



Department  
for Education

# Strategic College Improvement Fund (SCIF) pilot: process evaluation

Research report

February 2019

CooperGibson Research



Social Science in Government

## **Acknowledgements**

The research team would like to express sincere thanks to all colleges involved in the SCIF pilot for their cooperation with, and support of, the evaluation. We would also like to extend our thanks to research and policy colleagues at the Department for Education for their support in overseeing this study and their feedback on the report.

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# Executive Summary

## Background

The Strategic College Improvement Fund (SCIF) was launched as a pilot on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2017. The SCIF is designed to help address weaknesses in the quality of provision in further education (FE) and sixth-form colleges identified as needing to improve<sup>1</sup>. The SCIF programme is based on a peer support model. Colleges that are awarded the SCIF funding are partnered with one or more higher-performing college(s) to undertake a focused quality improvement programme.

The pilot SCIF programme involved 14 colleges that had successfully applied for the SCIF funding. Six colleges received funding in the first wave of applications and began work in January 2018; eight colleges received funding in the second wave and began work in March/April 2018.

To inform wider roll-out of the SCIF, CooperGibson Research was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to conduct a process evaluation of the SCIF pilot. In addition, CooperGibson Research provided tailored specialist advice to participating colleges to support the development of college self-evaluation plans for the SCIF activity.

## Aims and objectives

The overall aims of this research were to:

- Review the SCIF process, including the application process and partnership model, to identify what worked well, explore benefits and examine where refinements to policy and processes could be made.
- Identify lessons learned, and any opportunities during the early phase of the pilot project to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the SCIF process.
- Identify the progress that SCIF colleges made against project aims, whilst considering that full impact would not be seen ahead of the full SCIF roll-out.
- Work in partnership with pilot phase colleges, providing bespoke advice and support to enable them to develop appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs) and deliver high quality self-evaluations for the SCIF projects.

The research explored the design, set-up and delivery of the SCIF projects across the 14 applicant colleges. It also addressed early indications of effectiveness and perceptions around short-term, and potential long-term, impact.

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<sup>1</sup> Indicated by an Ofsted inspection rating of requires improvement or inadequate for overall effectiveness or apprenticeship provision at their most recent inspection.

## Methodology

The qualitative methodology for this evaluation comprised interviews with:

- Four representatives from the FE sector, plus members of the relevant DfE policy team.
- The 14 colleges in receipt of the SCIF funding.
- The 11 partner colleges identified to work with each applicant college (one college supported three applicant colleges, one supported two applicant colleges<sup>2</sup>).
- Four colleges that applied for the SCIF funding but were unsuccessful.

Visits and interviews with applicant and partner colleges were completed across two phases<sup>3</sup> of fieldwork. In total, 77 interviews (45 at applicant colleges and 32 at partner colleges) were conducted during phase one, and 118 interviews (89 at applicant colleges and 29 at partner colleges) were conducted during phase two.

The evaluation team also provided support to each applicant college to ensure that, as much as possible, they had robust self-evaluation plans in place for the SCIF projects. This included helping applicant colleges to identify a set of objectives and key performance indicators which were SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound). Self-evaluation reports were submitted to the DfE from November 2018 to January 2019. There will be a further supplementary findings report reviewing the self-evaluations from the SCIF pilot phase which will be published separately.

## Key findings

### Overall perceptions of the SCIF pilot

The SCIF was perceived by all applicant colleges to be an excellent opportunity to accelerate improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. Although prior to the SCIF some colleges were involved in a range of collaborative activity, all agreed that the SCIF had formalised and increased the intensity of partnership working. This would not have been possible using existing financial and staffing resources.

The SCIF encouraged a more meaningful collaboration between colleges, based on a model of self-improvement. Colleges and stakeholders welcomed this approach as a cost-effective means to maintaining and developing expertise within the FE sector. All applicant colleges felt that the SCIF funding had enhanced activities contained within existing Quality Improvement Plans, or supported delivery of new improvement activities.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, participating colleges are referred to as 'applicant colleges' and 'partner colleges' throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Phase one: January to April 2018; phase two: May to June 2018.

## **Developing the SCIF bid**

Applicant colleges reported that several factors were important when choosing a partner college: the synergy of college provision, geographical location, shared college cultures, and identifying a partner that had been on a similar improvement journey.

Most applicant colleges applied to the SCIF after having completed a diagnostic assessment with the partner college. Due to time constraints for the application, the thoroughness of these diagnostics was variable. All stakeholders felt that a robust diagnostic was an important part of the application process and that this needed to be reflected in the timescales for submission. Short timescales for submission also limited the ability of senior leaders to consult with wider college staff and the thoroughness of delivery plans was compromised.

## **Interventions**

The SCIF activities involved a wide range of college staff (principals, senior leaders, middle leaders, some teaching staff and support staff). Applicant colleges focused on a wide range of areas and activities, including developing and improving college strategies and systems, teaching and learning, English and mathematics (and other departments identified via self-assessment as requiring improvement), and recruitment and retention. Methods for delivering interventions included peer-to-peer development work, continuing professional development (CPD) and delivery of training to upskill leaders and teachers.

Principals and senior leaders from applicant colleges met individually and as a group with partner colleges. In some cases, partner college senior leaders attended applicant college meetings to observe discussions and understand how accountability was assured within the applicant college. Middle leaders worked with their counterparts in the partner college to observe lessons, review resources, scrutinise data and share ideas to improve practice.

## **Perceived Early Impact**

Due to pilot reporting timeframes it was too early to report the impact of SCIF on quantitative measures such as attainment, attendance and retention. Perceived impact of the SCIF activities to-date therefore related to changes and improvements in strategies, policies, and teaching, learning and assessment practices. Notable changes were reported in the culture of applicant colleges, particularly a renewed commitment and confidence among senior leaders to implement change.

Other emerging impacts reported by colleges included:

- Improved performance management systems and approaches, including targeted/tailored use of data.
- More confidence among middle leaders to undertake learning walks and lesson observations effectively, leading to improved teaching practice.
- Improved English and mathematics provision including staff training, progress tracking, and target setting.
- Strengthened roles and responsibilities within apprenticeship delivery, and better understanding of the importance of employer engagement.

## **Effectiveness of the SCIF model**

The model for the SCIF programme received overwhelming support from applicant colleges, partners and wider stakeholders. The following features were perceived to be of particular benefit:

- The focus on sector self-improvement, encouraging the sharing of good practice and collaboration via support services purchased primarily from other colleges.
- An injection of funding, which allowed for additional training and development support to improve practice.
- A level of flexibility allowed by the DfE in the delivery of the SCIF projects. Colleges often spoke of emerging or changing priorities and their ability to reschedule, substitute or enhance planned activities. This helped to maximise the value and benefit of improvement activities.

The partnership between applicant and partner colleges was a critical factor influencing the SCIF and the outcomes it achieved at a college level. The following factors were fundamental to successful partnerships:

- Trust and transparency developed through a genuine commitment and willingness to share knowledge, resources and processes openly.
- Awareness of a partner college's own improvement journey, which encouraged empathy and understanding between college teams.
- The opportunity for applicant colleges to visit partner colleges, to observe and discuss practice directly.
- Peer-to-peer working based around a critical friend approach, where staff felt able to share ideas and critique current practices.

## Challenges

There were some challenges experienced during the SCIF pilot:

- Colleges needed to be pragmatic and realistic regarding the potential demand on staff time during planning and delivery. Some activities were delayed due to capacity issues and competing demands within colleges.
- Applicant colleges' capacity to undertake monitoring and evaluation varied. In some cases, colleges outsourced this activity.
- Timescales for delivery were challenging for the majority of colleges, with feedback that there was not sufficient time for project lead-in. Colleges suggested revised timescales to align better with internal planning systems and the academic year.<sup>4</sup>
- Although improvements in colleges' strategies, systems and teaching and learning were reported, the extent to which changes in KPIs (attainment, attendance, recruitment, and student progress) could be realised within the timescale of the pilot was recognised as a challenge by most colleges.
- The SCIF plans were closely related to work already underway as part of existing Quality Improvement Plans. Therefore, due to the range of quality improvement activities that were being delivered alongside the SCIF, colleges could not attribute improvements in KPIs solely to the SCIF projects.

## Considerations for future delivery

### Improving SCIF applications

- Colleges would benefit from additional guidance and support through the application process, particularly in relation to costings and setting baseline performance indicators.
- Funding should be conditional on the completion of diagnostics before a college makes its application.
- A longer lead-in time for project design and planning would help colleges reflect on what was required and achievable.
- A partner college's ability and capacity to support more than one college should be carefully considered during the application and award processes.
- A more formal process identifying colleges as potential partners would help ensure the highest level of support was provided to applicant colleges.

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<sup>4</sup> SCIF delivery timescales were extended at some colleges through Autumn 2018.

## **SCIF delivery**

- Consideration should be given as to how the learning from individual colleges' SCIF projects could be shared more broadly.
- Allowing for sufficient time in delivery timescales will give colleges the time to identify the delivery activities that will make the greatest impact.
- Sustainability should be a key consideration during planning and delivery of the SCIF activities.

## **Evidencing impact**

- Colleges should be further encouraged to robustly monitor their progress and provide evidence of activities completed and outcomes achieved.
- A clear reporting template supporting the self-evaluation should accompany the set of SCIF resources to successful applicants. Costing for self-evaluation activities could be a standard feature of proposals to improve engagement and rigour.
- Any future impact evaluation commissioned, or any further self-evaluation conducted by the SCIF colleges, should fully consider quantitative measures and how best to evidence and attribute impact of activities and interventions undertaken during the programme.

# 1. Introduction

The Strategic College Improvement Fund (SCIF) Pilot was launched as a pilot on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2017, with the aim of helping to address weaknesses in the quality of provision delivered by further education (FE) and sixth-form colleges identified as needing to improve.<sup>5</sup> CooperGibson Research was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to carry out a process evaluation of the SCIF pilot, to inform the national roll-out of the SCIF.<sup>6</sup>

The pilot SCIF programme involved 14 colleges that had successfully applied for SCIF funding. Applications were received in two waves. The first wave of applications was received in November 2017, from which six colleges (four general FE colleges and two sixth form colleges) received funding. The second wave of applications was received in January 2018, from which eight general FE colleges received funding. The six colleges that received funding in the first wave of applications began work in January 2018, and the eight colleges that received funding in the second wave began work in March/April 2018.

This report provides an overview of the implementation of the SCIF pilot programme, key findings from the application process, lessons learned in delivery, and perceptions of early impact from across the 14 SCIF pilot projects.

## 1.1 Background to the SCIF pilot

The SCIF programme of support is one of a suite of initiatives aimed at addressing weaknesses in the quality of provision delivered by some FE and sixth form colleges, whilst drawing on the knowledge and experience of stronger providers. Other improvement initiatives include an expanded role for the FE Commissioner to help support improvement in colleges at risk of failure, and a new National Leaders of Further Education (NLFE) programme which was launched in October 2017.<sup>7</sup>

The SCIF is designed to support general FE and sixth-form colleges that need to improve the quality of provision, including for apprenticeships. The programme is based on a peer support model. Colleges awarded the SCIF funding partner with one or more higher-performing college(s) to undertake focused quality improvement activities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Indicated by an Ofsted inspection rating of requires improvement or inadequate for overall effectiveness or apprenticeship provision at their most recent inspection.

<sup>6</sup> Announced by the DfE on 28 June 2018: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-applicants-to-the-strategic-college-improvement-fund>.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-leaders-of-further-education-guidance-for-potential-applicants>

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this report they are referred to as 'applicant colleges' and 'partner colleges'. Where 'colleges' are referred to more generally, this means that the feedback being reported was provided by both applicant and partner colleges.

For the pilot programme, the latest Ofsted grading was used as an indicator to identify colleges that were eligible for support (those rated as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' - grades 3 and 4 - for overall effectiveness or apprenticeship provision at the most recent inspection). Eligible colleges were able to apply for a grant of between £50,000 and £250,000, although this was an indicative range and applications requesting funding outside this range were considered. There was also the expectation that participating colleges would provide match-funding.<sup>9</sup> Grant funding was expected to be spent by 31 July 2018, with a proportion used by 31 March 2018.<sup>10</sup>

The plans developed by pilot colleges included a range of improvement initiatives focused on aspects of provision such as business strategy, performance management, curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment, and governance.

The 14 pilot colleges in receipt of the SCIF funding were also required to design and produce self-evaluations to allow them to learn from the improvement activities they had implemented. These were expected to explore key deliverables, performance indicators and success measures, and provide data to identify the impact of college projects. In general terms, colleges were expected to implement quality improvement activities that led to increases in rates of attendance, progress, retention, and achievement.

Pilot colleges' self-evaluation reports were submitted to the DfE from November 2018 to January 2019. There will be a further supplementary findings report reviewing the self-evaluations from the SCIF pilot phase which will be published separately.

## 1.2 Aims and objectives

The overall aims of this research were to:

- Review the SCIF pilot process, including the application process and partnership model, to identify what worked well, benefits, and where refinements to policy and processes could be made.
- Identify lessons learned, and any opportunities during the early phase of the pilot project to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the SCIF process.
- Identify the progress that SCIF colleges made against project aims, whilst considering that full impact would not be seen ahead of the full SCIF roll-out.
- Work in partnership with pilot phase colleges, providing bespoke advice and support to enable them to develop appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs) and deliver high quality self-evaluations for the SCIF projects.

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<sup>9</sup> Match funding of £1 for every £3 of grant. Matched funding could be waived where it was deemed appropriate.

<sup>10</sup> During the SCIF pilot, some colleges were granted extensions to their timescales for grant spend.

To achieve these aims, the following objectives were set:

- Understand how well the application process worked and identify any improvements that could be made.
- Explore elements of the pilot process that worked well, or less well, and determine the reasons for this – identifying any benefits, challenges and unintended consequences of the programme design.
- Explore the partnership approach, how partners were selected, how partnerships developed, any benefits and limitations of the partnership model, and how effectively the partnerships worked.
- Explore how the SCIF pilot model was delivered, including activities/processes that were effective and replicable in other colleges, and perceptions of early impact.
- Identify how well college projects progressed as a result of the SCIF support, and whether they were on track to meet aims and objectives.
- Identify any potential improvements and changes to ensure that projects in mainstage roll-out stood the best chance of success.

