WP Interim Evaluation Report, Phase 1: Defining and Understanding Impact

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NSEE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report provides the findings from the first phase of the 2022-2023 evaluation of the West Partnership (WP) Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC). The main aim of this first phase was to scope WP definitions and understanding of ***impact*** from its key stakeholders. The two subsequent phases will assess ***reach****;* engagement and impact and offer insights into, and learning from, the previous phase and generate cases of impact.

The evaluation is underpinned by six research questions, addressing WP definitions and understanding of impact; considers the extent to which WP activity has impacted on teachers, schools, partnerships and beyond the school, and led to/driven improvement in schools and impacted on children and young people`s (CYP) learning.

Key findings

Key findings demonstrate that whilst there were many similarities over the two rounds of external evaluation in terms of members' definitions of impact or differences made there is a sense that ***more significant impacts*** **or changes occurred in 2021-2022**. There is no doubt that the effects of the pandemic strengthened relationships, (across the eight WP LAs) ,which led to more openness and willingness to collaborate, which in turn **led to increased opportunities for practitioners to learn and try new approaches to practice.** These are detailed in section 3.

There was a **stronger theme** in the evaluation findings from that year about the added value from the WP to the work of the LAs. Participants were very clear about how it had **impacted on them, their school, their service, and LA** during the worst of the pandemic. Added value was also viewed through a ***culture*** lens in relation to the trust, honesty and transparency created by the WP, in addition to its ***values*****,** which were framed in potential outcomes for learners.

There was also more of a recognition by the participants in 2021-2022, of **collective agency being built,** through collective capacity and a clearer association as to **how this led to, or in some cases, was driving or accelerating improvement.** Whilst 'space and time' to come out of 'context', featured over both periods it was **recognised more** in the latter period, and particularly by Headteachers (HTs), who welcomed the opportunity to share and reflect with peers.

The WP has **'grown capabilities**' in and across the system, with school practitioners and LA officers working across multiple boundaries. There has been a **shift in the balance** from sharing practice to knowledge mobilisation towards **higher levels of joint practice** development and the generation of new practices. **Systemic or transformative change has been, through West Online School, (West OS)** having a major impact in enhancing online learning in, across, out of schools and on the system more broadly. Significant impacts have taken place, which have led to systems improvement and impacted on learners. In summary, these are:

On 'Defining' and Understanding Impact:

- Differences made to individual and collective agency and professional capital;
- Sharing of systems improvement, practitioner enquiry;
- Cohesive networks; collaboration, communication and connections; formal and informal;
- Increased reflection in/on practice, improved practice for teachers and LA Officers, collective reflection;
- Leadership capacity building, mainly for HTs.

On `Defining` and Understanding Added Value to the LAs:

- Mainly demonstrated though networked learning, evidence-informed practice;
- Provided opportunities, removed or reduced duplication of activities;
- Added value at individual, school and service level;
- Supported increased focus and helped shape direction for individual LAs;
- Brought added value through reinforcing WP values.

On `Defining` and Understanding Building Collective Agency to Drive Improvement:

- Defined through developing a common understanding of improvement; collective solutions;
- Individual and collective capacity and professional capital building;
- Teacher empowerment through professional learning and joint working, e.g. Improving Our Classrooms, (IOC);
- Systems level development; collective action/upskilling, West OS.

Concluding remarks

This report presents the findings from the first phase of this round of evaluation. Whilst the extent to which WP activity has impacted on schools/partnerships, reached teachers in schools and driven improvement in classrooms/schools presents a challenge for evaluation, the further two phases will generate further data and more evidence relating to scale and outcomes for learners. We will, therefore, use the findings from this phase to inform our research approach in the next, which will focus more on professional judgement and practitioner evidence as a robust indicator of impact on learners/in classrooms.

1. Introduction

This is the first of three reports forming the external evaluation of the West Partnership (WP) Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) during 2022-2023. The focus for this period is `defining and understanding impact' and was highlighted in the previous round of evaluation[1]. The report provides definitions and understanding of ***impact*** as defined by WP key stakeholders, drawn from evidence collected from external evaluation conducted on WP process and impacts over 2020-2022.

This report is structured into four sections. First, we provide the policy context for the evaluation. Second, we outline the research evaluation methodology. Third, we present the key findings, including strategic perspectives and those of Workstream (WS) members and finally in section four, we conclude with defining and understanding impact across the WP, through the identification of key criteria and offer some critical reflection and concluding remarks.

1.1 Policy Context

National Improvement Framework (NIF) and the RICs

The Scottish Government (SG) has a statutory duty under the Education (Scotland) Act 2016 to review the NIF and publish subsequent annual plans. The current NIF 2023 sets out the vision and priorities for Scottish education that have been agreed across the system, and the national improvement activity that must be undertaken to support the delivery of key priorities.

The whole education system is continuing to recover from the health, social, and educational impacts of COVID-19. The 2023 vision for education in Scotland, is broadly similar to that in 2022: excellence through raising attainment and improving outcomes. Children and young people achieving the highest standards in literacy and numeracy is a priority, in addition to the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to achieve the four fundamental capacities of the Curriculum for Excellence: as successful learners; confident individuals; responsible citizens; and effective contributors which represent the lifelong nature of education and learning in Scotland. In addition, it gives more emphasis on 'Learning for Sustainability', as a fundamental aspect of the learning experience. Similarly, the focus on achieving equity remains the same, with a 'particular focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap'.

