

PROGRESS & CHALLENGE: REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEST PARTNERSHIP 2018-2020

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CONTEXT

This report offers insights into the developments of the West Partnership (WPS) Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC). The reflections on progress and challenge **draw on evidence collected for the external interim evaluation since its inception** in January 2018 until October 2020. The main aim of the evaluation was to address **three key research questions** which centre on the contribution of the RIC to the local authorities, the contribution of Education Scotland's (ES's) Regional Improvement Team (RIT) to the RIC and the extent to which the RIC's Learning System has built collective agency to accelerate improvement.

This report is structured into three further sections. First, we provide **an overview of the key findings**. Second we **offer some reflections** and in third, we conclude by **drawing out some issues and implications** to stimulate further thinking around **potential developments**.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings suggest that WPS **strategic vision and aims and objectives are clear** and expressed in relation to **attainment, learning and teaching and building capacity**. **Effective collaboration** is believed to be the **driver of systems change** that should be greater than the sum of its parts.

The **key factors** which have **enabled progress** are: **establishing the infrastructure for systems improvement through collaborative networks and culture, early buy-in from directors and a collective commitment to the Learning System. Relationships and the role and capacity of key intermediaries** have been **crucial to the process**. It is recognised that the impact on learning and teaching and positive outcomes for children and young people takes time, but there were signs those were beginning to happen.

Key factors or features which **hindered progress at strategic level centred around the establishment of the Partnership**. Early on key factors included **time, building consensus on approach, purpose and vision and agreeing respective roles and responsibilities**. **Communications** could be further enhanced - both internally, by having more opportunities for informal communications between the Board and lead officers and between workstreams and externally through 'external messaging' to classroom practitioners. **Workloads** were raised as a concern by the local authority officers, in terms of sustaining WPS activity, which is also the case for those who lead the ever-growing span of WPS networks that will require support for future activity. **Time** required to attend and travel to meetings was considered a barrier, although it was believed that the increase in virtual meetings could overcome those issues and lead to more inclusivity. **IT was deemed to be challenging in some contexts** where unreliable connections and access for some families and communities were problematic.

Partnership activity is promoting a collaborative ethos and infrastructure, building agency and capacity within, between and beyond schools and implementing a range of innovative and valued resources and approaches across the Partnership. Workstream activity was starting to impact on learning and teaching in the classroom. The plans of the workstreams were affected by COVID-19, but despite this, there have been positive adaption and progress. **The main challenge is to sustain and embed these initial successes** and to invest in independent evaluation and monitoring for understanding the impact of the WPS.

The WPS was seen as responding swiftly to the pandemic by suspending all professional learning activities and events, it also developed a one-year Recovery Strategic Plan to set out how best it could support practitioners and

systems leaders during and post COVID-19. This included streamlining the Partnership's activity into three workstreams and facilitating a more network-based approach. More recently, an Interim Action Plan has been proposed.

Opportunities for knowledge mobilisation and empowerment continue but face challenges regarding the sustainability of innovation and networks. This approach is consistent with recommendations relating to the "Networked Learning System" and digitalisation of learning and teaching as set out in the recent report by the First Minister's International Council of Education Advisors (ICEA, 2020).

Systematic as well as informal collaborative efforts led to significant learning and teaching developments. One such systems-level development that has gained increased traction was the **online school** and the development of a range of online resources in learning and teaching. This is a strength of the Partnership's activity. There was some concern that online support might not be suitable for families who do not have equal access to IT. **The evidence suggests that the WPS contributed to and added value to local authorities' response to COVID-19** through co-ordinating activity by workstream leaders and others in key positions. **Enhancing access to expanded networks to share ideas and advice to help deal with the effects of the pandemic was also highlighted.** However, there was concern that the challenges presented by the pandemic meant that staff in the local authorities and schools had been so focussed on recovery plans that there had been little time for WPS activity.

The work of the WPS had contributed to the work of local authorities. The extent of this contribution was dependent partly on the authorities' capacity for collaboration. The Partnership had been active, increasingly online, in sharing knowledge and ideas in extending professional relationships and networks and promoting collective action. Workstream

lead officers were seen as key to driving development and provided neutral support and advice. Similarly, local authority officers, particularly, at the start of the Partnership, were vital in facilitating and supporting the range of activities across the workstreams. More recently, the growing numbers of volunteers on, for example, subject networks have played an integral part in 'filling a gap in the system'.

