survey (Mid-Term 2012)	Wave 3 Survey (Final, 2013)
Understanding of the RLP	3.60	3.55	3.55
Engagement with the RLP	3.10	2.97	3.32
Commitment to the RLP	3.33	3.18	3.65

Source: Commitment surveys

15. **The evaluation found that the RLP had influenced partners/stakeholders in their level of partnership working with the public sector, and in defining the strategic priorities of organisations.** However, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below, the overall level of influence of the RLP did not appear to have increased in the final year of the evaluation. Essentially, the influence of the RLP ‘now’ appeared to be broadly what it was back in late 2011. Importantly, the nature of influence – consistently more partnership and strategic, than financial and operational, oriented – had also not shifted markedly. In part, this may have reflected the challenges in influencing substantially organisations working to their own strategic plans, tighter budgets, and responding to other pressures.

Figure 1: Average scores (max of 4) for response to ‘To what extent has your involvement with the RLP influenced you in terms of the following?’ (Where 4= Strong influence, 1= No influence) through Waves 1, 2 and 3 of the evaluation’s ‘commitment survey’



Source: Commitment surveys

16. Moving from a forum for discussion to one that makes decisions, as noted above, and in so doing moving from a responsive to a directive role, appeared to be key in increasing the level of the RLP’s influence on its partners. The evidence suggested that **the RLP had reached essentially a ‘plateau’ in the extent to which it can as currently organised influence partner activity.** More of the same, and more time, was unlikely to shift the picture substantially.

17. More widely, **outcomes generated by the RLP had included securing ‘more than fair shares’ funding for the region, generating an ‘environment of trust’ amongst key individuals, organisations, and sectors, developing a ‘culture of partnership working’, (with collaboration more the rule than the exception), and improving the dissemination and use of data and intelligence in service planning and delivery.**
18. These were all positives, and encouraging, demonstrating the benefits of the RLP intervention. **However, the outcomes of the RLP remained largely ‘process’ in nature, and the benefits ‘on the ground’ of its work had yet to be evidenced consistently.** The evaluation found that if the RLP is to maintain the credibility and trust of partners, there is increasingly a need to evidence how its work is translating in to tangible improvements in the region’s performance. Broadening and deepening the RLP’s understanding of its ‘routes to market’ is now needed.
19. **The evaluation found that the RLP had delivered benefit, or ‘additionality’, in terms of the quality, scale, and timing of the associated effects.** Without the RLP, many of the specific activities it had facilitated would not have been delivered, and partnership working in the region would have been much less evident. The partnership added significant value to these processes. The additionality of the RLP was at core about acting effectively to ‘*oil the wheels of partnership working*’, a role that partners/stakeholders consistently in the region report would not otherwise have been delivered to the same extent. To be clear, partnership working in the SW&CW region did not start with, and was not influenced solely by, the RLP. However, **the evaluation provided clear evidence that the RLP both scaled-up and improved the quality of this activity, and added significant value to these processes.**
20. **The Economy and Efficiency of the RLP over the evaluation period were assessed as broadly positive.** However, **Effectiveness was mixed:** whilst the RLP had done many good things, and achieved a lot, it had not met fully its core objectives, albeit these were broadly cast initially which hampered significantly definitive assessment. Work remained to be done in translating the partnership influence that has been delivered into more intensive and sustainable forms of revised working, and crucially, in meeting the needs of learners and the wider regional economy.

Recommendations

21. In light of the study’s findings and the issues identified in looking forward, the following recommendation were provided by the evaluation to the RLP:
- **Recommendation 1: The RLP intervention should be continued going forward.** Its overarching rationale remains valid given the on-going socio-economic challenges faced by the region, ongoing and ‘hard to fix’ coordination issues, and in response to the policy agenda. This said, retaining a ‘rationale-led’ not ‘policy-responsive’ operating mind-set, recognising that it is an initiative to address specific issues, rather than a long-term part of the institutional fabric, will be important.
 - **Recommendation 2: The underpinning rationale for intervention, as set out in the vision and ROAMEF (Rationale, Objectives, Activities, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback) Statement should be reviewed** to ensure that it reflects the issues of the expanded region, taking into account formally the specific issues of Ceredigion and Powys. This to ensure that the core foundational statement of the RLP reflects its full

spatial footprint. In this light, going forward, prior to taking on any substantive new activities, the RLP should review the vision and ROAMEF Statement to maintain clarity of purpose of strategic alignment.

- **Recommendation 3: The RLP should review formally its ‘Pillar approach’ as its principal activity model**, this to ensure activity forms avoid unhelpful hard boundaries and to ensure operating forms are best aligned with key functions.
- **Recommendation 4:** Informed by Recommendation 3, **the RLP should consider actively the potential to ‘spin out’ the RLSO and the E-Portal to appropriate partners**, as part of a wider approach to mainstreaming RLP activities going forward once they have been piloted and tested by the partnership.
- **Recommendation 5: Formal approval of the future governance model of the RLP should be agreed as a priority**, ensuring that the March 2014 deadline is met.
- **Recommendation 6: The RLP should ensure that active succession planning is initiated promptly**, reflecting the medium-to-long term need to refresh and update the leadership capacity, resource and competence in the partnership. This work, looking at both leadership and executive capacities and capabilities should be delivered in light of the RLP’s role in the SBCR, Structural Funds, and the emerging Regional Delivery Plan for Skills and Employment.
- **Recommendation 7:** Alongside the medium-term challenge at Recommendation 6, **a prompt health-check should be undertaken of the capability and capacity to respond fully, robustly and expertly, to the breaking agendas already in play**, notably in terms of defining, resolving, and subsequently delivering the RLP’s role in the next round of Structural Funds, and in the context of the RDPSE.
- **Recommendation 8: The RLP should continue to enhance links with the private sector**, with the upcoming discussion around the next round of Structural Funds providing an important further opportunity to induce private sector engagement. The RLP Team should also consider undertaking a review of how other public-sector led agencies have engaged successfully with the private sector across the UK from which to learn lessons.
- **Recommendation 9: The RLP should look to develop a high-level, but robust, framework to capture quantitatively data on the outputs and intermediate outcomes of its work.** This should include capturing data on funding leveraged, efficiency savings through reduced duplication, and costs avoided by promotion regional collaboration.
- **Recommendation 10: The RLP should consider how it can better evidence its effects ‘on the ground’ to ensure that the momentum is not lost and that the long-term benefits of the partnership are evidenced.** This should include considering how the research skills and capacities of the RLSO can be utilised to monitoring progress and outcomes of the RLP in real time going forward.