[1] Bell, I., Lowden, K., and Hall, S., (2021) *Progress & Challenge: Reflections on the Development of the West Partnership 2018-2020.* Internal report. University of Glasgow.

The Future of Scottish Education and the RICs

In addition to the 2023 NIF Plan, there are other significant developments in Scottish education which have and will impact on the RICs. These include the 'National Discussion' and 'Independent Review on Assessment and Qualifications' that will shape the future direction of education in Scotland. The RIC Strategic Group (co-chaired by SG/ES/COSLA and the RICs) has established a Next Steps Sub-Group to consider and make recommendations for the further development and sustainability of the RICs, taking account of recent reports and recommendations, including the SG-funded review of RICs. This work is being taken forward within the context of the wider education reforms to national bodies.

2. Evaluation Strategy

2.1 Objectives and Key Research Questions

Preliminary discussions with the WP identified an appropriate and robust evaluation approach that would address the two related research objectives:

1. To what extent WP workstreams and programmes are being implemented in schools and classrooms;

2. If and how these workstreams and programmes are impacting on children, young people and families.

However, it is a complex challenge to draw a 'line of sight' between WP programmes and demonstrating impact in classrooms and on learners. We recognise the difficulties in attempting to 'measure' impact in this type of complex, multidimensional, endeavour and that changes may not be easily quantifiable and/or may take time to measure.

Thus, evaluation of 'what works' in complex network settings requires more nuanced approaches and greater reliance on qualitative information about stakeholder perceptions of progress in achieving objectives (Head, 2008, p.11)

Perceptions of successful impact by key stakeholders should also include contextualised evidence from practitioners. (Outhwaite, et. al., 2020; Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

With this in mind, this evaluation focuses on six key research questions:

1. What do the WP and its stakeholders mean by 'impact'?
2. To what extent has the WP impacted on schools and partnerships?
3. To what extent has WP activity reached teachers in schools?
4. To what extent has teachers' engagement with the WP led to/driven improvement in classrooms/schools regarding the agreed criteria?
5. What examples of impact on children and young people's learning can teachers' highlight in their settings as a result of engagement with the WP?
6. To what extent has teacher and other practitioners' engagement with the WP impacted beyond the classroom/school regarding the agreed criteria?

Evaluation Design and Methodology

A mixed methods research design has been adopted to collect data and evidence to address the evaluation objectives and key research questions. The evaluation's design is structured in three broad overlapping phases:

Phase 1 *Understanding and Defining Impact*, (October 2022-February 2023), within the WP. Our findings on defining and understanding impact from Phase 1 will inform the design of survey questions, to be distributed in Phase 2.

Phase 2: *Engagement and Demonstrating Impact,* (February-April 2023), the main aim of this phase is to gauge 'reach', engagement and differences made or impact from such engagement. We will create an instrument (survey) from the findings from Phase1 – this is likely to be a tightly defined and focussed online survey and the final Phase 3.

Phase 3: *Cases of Impact: Insights and Learning,* (May-July 2023), will provide insight into definitions and criteria for impact across the WP and the effects on its main stakeholders from WP involvement. The main aim of the final phase is to address the research questions fully and provide insight into definitions/criteria of 'impact' across the WP and the effects on main stakeholders from WP involvement. This will be achieved by synthesising the findings from Phase 1 and 2 and potentially conducting focus groups/interviews, with a sample of teachers/schools, to provide contextualised qualitative accounts/case studies/insights of impact that include: why practitioners have engaged with the WP, what they engaged with and what difference it has made to learners. The detail of Phase 1 for the 2022-2023 evaluation is set out below[2].

Phase 1: Understanding and Defining Impact

Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this phase was to scope WP definitions and understanding of impact. The first objective was to identify definitions of impact and indicators used in WP key literature. Initially this was undertaken by desk-based research, scoping definitions and criteria used from secondary sources such as WP improvement plans, internal evaluation reports and associated documents. The second objective of this phase was to identify perceived definitions and understanding of impact across the WP key stakeholders at strategic and Workstream (WS) level. This was achieved through a granular analysis of data collected over two years, 2020-2022. Strategic 'definitions' of impact are represented by findings from interviews with board members and the outcomes of theory of change sessions with those members and key stakeholders. WS members' 'definitions' of impact are taken from a deeper analysis of 45 in-depth interviews with members of the then (2020-2021) six WP Workstreams: Collaborative Learning Networks (CLN), Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL), Curriculum, Families and Communities (F and C), Leadership and Systems Improvement (SI).

[2] The details of Phases 2 and 3 will be covered in subsequent evaluation reports.

In 2021-2022, these were from 39 in-depth interviews, with members of the then three WP Workstreams: Collaborative Learning Networks (CLN); Curriculum, Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CLTA); and Leadership, Empowerment and Improvement (LEI) and from findings from our survey of WP network members, reported in Bell, Hall and Lowden, op.cit.