Capacity building has taken place through knowledge mobilisation and individual agency and development of professional capital. There is a growing cadre of 'middle managers' and headteachers/depute head teachers skilled in practitioner inquiry/collaborative action research. At local authority level, it was recognised that it would be head teachers and teachers who will have the greatest impact on classroom change. Therefore, the Partnership should continue to work with and engage and empower them across the strata of the WPS.

Overall, the contribution by ES's RIT was perceived as positive. This view was most positive in those that had worked closely with ES personnel on the ground across the workstreams. When ES personnel worked closely with workstreams or groups to provide specialist advice, support and resources this was at its strongest. ES interviewees also believed they had added value to the work of the WPS in several ways but thought they could have had more of a contribution initially if they had been more involved in co-producing plans and shaping the offer accordingly. Some of the Board members recognised that at the outset there was a lack of pace and that relationships between ES and local authority staff took time to develop. As roles and responsibilities gain more clarity the **pace of action is accelerating and relationships are being strengthened.**

Collective agency was being built, but there is less evidence of accelerated improvement. The outlook was optimistic but has been inhibited by COVID-19. This was enabled by a focus on

leadership promoting collaboration and agency rather than competition. The WPS Learning System with its focus on the use of appropriate data/evidence was seen as helping to progress collective agency and empowerment, but there needed to be a continual focus on promoting a shared understanding of it, especially as practitioners became involved in Partnership activity. This was particularly the case with the concept of 'collective agency'. This is likely to become more important as the concept of the 'Networked Learning System' (ICEA, 2020) builds on some of the ideas that underpins the innovative work of the WPS's 'Learning System'

The RIC is still at an early stage in its development and that evidence of impact on learners will take time. Nevertheless, **the evidence of its influence and progress regarding its objectives to date is encouraging.** We highlight **key themes** to support this: **traction regarding the concept and practice of collaborative learning as a driver for improvement; developing an effective internal architecture for change including the role of lead officers; knowledge mobilisation; adding value to the local authorities and capacity building; and increased personal agency and professional capital.**

REFLECTIONS

Reflections on developing a design-based research approach

The collaborative improvement strategies adopted by the WPS and the underpinning concepts and principles align with, and build on, a body of international research that confirms **the value of adopting a design-based research approach to school-to-school networking and cross-authority partnership work** as key levers of innovation and system improvement (e.g. Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Fullan, 2013; Wohlstetter et al., 2003). Another effective educational

improvement strategy at the core of the WPS is partnership working, with school leaders collaborating with like-minded professionals. These partnerships act as levers of innovation and system improvement, working both within a local authority, or cross-authority (e.g. Fullan, 2013; Chapman et al., 2012; Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Ainscow, 2016; Ainscow et al., 2012; Goodall et al., 2005; and Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

The concept of **the Learning System has underpinned developments.** This has been a key part of the strategy and is a complex and challenging aspiration which we reflect has been made possible by the WPS occupying a unique or 'liminal' space in the education system, without being overly constrained by traditional structures or hierarchies. The progress made to date provides the foundations for building a Networked Learning System across eight local authorities as outlined in the recent ICEA report published in December 2020.

The WPS has contributed to the work of the local authorities, in many ways and has, in the main, **provided professional learning and built capacity, which otherwise would not have existed.** In addition, there is progression towards systems change, through, for example, volunteer-led subject networks, collaborative learning networks between schools and cross-authorities and a national model of an online school in development.

Where **ES** personnel were reported to be **working closely with WPS groups in co-delivery or providing national policy perspectives or networks** as in the Collaborative Learning Networks (CLN) Workstream, they were **highly praised for their contribution** and for what they brought to their co-facilitation role. ES staff believed they had made a significant contribution to the work of the WPS in several ways but some thought that this could have been enhanced had they been involved more 'at the start' to co-produce plans and shape the offer accordingly.

In terms of developing collective agency to accelerate improvement. Some interviewees were clear about the concept of collective agency and how it had driven or could drive improvement, others referred to impacts on individual agency to the collaboration and activity which took place, whilst some interviewees mentioned joint working or collaborative activity. **Most recognised that driving or accelerating improvement in collective agency took time.**

Reflections on Progress

The WPS infrastructure is working well. The following interrelated **key themes** highlight strategic and operational progress made by the WPS:

