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# Review of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives



**CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS**



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## Note on context

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.

# Key themes

- 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:
  - developing the skills of school staff and delivery of lessons
  - skills and consistency around assessment and moderation
  - leadership and improvement planning skills
  - building a collaborative culture between local authorities
  - 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.

# Executive summary

## About this report

This report sets out findings of a review of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs). The review was commissioned jointly by Scottish Government and COSLA. The overall aim of the review was to secure an independent analysis of the development and early impact of the RICs, focusing on themes around governance, collaboration, engagement with schools, planning, evaluation, use of data and support for RICs.

The review involved a desktop review as well as interviews with:

- RIC leads (6)
- wider RIC team members, workstream leads and partners (24)
- Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisors (6)
- wider regional improvement team members (6)
- elected members (6)
- national stakeholders including COSLA, Education Scotland, Scottish Government, ADES and SOLACE (10)
- 53 school staff at 50 schools identified as being involved in RICs.

The review was qualitative and involved in-depth discussions with a sample of those involved in RICs. To maximise the value of the qualitative approach, and minimise impact on school staff time, during such a pressured time, the sample of 50 schools was drawn largely from schools identified as engaged in some way in RIC activity.

## RIC governance, structures and resources

Since establishment in early 2018, each RIC has developed a structure and governance arrangements designed to suit local and regional requirements. RICs have developed over time, and there is now a high level of confidence among regional and national stakeholders in RIC structures, governance, decision making and leadership arrangements.

During 2020 and 2021, the pandemic encouraged more collaboration and development of strong, trusting relationships. Many stakeholders highlighted 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.

Overall, RIC teams felt that they had access to the resources and workforce required and that broadly each local authority contributed well. Areas for

potential future development included ensuring all local authorities were fully invested in the RIC approach, using the expertise within the Education Scotland regional improvement teams to full effect, and building expertise around performance and data analysis.

## **Plans and priorities**

Most stakeholders felt that priorities and plans were well underpinned by data analysis, but many highlighted that more could be done to continue to strengthen this at regional level. Most were very confident that priorities connected from school, local, regional and national level, with the National Improvement Framework being the thread that holds together the priorities across different levels - particularly around the themes of attainment in literacy and numeracy, improving health and wellbeing and closing the attainment gap. During the pandemic, RICs re-focused their work to meet needs in a rapidly changing environment, including an enhanced focus on e-learning.

Regional stakeholders largely felt that RIC plans were developed in a collaborative way, with a range of stakeholders involved in informing and developing plans and priorities. While most school staff felt that the RIC priorities were appropriate, around a third of the school staff taking part in this review felt that they had the opportunity to influence the priorities of the RIC. Some felt more work should be done to talk to school staff about RIC priorities.

## **Collaboration**

Most school staff involved in this review felt that they had the opportunity to collaborate and share best practice through the RIC. Many collaborative opportunities focused on empowerment and confidence building around approaches, pedagogies and themes. In some instances, RICs have also supported direct connections between schools - across local authority areas. Through these links, headteachers and other senior leaders felt that they developed strong, supportive and collaborative partnerships.

Regional stakeholders felt that the RICs had enabled local authority officers to collaborate in new and enhanced ways. The pandemic had built stronger regional collaboration with Directors of Education, Heads of Service and other senior staff communicating on a very regular basis at regional level. This encouraged people at other levels to collaborate and connect, sharing skills and expertise.

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 talked about a significant cultural shift taking place, with people pulling

together between the authorities, and proactively identifying where collaborative effort is needed.

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. Some national stakeholders indicated that through the RICs, working collaboratively between local authority areas had become an accepted way of working within education.

The RICs have also encouraged collaboration around wider thematic areas including children's rights, early learning and childcare. In some instances, RICs have worked together nationally on issues such as resources for pupils with additional support needs and e-learning. Some felt there was scope for more of this type of collaborative work between RICs.

## **Engagement and support of schools**

RICs undertook a wide range of activities to raise awareness of RIC priorities, plans and activities among school staff. This review involved conversations with 53 school staff at 50 schools identified as being involved in RIC activity. Most of the school staff involved in this review were aware of RIC priorities. Awareness was highest when school staff received regular updates from local authority education officers, by email, through online newsletters and through regular discussion of priorities. Awareness appeared to increase as school staff got involved in RIC opportunities such as training and events. As the work of RICs became more digital, many found this also increased awareness of the RIC. However, some highlighted that there remained challenges to awareness, particularly with school staff feeling under extreme pressure.

Most school staff involved in this review felt that they had learned new things and developed their skills through the RIC. This helped staff to become more inquiring, reflective and drive forward improvement in their classroom.

Some senior school staff involved in this evaluation had taken part in leadership activity, through events, networks and leadership courses developed by or promoted through the RIC. Senior staff developed skills around management, strategic change, recovery and supporting staff, and some particularly valued networks of senior staff during the pandemic, to reflect on key issues.

Fewer school staff felt that the RIC helped them to share data between schools, and some indicated there was more to be done to build the confidence of school staff to deal with data, analysis and research generally, across both primary and secondary schools. Most felt that while data had

been analysed and shared at a high level across the RIC, there was less sharing of data at school level.

During the pandemic, RICs supported schools by developing online learning opportunities for pupils for use during lockdown, as part of blended learning and more widely to increase pupil opportunities. RICs have also played a key role in contributing to Education Scotland's national e-learning offer, through the use and development of platforms such as e-Sgoil and the West Online School (West OS), and the contribution of both live and recorded lessons. RICs have learned from this experience and are continuing to explore how online learning opportunities could be best used in the future, for example through offering Advanced Highers online to provide greater subject choice to senior phase pupils.

Working with colleagues from Education Scotland, RICs also played an important role in enabling collaborative work to support secondary schools with the SQA alternative certification model used to award National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers in place of exams. The focus was on ensuring consistency in terms of approach, supporting teachers to gather evidence and encouraging schools to collaborate.

## **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 in the classroom - introducing new approaches and developing more consistency in pedagogical approach
- skills and consistency around assessment and moderation
- leadership and improvement planning skills
- building a collaborative culture between local authorities.

The RICs are also introducing new opportunities for learning for pupils, particularly through online learning opportunities during the pandemic and beyond. RICs have developed systems to track the impact of their work through to attainment, but this connection is challenging to track, with the RICs forming one part of a large system. There is some evidence of increases in pupil attainment, achievement, equality and inclusion across regions, but there is a very wide range of activity taking place to improve educational outcomes for young people in Scotland, and the direct link to RIC activity is more challenging to demonstrate.

While RICs have developed monitoring systems to demonstrate progress, outputs, demand and satisfaction with activities, there are gaps in terms of understanding the impact that RICs are having. RICs have been on a journey around setting realistic and focused priorities which can be achieved through

collaborative working within the RIC, identifying clear intended outcomes, setting appropriate measures and demonstrating impact. At the time of this review, each of the RICs was working on further developing its ability to demonstrate impact.

The challenges demonstrating impact have been experienced in the context a global pandemic since early 2020 and a wide range of broader activity in education in Scotland. Some stressed that in exploring impact, it was important to be realistic about what RICs could be expected to deliver in terms of improvement given the amount of funding available to them, and the wide range of other activity to support improvement and equity in educational outcomes in Scotland.

## **Support and funding**

Education Scotland regional improvement teams have been involved in, co-produced and led on a wide range of RIC activities, including supporting networks, delivering learning, quality assurance and peer review of materials, and direct support to schools. Education Scotland provides support to each RIC in a bespoke manner, and regional stakeholders felt that collaborative relationships have developed and improved over time.

The views of regional and national stakeholders on partnerships between RICs and Education Scotland regional improvement teams were mixed. Some felt the partnership was useful and helped to drive improvement, with access to specific support and guidance through working jointly. However, while many felt that over time relationships had strengthened, some felt that there remained some tensions in the relationship due to a lack of clarity around the role of Education Scotland, and a tension between being a partner in the RIC and co-producing activity, while also having a role in approving RIC plans. While the involvement of Education Scotland was generally felt to add value, there remained some issues around effective joint working.

Stakeholders felt that funding for RICs was vital, and that overall existing funding levels were broadly appropriate. However, regional stakeholders felt that a longer-term funding commitment would allow RICs to take a more strategic approach, focusing on improvement over time, increasing ambition and enabling staff resources to be managed more effectively.

Overall, regional 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. This would include clarification on national expectations of RICs and their purpose, with this being developed in a way which involves RICs which are now felt to be established enough to feed into these conversations at national level.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## About this report

This report sets out findings of a review of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs). The review was commissioned jointly by Scottish Government and COSLA.

## Research aims

This review is covered in the partnership agreement between Scottish Government and local government relating to the establishment of Regional Improvement Collaboratives for education. The review was originally commissioned in early 2020, two years after the RICs were established at the end of January 2018. However, the review was paused in spring 2020 due to the public health situation and the emergence of Covid-19. The review therefore took place between May and October 2021.

The overall aim of the review was to secure an independent analysis of the development and early impact of the RICs. The review focused on themes around:

- structures and governance
- collaboration and partnership working
- engagement with and support for schools
- planning and evaluation
- use of data
- support and guidance for RICs.

In the context of Covid-19, the review also explored the use of digital and virtual approaches across all six areas of focus.

The findings will be used to inform and support further development of RICs, to reassure and inform wider stakeholders of progress to date, and to learn from evidence of the early impact of the RICs.

## Context

### About the Regional Improvement Collaboratives

RICs bring local authorities together to secure excellence and equity in education. They are intended to:

- provide educational improvement support to practitioners through dedicated teams of professionals - drawing on local authority staff, Education Scotland staff and others
- provide focus across all partners through a regional plan and work programme - aligned to the National Improvement Framework (NIF)
- facilitate and create the conditions to support collaborative working across the region.

RICs were not intended to be formal bodies within the education system<sup>1</sup>. They intended to bring together local authorities and Education Scotland to develop different ways of working, bring together capacity across a region and add value through collective efforts.

There are six RICs, involving between three and eight local authorities. They are:

- **Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative** - involving Clackmannanshire, Falkirk, Stirling and West Lothian Councils
- **Northern Alliance** - involving Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney and Shetland Islands Councils
- **South East Improvement Collaborative** - involving Edinburgh City, East Lothian, Fife, Midlothian and Scottish Borders Councils
- **South West Education Improvement Collaborative** - involving East Ayrshire, North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway Councils
- **Tayside Regional Improvement Collaborative** - involving Angus, Dundee City and Perth and Kinross Councils
- **West Partnership** - involving East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire Councils.

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<sup>1</sup> Regional Improvement Collaboratives for Education, Report of the Joint Steering Group, September 2017

## **The establishment of the RICs**

The RICs were established following the Scottish Government's consultation on education governance and reform, during 2016 and 2017. In June 2017, the Scottish Government published 'Education Governance - Next Steps' setting out its vision of an education system centred around children and young people, with decisions taken as close to them as possible. As part of this, Next Steps set out the aim of establishing RICs to provide excellent educational improvement support for headteachers, teachers and practitioners through dedicated teams of professionals.

A joint steering group was set up to develop proposals for RICs, based on the policy direction outlined within Next Steps. The joint steering group involved Scottish Government, local government - including COSLA, SOLACE and ADES - and Education Scotland. The steering group produced a report setting out its interim conclusions in September 2017<sup>[2]</sup>. This report emphasised that RIC development was not about establishing a new formal body, but about developing different ways of working, bringing together capacity from across an area and beyond, to add value through collective efforts.

Scottish Government and COSLA entered into a partnership agreement to establish these new RICs for education, regional improvement leads were appointed, and initial regional improvement plans were required to be submitted for each RIC by the end of January 2018. This is the date from which RICs can be considered to be operational.

## **Support for the RICs**

From mid 2018, the RICs have been supported through a package of support. In June 2018, Scottish Government and COSLA announced support to enhance regional capacity to support schools - through the RICs and Education Scotland working together. Education Scotland developed its core offer of support to RICs and to schools over 2018/19 and created six Regional Improvement Teams. This involved recruiting additional staff to provide further expert support to each RIC. These teams support the RICs as well as help local authorities, schools, practitioners and other educational partners.