## 2. Methodology

This section explains the approach taken to the process evaluation and details the key stakeholders engaged in the research.

### 2.1 Fieldwork

The study was based on a qualitative methodology, comprising interviews and visits with:

- Four representatives from the FE sector and members of the relevant policy team within the DfE. The names of organisations and key contacts selected for interview were provided to the researchers by the DfE. Interviews explored their views on the benefits of the SCIF, perceptions of potential limitations and any lessons learned in the programme design.
- The 14 colleges in receipt of the SCIF pilot funding (referred to throughout as ‘applicant colleges’) and the 11 key partner colleges providing improvement support (referred to throughout as ‘partner colleges’).<sup>11</sup>
- Four colleges (two applicant and two partner colleges) that applied for SCIF funding but were unsuccessful. These were randomly selected from the list of unsuccessful applicant colleges, of which there were 14 in total.

The interview guides were agreed with the DfE and are included in Annex A.

Interviews with applicant colleges and partner colleges were completed across two phases:

- **Phase one:** January to April 2018 – exploring application processes, and set-up of the pilots.
- **Phase two:** May to June 2018 – exploring implementation, delivery, lessons learned, and early perceptions of impact.

Representatives from each applicant and partner college were visited or interviewed during both phase one and two. During the phase one visits, interviews were predominately conducted with applicant and partner college representatives involved in the application process and set-up of the SCIF project (e.g. principals, vice-principals and other senior leaders). The phase two visits involved interviews with a wider range of applicant and partner college representatives, including those directly involved in leading distinct strands of SCIF projects (e.g. curriculum and departmental leads) and those that had been involved in delivery in other ways (e.g. tutors, support staff). Senior leaders were also interviewed for a second time.

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<sup>11</sup> Where ‘colleges’ are referred to more generally, this means that the feedback being reported was provided by both applicant and partner colleges.

Face-to-face visits were requested with each applicant and partner college. Where these were not possible due to college staff availability and timings, telephone interviews were undertaken. Table 1 provides an overview of interviews completed.

**Table 1: Number of interviews by college type**

	<b>Phase one interviews</b>	<b>Phase two interviews</b>
Applicant college	45	89
Partner college/s	32	29
<b>Total interviews</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>118</b>

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the number of interviews completed by job role across applicant and partner colleges.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 2: Number of interviews by job role**

	<b>Phase one interviews</b>	<b>Phase two interviews</b>
Senior leadership team (including principals, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), executive directors)	58	59
Middle leaders (including heads of department and heads of subject/service)	9	38
Teaching staff (including course leaders, teachers and tutors)	3	11
Support staff	5	7
Consultants/wider staff	2	3
<b>Total interviews</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>118</b>

Phase one visits focused on the application process, progress to-date, effective partnership working, and any early signs of impact or success that had been observed by colleges. This phase of interviews fed into a presentation of key findings made to the DfE in May 2018, which helped inform decisions on the design of the SCIF for the national

<sup>12</sup> Some partner colleges offered support to multiple applicant colleges. To reduce burden on staff, and where possible, these partner colleges were asked about each college they were supporting during a single interview. Most of the applicant and partner colleges also participated in interim progress calls with the evaluation team. These are not recorded as separate interviews.

roll-out and changes to the application process (see Chapter 3)<sup>13</sup>. Phase two visits focused more on progress to-date, effectiveness of the partnership model, emerging impact, lessons learned and challenges in delivery.

The evaluation team also provided support to ensure that, as much as possible, colleges had robust self-evaluation plans in place for the SCIF programmes of work, and had identified a set of objectives and key performance indicators which were SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound). Colleges' self-evaluation reports were submitted to the DfE from November 2018 to January 2019. There will be a further supplementary findings report reviewing the self-evaluations from the SCIF pilot phase which will be published separately.

## **2.2 Methodological considerations**

### **2.2.1 Understanding progress in delivery**

Establishing the extent to which colleges delivered the SCIF pilot projects within the agreed timeframes was an important aspect of evaluating the effectiveness of the SCIF model. However, progress against each intervention was challenging to track in some colleges, particularly where there had been delays or where there were interlinking strands of delivery. In addition, the level of detail included in the monitoring reports provided to the DfE varied considerably.

### **2.2.2 Evidencing impact**

The timeframes in which the college SCIF projects were designed and delivered meant that student outcomes data were not available for the purposes of this report. Colleges will therefore measure impact through self-evaluations via a mixture of proxy/interim measures and longer-term performance and achievement measures available by November 2018. Consequently, findings in this report related to impact are best considered indicative.

There were delays in the delivery of many SCIF activities (across both types of college), and new systems and strategies were sometimes implemented much later than originally planned. This meant that during the visits and interviews, college leaders were estimating the potential impact of SCIF activities. In some colleges, the timeframe for delivery was extended to December 2018 and therefore any impact on outcomes may not be realised until the summer term of the 2018-19 academic year at the earliest.

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<sup>13</sup> Announced by the DfE on 28 June 2018: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-applicants-to-the-strategic-college-improvement-fund>

### **2.2.3 Attributing improvements to the SCIF pilot**

Discussions with college leaders and SCIF project managers revealed how the SCIF activities were reflective of, or aligned to, existing aims within college Quality Improvement Plans. As such, college leaders felt there were challenges in isolating and attributing improvements in key performance indicators (attainment, attendance, recruitment and retention, and pupil progress) to the SCIF.

## 3. The SCIF pilot application process

This section provides summary feedback from the 14 pilot applicant colleges, 11 partner colleges, and four unsuccessful applicant colleges on the experience of applying for the SCIF pilot.

### 3.1 Forming a partnership

All applicant colleges approached partner colleges at the point of application for the SCIF pilot funding. Some applicant colleges chose to contact partner colleges with which they had existing relationships, either having already worked together or through college networks. Other colleges deliberately selected a partner with which they did not have an existing relationship. This decision was based on the key factors listed below and to ensure a new and objective view to the partnership and support required.

Key factors that applicant colleges considered when choosing a partner college included:

- **Synergy of college provision** - applicant colleges felt it was important to partner with colleges delivering similar provision (e.g. same types of courses/qualifications), and that had a similar student demographic and context.
- **Geographical location** - partners were not so far away as to make travelling costly and time consuming, but not so close that competition was a concern.
- **College cultures** – applicant colleges appreciated partners that shared a similar culture and values (and agreed that those values were important).

*“It is really important to choose a college that is culturally compatible with you... relationship is everything to making it work. You have to trust each other and be prepared to have difficult conversations.”* (Principal, applicant college)

- **A similar improvement journey** - some applicant colleges wanted to partner with a college that had been through a similar process recently, i.e. had progressed from ‘requires improvement’ to ‘outstanding/good’ and was therefore well-placed to understand and provide experienced support.

### 3.2 Reasons for SCIF pilot application

Applicant and partner colleges learned about the SCIF through various routes. Some had attended a meeting at the Association of Colleges (AoC), which included a presentation delivered by the DfE. Others noted information being shared through regional college networks, and sector bodies had also notified colleges about the funding opportunity.

The decision to apply for the SCIF was a straightforward one for all applicant colleges interviewed. It was made by college principals and senior leadership teams (SLTs), with governor approval. Consultation with other staff was not very frequent, mainly due to the

lack of time to do so. But one college principal did, for example, discuss their decision with middle leaders in order to generate buy-in for the proposed activities.

SCIF funding allowed colleges to enhance existing, or establish new, quality improvement activities in key areas. All applicant colleges regarded the SCIF as an excellent opportunity to accelerate quality improvement progress beyond what was possible with existing financial and staffing resources.

Although several colleges were already networking and involved in collaborative work, for many the appeal of the SCIF was the opportunity to formalise and deepen a partnership with another college. One applicant college commented that they did not feel that the culture in FE supported the sharing of practice, due to competition for students. As such, they believed formalising a partnership based on a critical friend approach encouraged a more meaningful collaboration.

A desire to support the sector to improve, and the opportunity to share strengths and expertise, drove partner colleges' decisions to become involved with the SCIF.

*"I hold the belief that colleges working on the ground hold the key for driving performance in the sector. Historically this had been impeded by hyper-competition between colleges...a culture of not wanting to share good practice, and wanting to hide bad practice."* (Principal, partner college)

Partner colleges felt they could offer the following expertise:

- Direct experience in driving change in specific subject or business areas that could be replicated or adopted in applicant colleges.
- The ability to empower applicant college principals and leaders to drive whole-college improvement, through strengthening leadership skills and approaches.
- Experience of the development and use of data, systems and processes that could support whole-college improvement.
- An understanding of the journey to improvement that applicant colleges were embarking on, and therefore the ability to draw on experiences to support applicant colleges in an empathetic but challenging way.

Several partner colleges commented that they already supported other colleges in a more informal manner but felt that the SCIF model would strengthen, formalise and monetise this support. Some anticipated that they would also gain some mutual benefits from partnering with another college. At the time of application, few had concerns about becoming a partner college. However, a number were mindful of the potential risk that involvement in the SCIF might shift the focus away from business at the partner college, or affect the partner's reputation if the college being supported did not improve or the partnership was ineffective.

### 3.3 Use of diagnostics at application stage

The pre-application assessment (or “diagnostic”) of the applicant colleges’ improvement needs was recognised by colleges as important in ensuring that SCIF activities were based on sound principles and an agreed set of priorities.

The original design of the SCIF pilot anticipated that some applications would come from colleges where the FE Commissioner team had undertaken a diagnostic as part of their expanded role. In practice, given the timing of the launch of the pilot relative to the rollout of the Commissioner’s programme of work, it was rare for a college to apply after this form of assessment.

The majority of applicant colleges that applied to the SCIF pilot had completed a diagnostic with the partner college. Feedback from a few colleges was that the timescales for submission did not allow for this to occur prior to application, particularly where relationships had not been established. Applicant and partner colleges, as well as wider stakeholders, felt that a robust partner diagnostic was an important part of the application process and sufficient time should be incorporated for this, and for the partnership to be developed to some extent beforehand.

The activity undertaken as part of the diagnostic was variable across colleges, ranging from short discussions between applicant and partner colleges to more in-depth work to identify improvement needs. Some principals from partner colleges undertook a number of activities to gain insight into the improvements that could be made. These included:

- Reviewing the latest Ofsted inspection report, Quality Improvement Plans and college self-assessments.
- Speaking to a range of staff in applicant colleges.
- Reviewing accountability structures, performance management systems and attendance policies.
- Conducting learning walks, sometimes with applicant college principals.
- Scrutinising student workbooks.

In some cases, senior leaders from applicant colleges visited partner colleges to meet with the SLT, attend SLT meetings and undertake learning walks to get a feel for the culture of the partner college.

*“This was a really helpful day for me, spending time with [the principal] and the senior leadership team [of the partner college]. We realised we had a lot of commonality in our provision and that I could learn an awful lot from them.” (Vice-principal, applicant college)*

Diagnostics benefited both partner and applicant college SLTs. Applicant college principals realised the potential benefits of the partnership (e.g. peer-to-peer support), and the partner college principals gained a deeper understanding of the culture within the applicant college and what needed to change.

*“I spoke with the principal whom I know well, [and] all his senior team and conducted a learning walk where I spoke to students. I understood what the college needs to do, and we sat and talked through a proposal.”* (Principal, partner college)

Thorough diagnostics incorporating the activities listed above encouraged a transparent dialogue and enabled clear planning of activities. They also enabled applicant and partner colleges to move more quickly into delivery.

Where diagnostics were mainly undertaken in the early stages of the SCIF delivery phase (rather than as part of the application process), this had implications for the delivery plan. It meant that activities had been designed and costed in the application without a full or clear understanding from the partner college of the issues facing the applicant college. Although it was specified in the guidance that there was an allowance for a pre-diagnostic to be costed for, it is unclear how many colleges costed for this process within proposed budgets.

### **3.4 Developing and drafting the SCIF application**

In most cases, the principals from both the applicant and partner college, with one or two SLT members, designed the original SCIF proposal or improvement plan. In a small number of examples, colleges consulted a wider range of staff including middle leaders. A small number completed the application with the support of a bid writing team within the college. The low level of consultation with wider college staff and partner colleges during the drafting of the application meant that applicant colleges made several assumptions, particularly around continuing professional development (CPD) needs and training requirements. These were not always accurate, and adjustments had to be made at the implementation and delivery stage once further consultation and discussions had occurred.

Partner college involvement at the bid writing stage was variable and mainly involved partners drafting elements of the bid or commenting on drafts produced by applicant colleges.

The level and type of contact between the applicant and partner college at the bidding stage was affected by the timescales for the submission. For most, contact was over the telephone, or by email. A small number of applicant and partner colleges met face-to-face, although some did take the opportunity to meet at sector events. The majority of

colleges (both applicants and partners) found it a straightforward process to agree the allocation of days, responsibilities and budget.

Feedback from several partner colleges indicated that it was important for the SCIF applicant colleges to have open conversations with potential partners. Partners also highlighted the importance of ensuring capacity within their own institutions to be able to effectively support another college. One partner college commented that a certain level of commitment was required at the bidding stage, including an expectation that the partner college would provide input to the bidding process.

### 3.5 SCIF pilot timescales

In preparation for the pilot, the DfE specified during pre-engagement activities that it was looking for colleges to apply that had the capacity to begin delivery promptly. Despite this, many colleges found the timescales for submission challenging (including those in both waves of the SCIF pilot).

The delivery timescales and the requirement for the SCIF funding to be spent over a relatively short period of time was also a concern for applicant colleges, thus not allowing sufficient time for project lead-in, or to gather evidence of impact.

