Evaluation Summaries:

Strategic Infrastructure and Investment Fund (SIIF)

College Development Network (CDN)

Strategic Funds Review - College Development Network (CDN)

About Evaluation Summaries

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Evaluation Summaries are part of our ambition to share learning from our evaluations, to increase knowledge for the sector and generate new ideas.

Evaluation Summaries present an overview of the work that was undertaken, key learning and recommendations.

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Area in Focus: Strategic Funds Review

1. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has committed to undertake a review of its Strategic Infrastructure and Investment Fund (SIIF). As part of this review, we are evaluating current investments in detail, to understand outcomes, impact, and value for money. This summary provides an overview of the evaluation of SFC's annual SIIF investment in the College Development Network (CDN) in Academic Years (AY) 2021/22 to AY 2023/24.

Methodology

2. The evaluation was undertaken by SFC's Evaluation and Impact team to understand what has been delivered by CDN, the extent to which activities meet the agreed funding outcomes, the impact of the activities, and whether the services provided by CDN are meeting the current and future needs of colleges in Scotland. The evaluation included:

   - A desk-based review of reporting documents provided by SFC colleagues and CDN, focused on the SIIF reporting documents – Return on Strategic Investment (ROSI) forms.

   - Remote one-to-one interviews with seven staff from five agencies who regularly strategically collaborate on areas of work with the CDN and six network leads.

   - An online survey aimed at College Principals and Chairs (responses from 17 colleges).

   - Feedback from seven members of SFC staff who were involved with the CDN work.

Limitations

3. Due to the scope, available resources and timeframe, there were some limitations to the review:

   - The survey was distributed to college principals and vice-principals. Had time permitted it would have been helpful to include the views of a wider range of stakeholders.

   - We undertook a purposive sample of those who were most active in Strategic Networks and Communities of Practice (COPs) for the interviews. If time/capacity had permitted all the strategic networks and COPs would have been included.

   - Partner agencies invited to interviews were those currently most active in the work of CDN. If time and capacity had permitted, all agencies identified on CDN ROSI returns as contributing to SIIF-funded activities would have been invited.

- Over the period covered by this review, SFC changed its approach to monitoring and evaluation, including changes to the ROSI returns, shifting from a focus on reporting activities delivered (AY 2021/22 and AY 2022/23) to increased attention on outcomes and impact (AY 2023/24). Work to enhance SFC's approach to monitoring and evaluation continues to evolve.

College Development Network

4. SFC recognises the role of CDN as a quality-improvement and skills development agency for colleges in Scotland, supporting the SFC in delivering its statutory duties to secure coherent, high-quality provision and enhance the quality of this provision. CDN aims to do this by enhancing institutional performance and workforce capabilities to support a high quality and high performing tertiary sector.

Funding

5. SFC has provided annual funding to CDN since 2009. Within the scope of the review period SFC awarded CDN £1,613,000 in AY 2021/22 and AY 2022/23. In AY 2023/24, £1,371,050 was awarded to the CDN by SFC - this represented a 15% cut in funding from the previous year, linked to refocused strategic and operational priorities. A flat cash settlement of £1,371,050 was agreed for AY 2024/25.

Reach

6. Scotland's colleges have a combined workforce of 14,147 (49 per cent teaching staff and 51 per cent non-teaching staff - based on latest SFC College Staffing Data, AY 2022/23), and approximately 360 board members. The potential reach of CDN's activities includes the workforce and board members of 24 colleges in Scotland.

7. The reported aggregated reach of CDN's activities in AY 2023/24 was approximately 6,900 - an increase from approximately 4,000 in AY 2022/23. The approximated number includes all staff attending CDN activities such as college staff development, conference sessions, online training, specific courses and active users of Learn Online. SFC's ROSI returns have not routinely requested or contained detailed reach characteristics, e.g., institution/workforce participation in CDN activities.

CDN has refocused activity on core areas of quality improvement and enhancement

8. Prior to the review period CDN was suggested to have experienced 'mission drift' due to

factors such as seeking to address sector needs which were not provided by other agencies and the need to generate alternative income streams. CDN has since worked closely with SFC lead officers and the executive team to embed SFC and Scottish Government priorities within their strategic direction and outcome/funding agreements and has made progress by refocusing activities on core areas of quality improvement and the enhancement of college governance and leadership.