2018/19 was the first year that the Scottish Government provided funding to all six of Scotland's RICs, with the aim of supporting their first full Regional Improvement Plans produced in September 2018. Each RIC submitted an individual resourcing request, to support regional capacity building and planned RIC activity over the 2018/19 school year.

Between 2018/19 and 2021/22, the Scottish Government has committed a total of approximately £21 million of additional funding support to the RICs. The funding is provided from the Education Reform budget and the Attainment Scotland Fund (for regional activity related to closing the poverty related attainment gap). Access to support through Education Scotland regional teams has complemented this resource.

## **RIC development phases**

RICs have developed in broad phases. Phase One covers the initial establishment of the RICs from October 2017 to August 2018. This initial phase was evaluated in autumn 2018<sup>2</sup>. During this Phase RICs delivered their initial interim plans in January 2018 and worked through the process of developing their first full Regional Improvement Plans.

Phase Two refers to the 2018/19 school year, following submission of their first full Regional Improvement Plans in September 2018.

In September 2019, RICs produced plans for the 2019/20 school year. Part way through this year, in spring 2020, education was significantly disrupted due to the emergence of Covid-19 and corresponding school closure. In September 2020, RICs produced Regional Improvement and Recovery Plans for 2020/21, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In summer 2021, RICs produced Regional Improvement Plans for 2021/22, again in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **Evaluation method**

This review involved five phases:

### **Phase One: Desktop review**

We undertook a desktop review including a review of national guidance, regional improvement plans and annual reports, impact reports and evaluations. We also used the RIC interim review as a baseline for this review.

### **Phase Two: Regional level fieldwork**

We held online or telephone interviews with:

- Each RIC lead (6)
- 24 RIC wider team members, support staff, workstream leads and wider partners
- Each Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisor (6)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/regional-improvement-collaboratives-rics-interim-review/pages/4/>

- 6 Education Scotland regional improvement team members
- 6 elected members.

These interviewees are referred to as 'regional stakeholders' throughout this report.

### **Phase Three: School level fieldwork**

We held telephone interviews with a sample of 53 headteachers, depute teachers, principal teachers and class teachers at 50 different schools involved in RICs. Schools were identified in close discussion with the RIC team and Director for Education or equivalent in each local authority area. We gathered information on the range of schools involved in different types of RIC activity, in early 2020, and independently sampled these schools to include a mix of types and levels of involvement, school characteristics, geography and levels of deprivation. In spring 2021, when fieldwork with schools commenced, we checked this selection with the Director of Education in the context of the extreme pressure on schools during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The 50 schools involved included 33 primary schools, 13 secondary schools, 1 school with joint primary and secondary provision, 2 early years centres and 1 special school. The 53 interviews involved 38 headteachers, 8 depute headteachers, 4 principal teachers and 3 class teachers. Three joint interviews took place, during which we spoke with two members of staff, at the request of the school. All of these interviewees are collectively described as 'school staff' throughout this evaluation.

The review aimed to involve between one and two school interviews per local authority. The research took place during the pandemic, when schools were under intense pressure in terms of capacity and dealing with Covid-19 cases and related isolation requirements. While schools were selected independently by the researchers, discussions then took place with each Director of Education and in some cases the schools initially selected were replaced with those with more capacity to participate in research at this busy time.

The final 50 schools able to participate were from 31 of Scotland's 32 local authorities, with between one and three interviews taking place in each authority. This meant that there were between five and 14 school interviews per RIC, dependent on the number of local authorities involved. We would like to extend particular thanks to the school staff who gave up their time to take part, during such a busy time.

It should be noted that this is qualitative research, and the 50 schools were not statistically representative of the more than 2,500 schools and more than 2,400 early learning centres across Scotland. Qualitative research can provide

an in-depth understanding of experiences, feelings and behaviours, but findings cannot be extrapolated to the whole school population.

Schools were selected to provide a mix of characteristics:

- 44% of the schools were in large urban or other urban areas. 32% were in rural areas and 22% were in small towns.<sup>3</sup>
- 40% of the schools had more than 20% of their pupils in the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland. And exactly half of the schools had less than 20% of their pupils in the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland<sup>4</sup>.
- In 32% of the schools, more than 10% of pupils were minority ethnic.

### **Phase Four: National level fieldwork**

We held online interviews with COSLA, SOLACE, ADES, Education Scotland and Scottish Government. We spoke with a total of 10 people through these interviews. The discussions lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and explored views on RIC governance, planning, collaboration, use of data, engagement with schools and support and guidance for RICs. These interviewees are referred to as 'national stakeholders' throughout this report.

### **Phase Five: Reporting and analysis**

This report sets out the key themes under each of the six focus areas explored within the review. Where appropriate, quotes or examples are used to help to illustrate points. Notes from discussions were analysed using a system of manual thematic coding, which involves a researcher carefully reading responses to each interview question and coding key themes emerging. The researcher also reads the interview as a whole to ensure that responses are understood in context.

In analysing views, we explored any key variances of view between respondent groupings, including by RIC and local authority area, between different types of school and between teachers in different roles. Where differences of view have emerged, we have highlighted this within the report.

Views are reported completely anonymously. Quotes are tagged broadly, to provide an idea of the type of stakeholder commenting while preserving anonymity. Comments have been reported carefully to reduce the ability to identify the RIC area being discussed. When summarising views within bulleted lists, the points are listed broadly in order of frequency mentioned. Within the report, we used a broad qualitative scale to describe the proportion of participants who commented on particular themes and topics:

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<sup>3</sup> Geographic profile unavailable for one early years centre.

<sup>4</sup> SIMD information not available for 5 participating schools.

- One/ an individual - a point raised by just one person
- A few - two or three people
- Some - less than half the respondents in that category
- Many - more than half of respondents in that category
- Most/ almost all - a very high proportion of respondents in that category.

# Chapter 2: Structures, governance and planning

## Key themes

- 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.

## Introduction

This chapter explores RIC structures, governance and planning. It focuses on exploring the extent to which:

- RIC structures and governance are embedded and working as intended
- effective workforce and resource plans are in place
- regional priorities reflect stakeholder engagement and use of data.

In reading this chapter, it should be borne in mind that RICs were established in early 2018. They are not intended to be formal bodies within the education system, rather to bring together local authorities and Education Scotland to add value through collective efforts. The interim review of RICs undertaken in late 2018 found that regional and national stakeholders were broadly content with the governance arrangements established for RICs, but a few were unsure about the rationale of the RIC concept.

## Overview of RIC structures

Each RIC has a structure and governance arrangements designed to suit local and regional requirements. The main components of each RIC include:

- **Political oversight** - A programme board or convenors group involving elected members, often the convenors and chairs or vice chairs of local authority education committees. Often the local authority chief executives were also involved in this type of group.
- **High level forums or boards** - Mechanisms for Directors of Education or their equivalent to come together, often with the Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisor.
- **Workstreams, priority groups, networks or collaboration boards** - Themed areas of work focusing on priorities for the RIC. Often sub-groups within this (Task and Finish). These groups met often, with specific tasks to achieve. In some cases, these groups are empowered to set their own priorities and self-direct their work, and in other cases they accept tasks or commissions from within the RIC. These groups generally involved RIC team members, local authority officers and senior officers, headteachers and Education Scotland regional improvement team members.
- **Wider stakeholder groupings** - Groups or forums connecting with different stakeholders, including headteachers, teachers, young people, parents, wider teams such as children's services, and unions. In a few RICs, these wider stakeholder connections were in development.

### **Example: Tayside RIC - Local flexibility in structures**

In Tayside, the way the RIC is set up differs slightly from other RICs as it covers collaborative improvement for children, young people and families more widely. The TRIC is led by a Strategic Group with multi-agency representation. There are five Priority Groups - of which learning and attainment is one. Other Priority Groups focus on themes including health and wellbeing, safeguarding and looked after children. Each Priority Group reports to a Leadership Group, which sits below the Strategic Group and provides clarity and support to the Priority Groups. Education Scotland regional staff are also represented across the five Priority Groups.

## **Views on structures and governance arrangements**

### **Structures and governance**

At senior level within RIC teams and wider regional stakeholders, there was a high level of confidence in RIC structures and governance arrangements. Overall, there was a feeling that RICs had shifted over the past two years onto a much more solid footing, and become embedded at local and regional level with strong relationships between partners.

*“The Improvement Forum is strong and tight and has a clear purpose and works in a collaborative way.”* **Regional stakeholder**

Most regional and national stakeholders felt comfortable with local RIC governance. Stakeholders indicated that local governance structures had strengthened over time.

*“Each RIC has come to a position that suits its own situation.”* **National stakeholder**

Many pointed to changes over 2020 and 2021 which strengthened governance and partnership working. In most areas, the pandemic encouraged Directors of Education and other senior education staff to collaborate to respond to Covid-19 regulations and restrictions, which helped to embed joint working arrangements at regional level. Many set up regular online meetings - on a weekly or fortnightly basis - and set up other daily communication systems to allow communication between strategic leads. This had helped to engage almost all local authorities actively in RICs from a very senior level. This was a real change since the interim review, when there were some challenges bringing senior, busy people together to progress RIC priorities.

*“We have a strong collegiate partnership across the RIC that goes beyond the work of the RIC.”* **Regional stakeholder**

*“The pandemic has been the catalyst for people to appreciate that there are different ways of working. This could have a huge impact on the system.”*  
**Regional stakeholder**

In one area, the pandemic along with wider changes had provided an opportunity to re-develop RIC governance, structures and performance model.

*“We now have a better understanding of where we would like to see the RIC.”*  
**Regional stakeholder**

### **Decision making**

In terms of decision making, there was a high level of confidence that within each RIC partners were able to collaborate, compromise and come to a consensus without any real difficulty. This was helped both by having clarity about vision, purpose and priorities at local level, and by individual partners having strong and trusting relationships.

In some cases, as structures have become embedded this has enabled key RIC decisions to be taken at a more operational level within the RIC structure, helping to empower people and embed a collaborative and collegiate approach to working together.

## **Involvement of elected members**

Many regional stakeholders highlighted that there had been a real shift among elected members, with many becoming much more confident in the RIC, supportive and understanding of the added value of the RIC. Most national stakeholders also indicated that there was now much more buy-in of RICs at elected member level.

*“The RIC has got good political buy-in and good synergies with local priorities.”* **Regional stakeholder**

*“Elected members now accept RICs, they are embedded locally.”* **National stakeholder**

*“Elected members are really interested in and positive about the work of the RICs.”* **National stakeholder**

Most elected members involved in this review indicated that they felt that RIC structures were transparent and comfortable and were happy with decision making arrangements. Most felt content with the updates that they received on RIC work and felt involved in discussions about progress and priorities. They felt that elected members had accepted the role of the RICs, and there were no longer major tensions or concerns.

*“I am comfortable with the RIC’s structures and governance, it is transparent and clear.”* **Elected member**

*“Political oversight is good at the local level.”* **Elected member**

Elected members commented that initially RICs were treated with a great deal of scepticism. A few felt that their role had shifted from a scrutiny role, to ensure RICs add value, to a more collaborative and supportive role. However, in one area one elected member felt that there remained political sensitivities around the RIC and challenges managing different political agendas at the local level.

Some elected members felt that the pandemic had helped to demonstrate how important it was that local authorities worked together and collaborated on key issues. This was a real change since the interim review when there were more varied views on the value and role of the RICs and how they fit within the Scottish education system.

## Wider stakeholder views

Wider regional stakeholders indicated that RIC structures felt collaborative and inclusive. However, some felt that there was still more to be done to embed the RIC, to make sure that people at all levels in the education system understand the role of the RIC. A few in one area felt that RIC governance was not yet quite right and could have a stronger and more accountable architecture.