We based our thematic analysis of the interviews in both academic years on three key areas: on impacts or differences made; the potential added value to LAs; and building collective agency to drive improvement from WP involvement and activity. We have focused on these three areas as the 'best fit' for our preliminary analysis to address the main aims and objectives in Phase 1. Those interview questions were informed by the relevant literature on impact from collaboration, which suggest that effective collaboration is the driver of systems change. The literature foregrounds the concept of c*ollective impact,* the extent to which working collaboratively with a shared understanding and purpose can lead to greater benefits than working alone or in silos. Furthermore, the literature suggests that the process of, and results achieved through collective impact are "emergent rather than predetermined*",* (Kania and Kramer, 2013, p.10), through a series of collaborative change efforts.

WP Strategic Perspective – Vision, Measurement and Impact, 2020-2023

a) Vision and Impact

The overarching vision as set out in the WP Improvement Plan, 2020-2023: *The Road to Renewal: Our Response to Covid-19* frames the expected aspects of impact*;* to improve the learner experience and increase attainment, by a collective response, recovery and renewal through and out of the pandemic. The aims within that vision are the 3 Es:

Close the poverty-related attainment gap (Equity) and increase attainment and achievement for all (Excellence). Shift ownership of change for collective action, for stakeholder Empowerment to meet needs of individual learners.

This Plan expresses a longer-term aim to build collective agency, by having "every educator in the West Partnership engaged with colleagues and partners to bring about improvement in their class and playrooms through our professional learning offer" and by establishing, facilitating and supporting networks of professionals to work collaboratively to achieve the 3 Es. This three-yearly plan represents increased focus for the WP by being more streamlined and sharper to achieve objectives, with an emphasis on virtual learning, digital technology and virtual networking. The following annual plans indicate an increased commitment to networked learning, sharing evidence-informed practice and impact on learner experience and outcomes.

WP Annual Plans 2020-2023

2020-2021 – All the WP annual plans illustrate a commitment to the vision of the 3 Es and to recovery and renewal. However, the WP 2020-2021 Interim Action Plan was drawn up at the request of Directors (January 2021) to address the challenges of the current and immediately foreseeable educational landscape. The Plan was designed to be an action plan to deal with COVID-19. Therefore, the focus and potential impact was very much about supporting practitioners and the system during this time, through seven priority projects: Headteacher Mentoring Scheme (HT MS); Leadership Learning Sets; Virtual Leadership Networks (VLNs); West OS; Support for practitioners through curriculum networks; Health and Wellbeing (HWB) – Tracking learners' wellbeing; and Supporting learners with Additional Support Needs (ASN). This plan marks an evolution from the workstream structure to a more organic, network-based approach.

2021-2022 – This Plan emphasises the commitment to adding value to LAs and to be accessible to those who will benefit most. The WP focused on activities that have greatest impact on learner experience and outcomes. The variations here were mainly in rationalising workstreams and priorities, underpinned by the development of a networked learning system approach in all the workstreams. In addition, ongoing consultation with key stakeholders included consideration of the 'impact of provision'. It was during this period that the six WSs were rationalised into three: CLN; CLTA and LEI, the aim of which was to provide increased focus for driving improvement.

2022-2023 – The overarching vision and aims remain the same, with a particular focus on collective impact through three 'strategic drivers of improvement'. These are: facilitating various forms of collaboration; enhancing practitioner knowledge, understanding and confidence; and supporting practice change at various levels, with the aim of impacting on CYP and their families.

b) Internal Evaluation and Measuring Impact

The three-yearly Improvement Plan (2020-2023) indicated an aspiration that the role and impact of the Evaluation and Reporting Group (ERG) WS would be extended and enhanced through reporting more widely on the achievements and attainment of learners.

This plan also committed to evaluating longer-term impacts upon learning event participants and learners. Impact would be demonstrated by establishing and maintaining processes and tools for gathering a diverse range of evidence to measure and describe impact. This Improvement Plan identified 19 Critical Indicators (CIs) largely involving measures of attainment and achievement; focussing on literacy, numeracy, number/level of awards but also included areas such as staff knowledge, understanding and confidence, number of

practitioners accessing WP professional learning, establishments evaluated as good/better for leadership of change and learning, teaching and assessment, attendance and exclusion rates and initial school leaver destinations.

There were some variations [from the three-yearly plan] in the CIs in the annual plans e.g. the main differences in the 2021-2022 Plan are the inclusion of data re SIMD learners' achievements and positive destinations, [25 CIs]. The variations and missing values in some CIs are likely to be the effects of the pandemic on collection and availability of relevant data. Workstreams have specific indicators aligned to their priorities and support is given by the ERG WS in the development of the FOCUS Tool across the WP. The most recent WP Evaluation Report 2021-2022 cites programme evaluation to indicate 'changes and improvement' in practitioners' knowledge and confidence and offers some examples to 'showcase' how the three drivers work in practice with the purpose of demonstrating 'added value' by involvement in WP activity.

