

Schools - Regional Improvement Collaboratives: review

Published: 16 Dec 2021

In December, the Scottish Government published a review of Scotland's Regional Improvement Collaborations (RICs). The report sets out findings of a review of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs). The review was commissioned jointly by Scottish Government and COSLA.

This review was due to take place in spring 2020 but was paused due to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. The review was paused and re-started running from spring through to autumn 2021. Schools had been through significant periods of change, stress and restrictions, and the Covid-19 pandemic continued to have a major impact on schools at the time of fieldwork.

The review also took place during a time of education reform in Scotland. In 2020, the OECD began an assessment into the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence in primary and secondary schools, exploring progress made since 2015. The report was published in June 2021, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education announced the intention to:

- replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and consider a new specialist agency for both curriculum and assessment
- take forward reform of Education Scotland including removing the function of inspection from the agency.

This work was taken forward through an expert panel and advisory group, informed by a national consultation in autumn 2021 inviting everyone interested in the future of Scottish education and a dedicated consultation with children and young people.

There was a high level of confidence in RIC structures and governance arrangements. During 2020 and 2021, many felt that governance and partnership working had strengthened, in part due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Overall RIC teams felt that they had access to the resource and workforce required, and that each local authority contributed well to the RIC.
- RICs have enabled local authority officers to collaborate in new and enhanced ways. A few felt a significant cultural shift had taken place, with proactive, collaborative working becoming an accepted way of working in education.
- Most school staff involved in this review were aware of RIC priorities and felt they had the opportunity to collaborate, share best practice, learn new things and develop their skills through the RIC.
- Working with colleagues from Education Scotland, RICs played a key role in contributing to Education Scotland's national e-learning offer and supporting secondary schools with the SQA alternative certification model.
- From this review, there is evidence that RICs are having an impact on:
 - o developing the skills of school staff and delivery of lessons
 - o skills and consistency around assessment and moderation
 - o leadership and improvement planning skills

- o building a collaborative culture between local authorities
- o new online and blended learning opportunities for pupils.
- RICs have been on a journey around evaluation and impact. It is important to recognise that RICs form part of a large system and there is a need to be realistic about the role of RICs in the context of a wide range of other activity to support improvement and equity in educational outcomes in Scotland.
- Education Scotland regional improvement teams have co-produced, led and been involved in a wide range of RIC activities, including supporting networks, delivering learning, quality assurance, peer review and direct support to schools. Collaborative relationships have strengthened over time. Some felt that there remained some tensions in the relationship due to a lack of clarity around the role of Education Scotland in relation to RICs.
- Stakeholders felt overall existing funding levels for RICs were broadly appropriate, but that a longer-term funding commitment would allow RICs to be more strategic and ambitious and manage staff resources more effectively.
- Stakeholders felt that the policy direction around RICs so far had been clear, but it was important to have clarity on the future, including confirmation of how RICs fit into the education system in Scotland as broad changes are being made.

Key themes: structure, governance and findings

- There was a high level of confidence in RIC structures and governance arrangements, among both regional and national stakeholders.
- RIC partners felt able to collaborate, compromise and come to a consensus without any real difficulty, with clarity of vision and purpose and strong, trusting relationships.
- Many felt that there had been a real shift among elected members, with many becoming much more supportive and understanding of the added value of the RIC.
- Many felt that during 2020 and 2021 governance and partnership working had strengthened, in part due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Overall RIC teams felt that they had access to the resource and workforce required, and that each local authority contributed well to the RIC. Some raised issues around the RIC not being able to appoint staff on a permanent basis.
- A few, both at regional and national level, felt that there was scope to review whether the expertise within the RIC and Education Scotland regional improvement teams could be joined up more effectively and used to best effect

Example: West Partnership - Sharing resources

In the West Partnership, in addition to secondments to the RIC core team, individual local authorities provide different types of support to the RIC. For example, one authority provides human resources expertise and support, another finance, another project management expertise and another digital support.

Key themes collaboration and partnership

- Most school staff involved in this review felt that they had the opportunity to collaborate and share best practice through the RIC.