National stakeholders involved in this evaluation also indicated that they were broadly comfortable that RIC structures were well established and working as expected. National stakeholders felt that RICs each had different structures, identifying structures that reflected local circumstances in an empowered way. A few indicated that they felt decision making arrangements had been strengthened over the past year.

*“Flexibility is a key strength of the RICs, they have been able to respond and adapt to their own local circumstances.”* **National stakeholder**

*“There is now a stronger shared vision within the RICs, this has come in the face of adversity.”* **National stakeholder**

*“People are now clearer on the additionality that RICs can bring.”* **National stakeholder**

## Views on resources and workforce

### Leadership

Each RIC is led by a RIC lead, at Director of Education level. Most of the RICs have used a rotation model to share the role of RIC lead between local authorities. While many felt that this helped to build ownership and connection with the RIC, a few felt that there were both pros and cons to this approach. Taking on the RIC lead role helped to bring prominence to the RIC within that local authority area. However, rotating the lead meant that time needed to be spent on transition. Over time, RIC leads had learned that the role needed to be undertaken by a very senior member of staff in order to be effective.

### Day to day delivery

Each RIC lead has access to support to deliver RIC activity on a day-to-day basis. This includes:

- **Dedicated development officers** - RICs had appointed development officers, dedicated workstream leads (full or part time) or dedicated Quality Improvement Officers and Quality Improvement Managers.
- **Support roles** - RICs had dedicated business support roles, engagement officers, data analysts and data officers (on a full or part time basis).

It is worth noting that as many roles were secondment opportunities, the RIC teams fluctuated over time. At the time of this review, some RICs were recruiting to continue the roles of seconded staff, or to expand their teams to include new roles - including staff focusing on e-learning or learning teaching and assessment. Due to the pandemic, there had been a higher level of turnover in some areas than usual, with some staff needing to return to their substantive posts or take on other roles.

In some cases, administrative and practical support (around finance, communications or business support) were provided through partner local authorities taking on the role.

**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.

Each RIC lead also had access to wider support including:

- Support from Director of Education (or equivalent) peers across the RIC authorities
- Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisors and regional improvement teams
- Support from wider peers and colleagues including local authority chief executives, elected members/ chairs of education committee.

**Views on resources and workforce**

Overall, RIC teams felt that they had access to the resources and workforce required. This is a shift since the interim review, in 2018, when resources to support all six RICs had just been announced and work to set up the RICs had been done largely without additional funding or resources.

Although regional stakeholders were broadly content with the resources and workforce available to them, some raised issues around the RIC not being able to take staff on a permanent basis. While temporary staff secondments provided development and learning opportunities, it meant that the RIC lost continuity and it could take time for new staff to build relationships.

Regional stakeholders felt that each local authority contributed well to the RIC, and workloads were shared effectively. Having a dedicated RIC team helped with this, as did rotating the RIC lead role and ensuring that workstreams and priority group activities were led by different authorities. However, a few felt that some areas were more invested in the RIC approach than others which resulted in them carrying a larger share of the workload. For example, in one area regional stakeholders highlighted that the local authorities which had taken a turn at the role of RIC lead appeared more invested than those that had not yet done so.

A few, both at regional and national level, felt that there was scope to review in the future whether the expertise within the RIC and Education Scotland regional improvement teams could be joined up more effectively and used to best effect. For example, a few felt the RICs could do more to draw on the intelligence and resources held by Education Scotland, acting more as a collective regional team with a blended approach.

*“We need to take small steps and create common spaces and move towards creating a blended bio space longer term.”* **Regional stakeholder**

A few indicated that there were gaps in their team in terms of performance analysis and data analysis, feeling that this expertise was not available within the RIC authorities.

## Planning

### Use of data

RICs identified priorities through considering a wide range of data including information on:

- engagement with school - attendance, absence and exclusions data
- attainment levels - including achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels, qualification levels and Broad General Education data and information on the poverty related attainment gap
- health and wellbeing data
- school leaver destinations.

RICs organised this data around the National Improvement Framework priorities, and used school inspection reports, school improvement plans and Insight benchmarking for secondary schools to inform their plans. Data was correlated with evidence about the profile of the school and pupils, including information from Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and information on looked after children.

Most regional stakeholders felt that priorities and plans were well underpinned by data analysis. Within the RICs, local authorities had developed data sharing agreements, and could now share their data. In most cases, RICs had access to the information they needed in order to prioritise activities. However, there were some gaps:

- Data for 2020 and 2021 - Due to Covid-19 some data, such as SQA data and Curriculum for Excellence returns from schools, is either not as reliable, has gaps or is not available for certain time periods.
- Sharing data - A few stakeholders highlighted that data sharing agreements were not fully signed off or had only just been signed off - between local authorities, or with Education Scotland - and there remained some sensitivities in sharing data<sup>5</sup>.
- Rural poverty - In one area partners are working on exploring what rural poverty looks like and how it is different, in order to prioritise and target support.

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<sup>5</sup> As RICs are not formal bodies, data sharing agreements need to be considered by individual partner legal departments.

*“It is underpinned by evidence but could be better.”* **Regional stakeholder**

A few regional stakeholders highlighted that during 2020/21 there were fewer conversations about data informing planning, as there was a focus on immediate crisis support.

Some national stakeholders felt that RICs were using data well to inform their plans. A few national stakeholders felt that while committed to using data, there was a need to improve how data was used and analysed to inform their plans and priorities. A few indicated that the effective use of data was an issue across public policy and practice in Scotland, not just within the RICs. A few national stakeholders felt that some RICs had been stronger on using data to inform their plans and priorities than others, and that the RICs could learn from one another around the use of data.

### **Connecting priorities**

Regional stakeholders were very confident that priorities connected from school, local, regional and national level. Many talked of the National Improvement Framework (NIF) being the thread that holds together the priorities across different levels. Many felt that school plans and local authority plans were already focused on the NIF priorities, providing consistency and a clear focus for the RIC. Regional stakeholders were confident that there was clear alignment of plans in both directions - to national level, and to local and school plan level.

While in some cases, RIC priorities and activities were targeted to very local level, some regional stakeholders felt more could be done to target schools or year groups or connect schools together to share practice.

Most national stakeholders felt that RIC priorities were broadly consistent with the NIF priorities. One national stakeholder felt that more could be done to build consistency in priorities between the RICs, and better connect priorities across all aspects of the NIF.

### **Stakeholder engagement**

Regional stakeholders largely felt that RIC plans were developed in a collaborative way, with a range of stakeholders involved in informing and developing plans and priorities. This included local authority officers, headteachers and others involved in RIC structures. In some cases, wider stakeholders were included, such as professional associations, unions, parents and carers, and young people.

**Example: Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC - Stakeholder engagement**

The FVWL RIC held eight 'Wee Blether' style events to explore priorities. These events involved people involved in the workstreams, headteachers, central officers - such as Quality Improvement Officers, Scottish Attainment Challenge leads and wider education and children's services staff - and Education Scotland staff. There was also a survey for people who couldn't attend the events.

In many areas, Education Scotland regional improvement teams had become more involved in the planning process over time and were now very involved in creating and supporting RIC plans. RIC plans were developed iteratively and collaboratively, involving RIC teams and regional improvement teams. Education Scotland teams played a role in writing plans, creating graphics, making suggestions about priorities, challenging in a constructive manner, and engaging wider staff with national remits on key areas such as early years and community learning and development.

*"It is our plan. It was co-created, and we have confidence in it."* **Regional stakeholder**

Discussions with a sample of 50 schools across Scotland highlighted that some (around one third) felt that they had the opportunity to influence the priorities of the RIC. Almost half felt they did not have the opportunity to influence priorities, and a few were not sure. The same trends were seen across primary and secondary schools.

Most school staff felt that the priorities for their RIC were generally the right things to focus on and linked well with the priorities of their school and those of the National Improvement Framework. Some school staff involved in the evaluation had been involved in discussions about priorities through surveys, headteacher discussion groups and events. A few indicated that they were able to influence priorities through being on the Board.

*"I do feel that I have a voice and can input to the work of the RIC."*  
**Headteacher, secondary school**

Some school staff indicated that they weren't sure they directly influenced priorities, but that there was ongoing consultation and discussion through forums such as headteacher groups and through discussion with local authority education staff. A few also mentioned that they were aware that school improvement plans were discussed at local authority level, and then used to inform the regional improvement plan. However, some felt that more work should be done to talk to school staff about specific priorities for the RIC.

*“They should ask schools what their priorities are to ensure that they are focused on the right things.” **Headteacher, primary school***

A few school staff mentioned that they felt more connected to priorities before the pandemic, while others felt that the way schools were engaged had improved as time went on.

## Re-focusing in response to the pandemic

Since spring 2020, and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, RICs have re-focused their work to ensure that they meet needs in a rapidly changing environment. In some cases, the priorities remained the same, but with the work re-focused and an enhanced focus on e-learning. In other cases, the number of priorities was reduced in order to focus in on what was most important at the time.

Decisions about what to prioritise during 2020 and 2021 involved consultation with local authority central teams, workstream leads, headteachers and others to explore priorities.

*“We checked in with each of the local authorities to see what would be beneficial for them and then agreed our updated priorities at the board.”*

***Regional stakeholder***

In all cases, there was a renewed focus on e-learning, digital learning and blended learning. In areas where e-learning had been an existing area of work, this increased in priority. In other areas this was introduced as a new workstream or priority. Across the RICs, regional stakeholders found that it was evident that support was needed with issues like virtual classrooms, remote learning, online lessons, connectivity, access to devices, infrastructure and practicalities like linking in with external resources. The driver for this focus came from engagement with headteachers and moving at speed to try out different types of support, see what was useful and monitor demand. Over time, this type of work moved from helping tackle challenges and issues, to collaboratively developing robust digital strategies for the future.

The RICs also incorporated new areas of work as appropriate, where local authorities could add value by working collaboratively. This included specific work in some RICs on SQA qualifications, assessment and moderation, particularly the Alternative Certification Model used in 2020/21.

In discussion with 50 schools, many school staff were aware that in recent times the work of the RIC had been streamlined or re-focused in light of the pandemic. Many were happy that priorities had been reduced, feeling that this helped the RIC to be clearer and more connected to the needs of practitioners.

*“(The RIC) priorities are now more streamlined, relevant and responsive. The means of delivery is also more streamlined.”* ***Headteacher, primary school***

# Chapter 3: Collaboration and partnership

## Key themes

- 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.

## Introduction

This chapter explores the extent to which RICs are supporting collaboration at school level, local authority level, and with wider stakeholders.

For context, the interim review in 2018 found that while in some areas a culture of joint working had developed at senior officer level, others felt it was too early to point to changes in joint working across the region. There were challenges to joint working including taking the time to buy into and understand the concept of RICs, as RICs had only very recently been set up.

At the time of the interim review, there were very early examples of schools sharing practice in a more structured way than before, but stakeholders felt that engagement with schools through the RIC was at very early stages. Head teachers and other school staff largely felt that it would take time to see an impact in schools.

## School level collaboration

Each RIC undertook work to support schools to collaborate and share practice across the region. A sample of 53 school staff from 50 schools took part in this review, largely those who had been involved in RIC activity to some extent. Most of these school staff involved in this evaluation felt that they had the opportunity to collaborate with other schools through the RIC (86%) and share best practice (76%). The RICs supported schools to connect through:

- establishing thematic groups, learning networks and learning sets
- facilitating school to school connections
- bringing people together through events and enabling people to continue these professional relationships beyond the events.

## Thematic groups and networks

Many schools had taken part in groups and networks which enabled them to collaborate and share practice around specific themes. School staff and regional stakeholders gave a wide range of examples of this type of collaboration. Many school staff mentioned that having online collaboration opportunities helped to enable more staff from their school to be involved.

*“The networks allow people to seek out critical friends across the RIC.”*  
**Headteacher, secondary school**

Many collaborative opportunities focused on empowerment, and improvement through empowering school staff to share best practice, ideas and approaches. This included collaborative learning networks and learning sets, focusing on a wide range of areas such as evaluative practice. These approaches helped to reassure practitioners and build confidence, gain a wider perspective, access a wide range of resources and develop skills.