*“Colleges [plan] for a whole year or two, so it is difficult to change that as the time is set...in-year flexibility is a challenge.”* (Principal, applicant college)

*“Having to spend significant funds from day one and in three months is challenging. If we had...[a] sufficient level of resource and a bit of time to use it, you might get to the desired goal with better value for money and more solid outcomes.”* (Principal, applicant college)

Suggestions for new timeframes were made, for example with the planning starting in the summer term (May onwards).

*“The perfect scenario would be to win the bid in May and plan for September. It’s not awful but we could have done some preparatory work on some of the middle management skills and all that could have been done in the run up to September, it’s a bit quieter and easier to get everyone together.”* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

### 3.6 Improving the application process

For the mainstage roll-out of SCIF the DfE made a number of changes to the application,<sup>14</sup> including the introduction of a two-stage process and improved support for

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-applicants-to-the-strategic-college-improvement-fund#changes-from-the-scif-pilot>

colleges in preparing applications. Interim analysis of the phase one visits informed some of these changes. This should be taken into account when considering the improvements suggested by the pilot colleges within this section of the report.

Generally, the process of completing the application form was felt to be straightforward and the guidance document clear. Where issues were raised, this tended to be in relation to some repetition in information requests within the application form, and issues with the formatting of the form affecting ease of completion. Key suggestions for improving the application process are provided below.

**More detailed guidance on costing and budgeting:** Applicant colleges spent considerable time costing projects, counting days and predicting subsistence/travel costs. A few reported a lack of knowledge of how to appropriately cost for staff time within the bid (e.g. costs for staff at different levels), knowing what was appropriate to cost for, or how much budget should be allocated to the overall SCIF project or to certain activities. As such, applicant colleges requested better guidance, including exemplars on how to cost for the SCIF activities and issues to consider (e.g. hidden costs such as administration and project management time).

**Refinement of guidance to clarify expectations:** There were various aspects of the bidding process where colleges felt it would have been helpful to have more clarity. Examples given included knowing whether the use of external consultants was permitted, clarity about the number of partners allowed, or whether to allocate a budget for evaluation<sup>15</sup>. One applicant college felt that there needed to be more guidance on the degree of flexibility permitted within the bid, and the extent to which colleges would be able to shift budgets and activities once funding had been secured.

**Improving the format:** Due to the structure of the questions, there were sections of the bid where colleges felt that the information required was repeated. Some colleges commented that there was overlap in the information required in tables A and B of the application form.

**Establishing baseline key performance indicators:** There was some confusion about the use of the term 'success measures' within the application process. Applicant colleges felt that it would be more helpful to have a clear definition of this term and whether there was a need for baseline key performance indicators to be specified in the application.

**Partner college selection:** Some partner colleges and wider stakeholders suggested that there should be a more developed process for the selection of partner colleges. Concerns were expressed that partner colleges were in some cases selected with very

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<sup>15</sup> Note that the guidance document provided for applicants stated that evaluation activity could be included within the budget. It also indicated that improvement support could be sourced from third parties (though with the partner college's oversight).

little time for in-depth consultation regarding applicant college needs prior to application. As such, it was only after funding had been awarded and during discussions about the SCIF plan that the capacity or ability of the partner college to provide support within the required timescales, and in the areas needed, was fully explored.

There were some concerns raised about the capacity of partners to offer the support needed to applicant colleges, particularly where partner colleges were involved in multiple SCIF projects. Wider stakeholders and partner colleges also expressed concerns about the eligibility criteria for colleges to be a partner college. To ensure that the highest level of support was provided to applicant colleges, it was suggested that an application process for colleges wanting to become a partner should be introduced. This process could involve a college describing its strengths and capacity to provide support. It was also suggested that the FE Commissioner or the DfE should have some input into the selection of partner colleges and the 'match making' of applicant and partner colleges.

*"I do not like the idea of having many partner [colleges] involved in the SCIF and would like to see a limited number of partners overall being involved. I wonder how the DfE are planning to roll this out and what criteria there should be for allowing' partner colleges to operate."* (Wider stakeholder)

**Improving feedback:** Whilst DfE provided general feedback to all colleges that had applied for the SCIF funding, the unsuccessful colleges interviewed felt that it would have been helpful to receive individual feedback on the reasons for not being successful. They felt that this would encourage them to reapply in the future.

**Widening eligibility:** A number of colleges and wider stakeholders felt that any college that identified areas for improvement should be eligible to apply for SCIF funding, and that this would help to ensure that standards in the sector would not decline.

## 4. Delivering, monitoring and evaluating SCIF projects

This section provides an overview of colleges' SCIF projects and the nature of activities through which colleges planned to improve the quality of teaching and learning. It also describes how colleges monitored and approached self-evaluation activities. In doing so, this section considers the significance of peer development work, and provides examples of the most common types of intervention delivered by colleges. Due to the extent of the work undertaken by colleges, it does not provide a full account of all activities that colleges delivered or planned to deliver.

### 4.1 College interventions

A high-level analysis of the SCIF plans submitted at the point of application showed eighteen broad areas that colleges identified for improvement (Table 3).<sup>16</sup>

**Table 3: Colleges' planned interventions**

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>No. of colleges</b>
Teaching, learning and assessment/teacher CPD	14
Student recruitment/retention/achievement/value-added	12
Performance management/use of MIS	11
Leadership/senior management	10
English and mathematics	10
Curriculum design/management	8
Attendance and behaviour	8
Apprenticeships and work-placements	8
Student experience/support/voice	6
Business planning	5
Recruitment of additional teaching/support staff	4
Subject specific focus at level 3	4
Improving self-assessment	3
Governance	3
Use of technology	2
Staff morale	1
Foundation learning	1
Equality diversity and inclusion	1

The extent of each applicant college's planned activities was considerable, particularly when considering the timeframes of delivery, which for some partnerships was just three or four months running in to the summer term. Most applicant colleges committed to

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<sup>16</sup> Note that some SCIF delivery plans were revised during the early stages of planning and implementation. These broad areas are not discrete activities and are presented here to give an indication of the range of foci and their commonality across the pilot colleges.

deliver seven to nine interventions and a small number committed to deliver ten or more interventions.

The nature of interventions included a mix of:

- Peer-to-peer/partner engagement supporting a wide range of activities.
- Funding for staff training, either externally or internally provided.
- Payment for additional staff on fixed term contracts.
- Use of expert consultants.
- Development of management information systems.

#### **4.1.1 Peer-to-peer partnership working**

Applicant colleges based the SCIF improvement interventions around extensive peer-to-peer support work.

Peer-to-peer work was planned and delivered across a range of college staff including principals, senior leaders, heads of department, heads of subject and teaching staff. A small number of colleges involved some administrative personnel in the peer-to-peer development work, for example where this involved reviewing colleges' use of data and subsequent reporting functions.

The model of college improvement through peer-to-peer working appears to have been based on a top-down approach. This suggests that colleges believed that improvements relating to strategies and systems at leadership level, and improvements in quality and performance management, would cascade down and eventually lead to improvements in teaching and learning.

#### **Peer-to-peer support for senior leaders**

From application through to planning and delivery, principals/vice-principals worked together to identify key improvement priorities. Visits between SLTs were held to review:

- Quality assurance systems.
- Teaching, learning and assessment processes.
- Performance management procedures.
- Leadership and management training programmes.
- Workforce development strategies.
- Curriculum planning.
- In-year key performance measures against benchmarks.

Developing a strong working relationship between senior leaders was perceived by colleges to strengthen the activities delivered through the SCIF. This was due to three key factors:

- 1. Establishing a common understanding of the challenges faced by applicant colleges** was perceived to enable principals to focus on priorities for delivery and helped to shape the direction of the partnership.

*“The focus is always on teaching and learning, but if you are a grade three college there must be some aspect of leadership that is not working as well. That’s why I suggested to go in and observe SLT. I am fascinated for my own CPD to see how management meetings are run.”* (Vice-principal, partner college)

- 2. Continuing dialogue between principals throughout the SCIF delivery** was reported by colleges to have developed through the partners’ observation of the applicant colleges’ operations, including teaching and learning.
- 3. Sharing an understanding of the culture of both colleges** was felt to play a key part in identifying the differences in performance between the partner and the applicant college. Where this was more successful, partner college senior leaders fed back observations to their own college principal as well as to their counterparts in the applicant college. The feedback enabled a frank and honest discussion between the two principals on what needed to improve, including the need to:
  - Increase engagement of SLT in supporting middle leaders and heads of department when identifying and implementing change.
  - Strengthen systems for developing a college-wide strategy on teaching, learning and assessment practice.
  - Improve accountability by implementing rigorous performance management systems within the college.

### **Example: Senior leader peer-to-peer support**

An applicant college underwent two Ofsted inspections that rated the college as 'requires improvement'. The principal from the partner college was asked to work with the applicant college in creating a new strategic vision that linked performance in the college with the wider college improvement strategy.

The partner college delivered a half-day workshop with the applicant college principal, senior leaders and chair of governors. The partner college principal shared their college's strategic plan and talked through how the plan linked with all aspects of college performance. As a result of the half-day, the applicant college agreed a new set of performance indicators related to classroom observations, student attendance, student retention, feedback mechanisms and lesson planning. These new measures were intended to help monitor future improvement: *"[It] is very important for colleges to understand how their strategy is the framework for the operational plan. This is what you have to return to, to make sure you are achieving your longer-term aims of improvement."* (Principal, partner college)

### **Peer-to-peer support for middle leaders**

Many applicant colleges identified the need to improve the skills and performance of middle leaders in assessing teaching quality, with the intention that this would lead to improved teaching and learning. Thus, heads of teaching, learning and assessment from applicant and partner colleges met and reviewed practice, identifying approaches to improve effectiveness and types of support required. These included:

- SLTs allowing more time for middle leaders to engage with their role and develop their confidence in observation techniques, to improve skills and knowledge related to overseeing performance reviews.
- Improvements to the formal observation cycle, e.g. reviewing the schedule of observations to allow sufficient time for feedback, and for improvements to be implemented.
- Additional coaching support for underperforming teachers. Heads of teaching, learning and assessment at applicant and partner colleges worked together to improve in-college support for teachers.

Examples of peer-to-peer support that had been undertaken at middle leadership level included:

- Applicant colleges releasing heads of department/subject and some teaching staff to observe practice in partner colleges, to help improve teaching and learning in specific subject areas.
- Partner colleges visiting applicant colleges to observe teaching, review resources, student workbooks and the level and quality of feedback to students.
- Secondments from a small number of applicant colleges, enabling staff to work with partner colleges to help improve student target setting and student support.
- Partner colleges providing training to help develop applicant colleges' coaching skills to support underperforming teachers.

The quality of the peer relationship appeared to have an impact on the extent of practice shared and how predisposed applicant college teaching staff were to working together internally, and to collaborating with others externally.

*"[We achieved a] deeper level of change than we expected and an unexpected closeness... It's as though they are part of our team."* (Head of department, applicant college)

*"[The peer-to-peer support] was really supportive, it wasn't patronising and I think it's a really good idea. It has helped me to prioritise things within my department and review the staffing levels."* (Head of department, applicant college)

#### **Example: Peer-to-peer support for a head of department**

A department within an applicant college received a 'requires improvement' rating in the college's latest self-assessment. The partner college worked closely with the head of department to develop understanding of:

- Use of data to track progress and set meaningful targets for students.
- How to produce schemes of work that are consistent with raising aspirations and meeting student need.
- How to manage student progress.

The partner college worked with teachers in the department to support them in better engaging students during lessons. The partner college also undertook catch-up work with students over the Easter break, which focused on showing teachers from the applicant college how challenging and supportive they could be with students.

As a result of the support from the partner college, there were observed improvements in the department. Unit completion increased 13 percentage points since the SCIF started, from 37 percent to 50 percent.

## Peer-to-peer support for governors

Three applicant colleges focused on peer-to-peer support for governors. Interventions focused on improving the skills and knowledge of governors to challenge colleges that were underperforming. Examples of activities carried out with governors included reviewing college strategies and making changes to governance procedures. One applicant college commented that they had undertaken an awayday with governors, which had also involved the principal from the partner college. The aim was to provoke discussion, debate and challenge around the issues the college was facing, and how they could help in their role as governors.

### 4.1.2 Funding for continuous professional development

The SCIF allowed applicant colleges to either pay, or make time in the timetable, for staff training that would not be provided otherwise. This was seen as a key benefit of the fund. Many SCIF pilot projects included staff CPD, mainly for senior or middle leaders. Some applicant colleges also funded training for teaching and support staff, e.g. staff working in business sales teams. Training was delivered 'in-house' by teaching, learning and assessment teams, staff from partner colleges, or it was commissioned from external bodies.

Various types of CPD were delivered or planned for future delivery, for example:

- Improving advanced practitioners' skills. One applicant college embedded an advanced practitioner model, with 12 staff appointed as advanced practitioners, giving the college the capacity to improve teaching and learning going forward.
- Developing/improving student support, for example providing training for staff to help support students experiencing mental health difficulties.
- Engaging consultants to develop teacher toolkits and deliver training to ensure consistency in application.

There were some challenges in training delivery. Several applicant colleges experienced delays in releasing staff for training due to teaching demands. In addition, one training provider struggled to meet demands and training had to be rescheduled. Many reported that CPD activities had been moved to the late summer term.

### **Example: Developing a teaching, learning and assessment toolkit**

One applicant college developed a teaching, learning and assessment toolkit, with support from an external consultant. The consultant liaised with college staff to gather feedback on the required content for the toolkit. At the time of reporting, the toolkit had been piloted with specific curriculum areas within the college, and across both academic and vocational subjects. The college aimed for two weeks of CPD to be delivered to staff following the launch of the toolkit, to help them use it effectively. It was intended that use of the teaching, learning and assessment toolkit would link into the college's performance review process.

### **4.1.3 Funding additional staff/capacity resource**

In several applicant colleges, staff were recruited on a contractual basis for the period of the SCIF fund, to implement college-wide improvement practices in teaching and learning, increase teaching capacity, and provide backfill where staff were to be released for partnership work.