"CDN has morphed into various ways over years…they didn't focus on core functions of colleges, or the wicked issues and challenges…they had lots of commercial ideas which took them off in other directions…they then all go down different rabbit holes…I think it's in a good place now." (A2)

9. CDN appointed a new chair and a new chief executive in 2023. In AY2023/24, in response to a 15 per cent reduction in funding from the SFC, CDN developed a restructuring plan, including a reduction of 16 per cent in total staffing (currently 15.6 FTE) and a *"refocusing of the organisation around insight, delivery and impact."* (ROSI AY 2023/24). The refocusing of CDN's activity has been supported by the SFC through regular meetings, quarterly reviews and a programme lead who has oversight of the quality-focused agencies to support co-ordination of partnership working.

CDN has delivered a range of activities as a result of SIIF investment

10. Over the review period AY2021/22 – AY 2023/24, CDN delivered:

- Strategic Networks and Communities of Practice (COP).
- Training, including:
  - Training and support for Boards
  - Leadership training
  - Teaching in Colleges Today (TiCT) qualification.
- Online development resources.
- Sector-based research and insights, including the CAIRN journal.
- Development support, alongside other agencies, for the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF).

11. Additional activities in each year have varied in response to requests from SFC or the sector. Examples include the Regional Pathfinders programme, the Climate Emergency

Response and campaigning (#ChooseCollege).

12. Activity is routinely monitored through regular meetings between the SFC and CDN. CDN reported a high level of satisfaction across all its provision - approximately 65 per cent of respondents rated their experience as highly satisfied/ excellent in AY 2022/23 and 72 per cent responded in the same way in AY 2023/24.

13. CDN's delivery of contextualised training to colleges is important. This includes design and delivery of a National Board/Governance Development programme. Approximately 710 College board members and governance professionals completed the CDN National Board Development Programme across the review period (AY 2021/22 – AY 2023/23). Working with the Good Governance Steering Group, CDN has also supported the development of the Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges, and research including reports on External College Governance Reviews.

14. CDN's leadership development programmes were suggested to be of value to participants and contribute to staff achieving senior roles, although a minority of respondents to our survey suggested a need for more comprehensive Executive Leadership training. CDN reported that previous iterations, including the separately funded Preparing for Executive Leadership (PEL) programme, were financially unsustainable. CDN acknowledged changes in their Executive Leadership programme, due to developing an offer which is affordable for colleges and sustainable within SFC funding. The programme currently covers media training, leading in times of challenge and crisis, and leading change, college contribution for the Executive Leadership programme was reduced from £2,500 to £1,500 in AY 2023/24 - CDN reports that take up remains low (26 individuals in AY 2022/23 and 13 individuals in AY 2023/24).

15. In response to learning from their Pathways to Poverty best practice reports, CDN has developed and piloted a Trauma-Informed Colleges programme, to which 22 out of 24 colleges are signed up, with over 50 leads trained and 1,910 college staff involved in briefing and training sessions (AY 2022/23 and AY 2023/24). Embedding trauma-informed approaches is also part of The Changing Learner programme. Eighteen colleges are signed up to this through the College Delivery Agreements (CDAs) (AY 2024/25).

16. Ten respondents to SFC's survey suggested 19 organisations that they had accessed to provide similar 'critical' services/activities to CDN. The extent to which these organisations were accessed by colleges, and the quality/satisfaction with provision was not within the scope of the survey. Only two of the ten respondents suggested preference for accessing other providers.

CDN has increased engagement with the sector

17. CDN consults and gathers feedback from the sector, including through a biennial Workforce Survey and through producing or collaborating on research in areas affecting the sector. The CDN Research and Enhancement Centre launched in April 2021. The Centre website includes materials, copies of reports and case studies. The Centre responds to requests for support/research from SFC and the Curriculum and Assessment Board. This work is delivered through an associate model of delivery. CDN has reported where they have embedded research into the development of CPD programmes. Those that responded to the survey gave mixed feedback regarding the perceived value for money of the research to the sector and its alignment to CDN's role. This may be due, in part, to a lack of awareness of CDN's contribution to research, which is often in partnership with other agencies.