*“Collaborative working is amazing, you can see it when professionals get together and have rich dialogue with each other.”* **Headteacher, primary school**

### **Example: South East Improvement Collaborative - Networks**

There are 18 specialist networks across the SEIC - such as the early years network, and the special schools headteachers network. These networks, supported by the SEIC team and Education Scotland's South East Improvement Team identify their own priorities independently, evaluate their work and share practice.

The RIC, supported by Education Scotland, also undertook Pedagogy Pioneers activity with schools, to share practice, resources and build capacity. Practitioners recorded examples of best practice and had online sharing sessions for staff in other schools. The resources were then made available on the SEIC website. The RIC also held 'practitioner parties' during 2020, where staff shared their experiences of blended learning and digital approaches.

### **Example: Northern Alliance - Emerging literacy**

Northern Alliance also has over 30 class teacher networks, with over 1,300 active memberships. This is part of a Connect, Collaborative, Innovate, Test and Improve model. Practitioners can connect through professional learning opportunities, and then collaborate and share best practice in a non-judgemental environment.

Many schools talked about the Emerging Literacy programme, which involved P1 and P2 teachers sharing practice across schools. School staff felt that this helped to develop and upskill staff in terms of how to teach reading skills, track progress and assess children.

*"Practice has really changed at P1 level due to the Emerging Literacy programme."* **Headteacher, primary school**

*"I think I've got a stronger understanding of literacy as a whole. It's improved my practice, and my ability to support other practitioners."*  
**Headteacher, primary school**

Through this work, class teachers have developed their skills and gone on to take up key leadership roles within the programme.

One headteacher highlighted that this approach improved attainment in literacy in early years, explaining that despite young children having missed two full terms of school due to the pandemic, literacy attainment for these pupils has not fallen.

**Example: Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC - Reading networks**

The FVWL RIC has been involved in joint work with the Scottish Book Trust to develop a reading network “to collaborate and build a learning culture” and pilot Reading Schools accreditation. Schools also shared best practice around reading for enjoyment, where pupils got involved in choosing books and furniture to create cosy, informal reading spaces in schools.

*“We share and collaborate with others who we might not have met before.”*  
**Depute headteacher, primary school**

The RIC has also established networks of practitioners focused on particular topics - such as primary literacy or additional support needs. These Hubs were developed due to demand from practitioners attending RIC events and connect people who may not otherwise have the opportunity to connect.

### **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 self-evaluation, 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.

Some school staff talked about the value they gained from visiting other schools around a specific theme. For example, one school for children with additional support needs had taken part in a shared learning experience for special schools, with staff spending time in different schools and sharing feedback and learning from this. Another took the same approach with family learning. Sometimes these connections were directly supported by the RIC, and other connections developed organically through school staff attending events together and continuing relationships afterwards. When the pandemic emerged, the relationships in place helped these headteachers to connect and share different approaches to dealing with the restrictions and requirements.

A few regional stakeholders also indicated that they felt the RICs helped schools to feel more confident about sharing their own approaches. A few stressed that this is done in a way which ensures schools recognise they are not telling others what to do, but how to think about different approaches and develop ways that suit their own context.

### **School to school connections**

In some instances, RICs have also supported direct connections between schools, across local authority areas.

Some headteachers talked about being paired with or developing relationships with other schools in different authorities, developing supportive and informative partnerships enabling the sharing of ideas and approaches, mentoring and coaching. Some developed links with similar schools, and others talked of the value of working with very different schools in other authorities, with very different demographics but with similar ethos and ambition.

Through these links, headteachers and other senior leaders developed strong, supportive and collaborative partnerships. For example, one school highlighted that they had also set up joint in-service days for staff and job shadowing opportunities, which helped to develop staff skills. In one case the connection also encouraged staff to move between schools as senior opportunities arose, moving to work in areas with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

*“Overall, the impact has been immeasurable...Being able to get an outside perspective is utterly invaluable.” **Headteacher, secondary***

Regional stakeholders also indicated that due to the RICs, headteachers were more likely to contact their peers outwith their own local authority. A few mentioned that they were starting to see secondments between authority areas. Some national stakeholders also highlighted that collaboration between schools had developed through the RICs.

*“The language of collaboration was introduced through RICs and is now reflected at school and practitioner level.” **National stakeholder***

*“Practitioners now know that it (collaborative working) is expected of them, and they have permission to do it.” **National stakeholder***

## **Sharing data**

Of the 53 school staff taking part in this review, just over a third felt that the RIC had helped them to share data analysis or research (36%). Some school staff indicated that this had been limited so far, but there was potential to do more in the future.

A few school staff gave examples of how the RIC had helped to share data through:

- using improvement science and small tests of change
- bringing schools together to think about how to gather and analyse data to inform future approaches

- looking at how to use data to inform support for children on themes such as literacy, maths and curriculum development.

Some school staff indicated that there was more to be done to build the confidence of all staff to deal with data, analysis and research. Most felt that while data had been analysed and shared at a high level across the RIC, there was less sharing of data at school level.

Regional stakeholders agreed that there was more to do in sharing data between schools. Some gave examples of work that had been done at RIC level, including training schools on effective use of data. Some felt that the pandemic had impacted on their ability to focus on use of and sharing of data. Others felt that there was a nervousness and sensitivity about sharing data between schools. Many indicated that there was more to do to support teachers at classroom level to use and understand data.

*“Last year there was less focus on data, and more focus on supporting the Covid learning gaps.”* **Regional stakeholder**

*“There are still some sensitivities to be managed around data sharing.”*  
**Regional stakeholder**

## **Local authority collaboration**

### **Senior level collaboration**

Regional stakeholders felt that the RICs had enabled local authority officers to collaborate in new and enhanced ways.

For example, at senior level, Directors of Education (or equivalent) met regularly. As the pandemic emerged, directors met more regularly, online, sharing issues and discussing how to deal with new challenges. Most met weekly or fortnightly online, and also communicated regularly informally - for example through What's App groups. Some communicated on a daily basis during the pandemic.

Heads of Service level staff across RIC authorities were also collaborating regularly. The lead from the Directors, and recognition of the power of working together, helped other managers and senior staff, such as Quality Improvement Managers and Officers, see the value of working together strategically on a regional level.

Senior education staff found that this collaboration demonstrated the power of positive collaboration and reduced the pressure on individual staff members.

The opportunity for very senior staff to work so closely together provided a strong support network as well as a professional learning experience.

### **Officer level collaboration**

RICs found that when people saw collaboration happening at senior level, it encouraged them to do the same. Officers working in local authorities found that it was valuable to connect with others doing a similar role, as often their role was unique in their own authority - particularly in the smaller authorities. Central officers have been able to build connections, improve their learning, share ideas and experiences and take this back to their own authorities. During the pandemic, Officers leading on key themes, such as e-learning, assessment and moderation, had regular, often daily contact.

The opportunity to take on secondment roles within the RIC also helped to provide experience and learning opportunities. In a few cases, staff were providing mentoring support between RIC authorities.

*“It is the most effective form of professional learning.” **Regional stakeholder***

Most regional stakeholders felt that this type and depth of cross authority collaboration would not have happened before the RIC. A few talked about a significant cultural shift taking place, with people pulling together between the authorities, working together, and proactively identifying where collaborative effort is needed.

*“Staff in central teams now feel part of something.” **Regional stakeholder***

*“Through collective agency, the totality of improvement is greater than the sum of the parts.” **Regional stakeholder***

*“The collaborative landscape has changed. This will ultimately lead to a positive impact on children and young people as they move through school.” **Regional stakeholder***

A few indicated that levels of engagement had been lower in one area, and that the value gained through collaboration depended on partners engaging positively at all levels.

*“You will only get as much back out for your authority as you put in.” **Regional stakeholder***

## Sharing skills and expertise

In some cases, regional stakeholders felt that bringing together different authorities with different profiles helped to share skills and practice between officers with different areas of expertise. For example, in one area stakeholders highlighted that some authorities are Challenge Authorities, and some are not. This means that experiences are different, but officers have welcomed the opportunity to talk about experiences, explore what works and try out new things.

*“It has given us more perspective, rather than seeing things through one lens.”*  
**Regional stakeholder**

Similarly, one national stakeholder indicated that over recent years many local authorities have lost subject leads and specialists within their central teams, as roles had become more generic. By pooling resources across local authorities, RICs had been able to provide access to support from subject specialists across the region.

*“There is a real benefit in being able to pool resources and expertise at the regional level to support the improvement of pedagogy.”*  
**National stakeholder**

## Elected member views

Elected members were positive about the impact RICs had on collaboration, believing that through the RICs people had become more outward looking, keen to work together and saw the value of collaboration.

*“Originally we thought that the RIC would add another layer to the education service, but now we see it as a real strength.”*  
**Elected member**

A few elected members highlighted that there had been a degree of collaboration before the RICs were established, but that through the RICs the level of collaboration had increased, and people had greater recognition of the importance of working together.

*“The RIC put collaboration into a structure and allowed it to flourish.”*  
**Elected member**

## National stakeholder views

Most national stakeholders also highlighted that local authorities were working more collaboratively, and that approaches to working together had matured as the RIC had developed. 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. Some national stakeholders indicated that through the RICs, working collaboratively between local authority areas had become an accepted way of working within education.

*“There is definitely more trust between local authorities and more sharing of advice, guidance and resources.”*

**National stakeholder**

*“The concept of collaboration is now common currency.”* **National stakeholder**

### **Example: Northern Alliance - Collaborative working**

In Northern Alliance thinking around collaboration has been driven by principles around building back better and drivers for whole system change. As part of this, the RIC has explored how to build the right conditions for effective and true collaboration and has developed a collaborative evaluation model. As part of this work, the Northern Alliance priorities were refocused and reduced, and the RIC team has done a lot of training on principles and models for improvement.

### **Example: South East Improvement Collaborative - SEIC associates**

The SEIC, supported by Education Scotland, developed and trained a network of 50 SEIC associates focused on quality improvement, as part of the approach to developing an Empowered System. The SEIC associates explored the different approaches to school reviews across the authorities and reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of each to learn from each other. SEIC associates have been involved in school reviews outwith their own authority to further strengthen the review process.

*“It’s all about practitioners supporting each other.”*

**Regional stakeholder**

### **Example: South West Education Improvement Collaborative - Joint work**

In SWEIC, the Education Scotland regional improvement team has provided a wide range of support. Locality work led by the Senior Regional Advisor and Senior Inspector for the South West Education Scotland locality team resulted in targeted support to schools, work with central officers and headteachers and other support work. Education Scotland's Regional Improvement Team also delivered QAMSO training and support with digital learning.

### **Collaboration on wider thematic areas**

The RICs have also encouraged collaboration around wider thematic areas. In one case, the RIC encompasses children's services, and supports collaboration around a wide range of themes.

*"There is good representation and commitment, across education, social work, health, third sector and public health."* **Regional stakeholder**

Across the RICs, other areas where collaborative work has developed organically include supporting equality and diversity, community development, early years and hearing young people's voices in decision making. In some cases, RICs have drawn together practitioners on specialist areas of work including additional support for learning, home education and educational psychology.

A key area where many local authorities have collaborated around RIC areas is the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scottish law through the UNCRC Incorporation Scotland Bill. The bill places requirements on public authorities in terms of children's rights. As the requirements are new, local authorities were starting from similar positions and found it valuable to collaborate on their response through RICs. Education Scotland has provided extensive support through 'Train the Trainer' UNCRC professional learning webinars - which colleagues from all RICs have attended - and additional materials, resources and support to take forward rights based approaches across educational settings.

In some areas, local authorities worked together through the RICs on the delivery of the expansion of early learning and childcare, from 600 to 1,140 hours for all three and four year olds and eligible two year olds.