### **Example: Funding additional staff through SCIF**

One applicant college required additional capacity to implement a quality improvement strategy throughout the college. It therefore recruited quality managers to temporary positions, tasked with implementing a quality improvement model based on that in place at the partner college. Once in post, the quality managers conducted learning walks and concentrated work with students, and helped identify areas of teaching, learning and assessment that could be improved. The model was very well received by curriculum/teaching staff.

*'The quality managers model of support has been advantageous. We can see how moving forward this could be useful. For example, [a quality manager] has been [supporting a] whole faculty – she is good, looks at issues from different angles. If she talks to a teacher, she looks at it from their point of view, but if she talks to a programme manager, she [looks at things from] their point of view. She always has a solution and says how we can be better next time... [The advice] is very practical – it could be a minor thing – for example, she might observe a class and say [to the teacher] 'you haven't spoken to that table of learners'. It is about giving feedback and advice in a way that is not threatening at all. She is delivering training in a couple of weeks to the whole faculty, and staff are looking forward to it'. (Programme manager, applicant college)*

In one applicant college, recent graduates were recruited to provide additional support to students. This included identifying students with lower than desired attendance, actively encouraging attendance, supporting students in meeting academic deadlines, and providing subject specific one-to-one coaching. This had enabled teaching staff to increase their focus on lesson planning and preparation.

#### **4.1.4 Use of expert consultants**

A few applicant colleges drew on the expertise of consultants to support improvements in teaching, learning and assessment. Consultants delivered a range of interventions including the development and delivery of bespoke teaching, learning and assessment resources and delivery of CPD sessions. They also provided one-to-one support to middle and senior managers. This helped avoid putting extra stress and work onto college staff, allowing them to continue with day-to-day responsibilities.

A few applicant colleges contracted with consultants or ex-Ofsted inspectors to identify areas where further quality improvement was needed. Consultants reviewed current SCIF plans and undertook a series of activities to assess the effectiveness of change, particularly in teaching and learning. This provided an independent view and allowed observation of any improvements since the implementation of SCIF funded activities.

One applicant college commissioned a consultant to work alongside staff to help develop its evaluation plan and KPIs. Another commissioned a consultant to project manage the SCIF.

#### **4.1.5 Developing management information systems**

In several applicant colleges there was a focus on improving the use of internal management information systems and data (e.g. to track student progress or drive improvement).

*“We used data before, but [the partner college] helped us think about how we can support key middle managers to use data better and how we adjusted our data manager’s role... [The partner college brought in] a dedicated officer to take the heads of faculty through the data, it was a way of aligning our systems so [heads of faculty] aren’t bogged down finding the data.” (Principal, applicant college)*

### **Examples: Improving the use of management information systems**

The management information system teams from an applicant and partner college collaborated to further develop data handling and reporting systems at all levels. Mechanisms were established to identify student progress and monitor attendance with prompt and timely intervention. The aim was to use data efficiently to improve student experience and student outcomes.

The main implementation of the newly developed system took place in September 2018, but at the time of the phase two interviews, early indications were that access to data had increased. The apprenticeship area continued with developments throughout the summer and used internet-facilitated mobile devices to enable effective remote use of the electronic tracking system. Assessment boards were also established to evaluate attendance, retention, progress, achievement and at-risk students.

One applicant college used the SCIF to work with its partner to improve understanding of how to make the best use of college data. A comparative exercise was undertaken on the two colleges' capacity to utilise information, to identify strengths and weakness in college performance. The applicant college found that its system did not provide the same level of intelligence. It has, as a result, invested in a new management information system.

*“Our new active dashboard had its launch meeting...It’s mainly managers who will use it. One of the things that we had identified was that our reporting and management data was not as good as it could be. We had it, but it was very difficult to use and [we] spent too long getting the right data, so we didn’t have as much time to act on it. This [new system] is a dashboard which will tell you what you want to know instantly.”*  
(Principal, applicant college)

## **4.2 Monitoring SCIF pilot interventions**

Applicant colleges typically monitored project delivery on a monthly basis, although some did so on a weekly basis. This monitoring drew on centrally recorded documentation concerning activities, impact and spend. Most applicant colleges assigned leaders to take on responsibility for each intervention and held monthly report meetings. Monthly progress reports from each applicant college were also provided to the DfE/ESFA. The level of detail in these monitoring reports varied quite considerably; some colleges provided a summary qualitative account on progress and outcomes achieved, some provided a few short bullets on recent activities, and some provided detailed accounts of delivery against each costed intervention. The DfE noted these discrepancies and provided clarification regarding reporting requirements.

Some applicant colleges rated the progress of interventions and risks using a red, amber, green (RAG) system. This facilitated dialogue about the SCIF among SLTs and informed decisions about whether adjustments were needed in planned activities. In some cases, permission for adjustments and/or reallocation in spend was requested from the DfE. Revised guidance was issued by the DfE following discussions with colleges.

Where project management of the SCIF was outsourced, one applicant college noted that the pressure felt by senior leaders in managing SCIF had reduced, but it created additional paperwork for some members of the team.

A few applicant colleges reported that the process of monitoring the SCIF had improved communication between departments and that there was a better understanding of the improvement 'journey' across colleges as a whole. However, in a small number of applicant colleges, middle managers expressed concerns that projects were operating in 'silos' and that this reduced the level of cross-college insight that could be derived from the SCIF, such as opportunities for whole-staff CPD.

### **4.3 Self-evaluation of SCIF pilot**

Each applicant college was asked to submit a self-evaluation plan, which outlined the key activities and measures used to identify and monitor impact. To ensure that a range of evidence was being collected, colleges were encouraged by CooperGibson Research to improve and refine these plans over the course of the pilot. This aimed to help colleges understand what had worked, where SCIF had a positive impact, and where there were potential areas for improvement.

Key success measures and KPIs included both soft and hard measures. Soft measures related to evidence generated from focus groups, surveys or learning walks. Hard measures related to data such as attendance and achievement figures. These will be used by colleges to report on outcomes and impact towards the end of 2018. Most colleges struggled with the concept of evaluating the impact of changes introduced through the SCIF-funded programme of activity in the current academic year. Further details of challenges in self-evaluation are explored in section 6.

## 5. Perceptions of early impact

This section draws mainly on perceptual evidence from college principals, senior and middle leaders. Due to the short timeframes in delivery and evaluation, most colleges expressed concerns around measuring the impact of the SCIF pilot projects using quantitative KPIs such as attainment, attendance and retention figures. Therefore, evidence of impact in this report relates more to changes or improvements in college strategies, policies and/or teaching practice rather than outcomes data.

### 5.1 College-wide benefits

Many applicant colleges reported that a key impact of the SCIF interventions to-date had been a college-wide improvement in culture, leadership, and raising aspirations. This highlights the benefits of partner colleges undertaking a whole college review during the early stages of planning, to understand the culture of the applicant college and the common areas for development (e.g. performance management or teaching and learning).

Several applicant colleges and a few partners spoke about the renewed confidence and improved commitment to change at all levels, as a result of the time and impetus provided by the SCIF activities. One applicant college commented that relationships between staff had strengthened and deepened through the SCIF programme, bringing the team closer together and allowing for more honest and robust conversations.

Most applicant colleges were optimistic that the changes put in place were fundamental to improvement plans and would lead to longer lasting change.

*“There have been substantive changes in governance, attendance improved, our approach to planning is significantly better. Performance on A levels looks to be significantly better. Progress has been slower than I would have liked... but there is an optimism that comes with more pace and momentum on the back of what we are doing.”* (Principal, applicant college)

Colleges were focussing on student-related improvements such as attainment levels and overall educational experiences. They were also trying to ensure that improvements were embedded sufficiently to ensure that inspection results improved.

*“The acid test is the next inspection early next academic year...there are aspects of framework where we are closer to good...the most important area is teaching, learning and assessment. We are still at ‘requires improvement’ but there is improvement. I think we will get near to it by inspection.”* (Principal, applicant college)

## 5.2 Developing a new strategy and vision

Several applicant colleges used the SCIF pilot to renew strategic plans and visions. As such, the monitoring reports evidenced completion of new strategies and KPIs, which were planned to be implemented in the 2018-19 academic year. A few college leaders reported greater confidence in how the college's strategic plan would be delivered and secured through accountability measures. There were also examples of new accountability structures being put in place to strengthen strategic leadership and vision.

*“Yes there has been change at strategic level and as an example, as a result of reviewing the approach to Apprenticeships we have set up a Steering Group for Apprenticeships bringing all senior managers together across the college and taking a strategic approach to developments.”*

(CEO, applicant college)

### **Example: Impact on a college's strategic vision**

An applicant college worked with its partner college to create a new strategy and vision. The applicant college had significant financial concerns and needed to review its strategy to improve the quality of provision and secure its longer-term future. The partner principal delivered a series of seminars to senior leaders and governors at the applicant college to help shape the college's business strategy and curriculum planning. These considered the challenges within the college and how the strategy and vision needed to link to effective delivery across the college.

The applicant college agreed its new strategy and vision, which would be implemented with a new set of KPIs, including:

- Regular feedback from students.
- Staff consultations.
- Key stakeholder feedback, including from employers.

The applicant college also introduced a new standards committee for learning and skills to help develop consistency in its provision, and to ensure that standards expected throughout the college were closely related to the new vision and strategy.

Although work had started in creating a new college vision and strategy within some applicant colleges, this was still ongoing at the time of the phase two interviews. Leaders of these colleges felt that changes and impacts in this area would be more long-term.

*“It’s both top-down and bottom-up and ensuring we meet in the middle. We needed to make sure we were all working as one team and pulling in the same direction... We have spent longer on strategy with them than I thought we would, but now we have done it I know it was essential. There was no point in doing the rest without this foundation.” (Principal, applicant college)*

One applicant college undertook a college-wide consultation to help shape the college strategy, which included gathering feedback from staff and governors.

#### **Example: Consulting on a college-wide strategy**

In order to enable an applicant college to push harder to improve standards, its partner encouraged a wider consultation process. The applicant college SLT invited governors to a consultation. These governors were able to investigate with the partner college any difference in approach to holding the college to account, the data received by governors, and the interaction governors had with college leaders. According to the applicant college, this provoked a good level of discussion, debate and challenge.

The college also consulted with over 480 staff in groups of up to 40 individuals talking through key challenges that the college faced, gathering feedback to help shape the strategic plan.

*“Staff valued the opportunity to contribute. That helped in multiple ways: they understand the integrated pressures well...it gave them optimism to be able to feed into the changes we are making and the performance management. This has all been influenced by [name of partner college] and they have been key to us becoming a high performing organisation.” (Principal, applicant college)*

### **5.3 Improving performance management**

Improving, or introducing new, performance management systems, was a focus of the SCIF activity in many applicant colleges. Although for many this work was still in its early stages, at the time of the phase two interviews there was confidence that an increased focus on performance management would be beneficial in the long-term.

Evidence suggested that the applicant and partner colleges exchanged ideas and practices that increased the ability of applicant colleges to manage the performance of individual departments.

*“In the early phase [pre-SCIF] there was not enough clarity of focus on teachers and their individual needs. In our forward plan we aim to have undertaken extended learning walks for every teacher in the new academic year and all will have a personal improvement plan, which will be closely tracked and monitored.”*  
(Head of teaching and learning, applicant college)

In some applicant colleges, this work resulted in new performance management policies and practices to improve areas where provision was weaker. For example, in one applicant college, heads of department engaged with coaching training provided by the partner college to improve the performance of teaching staff. Although at the time of phase two interviews any impacts were yet to be observed, the college reported positive feedback from those involved.

#### **Example: Intelligent use of data**

One applicant college implemented fortnightly performance quality reviews. The quality manager met with each curriculum leader to go through student progress, as well as impact on at-risk students, at a granular line-by-line and student-by-student level. The college was aiming for a minimum of 80% achievement for students who enrolled, compared to 73% in the previous year. The college principal believed this change in approach had increased the accountability of curriculum managers.

## **5.4 Strengthening leadership**

For many of the applicant colleges, the SCIF project and relationships with partner colleges validated what they knew needed to change. These applicant colleges reported that the programme provided the support and time, and senior and middle leaders with the confidence, to develop practice and implement change.

*“Staff who have been here, at the college, for 20 years were used to their way of doing things and visiting [the partner college] helped to raise their levels of aspirations. The visits have helped us to reinforce the messages that are being communicated to staff through SCIF.”* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

*“[A positive impact of the SCIF has been] empowerment and working together as a group. The empowerment [of staff] to knock on the principal’s door [within the applicant college] and say they want to change things. Typically, middle management sit and wait for senior staff to tell them what the strategy is. We empower them to make those changes themselves. They left us on the Friday and on Monday they were knocking on the principal’s door!”* (Principal, partner college)

## 5.5 Improved teaching, learning and assessment

Several applicant colleges reported anecdotally on the impacts they were seeing on teaching practice and pedagogy. For others, improvements in teaching and learning were perceived to be taking longer.

Most applicant colleges extended and improved the use of learning walks and lesson observations to develop understanding of what good lessons look like, as well as to encourage consistency across departments. Staff in partner colleges often shared their approaches or systems for these, and counterparts within applicant colleges then adapted them for their own needs. One applicant college commented that it had reviewed its system for lesson observations, which had resulted in an increased priority on this within the college.

*“Now teaching, learning and assessment is at the heart of dialogue in college. We are about to have a development day and an accelerated development plan is being launched with teaching staff...It is a purposeful accelerated development plan that will continue to be rigorously monitored and delivered...it is a legacy of SCIF that we are really focusing on it. It will be launched this summer and driven through the first term [academic year 2018-2019] and beyond.”* (Head of teaching and learning, applicant college)

Senior leaders in three applicant colleges reported that the:

- Work through SCIF on teaching, learning and assessment encouraged staff to enhance their own practice and to have more professional conversations.
- Focus on teaching, learning and assessment created a culture of high expectations amongst staff, which improved teaching standards.
- Learning walks and observations were providing evidence of improved student engagement in learning and understanding of targets.

### **Example: Improving the quality of lesson observations**

One partner college shared a model for improving teaching, learning and assessment, which ensured that staff undertaking peer observations had the key skills and knowledge to do so effectively.