The 2022-2023 annual improvement plan indicates a move towards more focussed outcome-based planning and reporting. Co-creation of this annual plan included discussion of the 'impact of provision' using the three strategic drivers of improvement cited previously. It anticipates gathering evidence to show longer-term impact on practitioners and learners, demonstrating the added value of collaboration, which would be measured by an outcomes and drivers map, focussing on practitioner development, and practice change. The CIs in this plan have been reduced to 19, and outcomes to be achieved via the three drivers, by June 2023.

c) Strategic Impact – West Partnership Strategic Theory of Change (ToC)

This ToC was originally based on Board discussions and challenges to test a 'straw model' of the WP's contribution and involved four focus groups with key stakeholders in 2020[3]. We can see how the vision of the 3 Es develops over time with a view to embedding and sustaining evidence-informed practice. The ToC stated success also provided guidance on what evidence was required, even allowing for the challenges involved in gathering it. However, this was set in a point of time, pre-pandemic and when relationships, within and across the partnership were being built. The WP has now revised and refocussed, changing some of the language used in the ToC along the way, whilst maintaining a commitment to the long-term vision.

Applying a ToC model can be a useful 'tool' in evaluation, as it illustrates how context is important to understand how mechanisms can lead to intended outcomes (Pawson and

[3] Underlying assumptions and mechanisms to achieve outcomes have been removed for ease of reference

Tilley,1997) whereby the designers and implementers of programmes can identify where they are going and how they think they`ll get there. However, whilst useful, like any model or theory, it has its limitations, namely that of an assumption of linear progression, where specified actions lead to outcomes. This cannot encompass how complex systems work, nor take cognisance of unexpected or unanticipated consequences, nor accommodate major external changes (Barnes, et.al., 2003).

Even allowing for the aforecited caveats we believe that the identification of short, interim and long-term outcomes is a useful indicator of the original WP aspirations, which could be explored in Phase 3 of the evaluation to consider the WP `journey`. A revised ToC could also be useful as a communication tool and for internal monitoring and evaluation purposes. We will revisit this issue in Phase 3 of this round of evaluation.

Figure 1: West Partnership Theory of Change, 2020



Source: Adapted from Theory of Change Sessions, January-February 2020

3. Key Findings

We will address the six key research questions in our Phase 3 evaluation report but would like to offer some discussion on our findings to date relating to 'Definitions and Understanding of Impact'. This was addressed through what impact looked like for the Board and for WS members to date.

3.1 Key Definitions and Understanding of Impact, WP 2020-2022

Board members considered 'impact' through differences made by establishing the 'conditions for change': collaboration, building relationships and culture with a strengthening of the infrastructure to support it and educational systems improvement across the constituent local authorities. These relationships became much more important and strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of our initial round of individual interviews with the Board, board members were asked about their 'aspirations and potential impacts of the WP in five years or so'. The summary of their answers indicate that the WP should focus on 'ownership of change' through collaborative learning and a systems-level approach, but with the recognition that it would take longer than five years. Many of the aspirations regarding impact had been shaped by the pandemic, regarding the importance of digital learning and the online school. Similarly, HWB, nurturing communities and family learning featured strongly in the interviews. Additionally, board members believed the impact of the WP work should be evident in learner outcomes. In addition to the idea of system-wide improvement and impact was the need to have effective evaluation and monitoring in place to demonstrate this.

It should be recognised that the theory of change sessions occurred before the pandemic (January-February 2020) and the Board interviews took place at the height of it (May-July 2021). Therefore, understandably, potential longer-term impact was, partly, but not completely viewed through a COVID-19 lens. However, when considering the long-term outcomes identified in the theory of change model, the fundamental aspirations and commitments remained the same. This will be explored further in Phase 3.

There were a lot of commonalities across the WSs in their views on impact or differences made, from WP involvement and activity. Whilst there was a broad consensus that it was too early or too soon (2020-2021) to evidence impact on leaner outcomes, in addition to the scale of the WP, there were many examples given of the positive impact upon participants, in their agency and capital, which in several instances led to changes in professional practice and for some, classroom teaching. These in the main came from collaborative learning, interdisciplinary projects and the 'learning system' through CLN sharing the process of systems improvement across schools and challenging 'thinking'. The 'open space' opportunity

afforded by the work stream to bring teachers together with colleagues from the Robert Owen Centre and Education Scotland was also cited as making a difference.

Sharing good practice (and resources) was seen as making a difference and avoided reinventing the wheel through drawing on knowledge and skills. Highlights included good practice sharing, e.g. Assessment and Moderation, Networks such as ASN and the delivery of conferences such as early years/primary, attracting over 600 practitioners. The IOC programme was seen as beneficial to schools.

HT empowerment came from forming partnerships with other schools, relationships built, development of materials and piloting inter-authority activity. In addition to having a 'safe space' for open and honest conversations. The participants (2020-2021) believed the first steps had been taken towards having an impact on learner outcomes.

Although impacts or differences made did not stop at the 'school gates'. There were references to 'powerful collaboration', exemplified by jointly produced outputs, which were cited as having 'significant impact', e.g. the Family Learning Self-evaluation Toolkit. Similarly, professional learning events, e.g. Learning Together, were recognised as opportunities for collaboration and joint activity. The activity around youth and youth voice participation in the F and C WS was considered to have made a difference. Similarly, the Link Workers Enquiry Group using collaborative enquiry supported by ROC team, LA staff and others, was deemed to make a difference before lockdown. In addition, CLD planning had benefitted from forming a 'CLD Managers sub-group', bringing the eight LAs together to collaborate on, e.g. planning.