Regional stakeholders found this collaboration useful. Some felt that maintaining a relatively tight focus on education, and clear priorities within this, was useful for the RIC while others felt that there was potential to expand the

regional approach to exploring issues around children's services, families and community.

**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.

**Example: South West Education Improvement Collaborative - Wider themes**

As the SWEIC has developed wider groups have been established around additional support needs, educational psychology, IT, early years and community learning and development. These groups represent growth in the willingness to work collaboratively across the South West and focus on better outcomes for children and young people.

**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.

*“It has opened doors, there is stronger partnership working.”* **Regional stakeholder**

*“Now collaboration happens at officer and school level. The relationships that have been built have been strengthened over the past year.”* **Regional stakeholder**

Regional stakeholders stressed how the pandemic and the need to adapt, flex and respond to an ever changing landscape helped to strengthen and deepen their joint working arrangements. The RICs provided a strong basis for a quick and effective response.

*“We had a set of shared priorities and had built strong relationships. We had more agency to provide a collective response to our schools.”* **Regional stakeholder**

*“As a RIC, we were more outward looking and able to use our collective brainpower.”* **Regional stakeholder**

Although the pandemic was extremely challenging for all in the education sector, it also provided some opportunities. It gave people a chance to work differently, support one another and connect.

*“Lockdown opened doors for connections and collaborations... It brought people together, everyone was in the same boat. It was a shared experience. People were keen to connect – they didn’t want to be isolated.”* **Regional stakeholder**

The use of technology meant that it was much easier for people in different geographic areas to connect and feel like equal partners.

*“Working online and meeting remotely has made things more equitable, more people are able to get involved.”* **Regional stakeholder**

### **Collaboration between RICs**

Regional stakeholders also gave examples of how the RICs were collaborating with one another and sharing their work at national level, including collaborating on resources for pupils with additional support needs, e-learning and assessment and moderation. Through performing a range of roles at both regional and national level, Education Scotland played an important role in sharing approaches across the RICs and co-ordinating national practice. Some felt there was scope for more of this type of collaborative work between RICs.

### **Example: E-learning**

RICs are playing a key role in developing e-learning for pupils in Scotland. The national e-learning offer has been developed in partnership between the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, e-Sgoil, ADES and the RICs. It complements the online learning being provided by schools, local authorities and RICs. It covers:

- **Live learning** - The live learning offer is through e-Sgoil, originally created to offer greater learning opportunities for pupils in Western Isles. Pupils from across all local authorities have registered for this learning. RICs have contributed live lessons to e-Sgoil.
- **Recorded lessons** - The West Partnership provides a package of more than two thousand recorded lessons, through the West Online School (West OS). The other RICs have also contributed significantly to the recorded content.
- **Learning and teaching resources** - Education Scotland has worked with practitioners to prepare, quality assure and share around 14,000 resources. These have also been shared through RIC networks.

### **Example: Collaboration between RICs**

FVWL, 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 FVWL 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**

# Chapter 4: Engagement and support of schools

## Key themes

- This chapter draws on the views of 53 school staff from 50 schools. This is a small sample of in-depth discussions and their findings - while providing useful insight to experiences and views - cannot be extrapolated to the whole school population.
- Most school staff involved in this review were aware of RIC priorities.
- Most school staff involved in this review felt that they had learned new things and developed their skills through the RIC. This helped staff to become more inquiring, reflective and drive forward improvement in their classroom.
- Senior staff developed skills around management, strategic change, recovery and supporting staff. Some particularly valued networks of senior staff during the pandemic, to reflect on key issues.
- Most school staff and regional stakeholders felt that while data had been analysed and shared at a high level across the RIC, there was less sharing of data at school level.
- During the pandemic, RICs supported schools by developing online learning opportunities for pupils for use during lockdown, as part of blended learning and more widely to increase pupil opportunities.
- RICs have also played a key role in contributing to Education Scotland's national e-learning offer, through the use and development of platforms such as e-Sgoil and West OS, and the contribution of both live and recorded lessons.
- Working with colleagues from Education Scotland, RICs also played an important role in enabling collaborative work to support secondary schools with the SQA alternative certification model.

## Introduction

This chapter explores RIC engagement and support of schools. It focuses on:

- awareness of RIC priorities and activities among school staff (including headteachers, depute teachers, principal teachers and class teachers)
- learning and leadership opportunities
- the Covid-19 response
- future plans for school engagement and support.

The impact of this engagement and support is explored in detail in Chapter Five.

For context, the interim review of RICs in 2018 found that school staff, regional and national stakeholders all felt that engagement with schools through the RIC was at very early stages. Often engagement with schools was targeted, working with a small number of schools to test ideas. At the time of the interim review, most school staff were very positive about the RIC concept, sharing best practice, making connections and building consistency, but largely felt that it would take time to see an impact in schools and for RICs to be visible to teachers in the classroom.

## Awareness

### Awareness raising activity

RICs had undertaken a wide range of activities to raise awareness among school staff. This included:

- RIC website, Glow, blogs, Twitter, Sway, Facebook and e-newsletters
- encouraging local authorities to share information with schools
- involving headteachers in RIC development days
- directories or calendars bringing together learning opportunities
- promotion of specific activities or events
- sharing information with the local press.

RICs had communications strategies to ensure that school staff at different levels were aware of the opportunities available to them and monitored engagement levels to see what methods were working to engage target audiences.

The RICs had engaged with a range of different types of schools. For example, some support was targeted at particular schools based on attainment levels and school improvement plans. Some had focused more on support to secondary schools, for example around moderation or e-learning offers. Some had engaged most successfully with primary schools, due to

capacity to engage. In some cases, previously targeted approaches were replaced with more universal offers during the pandemic, due to all schools needing to adapt to new ways of working.

However, a few found that some local authorities were protective of their staff to ensure they were not overwhelmed with information and performed a 'gatekeeping role', particularly during very challenging times during the pandemic. A few found that use of Glow was a challenge as some local authorities chose not to use it, and so explored alternative options.

**Example: South East Improvement Collaborative - Short video**

SEIC has produced a video about the SEIC plan and priorities, which was used to raise awareness of the RIC at in-service days. This was linked to wider learning events and professional learning opportunities.

**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: South West Education Improvement Collaborative - Branding**

SWEIC uses a SWEIC branded template for its activities. Information is circulated by local authority central teams, as well as on the SWEIC blog and e-learning blog. SWEIC branding is also used on all RIC Teams meetings.

**Example: Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC - Sway**

FVWL RIC has introduced a more sophisticated and interactive tool for their e-newsletter, using Sway. There is a joint editorial team for the newsletter, involving workstream leads and Education Scotland.

## School awareness of RICs

This evaluation involved 50 interviews with school staff across the six RICs. It found that most school staff (86%) were aware of RIC priorities. School staff pointed to online newsletters (email, Sway), websites and online networks, and social media (Twitter, Facebook) as key places to find out about RIC priorities and activities. Where school awareness of the RIC was highest these communications were supported by:

- regular updates from local authority education officers - on a weekly or monthly basis
- education officers talking with headteachers about RIC activities and priorities
- regular discussion of RIC priorities at key forums such as headteacher groups
- an effective system of cascading information from headteachers to school staff - with headteachers emphasising how careful they were about making sure that staff did not become overloaded
- strong links with schools in the form of Board membership, workstream membership or secondments from schools to the RIC.

Some indicated that staff awareness of the RIC was increasing as staff got involved in courses, activities, events, training and professional development opportunities through the RIC. This was clear in fieldwork in some RIC areas, where awareness of and involvement in the RIC was high among school staff beyond headteachers. A few felt that particularly positive projects or approaches had helped to raise awareness of the role of the RIC among schools. A few school staff mentioned it was useful to have all of the information about RIC activities in a shared folder, and for all information to be clearly branded.

However, some highlighted that there remained challenges to awareness. During 2020 and 2021, school staff often felt under extreme pressure. A few indicated that they found that this meant that they looked inwards, rather than outwards. A few school staff also indicated that with so much going on in schools, there was almost too much information circulating and it could be hard to focus in on RIC activity and priorities. In one area, a few school staff indicated that the RIC was relatively low priority among schools as their focus was on recovery.

However, others indicated that the RIC had increased in prominence due to the need for support during the pandemic. A few felt that communications had improved recently, due to the RIC focusing in on a smaller number of priorities.

*“The (RIC) has more prominence now and its work is being promoted more.”*  
**Headteacher, primary school**

## Learning

### Opportunities available through RICs

RICs provided a wide range of learning opportunities for school staff. These opportunities were designed to complement the learning available through local authorities and Education Scotland.

RICs provided online career-long professional learning for school staff on a wide range of topics. Through RICs, practitioners had also had opportunities to take part in wider online professional learning opportunities, such as the World Education Summit.

#### **Example: West Partnership - Learning opportunities**

In 2019/20, a total of 3,185 practitioners accessed professional learning opportunities provided by the West Partnership<sup>6</sup>. 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: South East Improvement Collaborative - Learning**

**opportunities** More than 3,000 participants have attended one or more SEIC events. More than 92% of all schools have taken part in at least one event. This includes all secondary schools, and 90% of primary and special schools.

#### **Example: South West Education Improvement Collaborative – Numeracy**

The numeracy workstream within SWEIC had a focus on professional learning, open to all schools and educational establishments. 290 practitioners signed up to the launch of the network in September 2020, and by summer 2021 there were 420 members. This helped the RIC to reach practitioners in the classroom. This work was led by the RIC working with Education Scotland Regional Improvement Team colleagues.

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<sup>6</sup> The West Partnership Plan 2020-2023, The Road to Renewal: Our Response to Covid-19

### **Example: Tayside RIC - Learning**

The TRIC has provided school staff with a range of learning opportunities around digital technology, moderation and recovery after the pandemic.

- Tayside RIC has set up the [Tayside Virtual Campus](#) and offers a range of Advanced Highers online, providing a greater range of subject choices to senior phase pupils. In 2021/22 all senior pupils can access Advanced Higher Computing, Advanced Higher French and Advanced Higher Spanish using entirely remote learning, with occasional live learning sessions and some group and one to one tutorials.
- A Tayside wide digital pedagogy strategic action plan has been created and professional learning sessions are being held to support all practitioners on effective approaches to using technology to enhance learning.

In 2020/21 RICs shifted their delivery online, which most stakeholders believed was effective and was going very well. Some regional stakeholders indicated that since moving professional learning online, during the pandemic, uptake had increased. Being online helped to increase engagement through breaking down geographic barriers and empowering people to take part in activities. A few mentioned that this online engagement had been a key aspect of ensuring that the RIC supports class teachers and support staff.

*“At last we have managed to get through the classroom door.” **Regional stakeholder***

*“We moved online, there’s no going back now, there are no longer any class cover barriers.” **Regional stakeholder***

### **School views on learning**

School views on learning were explored through qualitative discussions with 53 staff at 50 schools. Schools selected for inclusion in the review were largely those which had been involved in RIC activity in some way. Most school staff involved in this review (66%) felt that they had learned new things through the RIC and most (68%) felt they had developed their skills.

Through RIC activity school staff involved in this evaluation indicated that they had learned about a wide range of topics, including:

- pedagogies and concepts for teaching topics such as numeracy, literacy or play
- improvement methodologies
- evaluative writing and providing feedback
- progression and achievement of a level
- digital learning and how to engage pupils online
- closing the attainment gap
- community connections.

As a result, headteachers felt that staff skills were refreshed and updated. Staff developed their knowledge, practice and self-confidence.

*“It has really got me thinking about the way I work in class and why I do things, and highlighted the importance of reviewing practice.” **Principal teacher, primary school***

*“Staff are now much better at providing focused feedback.” **Headteacher, primary school***

The learning opportunities also encouraged staff to become more inquiring and ask themselves questions about what they do and how they do it. Staff became empowered, and more able to reflect and drive forward improvement in their own classrooms for their pupils. Some school staff also felt that learning in this way helped to give them a wider strategic view.