*'A small team go through a rigorous process [learning how to observe] and they receive [authorisation to conduct observations] on completion. During the process, staff look at what progress looks like, [view clips of recorded] lessons...write reports, write judgements along the same lines as Ofsted, and [carry out] joint observations. A critical friend [also observes, and the judgements are compared] to see if the judgement [the trainee] makes is same as the [critical friend]. The process is focused on student progress, using the right sort of language [in reports] and identifying where there needs to be improvement...All written feedback is moderated'. (Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality, partner college)*

The applicant college embraced this model and reported plans to put its teaching, learning and assessment team through the training in September 2018.

*'The main change is in how judgements are written up for staff – this is part of a new accelerated development programme, based on themes and extended learning walks...We are confident that with the speed of training and skills learned, this will lead to rapid change [across] all staff'. (Principal, applicant college)*

The partner college was keen to convey that members of staff tasked with carrying out peer observations needed to first be able to demonstrate their competence in the practice.

*'All learning practitioners [at the applicant college] will undertake [the training towards authorisation] ....they might assume it is automatic rite of passage but it isn't. It is a process to demonstrate capability – in what you see, how you give feedback to the person you are observing, [and] how you action plan'. (CEO, partner college)*

In several applicant colleges, teaching staff across different departments were given time to critically review teaching and learning resources with peers in the partner college. As part of this work, they developed new resources, schemes of work, lesson plans and student workbooks to support teaching.

*"Because we are working to the same examination board, we can easily compare what we are teaching with what and how they are teaching. We can compare our resources. It's not that much different, but they had a much better focus on research methods and observation than we did, so we've brought that back with us and are building it in to our curriculum." (Head of department, applicant college)*

Staff CPD related to teaching, learning and assessment was reported by some senior leaders to have had positive benefits. One applicant college provided a series of coaching and mentoring interventions to improve the quality of teaching across several departments. This college indicated in its monitoring report to the DfE that over half of all staff on capability had improved their teaching, learning and assessment grade after being provided with training.

**Example: Improving teaching and learning through an external expert**

An applicant college employed a head of teaching and learning on a fixed-term contract for the duration of the SCIF project. Once in post, the individual reviewed the most recent Ofsted report, observation reports, and teaching and learning outcomes. Following this, they identified that the college needed to focus on questioning, differentiation, stretch and challenge, and improving attainment particularly at higher levels.

The head of teaching and learning was involved in designing and delivering training to all teaching staff, to support these areas of improvement. The training went back to basics and allowed staff to probe particular definitions, exploring for instance what ‘differentiation’ means. *“We assume people know [about differentiation] but sometimes... they just do it without understanding what they are doing.”* (Principal, applicant college)

A teaching and learning survey carried out by the applicant college showed that the training was very well received, especially since many teachers had not received training for some time prior to SCIF.

*“Without the SCIF, I wouldn’t have been able to employ [the Head of Teaching and Learning] and we wouldn’t have developed such a fantastic training programme for our teachers.”* (Principal, applicant college)

A few applicant colleges asked staff to complete feedback forms or evaluation surveys after they had participated in CPD, shadowing or mentoring opportunities with partner college staff. The results indicated a perceived positive impact on teaching practice. Teachers stated that they felt that the sessions improved their teaching, that the interventions were of a good quality and that they would continue to apply the knowledge they gained.

### **Example: Increasing staff confidence through CPD**

One applicant college used some of the SCIF funding to provide training for support staff, to improve understanding of their role and how to work effectively with teachers in the classroom. The training targeted specific areas such as administering medication, personal care and working with students with dyslexia.

The college asked the support staff to complete a survey before and after their involvement in the training. The survey results (completed by 58 support staff) were positive about the benefits of the training for the support staff. For example:

- 77% of staff after the training agreed with the statement “I understand what the college expects of me as an [job role]”, an increase from 39% prior to the training.
- 71% of staff after the training agreed with the statement “I know how to work effectively with the teacher in the classroom”, an increase from 41% prior to the training.
- 62% agreed with the statement “I have the skills needed to fulfil my role as an [job role]” after the training, an increase from 41% prior to the training.

## **5.6 Improving English and mathematics provision**

Most applicant colleges focused on improving English and mathematics provision to increase attainment, with partner colleges sharing examples of monitoring, tracking and target-setting arrangements. Activities included staff from both colleges reviewing English and mathematics strategies, carrying out classroom observations, sharing curriculum planning, mapping English and mathematics against wider curriculum areas, and centralising English and mathematics provision. Some teachers received refresher training from applicant and partner colleges.

Applicant colleges reported improved tracking of English and mathematics, including attendance rates. One principal commented that they had already seen an increase in attendance through the SCIF work:

*“So many of our pupils were not coming into class for maths, we have turned this around now.”* (Principal, applicant college)

Although at the time of the interviews some did not feel that an impact on achievement would be observable until the next academic year, applicant colleges were positive about improvements in staff confidence and student engagement.

*“Impact will not show until 2019 GCSE results. However, staff are already reporting that they have more confidence delivering maths and English as a result of the support that they are receiving. Likewise, learners appear to be responding positively to the greater confidence shown by delivery staff.”*

(Vice-principal, applicant college)

## 5.7 Development of apprenticeships

A few applicant colleges focused specifically on apprenticeship provision within the SCIF projects, particularly skills development among managers and delivery teams to increase employer engagement. It was common at these colleges for staff to shadow heads of business development and managers from partner colleges. Applicant colleges reported that this had increased staff understanding of the importance of employer engagement and refocused approaches to it.

Activities to evaluate and improve apprenticeships resulted in:

- A head of apprenticeships reviewing quality and curriculum planning across work-based learning provision.
- A head of business development reviewing and improving business development strategies to reach out to more employers.
- More responsive use of, and timely access to, data reports to understand where interventions were needed.
- The restructuring of an apprenticeships team.
- Increased focus on evidencing and auditing the student journey.
- Provision of CPD to apprenticeship delivery teams.

*“Key delivery staff have a greater understanding and awareness of how to develop and deliver new apprenticeship standards that will help develop an apprentice’s skills, knowledge and behaviours and support with their readiness [for assessment] and achievement at end point assessment.”*

(College monitoring report)

- Strategies to improve the use of formative assessments and support for students.

*“This has been a real success for us, we are now looking much more closely at individual learners and the quality of their assessments, feedback and progression.”* (Head of apprenticeships, applicant college)

### **Example: Development of apprenticeships**

One applicant college completed a series of shadowing visits with the head of business development and head of teaching and learning team at its partner college. A key lesson for the applicant college was the extent to which the partner college considered employer engagement to be everyone's responsibility. This college did not operate with a sales team as much of its work was repeat business. Therefore, all those involved, from delivery, to administrative support, to senior leaders, championed engagement.

*"A lot of delivery staff bring in sales and engage with employers on a sales level and this is fed through in to the head of sales. Because employer engagement belongs to everyone."* (Head of business development, applicant college)

At the time of the interview, the applicant college was planning on holding workshops from September to bring together staff to introduce the broader concept of employer engagement.

## **5.8 Improved attendance**

Some applicant colleges placed a specific focus on improving student attendance levels and developed new and innovative ways of encouraging students to attend. Most felt, however, that it was too early for any impact on attendance to be observed.

One, with support from its partner college, introduced a prize draw system offering items such as driving lessons and tablet devices for students with 100% attendance. Attendance rates improved from 79% to 86% in a two-month period. Another reported that its attendance had risen to near the national average since implementing activities through the SCIF. Another introduced a forum for students, to discuss the barriers they faced in attending college with senior leaders and governors. This provided a rich source of information to underpin development work to address these barriers.

*"Attendance is everyone's responsibility. Intrinsicly, if we get all these other workstreams right, if the learners are...engaged and receiving innovative lessons, then they will attend. Hopefully improved attendance will be a natural [effect] of all the quality improvements. It should be the [result] of improved teaching, learning and assessment."* (Teaching, learning and assessment leader, applicant college)

## 5.9 Sustainability of impact

Applicant colleges were generally optimistic about the potential sustainability of improvements achieved through the SCIF. This was because work had focused on strategies, systems, and teaching and learning. It was felt that sustainability would be achievable depending on the following conditions:

- Senior leadership commitment, capacity, energy and willingness to continue the work started through SCIF.
- The development of staff expertise through further CPD.
- Improvement activities and processes being embedded across college culture and planning, e.g. within Quality Improvement Plans.

*“Yes there will be lasting impact because we have deliberately focused on management training and performance management, it is about long-term resilience of college. It has got to be about building the infrastructure”.*  
(Principal, applicant college)

However, it was also recognised that there were challenges to sustainability once the funding, and support from the partner college, ceased.

*“There is financial challenge with the current funding methodology – there’s must do, should do and could do. FE has lean organisations. We are lean. So, there are challenges for sustainability.”* (Principal, applicant college)

## 6. Effectiveness and challenges

This section describes the perceived effectiveness of the SCIF pilot at a programme and college level. It focuses on the benefits and success factors of the partnership model, as reported by colleges. It also identifies challenges in delivery, and lessons learned from colleges' involvement in SCIF.

### 6.1 Effectiveness of the SCIF model at programme level

The model for the SCIF programme received overwhelming support from partners, applicant colleges and wider stakeholders. The following features of the SCIF model were perceived by colleges and stakeholders to be particularly effective:

- Sector self-improvement.
- Aiding rapid improvement.
- Flexibility in delivering the SCIF plan.

#### 6.1.1 Sector self-improvement

Colleges and wider stakeholders reported that the SCIF model of delivery supported colleges to take ownership of quality and self-improvement. Sharing good practice and expertise was seen as uncommon in the FE sector, and so the focus of the SCIF on encouraging collaboration across the sector was welcomed.

*“[Sharing practice more widely] does not happen enough, colleges across the board need to take a greater ownership of the overall performance of FE. When you have so many colleges that are a three or a four, it paints the sector in a bad light. It benefits FE as a sector to encourage a greater level of sharing of practice.”* (Wider stakeholder)

Added benefits of the model reported by colleges included:

- Cost-effectiveness, as financial support was being retained within the sector (e.g. support services purchased primarily from other colleges rather than from external sources such as consultants).
- Support being provided by professionals currently working in the sector and who therefore possessed up-to-date knowledge and skills.

*“It was great to have the opportunity to discuss with colleagues in same climate, talking college to college. FE is tough and they understand the constraints, they have an understanding of where you start from, you don't have to spend lot time explaining reasons for things as they get it.”* (Head of faculty, applicant college)

Reciprocal benefits of partnership working were reported by many partner colleges, and included:

- An increased knowledge and understanding of effective practice, providing a useful CPD opportunity for staff, reinforcing good practice and helping to identify areas for improvement: *“We have learned things we didn’t know about ourselves. It has been an opportunity for staff across college to take leadership on their bit of the project...it’s shone a light on things we could improve on even if we didn’t think it would”.* (principal, partner college)
- An opportunity for career development for middle leaders, providing them with the chance to critically observe teaching and to propose methods to improve practice.
- A sense of affirmation of the pathway to success, and confidence in performance management and teaching, learning and assessment systems.
- Strengthening the focus on learning within college. Some partner colleges included the SCIF project as a standing item on management meeting agendas, ensuring that any learning from the project was shared across college leaders and any effective practice was considered and adopted.

### 6.1.2 Aiding rapid improvement

Without the SCIF funding, applicant colleges felt that they would not have been able to focus so much of their attention on improvement in such a short timeframe. For example, many applicant college principals reported that the SCIF allowed them to deliver training and development support, and to improve practice more rapidly than would have previously been possible.

*“We got there quicker... we were heading in the right direction [but the] SCIF helped us get there quicker. We learnt...lessons [from the partner college], they have shared their training models and systems and given us the ideas.”* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

Whilst the timescales for delivery were challenging for many, colleges emphasised the need to ensure that the focus on rapid improvement did not compromise the quality of the activities delivered, or lead to undue pressure on colleges to see changes immediately.

*“There was perhaps an expectation that everything would happen quicker, I felt that pressure. There’s a natural tension there between doing things quickly and doing things right and it being really impactful and sustainable.”* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

Several applicant colleges had been through a recent change of leadership and in some cases whole leadership teams were new in post. Partner colleges noted that changes in

leadership provided a timely opportunity for applicant colleges to revisit strategic plans and overall visions. These applicant colleges reported that leadership changes had led to increased staff confidence in the potential for improvement; the additional support provided through SCIF enabled them to harness this optimism.

### 6.1.3 Flexibility in SCIF pilot interventions

Colleges felt that it was critical to have flexibility during implementation of the SCIF projects, to reflect the development of ideas through collaborative working. It was common that once applicant colleges began to work closely with partner colleges, elements of the partner's practice, systems or processes were identified for incorporation into the applicant college's plans for the SCIF activities. It was also common for colleges to refine planned activities once more thorough discussion had taken place.

Applicant colleges felt that the DfE responded appropriately to this need, allowing plans to be adjusted to take account of learning and changing priorities over the course of the project.

*“As it was a pilot it allowed for some responsiveness and flexibility although the core has remained but I have not felt confined. We have broadly kept to plan.”* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

#### **Example: Flexibility in SCIF delivery**

Curriculum leaders from an applicant college highlighted how they planned to make changes to the learning environment as a result of visiting the partner college; this had not been part of the original plan for the SCIF.

*“[The college is considering making changes to] some of the physical environments and visual displays [around the department facilities] and having a more focused approach to that. We have got all [the partner college's] templates of posters. They are on message and really sharp in terms of what they are focusing on. As a result, we are planning to take a fresh look and implement something similar and tailored to [applicant college].”* (Curriculum programme manager, applicant college)

A small number of applicant colleges suggested that less detailed expenditure projections (for instance, expenditure against individual activities) in the application and monitoring forms for the DfE/ESFA, would facilitate flexibility in delivery, and enable changing priorities to be taken into account.