In line with the findings from the first round of evaluation, members definitions of impact, (2021-2022) were understood through the changes to individual and collective agency and professional capital; impacts upon professional practice and learning from being involved in the collaborative networks and sharing evidence-informed practice. Reflection on practice featured quite strongly here, as practitioners critiqued and made sense of situations in different ways, similar to Schon`s (1983) concept of 'reflection on action'. Although, the examples given could also be considered as the result of critical *collective* reflection (Vince and Reynolds, 2009). Some of these were better use of HWB data, which led to a change in course delivery and for one LA, moving hundreds of previously in-situ college students to online courses. The latter example as a direct result of increased confidence to take action, from involvement in a WP group/network.

There were other differences made to LAs through adopting WP developments and piloting current/contemporary education initiatives across LAs, e.g. in play and outdoor learning. Data-

sharing re West OS was seen as impactful; creation of resources and volunteer teacher networks were perceived as empowering and upskilling teachers. Networks provided opportunities for sharing good practice, time and space for discussion, focus and clarity and offered collective solutions. Subject networks were seen to empower teachers as they were effectively volunteer leads bringing large numbers of practitioners (2000 plus) together, in a wide range of subjects, to teach/moderate online.

There were impacts on collaboration and communication and connections with people across the WPs, which led to reflection on policy and practice in LAs, e.g. the `ASL Review`. There were impacts on resource creation which fed into high quality learning and teaching, e.g. the teaching of Personal and Social Education (PSE), which in some instances was previously taught by non-specialist staff. Post the SG PSE Review, WP members who had considerable PSE teaching experience were able to share their knowledge (and resources) amongst the group and across the WP LAs. Similarly, a WP developed Diversity Package for probationary teachers was adopted and implemented by all eight WP LAs.

There was also more strategic reflection on approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, which in some cases led to significant changes in policy and practice, e.g. in assessment and moderation. Impact on individuals led to changes in strategic planning in assessment and moderation, which had an impact on many schools, particularly in one of the larger LAs. Teacher feedback suggested this had a positive effect on practice.

Increases in confidence were also reported as having an effect; in enabling practitioners to be more creative and innovative, not only from the formal networks but also through the informal relationships built, which improved classroom practice. There was an increased knowledge of different ways to drive improvement; opportunities to share, learn and meet other schools, which fed into school decision making and furthered own research and learning, e.g. in literacy assessment. The Literacy Network provided opportunities for extended learning to improve knowledge and understanding of the landscape, supporting professional development /learning.

Leadership was also impacted by WP programmes being able to implement in a contextual and localised way, e.g. HT Learning Sets (HTLS), which fed into SLT decisions and directions for schools. There was evidence that reflections on leadership contributed to building leadership capacity. ‘Leadership capacity` referred to agency and capital, expressed through increased confidence, reflections on leadership style, skills, and capabilities. These translated into self-identified improved action at school level, and new strategies to develop leadership capacity across teams. This informed and improved action relating to policies and practice not

only in school, but beyond school. In addition to the HTLS, this mainly occurred through involvement in the HT MS and the VLNs.

The VLN was seen to have impacted on HTs decisions and directions for schools. This included incorporating learning into SLT discussions, sharing good practice and (COVID) operating procedures. The VLN discussions also led to an increased awareness of the impact on staff HWB during COVID which leaders responded to by changing HWB policies and practice. HTs/DHTs also appreciated practical guidance on, e.g. online communications with families during lockdown, which some then implemented in own schools, which in turn led to more effective use of Microsoft Teams (MT). Class teachers learned of different ways of driving improvement from being part of IOC. Reciprocity occurred through individual school sharing of e.g. a learning pathway toolkit, (with other networks), which led to being piloted in schools.

Key Definitions and Understanding of Added Value, WP 2020-2022

Board members tended to believe that the WP had added value to the LAs, individually and collectively. Like the WSs, this was mainly expressed through its commitment to the networked learning system and systems improvement. The benefits of collaborative working were demonstrated, particularly through CLN, curriculum/subject networks and assessment and moderation activity. The IOC programme was also viewed as gaining traction and CLPL conferences were having an influence on LA 'thinking', e.g. on the WP principles of collaboration.

There was a broad consensus across the WSs (2020-2021) that the WP had added value to the work of the LAs. This was most evident in CLN and Curriculum WSs in terms of collaboration, demonstrable knowledge mobilisation and capacity building, through sharing practice and information, and challenging pedagogy and thinking. Within these WSs, LA staff, HTs and teachers experienced enhanced professional learning, which built capacity and added value at individual and school level, through e.g. improved self-evaluation and use of data; participants citing the 'experts in the room', e.g. ROC and Education Psychologists. Some interviewees took the time to identify the impact that CLN had had on their own practice, e.g. in leadership and professional learning, knowledge and understanding. Others pointed to impact on their own LA service by professional learning; looking outward and learning from others; and increased use of collaborative action research (CAR).