*“Teachers are starting to question their understanding of learning intentions and success criteria.” **Headteacher, primary school***

*“This is having a positive impact on what is being delivered in the classroom.” **Headteacher, primary school***

Schools also went on to have collaborative discussions about approaches, inspired by the new learning, and to develop new resources, approaches and frameworks. Some school staff reported that there was an increase in the level of professional dialogue between staff and senior management, with staff feeling inspired and motivated. In some cases, learning informed school visions and school improvement plans.

*“Staff are really enthusiastic and inspired and feel empowered to change how they do things.” **Headteacher, primary school***

*“It has had such a positive impact on school improvement, and on how we assess achievement and report on this.” **Headteacher, primary school***

Some staff became champions or leaders on new approaches, supporting others to develop their skills in new areas and embedding approaches within the school. A few highlighted the value of consolidating and reinforcing their learning through sharing their ideas and practice.

*“Staff have been empowered by contributing and presenting. It is reinforcing their own skills, understanding and knowledge.”* **Headteacher, primary school**

**Example: Learning and skills**

One staff member found that through the learning opportunities available through the RIC, she changed her ideas and pedagogy. She took part in RIC learning opportunities focusing on assessment, moderation and improvement science. She then went on to study at university to help tie together her learning.

*“I am now more equipped to challenge the traditional methods and look for new ways of doing things... The (RIC) has really helped to make this happen.”* **Principal teacher, primary school**

## Leadership

Most RICs had undertaken a range of activity on supporting leadership activity. This included

- promoting and creating pathways into learning and development opportunities for headteachers, deputes, staff in middle leadership and practitioners who wish to develop a leadership pathway
- tailored resources and programmes for leaders
- networking opportunities and learning sets for headteachers, deputes and other senior leaders
- wider wellbeing support for leaders through the pandemic.

This activity involved connecting into other existing leadership activities, recognising the key role that Education Scotland could play in supporting leadership activities and identifying needs. Regional stakeholders involved in a few RICs indicated that they had been quite careful about the leadership support made available through the RIC, as they did not want to duplicate what others were doing and felt there was quite an active landscape around leadership activity. A few found that plans for leadership support had to be put on hold because of the pandemic.

Some senior school staff involved in this evaluation had participated in leadership activity directly, or members of their senior team had taken part. Senior staff had taken part in learning activity including:

- events and workshops focusing on leadership skills
- networks bringing headteachers or other senior staff together
- leadership courses developed or promoted by the RIC.

A number of senior staff indicated that they had taken part in activity to build skills around leading in a time of change, during the pandemic. Some highlighted that they particularly valued networks of senior staff at headteacher and depute level during the pandemic.

*“It has made such a difference knowing that you were not the only ones going through such challenging times.” **Principal teacher, primary school***

*“The RIC has provided the platform to form new partnerships both within and beyond my local authority.” **Headteacher, secondary school***

Senior staff who had been involved in leadership development activity felt that they had learned a wide range of skills, which they could then bring back to the school to support staff. Key areas of skills development included around:

- management and coaching
- strategic change
- recovery
- supporting staff and staff planning
- assuring quality of teaching
- professional dialogue
- improving attainment
- pupil voice
- using data.

A few school staff also indicated that they had learned wider skills, including strategic thinking and planning, through being involved in RIC workstreams, on the Board or on secondment to the RIC. The opportunity to be involved in activity beyond their own school was viewed positively by many, supporting the professional learning and development of staff. A few also mentioned that barriers had been broken down between local authorities and schools, and the RIC enabled senior staff to reach out to wider colleagues within the central team or access support through Education Scotland.

**Example: South East Improvement Collaborative - Leadership activity**

The SEIC commissioned work by Drummond International on 'The Real Value of Safe Leadership'. The RIC used this to develop a package of resources. The SEIC also worked with Columba 1400 to develop a tailored programme for headteachers and developed safe place networks for headteachers so that they could link up with other colleagues across the RIC. The SEIC also provided wellbeing coaching and support for senior leaders and introduced virtual Depute Connect Collaborative Leadership networks, in partnership with Education Scotland, to promote quality improvement through self sustaining networks.

### **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.

## **Supporting schools through the pandemic**

Most school staff involved in this evaluation (82%) felt that priorities and activities had changed over the past year, in the context of Covid-19. School staff felt that there had been an enhanced focus on:

- digital and online learning for pupils
- online skills development and leadership opportunities for school staff
- core priorities of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing
- supporting schools through times of pressure and into recovery.

As the work of RICs became more digital, with more of a presence online, on social media and through Teams, many school staff found that this increased awareness of the RIC. The online presence was particularly helpful in rural and island areas.

*“Going online meant that more people could get involved.” **Headteacher, primary school***

Generally, school staff felt that the support they received through the pandemic was largely led by their own local authority. However, many felt that the RIC may have provided a framework for local authorities to work together to co-ordinate their support to schools - including around online learning and the SQA alternative certification model. In a few cases, school staff were aware that approaches were co-ordinated - for example on health and safety.

*“It was a real advantage having someone to co-ordinate the Covid Health and Safety guidance across the RIC.” **Headteacher, primary school***

### **Online learning opportunities for pupils**

During 2020 and 2021, RICs were involved in creating online learning opportunities for pupils. This area of work came about in response to the pandemic. RICs either introduced digital or e-Learning workstreams, or increased the priority and focus given to existing digital workstreams.

During times when schools were closed, and online or blended learning was in place, RICs played a key role in contributing to the range of ways in which pupils could learn from home. Firstly, some RICs provided guidance and training to schools on how to operate digital learning effectively - including setting up digital classrooms, delivering lessons online and approaches to effectively engage pupils. Some RICs played an important role in enabling schools to collectively learn from experience and share best practice across the region.

*“Lots of CLPL, guidance and support was provided to teachers to enable them to deliver lessons online during lockdown.” **Headteacher, primary school***

*“We were all encountering the same challenges, being able to learn from each other was really helpful.” **Headteacher, special school***

*“There has been lots of support for digital pedagogy around digital learning.” **Headteacher, primary school***

RICs have also played a key role in contributing to the national e-learning offer, through live and recorded lessons. In discussion with school staff, some indicated that they had used these online resources. However, many were not aware of what resources were RIC resources, and some indicated feeling a bit overwhelmed due to the volume of resource and information available.

**Example: Northern Alliance - e-Sgoil**

The e-Sgoil offers support for schools and learners. It launched in the Western Isles in 2017 and developed into a RIC wide programme and then a nationwide community for online teaching and learning offering live, interactive, online experiences as part of the national e-learning offer. During the pandemic, a new approach - i-Sgoil - was also further developed. This programme focuses on support for pupils experiencing interrupted learning.

Schools felt that this was a good example of collaboration. Schools can pick up online lessons which are accessible and relevant to pupils. Staff are using the approaches such as virtual classroom, and those that learn about it at RIC events then cascade this within their school - leading to more consistency of delivery.

**Example: Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC - Virtual learning**

At the beginning of 2021, FVWL RIC placed a renewed focus on virtual learning. The timing meant that they were able to use the learning from the first lockdown to inform approaches and support during the second lockdown. The group explored and shared what the different local authorities were using in terms of digital platforms and devices, local authority digital strategies and blended learning guidance, and how this connected to the national e-learning offer.

*“We made stratospheric leaps in knowledge.” Regional stakeholder*

Education Scotland’s regional team supported the RIC well on this and encouraged a focus on digital needs analysis. Each local authority had a one to one with Education Scotland and completed the needs analysis template, and then agreed a collaborative approach. An Easter School supported study opportunity was created.

Working jointly with e-Sgoil, a joint programme was created involving both live lessons and recorded sessions. e-Sgoil let the RIC know what live lessons they wanted, and the RIC identified six practitioners to deliver live lessons nationally. In FVWL there was a high volume of sign ups to e-Sgoil over this time.

*“We were creators as well as consumers.” Regional stakeholder*

Recorded lessons were also set up, through a RIC YouTube Channel. These were RIC branded, consistent in structure and quality assured. Lessons were 45 minutes long and focused on answering SQA assessments. There were 5,500 views over 90 days. All four authorities

were also supported to sign up to West OS, for access to further recorded lessons in 10 to 15 minute sessions.

After Easter the RIC created a Sway to share all of the supported study resources/ opportunities and asked schools to share through their online classrooms with young people and parents/ carers. There were 2,500 views of the Sway and feedback shows the value of having all the links in the one place.

### **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 e-learning 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**

RICs have learned from this experience of providing online learning for pupils and are continuing to explore how online learning opportunities can be best used in the future. For example:

- South West Education Improvement Collaborative is piloting online Advanced Highers during the 2021/22 academic year and launched its new virtual learning campus for pupils in summer 2021 - @South-West Connects.
- Tayside RIC has set up Tayside Virtual Campus, where the RIC is able to offer a range of Advanced Highers online, providing a greater choice of subject choices to senior phase pupils. In 2021/22 all senior pupils will be able to access Advanced Higher Computing, Advanced Higher French and Advanced Higher Spanish using entirely remote learning, with occasional live learning sessions and some group and one to one tutorials.
- South East Improvement Collaborative worked with the University of Edinburgh to deliver targeted remote learning support to senior phase pupils. University students provide support to pupils using the TutorEd tutoring programme. Twelve schools took part in the first pilot, and the RIC plans to continue with this in the next academic year.
- Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC is exploring how to retain the best elements of online and blended learning for the future. They know that some learners - particularly those with autism or mental health needs - found online learning very effective.

## The alternative certification model

RICs played an important role in enabling collaborative work to support secondary schools with the SQA alternative certification model used to award National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers in place of exams. The focus was on ensuring consistency in terms of moderation approaches, supporting teachers to gather evidence and encouraging schools to collaborate.

### **Example: Tayside RIC - Moderation**

The RIC created and developed a PT hub for Tayside principal teachers to establish effective networking and support around moderation practices and the SQA alternative certification model. The RIC also provided career-long professional learning with training sessions held for all QAMSOs across Tayside. Sessions were open to all schools on planning for high quality assessment and colleagues were guided through the work, including revisiting all key messages of the Moderation Cycle.

### **Example: South West Education Improvement Collaborative – Moderation**

In SWEIC, the Assessment and Moderation workstream focused on literacy and numeracy. Practitioners and schools worked together, alongside literacy and numeracy leads for the four authorities. The groups worked to explore progress against critical indicators and identify areas for improvement. For example, a key focus was literacy and numeracy for P4s and P7s. The focus was on added value, and how they could work together to address this.

School staff talked about this work, feeling that through sharing practice across the region, confidence in assessment and moderation work increased among school staff.

During the pandemic, this workstream supported secondary schools in certain subjects around quality assurance of the Alternative Certification Model.

## Future engagement with schools

Each of the RICs had clear plans and priorities for engaging with schools in the future. This included:

- ongoing work to involve schools in setting priorities
- building school to school links
- data literacy for school staff
- sharing practice online

- co-ordinated learning offers across the RIC
- leadership and development opportunities
- moderation and assessment work
- online learning offers for pupils
- supporting networking to become self-sustaining.

RICs indicated a need to be flexible, agile and adaptable to support schools in the way that was needed at the time. Many were consulting with school staff to inform future RIC plans, priorities and activities.

*“We have a real opportunity now to move to a more collaborative culture. People are more open now and less protective.”* **Regional stakeholder**

School staff involved in this review indicated that overall, they were content with current RIC priorities, and felt that it was positive to focus in on core priorities such as literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing, digital learning and closing the poverty related attainment gap. Some felt that health and wellbeing was the main priority for schools, and it would be important to think about how best to support pupils around social, emotional and behavioural needs to enable effective learning for children and young people.

Some school staff cautioned that schools were exceptionally busy and that there was a need for stability of priorities, rather than introducing new ones. However, a few suggested more work could be done on<sup>7</sup>:

- children’s rights - with all schools working on their response to the UN Convention of Children’s Rights being brought into Scottish law
- transitions - with some children and young people finding transitions particularly hard during the pandemic
- data analysis - to upskill staff in the use of data to inform their approaches
- support for newly qualified teachers.