- **Building on the concepts, principles and practice of collaborative learning as a driver for improvement.** The principles and approaches of evidence-informed collaborative working have been largely understood, accepted and are influencing the culture of the Partnership. Key factors in this have been the role of the Board in establishing the vision and objectives of the WPS and the work of the CLN Workstream where the concepts of collaborative inquiry have extended across and informed the other workstreams. There was also evidence of a growth in collective agency as this collaborative process developed.
- **Developing an effective internal architecture for change.** The WPS has developed an appropriate and effective organisational structure to manage and execute its objectives. While the workstreams have been streamlined, these are seen as having progressed the planned activity and goals of the Partnership as stated in annual Regional Improvement Plans. The main features which have enabled this are leadership, planning, organisation and `shifting the ownership of change` where this infrastructure was evident from the beginning, those workstreams appear to have developed more quickly. The role

of lead officers has been pivotal to driving the WPS agenda forward. These officers have demonstrated strong reticulist abilities and have helped build others' capacity and skills which has extended, and enhanced networking focused on the Partnership's objectives.

- **Knowledge mobilisation has taken place** mainly through networking, sharing of information, practice and resources or materials: formal and informal contact and discussion, leading to a range of connections, with equivalent personnel in other authorities. This has benefited the work of local authorities and again, the role of key intermediaries, lead officers and facilitators has been instrumental here. Building cross-authority partnerships and networks to tackle key challenges
- **Adding value through 'filling a gap in the system'**, this aspect of WPS activity is potentially best demonstrated through e.g., promoting Subject Networks, which transcend local geographies and systems. An interesting feature of this development is the growth and importance of skilled and enthusiastic volunteers that are both adding value to the local authorities, the RIC and now across the whole system. These developments, including sharing of expertise have also assisted local authorities in tackling the challenges of COVID-19.
- **Capacity building through a growing cadre of 'middle leaders' and headteachers and depute headteachers** who are involved in driving improvement informed by their knowledge and experience of collaborative practitioner inquiry. There has also been increased personal agency and professional capital with reported improvement in confidence and shifts in thinking for practitioners, particularly those involved in the CLN as well as positive impacts upon facilitators`

learning. Cross-authority working has also provided a source of professional learning for local authority officers, including Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs)

- **Capturing learning and demonstrating impact.** The value of on-going monitoring and evaluation activity is paramount. This includes the use of qualitative evidence and indicators as well as appropriate quantitative data to understand and demonstrate the impact on practitioners' agency and professional capital, in addition to successful outcomes for children and young people.

Reflecting on Challenges

While recognising and reflecting on the achievements of the WPS, we also recognise and reflect on the challenges of engaging in this nuanced and complex endeavour. The main challenges can be summarised as:

- **Promoting commitment - across all local authorities and schools** and achieving greater 'buy-in' from all stakeholders.
- **Extending reach and impact within schools** - there is consensus that the WPS activities have yet to reach the majority of teachers or impact in the classroom, to any great extent. However, this is unsurprising given the time it takes for ideas to reach the classroom and be translated into demonstratable impact. Given the buy-in from headteachers/depute headteachers to collegiate events during the pandemic one would expect WPS activity to influence practice in schools.
- **Communications** - both internally and externally have been an area for development. Internally, between the Board in relation to decision making and the lead officers and across the WPS. The majority of workstream members referred to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the activities of other workstreams. Externally, more needs to be done to raise awareness

across all classroom practitioners.

- **Sustaining the eco-system** - as different types of networks grow across the WPS; this increases the scale and scope of the Partnership. Such upscaling could leave it vulnerable depending on the capacity and structure of the networks, particularly in the number of skilled facilitators and intermediaries available. Similarly, the workstream lead officers have been key to coordinating developments, but as secondees from the local authorities, the eco-system could be exposed, if (as looks likely), they are recalled to their respective local authorities. This highlights the need to think about building in sustainability to the Partnership's system at various levels and should be viewed as an opportunity to reflect on the best structures and processes to optimise the potential of the WPS.

We now move on to the final section to consider some key issues and implications for consideration.

ISSUES & IMPLICATIONS

We conclude by focusing on some **key issues and implications** for consideration by the WPS and its key stakeholders. Taken together the above reflections highlight that the WPS's approach is **creating the conditions and processes for systems improvement and eventual learner attainment across participating local authorities**. The impact of the WPS on the **wider Scottish system is also evident**, as is its role in supporting recovery across this system. While the WPS occupies, like other RICs, a unique space in the Scottish education system, it cannot deliver desired outcomes on its own. It can, as we have argued enable and facilitate collaborative action and build collective agency. However, ultimately success will depend on a wide-spread genuine culture of collaboration. The Board has shown a clear focus on purpose, priorities, and

impact since its inception. This has **included a continuing commitment to building capacity and enhancing professional capital; features which are fundamental to a sustained Learning System** and will be **even more critical in developing a Networked Learning System**.