*“Expenditure should be aligned with outcomes not activities, then it doesn’t matter how you get there as long as you get the results.”* (Head of apprenticeships, applicant college)

*“It would be helpful to have guidance on flexibilities. We estimated the number of staff who would get involved, but we opened it up to everyone and asked for people to put themselves forward (rather than targeting specific staff). So that can affect numbers and hence costs. [The guidance should be] explicit if the college can decide on approach, and whether there is flexibility to shift the budget as you go along.”* (Principal, applicant college)

## 6.2 SCIF project level conditions for success

The evaluation collected evidence of the factors that were felt to maximise success in SCIF project delivery.

### 6.2.1 Establishing an effective partnership

The partnership between applicant and partner colleges was a critical factor influencing the success of the SCIF and the outcomes it achieved at a college level. Many colleges were confident that relationships developed through the SCIF would continue in the long-term, due to the quality and benefits of the partnership work. However, it was generally felt that ongoing contact would be less intense than during the SCIF pilot.

The following factors were fundamental to successful partnerships:

**Trust and transparency in the partnership.** Many applicant and partner colleges cited transparency, openness and honesty as being critical success factors in the partnerships. Establishing these was facilitated by:

- A genuine commitment to share knowledge and practice openly, and to improve quality of provision in the FE sector.

*“We have shared everything, all our data, our self-assessment review, everything. We wouldn’t normally do this, but this is what they needed.”* (Principal, partner college)

- Awareness of a partner college’s own improvement journey, which encouraged empathy and understanding between college teams. This offered reassurance to staff that they would benefit from the peer-to-peer work.
- The opportunity for applicant college staff to visit partner colleges and meet their counterparts. This helped to strengthen relationships and was beneficial in alleviating staff’s initial concerns or reluctance about the process.

**Delivery of support and challenge.** Support and challenge was a key element of the SCIF partnerships. It played an integral part in applicant and partner colleges' development of a relationship that was focused on driving improvements in staff performance, making better use of data, and understanding and improving student progress and performance.

Sometimes, applicant college staff at all levels received difficult feedback from partner colleges on their own practice and management decisions. Most understood that the challenge was being delivered within the context of a supportive relationship and responded positively. They emphasised the value of observing and discussing practice with peers. Staff from applicant colleges reported that the support and challenge from partner colleges also gave them the opportunity and confidence to make their own suggestions for improvements in leadership, performance or culture in their college.

#### **Example: Support and challenge from partner colleges**

One applicant college adopted a programme used in a partner college to improve underperforming areas. This involved an improvement team meeting fortnightly with a department that had been identified as underperforming, to agree actions required to support improvement. During the intervening two weeks, it was expected that these actions would be prioritised by all staff. The department lead was responsible for ensuring that actions were addressed, including those attributed or delegated to others. The partner college felt that this programme had played a significant part in its journey from 'good' to 'outstanding'.

The applicant college chose to trial the programme with one of its departments where senior leaders were struggling to engage staff in its improvement agenda. Therefore, the partner college visited the applicant college's chosen department and took them through the process. As explained by the partner college, *"you can't describe what to do and expect them to pick it up, they need to see it in action, they can develop and tailor practice....you talk about the theory and then show it in action."* (CEO, partner college). The applicant college commented that seeing the programme in action was very beneficial. It adapted the programme to meet its needs and continued to work with the department in a supportive and challenging way.

In some applicant colleges, confidence was boosted by the experience of observing teaching and learning practices at a partner college. It enabled those applicant colleges to understand that partner approaches were not significantly different, and therefore the changes required were subtle. Similarly, in some cases, small changes were all that were needed to improve areas such as student engagement, e.g. the use of additional resources or moving at a faster pace.

## 6.2.2 Engendering whole college accountability for improvement

Applicant college senior leaders, particularly those new in post, recognised that a culture shift was required in their college. They discussed ways of improving this with their partners and had begun a series of activities to instigate culture change. Senior and middle leaders in some partner colleges noted the difference in cultures and *'mindsets'* in the applicant college.

*"SCIF has shone a light bulb on us, things have to improve, and we are working particularly hard to make sure that everyone understands what needs to change, down to all the support staff, there needs to be a fundamental shift in expectation and quality."* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

Communicating and championing the SCIF at a whole-college level generated wider ownership for improvement across staff, and it minimised the risk of specific areas of learning or quality improvement being over-looked. Where applicant colleges were actively managing the SCIF through steering group meetings and communicating plans more widely, staff reported that colleges were beginning to move forward in a more coherent and consistent way. In these instances, teaching and support staff were in a better position to take advantage of the peer-to-peer work and understand their role in college-wide improvements.

Where SCIF was less widely communicated, some staff felt unsure of the partner college's involvement.

*"When you are an RI, you get so many observations, I thought, oh someone else who's coming in to give me a kicking...I didn't know what to expect."* (Middle leader, applicant college)

## 6.3 Challenges in SCIF pilot set-up and delivery

Both applicant and partner colleges faced challenges when setting up and implementing intensive programmes of work. There were also examples of SCIF projects evolving from the original bids, meaning that greater resource and time was needed from partner colleges than originally anticipated. These challenges are summarised below.

### 6.3.1 Colleges' capacity to deliver

In terms of the delivery of the SCIF pilot, the challenges experienced by colleges particularly related to:

- The ability of applicant colleges to release staff for improvement activities due to workload demands or insufficient staff cover.
- A lack of dedicated resource in applicant colleges to project manage the delivery of the SCIF plan.
- The inability of applicant colleges to manage the SCIF effectively at SLT level due to competing pressures, for example when facing financial crisis, mergers, staffing issues or impending Ofsted visits.
- The inability of partner colleges to deliver as originally expected in the SCIF plan, due to staff capacity or not having the appropriate provision for applicant colleges to view or embed.

Two partner colleges worked with multiple applicant colleges, and this had implications on partner colleges' capacity to provide support. These partner colleges recognised that supporting more than one college was a challenge and needed careful planning to make sure it was deliverable. One mitigated this through backfilling the posts of staff they knew would be involved in the SCIF delivery. The other commented that staggering the start dates for SCIF projects had been beneficial.

### 6.3.2 Evolving plans

Many applicant colleges did not complete the SCIF plans according to the original timescale as set out in the applications. The short timescale particularly affected colleges that received funding in wave two. These colleges did not start delivery until March/April 2018. There were a number of reasons for this delay, including:

- The colleges that applied on 5 January 2018 receiving notification of their award in the latter part of February.
- Slower than expected transition from planning to delivery stage, for example due to undertaking a more thorough diagnostic, or poor weather delaying visits.
- Adjustments to the SCIF plans and planned interventions i.e. to reflect wider staff consultation or after further discussion with partners.

*"[The applicant college] may have been over-optimistic on some of [its] interventions and in other areas [it has] not included things which in hindsight, [it] should have. For example, [it] did not put anything in for teaching and learning in maths and English across the college, but [it is] considering that [it] needs to do some additional training on this."* (Principal, partner college).

For many partnerships, considerable work was extended into the summer period, particularly in relation to training for teachers where several applicant colleges pushed

back training to after the exam period. Some were given extensions to funding timescales, allowing them to continue delivery into the autumn term.

### 6.3.3 Establishing an effective partnership

The partnership approach was in most cases a strength of the SCIF model. However, the ways in which partnerships operated, particularly at middle manager level, needed careful planning and a clear communication strategy. Some applicant colleges gave examples of where engagement at this level had been challenging and staff had lost trust in the method.

*“[The observation model suggested by the partner college] was badly received by programme managers and faculty managers here; they saw it as someone from outside the college, who knew nothing about the limitations we are working within, they felt like they were telling them off, they would have accepted [the applicant college principal] telling them off, they found it difficult having someone from another college criticising their work”.* (Principal, applicant college)

Sometimes, the depth of challenge facing certain areas of colleges was extensive. Relations therefore, between staff within colleges and between partners was not always smooth and implementing improvement and change in some applicant colleges was challenging.

## 6.4 Challenges in monitoring and evaluation

Applicant colleges were required to undertake a self-evaluation of the SCIF activities, submitted to the DfE from November 2018 to January 2019. Some applicant colleges found it challenging to develop appropriate self-evaluation plans and collect evaluation data, even with support from the evaluation team. The reasons for this tended to relate to three types of challenge: (1) understanding how to plan and deliver a self-evaluation, (2) having the capacity to do so, and (3) having the resource and time to collate the relevant data. Examples of how these are borne out in practice are illustrated below (with examples all relating to applicant colleges).

**Confusion and lack of clarity regarding definitions:** A review of colleges’ key performance indicators showed varying levels of specificity and some colleges had very few objectives that were SMART. Success measures were often described and not quantified. In many cases, colleges focused on defining ‘outputs’ and delivery activities, rather than on short- and long-term outcomes and impacts expected from the SCIF project. Considerable work was therefore undertaken by the evaluation team to support colleges in refining self-evaluation plans.

**Less focus on softer outcomes:** Establishing softer outcomes from the SCIF received little attention in some colleges, although others completed surveys with teaching and

support staff. Importantly, a number of applicant colleges did not request feedback, in particular from middle leaders, of the results of the peer-to-peer work. Colleges needed to organise clear reporting of key findings and recommendations from all those involved to thoroughly capitalise on the learning.

**Lack of understanding of the importance of baselines:** Many colleges did not establish baselines, particularly for soft outcomes such as teacher confidence or governors' perceptions. Colleges explained that any thinking related to baselines happened too late, even though it was addressed in conversations with the evaluation team. This had implications for colleges' ability to fully evidence the impact of the SCIF delivery.

**Ability to allocate sufficient resources to evaluation:** For many colleges, the ability to design and conduct a self-evaluation of the SCIF pilot within the available timescales was a challenge, and some had underestimated the resources required.

*“Planning...and delivering [the project] at the same time as having detailed assessment of impact is difficult. There are many other things going on, and [other] accountabilities. It can feel a bit intense.”* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

**Timings for gathering data:** The timescales for the SCIF delivery meant that colleges faced challenges in evidencing the quantitative impact of the activities on attainment, retention and attendance measures within the duration of the project. Colleges were encouraged to include interim measures for these within their self-evaluation plans. There were, however, concerns raised by colleges that much of the quantitative impact of the SCIF project would not be seen until the end of the 2018-19 academic year.

## 6.5 Lessons learned

Applicant and partner colleges identified the following lessons learned from the SCIF pilot. It is important to note that although there were some common themes across colleges in the lessons learned, many were unique to individual colleges' experience of the SCIF. Lessons learned included:

- The need for flexibility in the relationship between applicant and partner colleges. It was important to be open to change and not too prescriptive about the relationship and how it should develop.
- Being realistic about what was achievable within the timescales, narrowing the focus if necessary.

*“It is better to focus on fairly specific things to move forward in a realistic timescale. We should have left out our management focus and put more into teaching and learning. Although there are lots of things that you*

*want to do, really rationalise things that will have best impact.”* (Principal, applicant college)

- Allocating sufficient resources to project manage delivery.

*“Funding for a project manager would have been something that we could have done: someone to manage things, pull things together at the end, organising everything.”* (Vice-principal, applicant college)

- The importance of geography when choosing a partner, which could create some logistical implications, e.g. time required for travel.

*“For the pilot – we looked for synergy irrespective of geography, now geography is definitely a factor.”* (Principal, partner college)

- The desirability for the applicant and partner college to have similarities that make them a ‘good fit’ for a partnership.

*“We are geographically close so can meet but not too close so that there is rivalry for learners. We also have similar curriculum offers...We have a good rapport, get on well and have similar ideas as to how to improve.”* (Principal, applicant college)

- Being sensitive to existing college relationships in order to avoid tensions.

*“We have had to be a little bit sensitive in who we have partnered with, taking into account other colleges we have relationships with. You need to think about the competitors of colleges and consider other long-standing relationships you already have....keep the communication open and keep talking to manage that. There’s a benefit to the sector as everybody ups their game. It’s not a negative, just something to be aware of... Be sensitive to others around the organisation as well as the organisation itself.”* (Principal, partner college)

- Resourcing self-evaluation planning from the outset, to ensure that relevant data for baseline indicators are gathered and data collection exercises were appropriate.

## 7. Conclusions and points for consideration

Overall, colleges involved in the SCIF pilot were positive that the programme offered an excellent opportunity to deliver a range of quality improvement interventions across the FE sector. Colleges particularly noted the ability to accelerate rates of improvement over one academic year; without the grant, it was felt that applicant colleges would not have been able to deliver so many changes. The SCIF pilot provided vital financial support for quality improvement activities, allowing for the enhancement of existing interventions, or for new interventions to be developed.

Colleges viewed the partnership model as fundamental to the success of the SCIF pilot. The model of the sector supporting itself to improve was highly valued. Factors such as the synergy of the partner college culture and provision, geography, and experience of having made a similar improvement journey were integral to applicant colleges' decisions about potential partners.

The focus that the SCIF placed on peer-to-peer support allowed applicant college staff to visit partner college counterparts. This provided the opportunity to observe systems and processes in practice, allowing a deeper understanding of how these could be tailored or embedded within their own college. In many applicant colleges, this generated wider ownership for improvement at all levels and increased awareness of the role of all staff in quality improvement.

The fieldwork evidenced a great deal of respect between applicant and partner college staff, and a genuine commitment to share knowledge and practice openly, and to improve the quality of provision in the FE college sector. Partner colleges reported reciprocal benefits, highlighting that the programme allowed them to reflect on practice and learn from applicant colleges.

There were several challenges identified during the set-up and delivery of the SCIF pilot. These included: gaps in capacity to deliver activities within the timescales, slow transitions from planning to delivery, plans evolving as interventions progressed, and a lack of understanding of, or capacity for, the monitoring and self-evaluation requirements.

Much of the work undertaken by colleges focused on the implementation of new strategies, performance management, and teaching and learning practices. This represents a top-down approach that will take time to embed, and still more time to show measurable impact, for example through improved outcomes. As a result, the impact of the SCIF pilot activity is difficult to clearly specify within the time-frame of the pilot. However, it was believed by those involved, that changes will lead to improvements in the long-term.