Generally, school staff were happy that opportunities to engage with the RIC were available but not required. Some suggested more work to extend the visibility of RICs to class teachers and support staff. There were mixed views on how best to do this. Some felt that headteachers should play a key role in filtering information to staff as appropriate. Some thought there could be tailored communication for different roles, perhaps through resources such as simplified versions of the RIC plan, or two minute videos on the RIC purpose and activity.

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<sup>7</sup>Priorities varied between RICs area, and many RICs have already undertaken a range of work in some of these areas.

School staff enjoyed working jointly with other schools, and some suggested more work could be done to connect schools across the RIC area. A few felt there should be more networking opportunities on themes such as subject specific support for secondary schools, supporting children and young people with additional support needs, and Gaelic medium education.

A few suggested more should be done to speak to schools about their specific priorities for the RIC. A few highlighted that the future priorities of RICs would need be developed in the wider context of education reform in Scotland.

# Chapter 5: Evaluation and impact

## Key themes

- From this review, there is evidence that RICs are having an impact on:
  - developing the skills of school staff
  - delivery of lessons in the classroom - introducing new approaches and developing more consistency in pedagogical approach
  - skills and consistency around assessment and moderation
  - leadership and improvement planning skills
  - building a collaborative culture between local authorities
  - new online and blended learning opportunities for pupils.
- RICs have been on a journey around setting realistic and focused priorities which can be achieved through collaborative working within the RIC, identifying clear intended outcomes, setting appropriate measures and demonstrating impact.
- RICs have developed systems to track the impact of their work through to attainment and there is some evidence of increases in pupil attainment, achievement, equality and inclusion across regions. However, this connection is challenging to track, with the RICs forming one part of a large system, the context of a global pandemic since early 2020 and the very wide range of activity taking place to improve educational outcomes for young people in Scotland.
- Some stressed that in exploring impact, it was important to be realistic about what RICs could be expected to deliver given the amount of funding available to them, and the wide range of other activity to support improvement and equity in educational outcomes in Scotland.

## Introduction

This chapter explores RIC evaluation and impact. It focuses on:

- processes for monitoring and evaluating effectiveness and impact
- the available evidence relating to the impact of the RICs so far.

When considering impact, it is important to understand that RICs remain at a relatively early stage in their development. The pandemic also impacted on the RICs in terms of shifting priorities and disrupting access to data.

For context, the interim review of RICs in 2018 found that all stakeholders felt it would take time to see an impact. There were some positive early examples of schools sharing best practice, and of skills development and practice change among school staff.

## **Monitoring and evaluation processes**

Regional stakeholders felt that their monitoring systems were effective. They could monitor activities, who was taking part and where the gaps were. RICs were able to demonstrate:

- progress with activities
- outputs - events, activities, resources
- number of people engaging with activities
- demand for different activities
- profile of people and schools taking part
- participant satisfaction with activities.

However, many felt that while there was lots of evidence of RIC activity, there was a gap in terms of understanding the impact of this. Interviews with regional stakeholders demonstrated that many found it difficult to talk about the impact of the RIC. Most could talk about demand, activities and outputs, but found it harder to talk about the impact this had. Some regional stakeholders said that they could talk about impact based on their own impressions rather than wider evidence.

***“If I’m entirely honest, we don’t have evidence yet of impact.” Regional stakeholder***

National stakeholders also indicated that there was evidence about events, activities, participation and attendance, but less evidence about the impact of this on the classroom and on teaching practice.

Many regional stakeholders said that their RIC had been on a journey around demonstrating impact and were working hard on identifying clear outcomes or drivers and setting up appropriate measures. Most felt that they were beginning to make stronger use of data and evidence, and that this was built into 2020/21 RIC plans. Many indicated that while the RIC was able to demonstrate progress with activities and workstream outputs, it was much harder to establish wider change.

***“We need to get better at measuring what is making a difference and evidencing this.” Regional stakeholder***

Some talked of the learning that had taken place around evaluating impact:

- setting realistic priorities - a few felt they had been over-ambitious
- focusing on a smaller number of priorities
- setting clear targets - being SMART about setting outcomes and how to measure progress
- using and understanding data - selecting a small group of measures that fit with the intended improvement and not trying to measure everything
- using a mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence
- setting time aside to explore impact.

*“We want to be more slick regarding performance measures.”* **Regional stakeholder**

*“How do we measure what we value?”* **Regional stakeholder**

*“There is so much data, we have to be clear about what it is we are trying to find out. Otherwise you can drown in the volumes of data.”* **Regional stakeholder**

Many regional stakeholders felt that it was also very challenging to demonstrate that impact was directly linked to the RIC. It was difficult to say if change had come about due to the RIC, the local authority, both or wider activity.

*“Attribution continues to be an issue. It is hard to say conclusively that improvement is down to the RIC.”* **Regional stakeholder**

National stakeholders also commented on the ability to demonstrate impact of the RICs. Some national stakeholders stressed that in exploring impact, it was important to be realistic about what RICs could be expected to deliver in terms of improvement given the amount of funding available to them, and the wide range of other activity to support improvement and equity in educational outcomes in Scotland. A few felt that there was a lot of scrutiny related to RIC funding, compared with some other approaches.

*“Are our expectations of RICs realistic?”* **National stakeholder**

National stakeholders had varied views on what the intended impact of the RICs was, and how to measure this. One national stakeholder felt that there was a need to develop a system at national level to track and monitor change in the education system more widely and explore where RICs fit into this. Some national stakeholders highlighted that the focus should be on tracking

the impact of RIC activity at classroom level, such as change, improvement or consistency in pedagogy while others felt that RICs should also demonstrate impact on pupil outcomes.

Each of the RICs was working on further developing its ability to demonstrate impact. However, the pandemic, re-focus of activities and gaps in data for 2020 and 2021 made this challenging. In some cases, the pressures relating to the pandemic meant that evidence had been gathered but not yet analysed.

### **Example: Northern Alliance - Small tests of change**

The RIC has implemented 'tests of change' and explored impact. For example, for maths attainment the RIC is working with the University of Highlands and Islands on a project which involves work with 50 primary school teachers from across the 8 RIC authorities, working on fractions at Level 2. Key features include:

- development of a logic model and a peer mentoring approach
- data collated and presented in an anonymised spreadsheet, to facilitate professional dialogue around the data and share practice
- supporting children with maths anxiety – and will involve changes in pedagogy, interaction and assessment.

The project has measurable aims and seeks to build the confidence of teachers and pupils, as well as its impact on 300-400 learners.

More widely, Northern Alliance is collecting and analysing data to understand whether activities are leading to improvement. The RIC uses a range of processes to capture progress including a data dashboard, progress tracker and improvement studies. The RIC is finding that case studies and real life examples are particularly powerful, showing how the work they have done has made a difference to an individual. This sits alongside the data and provides lived experience and richness of communication. The RIC is also collaborating with the Data for Children's Collaborative (with UNICEF). They aim to identify 'meaningful measures' for practitioners to make use of in order to improve outcomes for children and young people across the Northern Alliance.

### **Example: Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC - Using data**

The FVWL RIC Performance Group looks at data and evidence across the four RIC local authorities. It is led by an Education Scotland Attainment Advisor, and links with the work of Data Coaches within each local authority. The group is developing an evaluation framework with progress milestones, which will be used to monitor impact.

## **Evidence about impact on schools**

As part of this evaluation, existing evidence about impact was reviewed, and new evidence gathered through 53 interviews with school staff from 50 schools. Through engaging with the RIC, school staff reported improvements in:

- skills of school staff
- delivery of lessons in the classroom

- assessment and moderation
- school leadership and improvement planning.

### Skills of school staff

The RICs have supported school staff to develop their skills. Two thirds of the school staff involved in this review felt that they had developed skills and learned new things. Through this, staff became more empowered, inquiring and reflective in their practice.

*“It’s broadening their horizons, because they’re influenced by research and evidence.” **Regional stakeholder***

*“Creativity and new thinking happen when you get together with other teachers.” **Headteacher, primary school***

#### **Example: Northern Alliance - Skills and confidence**

Northern Alliance has evaluated many of its events, professional learning and opportunities for collaboration through exploring impact. This shows that teachers developed their skills - for example around facilitation and model for improvement - and reported changes in pedagogy and approaches to assessment as a result.

### Delivery of lessons

Many school staff felt that through the RICs they had improved their delivery of lessons in the classroom due to:

- introducing new approaches to learning based on research and evidence
- being more consistent in their pedagogical approach across the region
- being more aware of issues such as the attainment gap and poverty proofing
- having access to a wider range of tools and resources

*“It has had a really positive impact on the school. We have changed the way we think about CLPL and how to deliver lessons in the classroom.” **Acting headteacher, primary school***

Learning through the RIC has helped to drive improvements within individual schools, as learning is used and cascaded. School staff gave examples of adopting approaches they had learned about across the whole school.

In a few cases, schools had adopted more research based and reflective practices, as a result of learning through the RIC. For example, one school had participated in a learning set, felt it would drive improvement, and so took the approach and used it with the school staff team, grouping staff into small teams of 4 or 5 who would not normally have the chance to have professional discussions. This is leading to better and more consistent approaches in the classroom.

**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.

**Assessment and moderation**

School staff also highlighted that through learning and leadership opportunities available through the RIC, they had become more skilled at professional judgement, assessment of progression and achievement of a level, quality assurance, evaluative writing, providing feedback and self-evaluation.

**Example: West Partnership - Skills and confidence**

The West Partnership undertakes evaluation of its events and programmes. Evaluation of events for headteachers and depute 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.

**Leadership and improvement planning**

Some senior leaders felt that school leadership and improvement planning had also improved, resulting in a better experience for children and young people. Key areas of skills development included around management, coaching, strategic change and recovery. Leaders also improved their skills around professional dialogue and assuring quality of teaching.

*“I was able to use the theory I had learnt on the leadership development course to lead in a time of change.” **Headteacher, primary school***

## **Evidence about impact on pupils**

### **New opportunities for pupils**

Some regional stakeholders and school staff felt that the RICs had opened up new opportunities for young people. For example, a few elected members highlighted that young people would have a more positive education journey directly due to opportunities opened up by the RIC - including online learning, Easter study and contribution to the national e-learning offer.

Regional stakeholders also highlighted that because of the RICs, pupils would have better access to online and blended learning. Learning from this digital offer has encouraged the RICs to consider shared online learning opportunities, such as offering a selection of Advanced Highers online, which opens up new opportunities for pupils who may previously have been unable to access these courses or have faced challenges travelling and co-ordinating their timetable.

### **Pupil attainment**

Ultimately, improvements in opportunities, teaching and leadership should result in longer term positive outcomes in terms of pupil engagement with school and attainment.

This link is harder to track, with the RICs forming one part of a large system. This has been made more complex with the pandemic affecting wider pupil health and wellbeing, learning outcomes and access to data about attainment. Both regional and national stakeholders stressed that it was challenging to track improvement due to gaps in robust and reliable data for 2020 and 2021. However, the RICs are working to develop ways of tracking how improving teacher skills, teaching approaches and leadership and sharing best practice and experience is having an impact on attainment.

### **Example: South East Improvement Collaborative - Tracking improvement**

The SEIC 2021 plan indicates that there has been an increase in the How Good is Our School 4? Framework quality improvement indicators between 2016/17 and 2019/20.

- learning, teaching and assessment - 17.2% increase
- leadership of change - 14.5% increase
- raising attainment and achievement - 13.5% increase
- ensuring wellbeing equality and inclusion - 11.5% increase.

### **Example: South West Education Improvement Collaborative - Leadership**

High level indicators for SWEIC show increases between 2016/17 and 2019/20 in the proportion of early learning, primary and secondary establishments evaluated as good or better for:

- learning, teaching and assessment - from 52% to 76%
- leadership of change - from 54% to 73%
- raising attainment and achievement - from 62% to 86%
- wellbeing, equality and inclusion - from 70% to 82%.