18. CDN's engagement with colleges has been recently enhanced through College Delivery Agreements (CDAs). CDN has identified work deliverables for 19 colleges and future meetings are scheduled with three colleges (reported February 2024). Feedback from the sector as part of this evaluation welcomed this approach. Future training and development priorities and opportunities have been identified through the CDAs, including digital skills, Artificial Intelligence and the Changing Learner programme.

The remit of SFC funded agencies is not always clear

19. CDN interacts with a range of agencies in developing and delivering its work. During the period within scope of this review, written documents highlighted that CDN formally engaged with 15 agencies for which there were examples of work outputs or outcomes. It is important for SFC to cross-reference funded projects to ensure clarity and maximise opportunities for collaboration where appropriate – two examples were shared in which the funding agreements of other agencies identified a requirement to work with the CDN, but this had not been reflected in the CDN's own agreement.

20. Many comments from respondents in this review highlighted the importance of increased understanding and awareness across the sector about the contributions of different agencies to programmes of work, so that individuals do not have to 'join the dots'. This was also inferred in comments which queried why CDN had undertaken some strands of work. Queries regarding overlap of agencies were focused on the distinction between CDN and Colleges Scotland (survey n=5, interviews n=2). The overlap was suggested to be due to the types of activities delivered by the two organisations. Examples included the 'Choose college' campaign, and activities the respondents felt were strategic or policy-related.

CDN plays an important role as an intermediary agency

21. Participants in this review suggested that CDN's value lies in its provision of relevant, timely and contextualised training for the college sector. This is enabled by CDN's knowledge and positioning as an intermediary agency, supporting peer-peer interaction, agency engagement with the sector, contributing to learning and dissemination of information through partnership working.

22. CDN plays an important role as an intermediary agency, both for staff in the facilitation of peer-to-peer learning and for other agencies to connect with the workforce and disseminate information. The review feedback suggests it is important that CDN continues to have this role and continues to focus on the delivery of quality enhancement.

"It needs CDN to be working with the sector as to what are the issues – you know as we are having funding squeezes, it's more important than ever to pull that (learning) together and be the glue and I think that's where CDN has a role." (N2)

23. One medium by which CDN provides an intermediary role is through its 14 Strategic Networks and 23 Communities of Practice (COP). Stakeholder views about the groups were generally positive, there were some queries about the number of groups, their effectiveness, and level of facilitation by CDN. CDN is currently reviewing the remit of these groups, sharing an overview of the purpose of the groups with colleges, and establishing a process to increase communication of learning between the groups (AY 2024/25).

CDN is committed to supporting SFC to meet strategic priorities

24. Across the review period, CDN delivered activities that align to its strategic priorities, and worked with SFC to ensure that these reflect Scottish Government, National Performance Framework (NPF) and SFC strategic priorities. Over the period, there has also been a refocus of CDN's activities on core areas of quality enhancement and the enhancement of college governance and leadership.

25. CDN, including the chief executive, the chair of the board and other identified staff were engaged in the review, sharing learning reports and reflections, responding to requests for further information, and supporting the dissemination of information to wider networks.

Key recommendations

- SFC and CDN should work together to understand the learning and development needs of leaders, staff and the wider sector and target work accordingly, for example in the areas of Artificial Intelligence, Digital Skills and Sustainability.

- CDN and SFC should continue to work together to ensure that CDN's model of delivery, including the College Development Agreements (CDAs), continue to match SFC's priorities.

- SFC and CDN should work together to provide increased clarity on the role and contribution of different agencies in delivering activities and outputs and explore further opportunities for collaboration. This should be explicitly stated in all relevant funding agreements.

- SFC and CDN should work together to support the development and implementation of monitoring and evaluation processes which are proportionate to CDN's activities and link to wider developments in monitoring and evaluating SFCs strategic investments.

- Consideration should be given to a longer-term commitment for any future funding agreement (subject to Scottish Government funding availability).