## 7.1 Points for consideration

### 7.1.1 Improving SCIF applications

- **Colleges would benefit from additional guidance and support through the application process** (see section 3.4 and 3.6). For example, this could include costing templates, suggested rates for staffing levels for creating costs, clarifying expectations such as the number of partners allowed and the use of external consultants, and how to establish baseline key performance indicators.
- **Funding should be conditional on the completion of diagnostics before a college makes its application** (see section 3.3). Guidance on how to conduct a high-quality diagnostic could be developed and shared with partner colleges.
- **A longer lead-in time for project design and planning would help colleges reflect on what was required and achievable** (see section 3.5). Feedback on the application process highlighted the importance of allowing appropriate time for planning and partner diagnostics. These were felt to ensure that delivery commenced more quickly and that the focus of interventions fully reflected the quality improvement priorities for applicant colleges.
- **A partner college's ability and capacity to support more than one college should be carefully considered** (see section 3.6). The capacity to deliver the required level of support should be assured, and colleges agreeing to support more than one applicant need to be fully aware of the level of commitment being taken on.
- A more formal process identifying colleges as potential partners would help ensure the highest level of support was provided to applicant colleges.  
**Independent stakeholders could oversee the matching of applicant and partner colleges.**

### 7.1.2 SCIF delivery

- **Colleges should be supported to achieve early impact during delivery through sharing good practice.** Consideration should be given as to how the findings from individual colleges' SCIF projects could be shared with a wider audience (see sections 5 and 6). Encouraging networking between colleges involved in the SCIF (those engaged in the pilot and the mainstage roll-out) will help to disseminate practice, share learning, and highlight different approaches to effective partnership working.

- **The timescale for the delivery of the mainstage SCIF projects could be extended** (see section 3.5 and 6.3). Allowing for sufficient time in delivery timescales will give colleges the time to identify the delivery activities that will make the greatest impact.
- **Sustainability should be a key consideration during planning and delivery of the SCIF activities.** This could be supported through colleges ensuring that there is the appropriate level of commitment, capacity and willingness of SLTs to continue the work started through the SCIF, developing staff expertise through CPD programmes, and embedding improvement activities into long-term Quality Improvement Plans.

### 7.1.3 Evidencing impact

- **Colleges should be further encouraged to robustly monitor and provide evidence of activities completed and outcomes achieved** (see sections 4.2 and 6.4). Success measures should be linked to overarching objectives/outcomes rather than each activity, and a clear reporting template supporting the self-evaluation should accompany the set of SCIF resources provided to successful applicant colleges. Costing for self-evaluation activities could be a standard feature of proposals to improve engagement and rigour.
- **Any future evaluation activity should clearly define key measurable outcomes for identifying impact.** The focus of this process evaluation was on obtaining perceptual data on the impact of SCIF to-date from staff at applicant and partner colleges. It is important however, that any future impact evaluation commissioned, or any further self-evaluation conducted by the SCIF colleges, fully considers quantitative measures and how best to evidence and attribute impact of activities and interventions undertaken during the programme.

## Annex A: Topic guides

### Applicant College Topic Guide – Wave 1

Key Areas of Investigation	Key Questions
<b>APPLICANT COLLEGE (PROCESS INTERVIEWS)</b>	
Role of interviewee	<p>Please collect details on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role/responsibilities of interviewee</li> <li>- Length of time in role/at college</li> <li>- Level/type of involvement in the application process/delivery of SCIF</li> </ul>
Application Process (up to the point of notification of decision and including feedback)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did you become aware of the SCIF funding? e.g. through the DfE or ESFA, the FE commissioner, a college association, the media?</li> <li>2. Why did the college decide to apply for the SCIF fund? Explore: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Key priorities/areas for improvement it was intended to address</li> <li>- Who was involved in the decision process to apply within the college? Staff involved? At what level?</li> <li>- Involvement of FE commissioner team? Had the FE commissioner team undertaken a diagnostic assessment, or had it been involved in other ways with the college?</li> <li>- Involvement of wider partners - who?</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. [note: tailor to whether QIP has been provided prior to interview] Could you provide an outline of your quality improvement plans prior to the SCIF application and then explain how these informed the SCIF application? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extent of involvement of the partner in the diagnosis of improvement needs</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

- Extent activities proposed in SCIF built on pre-existing (or were similar)
4. Was the college receiving other quality improvement support prior to applying to the SCIF?
- Who was providing that support? e.g. partner college; other external stakeholders/organisations – who? nature of support?
  - Has the SCIF funding been used to build on that previous support? Or does it have a new focus?
5. What was your experience of the application process? Are there elements of the process that worked well or less well? *Probe for examples*
- how long did it take to complete?
  - views on the nature of information that was asked for?
  - how many people did you consult with?
  - how many processes were involved?
  - were the partner college(s) involved in the application process?
  - agreeing priorities/delivery focus
  - engagement with DfE and / or FE Commissioner team in advance of application (if applicable)
  - role of representative bodies (e.g. AoC, SFCA)
  - clarity and structure of the application form
  - level of guidance provided by DfE
  - completing the application form

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- timescales for submission</li> <li>- visit from member of FE Commissioner team after application (but before decision)</li> <li>- timescales for DfE making a decision on application</li> <li>- amount of funding available</li> <li>- feedback after decision</li> </ul> <p>6. How much time was needed to put the SCIF application together?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thoughts on the amount of time that was required</li> <li>- Views one on the application requirements – level of detail/length of form</li> </ul> <p>7. To what extent have staff been involved in developing the SCIF proposal/ how extensive is staff awareness of the priorities on which the college is focussing?</p> <p>8. Did you face any challenges or issues during the application process or in applying for the SCIF? How were these overcome?</p> <p>9. Do you have any suggestions for improving the application process?</p> <p>10. Do you have any recommendations for other colleges going through the application process?</p>
<p>Partnership Working (note – this section is primarily about the main partner college – some colleges have other partners too, which is covered in the section below)</p>	<p>11. At what stage of the SCIF application process did the college seek a partner (or number of partners)?</p> <p>12. How did the college identify a suitable college to partner with for SCIF? Probe for..</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- prior relationship/support from partner college</li> <li>- factors informing decisions about a partner e.g. perceived key strengths of the partner, approach to quality improvement, learner outcomes</li> <li>- involvement of others (internal and external to the college) in identifying an appropriate partner</li> </ul>

- how difficult it was to identify a partner (and what barriers there were)

13. What were the key capabilities or other characteristics the college was looking for in a partner college?

14. Were there other partner colleges that they had considered partnering with initially (as a main partner)?

- Who?
- What were the reasons for choosing your current partner college over an alternative partner?

15. What role did the partner college have at the application stage in relation to?

- level of involvement in diagnosis of improvement needs
- agreeing the priorities/objectives for SCIF delivery
- agreeing the allocation/split of funding between your college and partner college
- supporting the completion of the application form
- reviewing the application form
- what was the level of contact between partner college and applicant college during application process

16. What specific areas of delivery are you planning on working on with the partner college? (Note: cover areas not already addressed in the application)

- nature of delivery/project activities partner college is supporting and rationale for this—probe for examples
- what expertise is the partner college providing?
- amount/time allocated to partner college to support applicant college
- number and type of staff involved in providing support from partner college

- involvement in self-evaluation process

17. How was the role of each college negotiated? In terms of..

- How the partnership would work and expertise provided by provider (refer to application which sets out nature of delivery/activities, time allocated and staff)
- Exploring the process of negotiation of what was needed and what was available, whether there was some particular areas of expertise that were valued more than others, how the applicant college verified that the partner had the desired capability and expertise
- The scope of the partner role – how extensive it will/should be
- The split of activities and the types of activities to focus on
- The split of the budget

18. How well is the partnership working with the partner college so far?

- What has worked well/less well?
- Have there been any particular challenges/issues in establishing and implementing this partnership?
- Do they envisage any challenges going forward?

19. Has the approach to the partnership arrangement changed from your original bid?

- To what extent has the planned arrangement outlined in the application had to change once funding was received/project begun?

20. Is the amount and type of support the partner college providing appropriate? If not, how would this need to change?

- Is it at the level that intended in the bid? Amount and time provided by partner college staff

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is it focused in the right way? i.e. in terms of the areas of SCIF delivery.</li> <li>- Any changes to the amount and type of partner support that have been made compared to the proposals set out in the application</li> </ul>
Other partner colleges./ consultants	<p>21. Were other partners identified at the application process or afterwards?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How were they identified?</li> </ul> <p>22. What is their role, what are they contributing and why did you feel they were needed?</p> <p>23. Did they play any role in the application process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- diagnostic of college needs</li> <li>- support in writing application</li> <li>- level of involvement in deciding SCIF delivery/project priorities</li> <li>- how was their role negotiated (and funding)</li> </ul> <p>24. How well is the partnership working with this/these college(s) or consultants so far?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What has worked well/less well?</li> <li>- Have there been any particular challenges/issues in establishing and implementing this partnership?</li> <li>- Do they envisage any challenges going forward?</li> </ul>
Lessons learnt/challenges	<p>25. How is the delivery of your SCIF programme of work progressing to date? Probe across the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Progress with implementing specific elements of delivery</li> <li>- Establishment of partnership arrangements</li> <li>- Engagement of wider college staff in the SCIF process</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meeting timescales for implementation/delivery</li> </ul> <p>26. Have there been any key issues or challenges in the set-up and implementation of SCIF so far?</p> <p>27. Any key learning or successes in the set-up and implementation of SCIF so far? Probe across</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Application process</li> <li>- Developing and agreeing SCIF priorities</li> <li>- Working with a partner college (and other partners/providers)</li> <li>- Implementing SCIF plans</li> </ul> <p>28. So far, have there been any unintended consequences (good or bad)? (other potential knock on effects of working with other colleges on improvement, e.g. improved collaboration/networking – or the tensions of these)</p>
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**APPLICANT COLLEGE (SELF-EVALUATION)**

<p>Identifying priority areas</p>	<p>29. What are the key priorities on which the college is focussing (overview of SCIF project)</p> <p>30. What evidence have you used to understand under performance? (For example)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher observations</li> <li>- Progress data</li> <li>- Attainment data</li> <li>- Retention data</li> <li>- Ofsted Report or Support and Challenge letters</li> <li>- Input from the FEC team</li> <li>- Input from your partner college</li> </ul>
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	<p>31. How did you make use of this evidence when designing your programme of work?</p> <p>32. What are the key challenges in understanding what needs to improve in the college?</p> <p>33. Is the college's use of evidence/data sufficiently effective or are there issues in using data to understand where change is needed?</p> <p>34. How was the focus of the SCIF determined?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- College wide approach?</li> <li>- One or two senior leaders?</li> <li>- Were the Governors involved?</li> </ul> <p>35. To what extent does the SCIF contribute to the whole college quality improvement plan? Is the college using the fund to focus on one particular area? (This will help understand potential impact)</p>
Clarity of Objectives	<p>36. Can we talk through each objective to understand the focus and nature of interventions? (Considering: is each objective clearly articulated in terms of what they are trying to improve? If it is expressed as "teaching, learning and assessment," how is the college determining which teachers and which aspect of teaching and assessment and which area of learning?)</p> <p>37. How is each objective being led?</p> <p>38. Who is responsible for providing detail and for driving action or change?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How does the partner contribute towards understanding what needs to change and what is having an impact?</li> </ul> <p>39. How are the actions being communicated to key staff?</p> <p>40. What are the challenges relating to achieving each objective (exploring this can help identify some additional measures and links with other KPIs?)</p>
Monitoring and Reviewing SCIF	<p>41. What are the processes for monitoring and reviewing objectives, interventions and impact?</p> <p>42. Who is involved in monitoring and reviewing the progress and impact of interventions?</p> <p>43. How often does the team meet within the college to report on progress?</p>

	<p>44. How confident are they that they have the right systems in place to monitor impact?</p> <p>45. How will they know what has been learned from the partner college? Are the reporting requirements sufficient to ensure that improved practice is embedded?</p> <p>46. What are the key challenges that may impact on effective monitoring and review of progress?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Staff time to commit?</li> <li>- Expertise to deliver change?</li> <li>- Monitoring and reviewing the change?</li> <li>- Identification of measures and KPIs and use of data?</li> </ul> <p>47. Does your SCIF grant include funding to help undertake review/monitoring activities/provide resource capacity to help alleviate some of these challenges?</p>
Measures and KPIs	<p>48. Have they defined a set of measures and/or KPIs to support their interventions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What data are they using to determine improved outcomes?</li> <li>- What data and other sources of evidence are they using to monitor progress against objectives?</li> </ul> <p>49.</p> <p>50. Are they working towards new sets of measures/KPIs, what is the progress since application?</p> <p>51. What are the limitations of any of these datasets/evidence (e.g. timing of available data?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can the college use different measures?</li> </ul> <p>52. How confident is the college in using this data and other measures to understand progress?</p> <p>53. Does the college use a dashboard system for identifying achievement against KPIs – does it RAG rate these?</p> <p>54. Are there any areas where the college feels it may need help in developing suitable measures and identifying KPIs? What kind of support is needed?</p>

	<p>55. How does the college feel that future applicants might benefit from a self-evaluation guide and what material should it contain?</p>
<p>Potential Impact of SCIF</p>	<p>56. What difference does the college expect the SCIF will make in improving the college's performance?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How is college performance being specifically improved through SCIF funded culture change?</li> </ul> <p>57. Do you think the SCIF will help the college understand what has worked in improving outcomes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do you think you will be able to capture lessons from your SCIF-funded project to help you continue to improve outcomes in the future?</li> </ul> <p>58. So far, have there been any unintended consequences (good or bad)? (other potential knock on effects of working with other colleges on improvement, e.g. improved collaboration/networking – or the tensions of these)</p>