- Regional stakeholders felt that the RICs had enabled local authority officers to collaborate in new and enhanced ways. The pandemic had contributed to building stronger regional collaboration.
- Most regional stakeholders felt that this type and depth of cross authority collaboration would not have happened to this extent before the RIC.
- A few regional and national stakeholders talked about a significant cultural shift taking place, with people proactively collaborating between local authority areas, and working collaboratively becoming an accepted way of working in education.
- Most national stakeholders were positive that RICs created a space where people could come together to collaborate and share ideas, adding value to, rather than duplicating the role of local authorities.
- The RICs have also encouraged collaboration around wider thematic areas including children’s rights, early learning and childcare

Example: West Partnership - Collaboration and empowerment

The West Partnership ‘Improving our Classroom’ programme started as a Glasgow City Council project and then expanded across the RIC. It supports teachers to focus on pedagogical improvement through selfevaluation, developing collaborating between different schools, and empowering teachers to make change through collaborative action research.

One school involved in this research indicated that the Improving Our Classroom programme helped to strengthen teachers’ practice, ultimately having a positive impact on children and young people.

“For my staff, I can see that it has had an impact.” **Headteacher, primary school**

The West Partnership uses story boards to capture and showcase best practice. Following a process of local authority, RIC and Education Scotland quality assurance, storyboard exemplars are shared on the West Partnership website. Where highly effective and innovative practice is identified, the RIC works with Education Scotland’s regional team to share these exemplars at national level, through the National Improvement Hub.

Schools are growing in confidence to share work initially at regional level, which can then broaden to a national reach.

Example: West Partnership - Wider themes In the West Partnership, an existing network for Community Learning and Development Managers now connects into the RIC.

Supported by Education Scotland and the RIC, CLD officers strengthened their connections with the RIC, developed a shared understanding of regional priorities and now link in with the RIC plan.

Impact of the pandemic on collaboration

Most stakeholders felt that the pandemic had made a big difference to how local authorities worked together through the RICs. Most felt that the pandemic had increased the intensity of joint working and made local authorities more open to sharing and less protective or territorial about their own work.

Dealing with new situations and need to focus and adapt very quickly has helped relationships within the RICs to deepen and strengthen.

“The phone used to light up every time there was a change to the restrictions.” **Regional stakeholder**

Using online communication and collaboration tools increased their ability to regularly engage and work together, particularly in rural and remote areas where geography was previously a challenge. Access to virtual meeting space enabled people to develop online support networks, share practice online and participate in online events, webinars and Teams meetings. Some felt that more people were able to take part in this way, as it negated the need for travel.

Example: Collaboration between RICs

FWWL, the West Partnership and Tayside RICs are working together to develop National 1, 2 and 3 resources for learners with additional support needs in response to a gap in appropriate resources.

The work was initiated by the Tayside RIC in partnership with the FWWL RIC. The RICs are creating a national project, creating a national bank of resources linked to West OS and e-Sgoil national e-learning offer.

“There is a real willingness to share information, help each other and get involved.”

“The RIC took a strategic role and made things happen.” **Regional stakeholders**

Key themes – engagement and support of schools

Example: West Partnership - Use of Twitter

The West Partnership has over 5,000 followers on Twitter. It has found that social media platforms like Twitter are very effective for reaching teachers from across the region.

The RIC has also developed an interactive website and continues to use a range of communication channels.

Example: West Partnership - Learning opportunities

In 2019/20, a total of 3,185 practitioners accessed professional learning opportunities provided by the West Partnership

Learning opportunities were developed in response to support requests from teachers and local authorities. Many sessions were co-designed in partnership with Education Scotland’s regional team.

Example: West Partnership - Leadership activity

Within the West Partnership there are a wide range of leadership support activities supporting leadership at all levels. This includes Virtual Learning Networks, coaching and mentoring support, the 'Improving our Classroom' programme and pathways into existing local and national leadership programmes.

Leadership activity has been carefully connected to the Education Scotland national offer for leadership, and to local authority priorities around needs.