Issue for consideration: Maintaining an emphasis on the Learning System to support evidence-informed activity and improvement planning and exploring ways of growing the system. This could also include a focus on the role of leadership in building collective agency as highlighted at the beginning of this section. Furthermore, building on the concept of a Learning System moving towards the idea of a Networked Learning System as outlined in the ICEA (2020) report would be a positive direction of travel.

It may be timely, as a new lead director of the WPS is in place to co-construct a shared set of expectations and protocols for ways of working and deepen the ethos and culture of collaborative governance and innovation between key stakeholders, such as ES and the eight local authorities.

Issue for consideration: Could greater clarification of roles and responsibilities be helpful? This might include advising on/developing workload models which recognise input to WPS activity, shared planning, and resources to build collective agency and maintaining emphasis on partnership working to impact classrooms and schools.

The importance of boundary spanners or reticulists, in building agency and professional capital across the WPS cannot be underestimated. Some of those, of course have been the Partnership's own personnel. However, many have been local authority 'Improvement' staff, who in turn have themselves greatly benefitted from connections made and collaborations with officers (and others), in different local authorities and with different players in the system such as ES and university staff. A repeated phrase, "there's no point in reinventing the wheel", was a typical response in relation to such activity. This was not necessarily a cascade of knowledge, information, or ideas, from large to small authorities, but learning from each other, where good practice was acknowledged

or recognised. There were instances though where interviewees suggested that sharing was sometimes problematic. There is a need to shift the balance from sharing practice to move ideas, expertise and knowledge around the system towards high levels of joint practice development (Fielding et al., 2005) and the generation of new practices.

Issue for consideration: Recognising the key role of QIOs in the RIC. In addition, develop a shared understanding of the potential benefits of the economies of scale and scope in adopting a co-ordinated regional approach to improvement efforts, which might mitigate against some of the challenges experienced in sharing practice and engaging in joint practice development.

A significant challenge for the Partnership has been extending reach and impact within schools and as the evidence suggests this is not surprising, given the relatively short time frame in which it has been in existence.

Issue for consideration: Focusing on systematic approaches to 'engagement' in the next phase of strategic planning e.g., analysis/classification of stakeholders and defining their interest. This could be beneficial in attracting and involving more teachers and other practitioners in all types of WPS activity, including workstream planning, discussion, and representation.

Effective internal and external communications are a key issue. The former is regarding vertical and horizontal internal communications. The latter has its basis in the previous point, in 'getting the message out' to teachers and other practitioners.

Issue for consideration: Developing a communications strategy to enable more efficient internal working and to raise the profile of the WPS and spread understanding of the Partnership 'offer' externally. This is linked to the previous issue and both may, in part, be progressed by the provision of additional support for senior lead officer role and lead officers. This could take the form of resources for programme/project management or coordination.

The WPS's response to the pandemic in terms of speed of response and 'recovery' activities has been viewed as a success. Although, there was an impression by some that it could be an

opportunity for the Partnership to build on its brokerage role between different stakeholders and in certain sectors to optimise online learning provision and ensure quality of online resources.

Issue for consideration: The WPS and key stakeholders could continue exploring the potential of online provision to match learners with additional support needs and Early Years schools with similar learners/schools. In addition, those key stakeholders could continue to collaborate with the Partnership to explore innovative ways of breaching the IT divide for family and community learning.

The increasing scale and scope of WPS activity and a more network-based approach opens many opportunities. While there have been many demonstrable benefits and positives, not least of which is the rapidly increasing large number of volunteers signing-up for the Subject Networks and to produce online materials for West Online School. There is a potential issue with the sustainability of these developments.

Issue for consideration: Reviewing the need to build in sustainability to the Partnership's eco-system of groups and networks at every level where activity expands.

In summary, the WPS may want to consider these reflections, issues for consideration as a milestone to reflect upon; to pause and reflect on the achievements and successes highlighted in this report. As yet the impact on the classroom will take time and remains to be evaluated; capturing the learning and demonstrating impact will require ongoing monitoring and evaluation activity, including the use of qualitative indicators to indicate impacts on practitioner's collective agency and professional capital.

The ultimate test will be the extent to which learner outcomes and other critical indicators, including reductions in the attainment gap, demonstrate progress across the WPS. However, the Partnership working across these authorities, the growing recognition of the importance of professional agency and capacity, the commitment to professional inquiry and

the importance given to an evidence-informed approach, suggest that it will continue for some time in the future.

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