## Partner College Topic Guide – Wave 1

Key Areas of Investigation	Key Questions
<b>PARTNER COLLEGE (PROCESS INTERVIEWS)</b>	
Role of interviewee	Please collect details on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role/responsibilities of interviewee</li> <li>- Length of time in role/at college</li> <li>- Level/type of involvement in the application process/delivery of SCIF</li> </ul>
Involvement with SCIF	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How many colleges did you discuss SCIF applications with and what were the negotiations?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Did you approach this applicant college, or were you approached by it?</li> <li>- Any involvement with other colleges as part of SCIF? Similar/different approach to this pilot college?</li> <li>- Any involvement with other colleges which you did not take up? Why?</li> <li>- Any involvement with other colleges where the application was not successful?</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. If the former, how did you identify which college(s) to approach?</li> <li>3. If the latter, how were you initially approached to become a partner college for the SCIF fund?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Directly by applicant college(s)?</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- By another stakeholder (e.g. a college association; a member of the FEC team)</li> </ul> <p>4. If the latter, at what stage in the application process was the applicant college(s) at when you were approached to be a partner college?</p> <p>5. What were your reasons for deciding to become involved with the SCIF?</p> <p>6. Did the college have an existing working relationship with the applicant college(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If yes, what was the nature of this relationship?</li> <li>- Was the partner college already providing support to the applicant college(s) prior to SCIF funding (e.g. quality improvement support, teaching and learning, other support)?</li> </ul> <p>7. Did you have any initial concerns about your college becoming involved in the SCIF fund? Have these initial concerns being realised?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Capacity of existing staff to provide appropriate level of support</li> <li>- Amount of funding available</li> <li>- Level of commitment required</li> <li>- Impact on own college</li> </ul> <p>8. What expertise do you feel you can provide to other colleges that may have challenges with quality improvement? <i>Probe for examples</i></p>
<p>Application Process (up to the point of notification of decision and including feedback)</p>	<p>9. What role did you as a partner college have at the application stage in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- undertaking a diagnostic of the needs/priorities in the applicant college</li> <li>- agreeing the priorities/objectives for SCIF delivery</li> <li>- agreeing the allocation/split of funding between the applicant and partner college</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- supporting the completion of the application form</li> <li>- reviewing the application form</li> <li>- what was the level of contact between partner college and applicant college during application process</li> </ul> <p>10. If this role was different across different 'applicant' colleges, please explain the difference.</p> <p>11. What was your experience of the application process? Are there elements of the process that worked well or less well? <i>Probe for examples (including differentiation with different applicant colleges if applicable)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how long did it take to complete?</li> <li>- views on the nature of information that was asked for?</li> <li>- how many people did you consult with?</li> <li>- how many processes were involved?</li> <li>- were the partner college(s) involved in the application process?</li> <li>- agreeing priorities/delivery focus</li> <li>- engagement with DfE and / or FE Commissioner team in advance of application (if applicable)</li> <li>- role of representative bodies (e.g. AoC, SFCA)</li> <li>- clarity and structure of the application form</li> <li>- level of guidance provided by DfE</li> <li>- completing the application form</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- timescales for submission</li> <li>- visit from member of FE Commissioner team after application (but before decision)</li> <li>- timescales for DfE making a decision on application</li> <li>- amount of funding available</li> <li>- feedback after decision</li> </ul> <p>12. Did you face any challenges or issues in supporting the SCIF application(s)? How were these overcome?</p> <p>13. Do you have any suggestions for improving the application process?</p> <p>14. Do you have any recommendations for other colleges going through the application process?</p> <p>15. Do you have any recommendations for other colleges that may be considering being a partner college as part of SCIF?</p>
Partnership working	<p>16. What specific areas of SCIF programme of work delivery are you planning on working on with the applicant college(s)? (<i>differentiate if involved with more than one applicant college</i>).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- nature of delivery/project activities partner college is supporting and rationale for this—probe for examples</li> <li>- amount/time allocated to partner college to support applicant college</li> <li>- number and type of staff involved in providing support from partner college</li> <li>- what expertise is your college providing as the partner?</li> <li>- involvement in self-evaluation process</li> </ul>

	<p>17. How well is the partnership working with the applicant college(s) so far?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What has worked well/less well?</li> <li>- Have there been any particular challenges/issues in establishing and implementing this partnership?</li> <li>- Do you envisage any challenges going forward?</li> <li>- Has the approach to the partnership arrangement between yourself and the applicant college(s) changed from your original bid?</li> </ul> <p>59. Has the approach to the partnership arrangement(s) changed from your original bid?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To what extent has the planned arrangement outlined in the application had to change once funding was received/project begun?</li> </ul> <p>60. From your experience so far, do you feel the amount and type of support you are providing to the applicant college(s) is appropriate? If not, how would you change this?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is it at the level that you intended in the bid? Amount and time provided by partner college staff</li> <li>- Is it focused in the right way? i.e. in terms of the areas of delivery of the SCIF programme of work</li> <li>- Impact/issues with working with more than one successful applicant college</li> </ul> <p>61. How have you found working with other partners (colleges/consultants) who may be involved in supporting improvement as part of the bid ?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is your relationship with those partners?</li> </ul> <p>62. What are your views on how delivery of the SCIF programme of work is progressing to date? <i>(differentiate across different applicant colleges if appropriate)</i></p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Progress against delivery plan</li><li>- Progress in setting-up SCIF delivery</li><li>- Confidence in applicant colleges agreed priorities/strategy for delivery</li><li>- Is there anyway the approach/delivery could be improved?</li><li>- What areas are working well? Why?</li><li>- How involved are you in the monitoring/evaluation activity?</li></ul> <p>63. Thinking about your involvement with the applicant college(s) so far, what difference do you feel your involvement as a college has made?</p> <p>64. Is there a wider need across the further education sector for a programme of this nature?</p>
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## Applicant College Topic Guide – Wave 2

Key Areas of Investigation	Key Areas of Investigation
<b>Applicant College</b>	
Role of interviewee	Details on all key staff interviewed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role/responsibilities of interviewee</li> <li>- Length of time in role/at college</li> <li>- Level/type of involvement in the application process/delivery of SCIF</li> </ul>
Overall progress to date  in delivering the SCIF planned interventions  [Interviews with SCIF lead(s)/Principal]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How has the college progressed against its original SCIF plan?</li> <li>2. Has the college made any adjustments to the intervention plan and spend?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why was this necessary?</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Has the college delivered the range of interventions it intended? If not, why not?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is there something the college would have liked to have delivered but couldn't? Why not?</li> <li>- Are there any plans going forward to address this?</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. What have been the key challenges in delivering to the plan?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Releasing staff?</li> <li>- Partnership college's ability to respond?</li> <li>- Sourcing appropriate expertise?</li> <li>- Geography?</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Timings?</li> </ul> <p>5. With hindsight, would you have changed the SCIF planned interventions? In what way?</p> <p>6. Is there anything you would have liked to have done but did not plan for?</p>
<p>Staff involvement and change of approach</p> <p>[Interviews with relevant staff – senior leaders, middle leaders, CM, head of subject, teachers, support staff]</p>	<p>7. How did you engage in the SCIF work – was your area of work/department involved in any intervention?</p> <p>8. Has this been useful or worked well?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What elements did you find useful?</li> <li>- Have you been able to embed the learning into your practice – can you give examples?</li> </ul> <p>9. What elements were not useful or did not work well? Why?</p> <p>10. Is there any ongoing work with the partner college(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If so, what is the nature of this, how long will it go on for and how do you expect it to impact on your work?</li> <li>- If not, would you have liked more support - why/why not, in what way?</li> </ul> <p>11. What could other colleges learn from this college’s experiences of SCIF implementation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advice/guidance to maximise success</li> </ul>
<p>Benefit of partnership working for the SCIF funded college</p> <p>[Interviews with relevant staff – senior leaders, middle</p>	<p>12. Did staff feel they clearly understood the purpose of the partnership approach?</p> <p>13. Did the partnership arrangements stay as planned from the beginning or change?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Additional/different partners brought in, rationale</li> <li>- Change of role/activities of partners, rationale/reasons</li> <li>- Extent of involvement of partner/closeness of relationship</li> </ul> <p>14. Did staff develop trusted relationships? If not, why not?</p>

<p>leaders, CM, head of subject, teachers, support staff]</p>	<p>15. How/did these relationships develop from the first visits?  16. What were the benefits of the partnership(s)? (one way or both ways)  17. Has there been follow-up support from the partner college such as sharing of resources etc?  18. Did colleges feel the support or visits could have been improved in any way?  19. To what extent have staff changed their practice as a direct result of what the partner college does/recommend?  20. Have there been any challenges in the partnership approach?  21. What are the key lessons to be considered in rolling out a partnership model of support?</p>
<p>Impact of interventions   [Interviews with relevant staff – senior leaders, middle leaders]</p>	<p>22. How well were the interventions executed to achieve the desired outcomes – was the quality of intervention/support/challenge appropriate to meet the college’s and staff’s needs?  23. How well/to what extent did key staff engage in the interventions?  24. How has the senior leadership team responded to the issues raised by some of interventions? Has there been a meeting to discuss issues raised by visits to/from partner colleges etc?  25. Were the findings from partner interventions shared across college staff to ensure that all staff were fully informed of the areas for improvement?  - Could this have been improved to the benefit of staff within the college?  26. Has there been a systemic change to, for example:  - teaching, learning and assessment practices,  - performance management systems  - use of progression data  - what has been the most significant change to date?  27. How has the SCIF model of support facilitated this change/ improvement?</p>

	<p>28. Did the range of interventions delivered have the impact that the college was expecting? If not, what were the reasons for the limitations on impact?</p> <p>29. What interventions had a strong and lasting impact and why?</p> <p>30. Which interventions are less likely to have a strong and lasting impact and why?</p> <p>31. So far, have there been any unintended consequences (good or bad)? (Other potential knock on effects of working with other colleges on improvement, e.g. improved collaboration/networking – or the tensions of these)</p> <p>32. How is the college moving forward beyond the pilot? What will be the legacy?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- continued QI work on priority areas (objectives of the pilot and wider)</li> <li>- continued partnership</li> <li>- change of policy/practice</li> </ul>
<p>Evidence of impact</p> <p>[Interviews with SCIF lead(s)/Principal]</p>	<p>33. What evidence has the college used to understand the impact of the SCIF to date?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- MIS (attendance, retention, progress, attainment data etc)</li> <li>- Scrutiny/teacher observations</li> <li>- SMT, middle managers, teachers' feedback</li> <li>- Learners' feedback</li> <li>- Self-assessment, Ofsted Report or Support and Challenge letters</li> <li>- Feedback from your partner college</li> </ul> <p>34. Were the KPIs the right KPIs for their programme?</p> <p>35. Is the college continuing to deliver SCIF until December?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If so, what are they focussing on?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Will they achieve their full SCIF objectives by the end of the pilot?</li> <li>- How will they continue with the improvement programme?</li> </ul> <p>36. How confident is the college in the evidence they will generate will provide them with sufficient understanding of the impact of the SCIF and where you may need to focus further attention to improve?</p> <p>37. Is the self-evaluation progressing as expected? If not, what are the issues?</p> <p>38. What challenges does the college face in understanding and evidencing the impact of the SCIF across the college?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are the challenges in understanding impact related to timing of data or resource/capacity related?</li> <li>- Has the monitoring and reporting of interventions and impact been sufficient within the college/SCIF team?</li> </ul> <p>39. Is the college's use of evidence/data sufficiently effective or are there issues in using data to understand where change is needed?</p> <p>40. What lessons can be learned from this to feed into the self-evaluation guide? What additional support would colleges like to have accessed regarding self-evaluation of the SCIF?</p>
<p>General views of the SCIF</p>	<p>41. Do pilot SCIF colleges feel the FE sector could benefit from access to funded partner support of this nature?</p> <p>42. Do they feel the programme offers value for money in terms of the impact of SCIF on the college?</p> <p>43. What the key lessons that need to be taken forward in any future delivery of the SCIF?</p>

## Partner College Topic Guide – Wave 2

Key Areas of Investigation	Key Areas of Investigation
<b>Partner College</b>	
Role of interviewee	Please collect details on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role/responsibilities of interviewee</li> <li>- Length of time in role/at college</li> <li>- Level/type of involvement in the application process/delivery of SCIF</li> </ul>
Involvement with SCIF  [Lead partner or Principal]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Has the college’s involvement with the SCIF been as they expected in terms of delivering the range of interventions they had planned for?</li> <li>2. What has been your experience of working as a partner college generally? Positive or not so positive and why?</li> <li>3. What are the key benefits of the partnership model both for partner/SCIF funded colleges?</li> <li>4. What challenges have partner college staff faced in working in partnership with the SCIF college?</li> <li>5. How were these overcome?</li> <li>6. What are the key lessons to be considered in rolling out a partnership model of support?</li> </ol>
Partnership working  [This will be a combination of	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Looking at each of the interventions in which the partner college were involved, were these executed as planned in the original plan, if not why not?</li> </ol>

<p>interviews with the principal, senior leaders and middle leaders as necessary to drill down on each intervention].</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. What worked well in terms of transferring good practice to staff at the partners college for each intervention?</li> <li>9. What were the challenges partner colleges had to overcome in delivering against each intervention?</li> <li>10. How, to what extent do partner colleges feel the SCIF college benefited from the partner college's support, what were the key learning points they have taken away?</li> <li>11. Are there any limitations of SCIF in terms of college improvement (either as a result of the financial investment, capacity issues or the timeframes)?</li> <li>12. Have relationships continued? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have staff continued to share ideas and resources?</li> </ul> </li> <li>13. Did partner colleges feel the SCIF college could have engaged to a greater extent with the support? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If so, what were the reasons for lower than anticipated levels of engagement?</li> </ul> </li> <li>14. Has the extent of support partner college delivered been as expected? If not, how has it differed?</li> <li>15. Did partner colleges feel they were sufficiently financially compensated for their support?</li> <li>16. Have partner colleges benefited from then partnership work? If so, in what way?</li> <li>17. Would they do this again?</li> </ol>
<p>General views of the SCIF</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18. Do partner colleges feel the FE sector could benefit from access to funded partner support of this nature?</li> <li>19. Do they feel the programme offers value for money in terms of the impact of SCIF on the college?</li> <li>20. What are the key lessons that need to be taken forward in any future delivery of the SCIF?</li> </ol>



Department  
for Education

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**Reference: DfE-RR893**

**ISBN: 978-1-78105-995-1**

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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