During 2020, the West Partnership local authorities reported that some depute heads were not ready to do the Education Scotland 'Into Headship' course but did require some rich leadership opportunity. In response, the RIC developed an existing local authority's 'Thinking about Headship' programme for depute heads.

The West Partnership quickly recognised that the demand on school leaders during the pandemic was extraordinary. Leaders also wished to collaborate with others beyond their own local authority. In response, the RIC created Virtual Leadership Networks for headteachers and depute heads, which had very high uptake. Over 300 headteachers and depute heads participated in the networks. The networks were accompanied by wellbeing support.

"The virtual networks have been a 'game-changing' moment, they are a much more effective way to engage."

Regional stakeholder

The West Partnership has also developed two pilot headteacher learning sets, which were led by external facilitators. Feedback from participants was very positive and many continued to meet after the facilitation support was complete.

Example: West Partnership - West Online School (West OS)

West Partnership local authorities worked together across the RIC to support remote learning. The whole system of education changed overnight for schools, during the pandemic and associated school closures.

The RIC established West OS, to support digital delivery and develop resources for schools, practitioners and learners. The platform has been extremely successful both regionally and nationally, and is now part of the national elearning offer and accessible to all schools in Scotland.

Every school in the West Partnership area has used West OS in the 2020/21.

"The RIC took the lead in developing digital learning, this took the burden off local authorities and saved everybody re-inventing the wheel." **Regional stakeholder**

Practitioners from other RIC areas also supported the development of content for West OS. For example, over 100 teachers in the Tayside area volunteered to upload lessons to the West OS platform.

"Covid has turbo-charged collaborative working." **Regional stakeholder**

Example: West Partnership - Evidence of impact on delivery

The Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change at Glasgow University undertakes external evaluation of the West Partnership. It produced an interim evaluation in February 2021.

The evaluation highlighted that the West Partnership was still at an early stage in its development, had been impacted by COVID-19, and the evidence of impact on learners would take time.

However, it found that the West Partnership was promoting a collaborative ethos and workstream activity was starting to impact on learning and teaching in the classroom.

Example: West Partnership - Skills and confidence

The West Partnership undertakes evaluation of its events and programmes. Evaluation of events for headteachers and deputy headteachers found that these would impact on practice through providing teachers with reassurance to try approaches, supporting teachers to get ideas to apply in their own contexts, and increase confidence in their role.

For example, of the 150 staff who attended evaluative writing professional learning through the RIC 80% indicated that they felt their confidence levels improved.

Example: West Partnership 2020-2023 critical indicators

The West Partnership has agreed high level indicators which will allow it to report on the impact of its work with schools. Baselines were taken in 2016/17 and 2017/18. RICs were established in 2018 and information is available for 2018/19.

However, there are gaps in most of the data for 2019/20 due to the pandemic, which means it is not yet possible to explore trends and the extent to which these have been driven by the RIC.

The types of measure being reported on for the 2020-2023 plan include:

- Primary - % of pupils P1, P4 and P7 achieving expected levels in literacy and numeracy
- Secondary - % of S3 pupils achieving third level or better and fourth level or better in literacy and numeracy
- Leavers - % of leavers achieving one or more and five or more awards at SCQF Level 6 or better
- Attendance - primary and secondary attendance and exclusion rates.

Indicators are also in place for the percentage of establishments evaluated as good or better for leadership of change, and learning teaching and assessment during HMIE Inspections, and changes in staff knowledge, understanding and confidence as a result of professional learning are also gathered and examined to identify next steps in planning.

Example: West Partnership - Joint work

Education Scotland staff work in partnership across all three workstreams. For example, this has included helping develop online learning opportunities through quality assuring remote learning resources and materials for West OS. Education Scotland also co-facilitated virtual networks for headteachers and other school staff, jointly with the RIC team officers.

Review method

This review explored the development and early impact of the RICs, three years after they were established. The review was largely qualitative and involved a desktop review as well as interviews with RIC leads, RIC teams, Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisors and wider regional improvement team members, elected members, national stakeholders and schools.