### **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.

# Chapter 6: Support and funding

## Key themes

- 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.
- Education Scotland provides support to each RIC in a bespoke manner. Regional stakeholders felt that collaborative relationships had strengthened over time.
- Some regional and national stakeholders felt the partnership between RICs and Education Scotland regional improvement teams was useful and helped to drive improvement, with access to specific support and guidance. Some felt that there remained some tensions in the relationship due to a lack of clarity around the role of Education Scotland.
- Stakeholders felt overall existing funding levels were broadly appropriate, but that a longer-term funding commitment would allow RICs to take a more strategic and ambitious approach and enable staff resources to be managed more effectively.
- Overall, regional 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.

## Introduction

This chapter explores views on RIC support, funding and guidance. It focuses on:

- partnerships between RICs and Education Scotland Senior regional improvement teams
- funding processes and any suggested improvement to this.

For context, the interim review of RICs in 2018 found that regional stakeholders felt that the support offered by Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisors was good and helpful. At that time, regional stakeholders were interested to see how the regional offer of support from Education Scotland would develop in the future. Since then, Education Scotland

developed its core offer of support to RICs and to schools over 2018/19 and created six Regional Improvement Teams. This involved recruiting additional staff to provide further expert support to each RIC. These teams support the RICs as well as help local authorities, schools, practitioners and other educational partners.

At the time of the interim review, regional stakeholders also welcomed the availability of resources to support the next phase of RIC activity, with most feeling that early phases of RIC development were challenged by limited resources and tight timescales. Since then, between 2018/19 and 2021/22, the Scottish Government has committed a total of approximately £21 million of additional funding support to the RICs.

## Partnerships with Education Scotland

Education Scotland regional improvement teams have been involved in a wide range of RIC activities. Senior Regional Advisors were able to provide support and challenge at RIC meetings, co-ordinate resources and support from Education Scotland - regionally or nationally - and provide strategic support in a bespoke, fluid and organic manner rather than as a standard product or offer.

*“It feels as if we have been on a journey to become more collaborative. We are definitely in a better place.”* **Regional stakeholder**

Through the wider regional improvement teams, scrutiny staff and national staff, Education Scotland also provided support including:

- quality assuring and peer reviewing learning resources and materials
- supporting establishment of and co-facilitating virtual networks
- supporting delivery of professional learning activities
- delivering festivals and events
- directly supporting school leaders and practitioners
- signposting to specialist colleagues
- supporting schools to share practice
- providing tailored direct support to schools as identified by local authorities and RICs.

**Example: Northern Alliance - Joint work on pupil equity**

Education Scotland worked with the RIC to offer the Pupil Equity Week programme, with approximately 900 teachers engaging with the offer. From this event, work is now being taken forward by schools looking at the cost of the school day. Schools are now making more effective use of data to improve outcomes for individual children and young people through engagement with class based improvement projects and analysing data over time.

**Example: Tayside RIC - Sharing resources**

As part of the TRIC school improvement project, central officers from across the RIC authorities are creating a practical toolkit to support schools in effective self-evaluation for improvement in learning, teaching and assessment. Resources from each of the local authorities are being collated and quality assured to create an interactive resource for all Tayside schools to support their professional learning and self-evaluation. Central officers have worked with colleagues from Education Scotland through regional staff and HMIE.

Senior Regional Advisors worked very closely with RIC leads and Directors of Education during the pandemic - with daily contact over critical periods. They were able to provide information, act as a sounding board, support problem solving and ensure voices were heard at national level. In some cases, Senior Regional Advisors helped to co-ordinate and manage requests for information from Scottish Government.

The views of regional and national stakeholders on partnerships between RICs and Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisors and wider regional improvement teams were mixed.

Some regional stakeholders felt that the partnership was useful and helped to drive improvement. These stakeholders talked of the Education Scotland Senior Regional Advisor feeling very much part of the team, having a good relationship, sharing information and guidance, and participating in regular one to one and group discussions. Often these relationships had developed and strengthened over time, and there was now a close and embedded relationship, with Education Scotland regional improvement teams collaborating and supporting delivery of RIC priorities and workstreams. Stakeholders talked of being able to access specific support, for example through Attainment Advisors, NIF Officers or Community Learning and Development staff.

*“It is about the sharing of the resource to benefit the workstreams and the young people.”* **Regional stakeholder**

National stakeholders indicated that over time, partnerships between the RIC and regional improvement teams within Education Scotland had developed and strengthened.

**Example: South West Education Improvement Collaborative - Joint work**

As part of the SWEIC’s work on improving attainment in broad general education, a great deal of work took place to develop shared approaches to assessment and moderation across the four local authorities. For example, Quality Assurance and Moderation Support Officers (QAMSO’s) in each of the local authorities worked together to get consensus and agree a consistent approach to four stages in a level at broad general education.

**Example: South East Improvement Collaborative - Joint work**

In SEIC, Education Scotland co-designed and co-delivered the depute head Connect programme. Education Scotland’s South East Improvement Team also co-designed and co-delivered the Inclusion and Equity professional learning programme, and played a key role in the Intensive Quality Improvement Programme. This programme aimed to use the model of improvement to support schools to enhance learner attendance or engagement. The South East Improvement Team also led the SEIC’s Digital Needs Analysis leading to a shared logic model and digital improvement plan across the SEIC. Education Scotland also provided tailored support to individual schools following up on previous inspections.

**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.

**Example: Forth Valley and West Lothian RIC - Re-visioning**

In FVWL RIC Education Scotland played a key role during the pandemic through supporting the RIC to re-vision and re-structure. Education Scotland led sessions on developing a vision and values for the RIC and exploring governance options, with the aim of gathering views and providing

options for the new RIC lead and partner authorities. Education Scotland focused on stimulating thinking and providing options, rather than suggesting a precise model.

Some regional stakeholders felt that there were some tensions in the relationship between RICs and Education Scotland regional improvement teams. Some felt there was a lack of clarity around the role of Education Scotland. As Education Scotland regional improvement teams became more involved in co-design and co-delivery, both regional and national stakeholders felt that there could be tension in the roles of planning activity, delivering and signing off plans. A few stakeholders suggested increasing the role of peer review, between RICs, may help with this.

*“It is difficult to co-create a plan when one of the partners is involved in marking your homework.”* **Regional stakeholder**

A few regional stakeholders felt that while relationships had settled in at regional level, wider structures and systems within Education Scotland had not moved on in the same way. A few pointed to delays in accessing support, information or approvals from Education Scotland. A few said that they managed to make the relationship work, and that Education Scotland teams added value, but that it took a lot of effort and there could be issues around effective joint working. A few regional stakeholders felt that Education Scotland believes it has a role in sanctioning, governing or signing off the work of the RICs.

*“You can see tension in the system. This is a barrier that needs to be removed.”* **Regional stakeholder**

A few regional and national stakeholders felt that RICs could do more to involve Education Scotland as a key partner, co-creating and co-delivering activities within a blended approach involving RICs and regional improvement teams. A few stressed that Education Scotland regional teams brought a large staff team and resource, to support and complement RIC delivery. Some felt that there was potential to further join up the offer, make the most of the regional improvement teams and reduce duplication and overlap. For example, a few felt that the environment was a little cluttered in terms of leadership and learning opportunities for practitioners.

## Funding

Senior regional stakeholders all agreed that funding for the RICs was vital and made a huge difference to the capacity of the RICs and what they were able

to do. Elected members agreed that funding added weight to the RIC and enabled the delivery of plans. Overall regional stakeholders felt that funding levels were about right.

*“We have had staff able to engage fully and develop the workstreams.”*

**Regional stakeholder**

Regional stakeholders felt that a longer term funding commitment, for example of three or five years, would be better than annual rounds of funding. It would:

- allow RICs to take a longer term and more strategic approach, focusing on improvement over the longer term
- simplify the planning cycle - which could be linked to wider plans such as Children’s Services plans
- enable staff resources to be managed more effectively - reducing staff turnover and associated turbulence in RIC teams and ensure the highest quality staff are involved in the RIC
- enable RICs to be more ambitious and less risk averse in their plans
- reduce the amount of time spent planning and increase the amount of time spent delivering.

*“I would like to see a move to a three year planning and funding stream.”*

**Regional stakeholder**

*“The year-on-year allocation of funding for RICs poses an issue for their sustainability longer term.”* **Elected member**

*“We need a clear steer from government that RICs are here to stay.”*

**Regional stakeholder**

Regional stakeholders had mixed views on the process of bidding for funding. While some found it very helpful, and were able to achieve what was needed, others felt it would be useful to review the funding approach and make funding proportionate to the numbers and profile of children in the region. One national stakeholder indicated that if a funding formula was introduced, it would be important to explore fair approaches to this as the RICs are very different.

A few regional stakeholders felt that while funding was important, it was also very important not to have too much funding as RICs may then be seen as separate entities. A few felt that it was a balance - people needed to see collaboration and RIC activity as their day job, but that certain support functions were also needed. A few, in one RIC area, felt that it was important that the balance felt right, if local authorities are having to make cuts then new

posts through RICs doesn't always feel right. A small number of regional stakeholders questioned whether funding would be better going directly to local authorities or schools.

*"It needs a mature debate around funding."* **Regional stakeholder**

National stakeholders also felt that it was important to have a conversation around funding of RICs. Most felt that annual funding doesn't help and that longer term funding would provide more sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness. One national stakeholder felt that funding for RICs was not intended to be long term, and that any further funding would need to be clearly linked to demonstrable impact.

*"More certainty is needed on funding, if RICs are to be sustainable."* **National stakeholder**

## **Wider views**

Overall, senior staff involved in RICs felt that the policy direction around RICs so far had been clear, but that they were keen to know what would happen next for RICs. Some national stakeholders also mentioned that during the pandemic, there had naturally been less focus on the strategic role of the RICs at national level. Senior regional stakeholders had also found that due to the pandemic, their links with Scottish Government had been slightly reduced<sup>8</sup>. Regional stakeholders were pleased that meetings involving RIC leads across Scotland were re-commencing after being paused during the pandemic.

Some stakeholders felt that it was important to have clarity on a range of issues including:

- reassurance that responsibility for education would remain with local authorities
- confirmation of how RICs fit into the education system in Scotland, as broad changes are being made
- careful consideration about how RIC and Education Scotland regional improvement team roles align
- confirmation of whether RICs will be a permanent feature of the Scottish education system, to provide stability.

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<sup>8</sup> The RICs Joint Steering Group involving RIC leads, COSLA, Education Scotland, ADES and SOLACE meets every three months but was paused during the pandemic, and recommenced March 2021.

Most national stakeholders also highlighted that it was important to clarify the role of RICs within the wider education system, including national expectations of RICs, the purpose of RICs and what we hope to gain from them.

A few national stakeholders also felt that national clarifications needed to be developed jointly, involving RICs - who were now in a good place to feed into these conversations at national level. A few highlighted it was important that national clarifications fit with the principles of an empowered system and bottom-up development of the RICs.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions

## 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.

### **How to access background or source data**

The data collected for this <statistical bulletin / social research publication>:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route <specify or delete this text>
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact <email address> for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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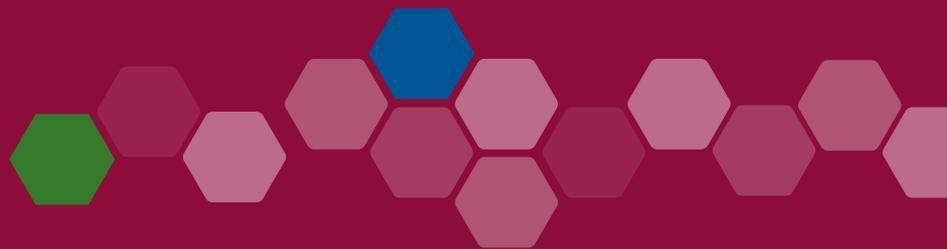
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