WP added value to LAs by bringing quality and rigour to practice. Involvement saved LAs' time, reduced duplication, and initiated collaborations and initiatives that may not have existed, which was supported by resources and sharing of ideas across the system. The IOC initiative,

with its origins as a GCC initiative, was reported to have a notable impact in other local authorities. One of the WSs perceived that added value in this context was partly dependent on the size of the local authority, with larger authorities having more staff with more specific remits, which could present a challenge in knowledge mobilisation. To help overcome these issues, one interviewee began to offer coaching and mentoring opportunities, for example, working in partnership with other LAs and developing skill sets to take back to school.

In line with the first round of evaluation, 2021-2022 members also recognised that the WP had added value to the work of the LAs, with the evidence suggesting that it had increased and was of ***more value*** than before, due to the pandemic's impact. This was demonstrated through sharing of evidence-informed practice, development of confidence, knowledge and skills and professional learning; from high-quality programmes and providers, e.g. in United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child **(**UNCRC) training. In addition, self-evaluation processes for HMI inspection were seen to benefit from sharing evidence informed practice from across the WP authorities. Partnership working with ES added value for the WS members through e.g. the professional learning sessions on working with data for school improvement, namely, Insight, and the BGE toolkit. Effective Evaluative Writing led by ES, was another programme which was seen to add value as LA staff created action plans to take back to their own LA/schools. Other examples cited sharing experiences, resources, and good/evidence-informed practice, which fed into LA action plans. Collaborative professional enquiry and tests of change were viewed as beneficial to LA work.

The WP move to provide its programmes online was welcomed as members believed it benefitted teachers and HTs. It benefitted teachers through providing opportunities for collaborative activity and networking in an accessible online way. The accessibility of these online opportunities for teachers, removed pressure from HTs to provide similar activities. Coaching and mentoring programmes were seen to add value because in some cases LAs would not have been able to offer or get external support, for those due to capacity or finance issues.

It had added value through skills and knowledge acquisition e.g. re accreditation in PSE; learning from colleagues` presentation/discussions and the SQA Mental Health Award demonstrated how a school had taken resource materials and implemented them with a view to teaching them. The co-production of outputs featured strongly as having `impact`, as did West OS and its potential to be sustained in the medium and long term. Opportunities provided by the WP for developing alternative practices and resources led to more informed decision-making and access to other LAs, organisations, schools and programmes that would not have existed. Members indicated a range of outputs, which they believed had made a difference

e.g. Storyboards, Self-evaluation Toolkit by F and C WS with CLD, co-produced between five LAs and the HWB Matrix document, which was also jointly produced.

Reflection on how and why individuals did what they did was then shared across peer groups which led to deeper thinking on evidence to support practice. There was some indication that involvement [in the WP] had led individuals to 'raise their game', having to reflect on their practice and then share with peers led to deeper thinking around data/evidence to support practice. Impactful, indirect learning featured in relation to digital strategies and approaches shared offline; opportunities to hear/share with colleagues and learn from that added value.

The impacts from WP *culture* were seen to add value to the LAs; honesty and transparency equalled a strong network of trust, and the WP values of a shared commitment to make a difference to CYP, were viewed as 'strong and good'.

Key Definitions and Understanding of Building Collective Agency to Drive Improvement, WP 2020-2022

Most Board members reported increased collective agency and that this was underpinned by building collaboration through focussing on leadership and agency, rather than competition. Furthermore, that CLN and curriculum networks were key drivers for this process.

Building collective agency was defined through developing common understanding of improvement, through the CLN and CAR; networks affording a 'safe space' for discussion, with a democratic process in planning, and sense of ownership with leadership in building individual capacity. There was a focus on joint working between schools, and LAs e.g. IOC, which had an impact on teacher agency and empowerment. There was an impression that HTs/DHTs had been empowered by learning from others. Knowledge mobilisation across the system had led to *collective action,* e.g. practitioner volunteers developing innovative approaches. There was system-level development through the online school; resources and skills, e.g. the Digital Literacy Group fostered practitioner agency and empowerment. WS and volunteer teacher leads were key to these developments. Upskilling of staff took place which led to collective agency, development of resources and piloting activity. Professional learning of teachers had led to improvements in learning and teaching.

Most WS members (2020-2021) believed that whilst collective agency was increasing, it was too soon to talk about accelerating improvement. The impact of the pandemic was viewed as an inhibitor to accelerating improvement.

Participants (2021-2022) described building collective agency by focussing on capacity building, including staff professional capital of 'skills building', which in many instances led to

driving improvement, if not accelerating it, e.g. collaborative professional enquiry, West OS and the HWB network. Professional learning allowed practitioners to evaluate where they were in the learning, teaching and assessment cycle and to identify the professional learning which they required.

WS interviewees cited opportunities to come out of context and have the space and time to share experiences, ideas and resources, process models and pedagogy – influenced the way improvement was driven in schools – building agency, capacity and confidence. This was evident at a LA level – ability to see where work was validated or needed adjustment to align with other LAs – led to better support for teachers and schools.

WS members identified a lot of staff engaging and being upskilled, which increased agency, both individual and collective and professional capital, in shared learning, resources, ideas and connections to colleagues. Similar to 2020-2021, it was believed that Digital Officers felt more agency and knowledge through joint learning, which led to better support for teachers and schools. There was time to stop and reflect and share learning in other systems, process models and pedagogy, which led to better informed decision making (including more use of research and access to data).