It should be noted that discussions with schools involved 53 interviews with staff from 50 schools - out of more than 2,500 schools and more than 2,400 early learning centres in Scotland. The schools selected were largely involved in RIC activity, to ensure the valuable time of school staff was used most effectively.

Qualitative research can provide an in-depth understanding of experiences, feelings and behaviours but findings cannot be extrapolated to the whole school population. RIC governance, resources and plans.

This review found that there has been real progress since RICs were established, and since the interim review in late 2018. There is now a high level of confidence in RICs - in terms of their governance, structures and plans - and they have become established within the education system. There has been a real shift among elected members, with many becoming much more supportive and understanding of the added value of the RIC.

Collaboration

The Covid-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on schools and the education system. RICs strengthened their collaboration during this time, using existing networks to build their response to this crisis.

Although this was an extremely busy and pressured time for all in the education system, the pandemic fostered stronger regional collaboration at all levels, including staff at very senior levels. The RICs helped local authority officers to collaborate in new ways and working collaboratively between local authorities became an accepted way of working.

While the pandemic put intense pressure on schools, most found that they were able to collaborate, share, learn and develop skills through the RIC. The RICs helped many schools to look outwards and learn from what others were doing, with a focus on outcomes for children and young people, at a time when the pressures may have made people feel unable to do so otherwise.

The RICs also helped to provide opportunities for school leaders to collaborate and support one another through extremely difficult times, with headteachers and other senior leaders highly valuing the opportunity to work with one another through strong, supportive partnerships.

Engagement and support of schools

Since the interim review in 2018, there has been a real shift in awareness of RICs among schools. Most of the school staff involved in this review were aware of RIC priorities, and staff at

different levels - beyond the headteacher and other senior leaders - had often been involved in RIC activities.

Many found that as their work shifted online, due to the pandemic, this helped to increase awareness of and participation in RIC activities, particularly beyond the headteacher. Through the opportunities made available through RICs, school staff learned new things and developed their skills. This helped staff to become more inquiring, reflective and drive forward improvement in their classroom.

Senior leaders also developed skills around management, change, recovery and supporting staff. During the pandemic, many schools were grappling with similar issues and looking for support or ideas around the same topics. The RICs, working with Education Scotland, helped to provide a co-ordinated regional approach to this support - particularly around online and blended learning and the SQA alternative certification model.

Evaluation and impact

From this review, there is evidence that RICs are having an impact on developing the skills of school staff, delivery of lessons, skills and consistency around assessment and moderation, leadership and improvement planning skills, collaboration between local authorities, and online learning opportunities for pupils.

RICs have developed systems to track the impact of their work and are on a journey around demonstrating impact. In their first three years, RICs have worked to refine their role, focus in on intended outcomes and develop appropriate measures.

There are many different ways in which RICs could facilitate and support collaboration for improvement - many different outcomes they could aim to achieve. The strongest evidence this review gathered around RIC impact was in relation to drivers for improvement - building teacher professionalism, strengthening assessment of children's progress, strengthening school leadership, school improvement and (in time) strengthening performance information.

These are important outcomes for strengthening schools and the system, which should then result in ultimate benefit for children and young people in terms of improvement in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing.

With the purpose of RICs being to support collaborative working, to secure excellence and equity in education, it is important to be focused and realistic about what impact RICs are expected to have, within the wide range of other activity taking place to support positive outcomes for children and young people.

Support and funding

Education Scotland regional improvement teams have co-produced and led a wide range of RIC activities, in a bespoke way, adding value and providing support and guidance. While collaborative relationships have strengthened over time, some expressed a need for more clarity about the role of Education Scotland within RICs and there remained some issues around effective joint working.

Overall funding levels for RICs were felt to be broadly appropriate, but there was a clear demand for a longer term funding commitment to allow RICs to take a more strategic and ambitious approach and manage staff resources more effectively.

Many sought clarity on the future role of RICs, including confirmation of how RICs fit into the education system in Scotland as broad changes are being made. This would include clarification on national expectations of RICs and their purpose. This should be developed in a way which

involves RICs, which are now felt to be established enough to feed into these conversations at national level.