Literacy discussions took place on what is good and best practice, helping to inform and drive improvement. There was supportive professional dialogue to drive improvement and find *collective solutions* to problems. Discussions between HTs enabled more autonomy in decision making and an increased sense of empowerment which built agency and drove improvement in schools. Collective capacity was also built through distributing leadership, e.g. MT training opportunities, shared with staff and then PTs leading it across staff teams. In addition, the VLNs gave the WS members impetus and reassurance (clear direction) to refocus their school improvement plans on nurturing across the whole school, the School Improvement Plan (SIP) directly addressing recovery with staff and learners.

The VLNs were considered to have built capacity in HTs and Thinking About Headship was seen to build capacity for DHTs and PTs across the WP due to the relevant and ‘real-time’ nature of the programme. Discussions between HTs enabled more autonomy in decision making and an increased sense of empowerment which built agency and drove improvement in schools, e.g. working out of school and with other schools and organisations in ASN, in a network and across other networks gave a sense of validation to decisions and activity.

Collective capacity was also built through access to WP podcasts, Twitter, Sway newsletters and research papers on topics such as remote learning. These were seen as beneficial in terms of accessibility to information and professional learning.

Summary of Key Findings:

On Defining and Understanding Impact:

- Differences made to individual and collective agency and professional capital; teacher empowerment (including confidence) from network involvement and upskilling;
- Sharing of systems improvement; collaborative/networked learning/practitioner enquiry; development of resources, pilot and inter-authority activities, e.g. assessment and moderation;
- Cohesive networks; collaboration, communication and connections enabled by open and safe space and trust established; led to collective solutions sought;
- Increased reflection in/on practice; learning, teaching and assessment, creativity and innovation and strategic/deeper thinking/collective reflection;
- Leadership capacity building; HTs/DHTs capabilities, skills and style.

On Defining and Understanding Added Value to the LAs*:*

- Mainly demonstrated though networked learning – collaborative action research and curriculum-based activity, professional learning; knowledge mobilisation, sharing practice, challenging pedagogy, and thinking; evidence-informed practice;
- Provided opportunities, removed or reduced duplication of activities, saved time and resources; accessible online professional learning and joint production of outputs/resources e.g. West OS and F and C Self-evaluation Toolkit;
- Added value at individual, school and service level; improved self-evaluation and use of data and quality and rigour in professional learning;
- Supported increased focus and helped shape direction for individual LAs;
- Brought added value through reinforcing WP values, regarding commitment to making a difference to CYP and the culture impacts of honesty, trust and transparency.

On Defining and Understanding Building Collective Agency to Drive Improvement:

- Defined through developing a common understanding of improvement, through CLN and CAR networks and professional dialogue to find collective solutions;
- Individual and collective capacity and professional capital building through collective discussion, ownership of planning and leadership; skills building and accessibility of information and professional learning; formal and informal;

- Teacher empowerment through professional learning and joint working; between schools and LAs, e.g. IOC and HT empowerment and `distributing leadership`, through learning from others;
- Systems-level development; collective action, volunteer teacher leads on subject/curriculum networks and West OS, sharing learning, ideas, joint-production, process models and pedagogy e.g. in assessment and moderation.

4. Conclusion

As we indicated in section 1, this report is the first of three over 2022-2023, as such our purpose is to address two key research objectives for the WP:

1. To what extent WP workstreams and programmes are being implemented in schools and classrooms

2. If and how are these workstreams and programmes impacting on children, young people and families.

We therefore framed the aforecited six key research questions to achieve those objectives. It is too early in the evaluation process to reach any definitive conclusions; we intend to fully address all the key research questions and offer conclusions in Phase 3. However, we have addressed key research question 1: What do the WP and its stakeholders mean by impact?

We have also laid the foundations to address the others by identifying and summarising the key findings in section 3: definitions and criteria around the main themes of understanding of intended impact, added value and building collective agency across the WP to date, with some tentative judgement on progress at classroom/school and system level. These are closely inter-related, they don't stand alone; however, we feel it important to represent separately because they not only represent participants' responses, but also demonstrate contextual and nuanced differences, which are important in evaluation of highly complex, multi-faceted collaborations of this nature.

Although this evaluation phase is a retrospective view of WP *impact* (2020-2022) and not an evaluation of process, it is also important to emphasise the context for some of the changes that have been made to WP programmes and delivery structure and the reasoning behind those. The CLN WS ceased to be `stand-alone`, but instead was offered on specific programmes, with collaborative action research also integrated into other WP activity. The online SSN activity offered by the WP was, in the main, a response to the challenges of the pandemic and needs of the system at the time, particularly in alternative certification. Once schools had returned, post-pandemic, to `near normality`, it was deemed more appropriate for LAs to provide this function again. Similarly, as the VLNs had arisen as a response to the pandemic to support school leaders at the time, those `evolved` into other context, as changing needs dictated. These examples illustrate the growing maturity of the WP and its ability as a networked system to respond ably and flexibly to an ever-changing environment.

4.1 Critical Reflection and Concluding Remarks

There are understandably, similarities over the two rounds of external evaluation in terms of members` definitions of impact or differences made; in relation to changes in agency, both individual and collective and in professional capital, which fed into changes in practice and collaborative learning through the networks, programmes and events.

Empowerment came from building relationships/partnerships with other practitioners/schools and sharing resources, good/evidence informed practice and joint working. However, there is a sense that *more significant impacts* or changes occurred in the latter academic year (2021-2022). It is also worth acknowledging that relationships (across the eight LAs/WP) have been beneficial and strengthened during the pandemic, both at a strategic level and across the WSs. Relationships were cemented, and extended, which led to more openness and willingness to collaborate, which in turn led to increased opportunities for practitioners to learn and try new approaches to practice. This is aligned to increased feelings of empowerment, and confidence, particularly amongst HTs, building their leadership capacity and that of DHTs, in addition to impacts upon the 'volunteer' teachers and the upskilling of practitioners. Similarly, evidence suggests that more reflection/deeper thinking took place in the same period, which informed not only changes to practice, but also changes to policy at school level and LA level.

There was a stronger theme from the second round of evaluation findings about the added value from the WP to the work of the LAs. Although there was broad consensus in the former period (2020-2021) that it had added value, there was a recognisable *shift* in the degree of added value in the following year (2021-2022). Participants were very clear about how it had impacted on them, their school, their service, and LA during the worst of the pandemic, with many cited examples to demonstrate impact or differences made. There were more references to the *culture* created by the WP in relation to trust, honesty and transparency. Interestingly, there was more mention of the *values* of the WP, which were framed in potential outcomes for learners. Whilst the former round of evaluation (2020-2021) elicited many references to the 'sharing of good practice' in terms of added value, there was more of a tendency in the latter round (2021-2022) to refer to evidence-informed practice. This was seen to enable better informed decision-making for both teachers and LA staff.

The findings from 2020-2021 show that the foundations were laid to build collective agency and whilst not 'accelerating improvement', WP developments had contributed to it at school and LA level, although this was mainly expressed through changes to individual, rather than collective agency. This was seen to be mainly through CLN and the CAR approach, West OS and IOC and other professional learning. Practitioner enquiry was expressed in broader terms

in the second round of evaluation (2021-2022) and there was more mention of professional or collaborative learning from, e.g. West OS and other networks, particularly in *upskilling,* of both teachers and LA staff.

There was also more of a recognition by the participants, of collective agency being built, through collective capacity and a clearer association as to how this led to, or in some cases, was driving or accelerating improvement. Whilst space and time to come out of context, featured over both periods it was recognised more in the latter period, and *particularly by HTs*, who not only welcomed the opportunity to share and reflect with peers, with HWB featuring strongly in encapsulating learning from e.g. VLN networks and subsequently informing School Improvement Plans (SIP).

The key stakeholders in the WP have largely defined impact through differences made at an individual practitioner, school and service level in the various eco-systems; those differences have been expressed or understood, in relation to changes in agency; individual and collective, professional and social capital, leading to collective capacity being built. It is the understanding of the participants that these impacts have, but not entirely, arisen from collaborative enquiry/networked learning, the curriculum/subject networks, assessment and moderation activity, IOC and the VLNs.

One small LA suggested the biggest positive impact for them had been through their primary schools` involvement in IOC. Similarly, another small authority recognised the benefits of their primary schools using practitioner enquiry to drive improvement in schools. However, impact or reach is not confined to small LAs, we noted earlier the impact of assessment and moderation activity in a large WP LA and across other WP LAs. These examples demonstrate an important point re defining or understanding *impact,* in that it is not, nor will be, the same for every individual practitioner, school, or LA in the WP. This is dependent on myriad variables; some of which we hope to explore in subsequent evaluation phases.

Direct and indirect impacts have occurred at each level of the system with a growing cadre of middle managers versed in practitioner enquiry. The WP has grown capabilities in and across the system, with school practitioners, HTs and LA Officers *collaborating* across geographical, organisational and sectoral boundaries. There has been a shift in the balance from sharing practice to moving ideas, expertise and knowledge around the system towards higher levels of joint practice development (Fielding et al., 2005) and the generation of new practices, as exemplified in section 3. Systemic as well as informal collaborative efforts led to significant learning and teaching developments. One such systems-level development that had gained increased traction was the online school. The development of resources and skills regarding

online learning had been accelerated. Systemic or transformative change has been though West OS in having a major impact in enhancing online learning in, across, out of schools and on the system more broadly.

There has been less reference, understandably given the scale and time in operation of the WP, not to mention a pandemic, to outcomes. Whilst recognising significant impacts have taken place, which have led to systems improvement and impacted on learners, the *extent* to which this impacted on schools/partnerships, reached teachers in schools and driven improvement in classrooms/schools is not easy to assess fully at the moment. More evidence is required on the *scale of impact* and on *outcomes for learners*. This will be one of the challenges for the subsequent phases of evaluation and we will use the findings from this phase to inform our research approach in the next. We are in a good position given the evidence presented here and drawing on some of the literature in this area (Outhwaite, et. al.,2020) to focus more on professional judgement and practitioner evidence as a robust indicator of impact on learners/in classrooms, in the future.

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