



Department
for Education

Skills accelerator pilot evaluation: follow up

Research report

July 2023

**Authors: IFF Research and Learning and
Work Institute**



Government
Social Research

Contents

Skills accelerator pilot evaluation: additional report chapter	2
Introduction	2
Delivery of SDF pilot projects	3
Performance against planned outcomes	4
Sustainability	10
Funding plans and financial viability	10
Support needed to sustain SDF pilot projects	11
Partnership working	12
Plans for future partnership working	14
Reflections on LSIP development process	15
LSIPs and identifying priority needs	15
SDF 2 delivery plan process	17
Conclusions	19
SDF pilot project delivery and sustainability	19
Partnership working	20
LSIPs and identifying priority needs	20
SDF 2 delivery plan process	21
Programme outcomes achieved	22
Issues for consideration	23
Annex A: Methodology	24

Skills accelerator pilot evaluation: additional report chapter

Introduction

The Skills Accelerator pilot and evaluation

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned IFF Research and the Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to conduct an evaluation of the Skills Accelerator pilot. The Skills Accelerator pilot aims to better align technical education and training provision to local labour market needs. It includes 18 Strategic Development Fund (SDF) pilot areas, eight of which are also Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) Trailblazers. References to LSIP areas in this report are to these LSIP Trailblazers.

The evaluation addresses the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: Does the Skills Accelerator pilot help to better align technical education and training provision with local labour market needs?
- Research Question 2: What can be learned from how LSIP Trailblazers and SDF pilots were delivered?
- Research Question 3: What (perceived) impacts have been achieved and how?

The evaluation focuses on areas for learning from the implementation and delivery of the Skills Accelerator pilot, to inform future skills policy development and delivery.

Methodology

The evaluation comprises several research elements, including:

- A scoping phase including a review of the programme Theory of Change (ToC) and materials design;
- Interviews with SDF pilot area lead partners and Employer Representative Body (ERB) leads;
- Case studies (including interviews with a further 3-4 partners and key local stakeholders, as well as observations of key meetings);
- A small-scale online survey of wider partners;
- Interviews with ERBs and SDF pilot leads in June 2022;
- Interviews with SDF pilot leads in September 2022;

- Interviews with SDF pilot leads and wider partners (i.e., not project leads) in January and February 2023.

The main report for the evaluation is based on the findings from fieldwork to September 2022. It was published in July 2023 and is available at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-accelerator-pilot-evaluation>

About this report

This additional short report draws on the final round of 33 interviews with SDF pilot leads and wider partners. In total, 13 interviews with SDF pilot leads and 20 with wider partners were carried out in January and February 2023 to reflect on progress over time following the end of SDF pilot funding. In particular, the final round of interviews allowed leads and partners to assess outcomes including recruitment onto new provision, continued partnership working and sustained relationships between partners, and early signs of longer-term sustainability and stability of provision.

This additional short report covers project delivery, the extent to which the SDF pilot has met its objectives, partnership and project sustainability, and areas for future work. It is structured as follows:

- Delivery of SDF pilot projects – including outcomes, enablers and barriers;
- Sustainability – including continuation of SDF pilot projects post-pilot funding, and future funding plans;
- Partnership working – including effectiveness, enablers, barriers, and future plans for partnership working;
- Priority needs – including how LSIPs articulated priority needs;
- SDF2 delivery plan process – including the extent to which it supported longer-term planning / sustainability of activity;
- Conclusions.

Delivery of SDF pilot projects

Stage of delivery

All capital SDF pilot projects have been completed. Many projects experienced delays and some therefore were completed very recently (February 2023). Delays in delivering capital projects in some cases had a direct negative impact on partners' ability to deliver related training and learning provision; for example, where new facilities were not ready to open when planned, or where delays in securing equipment meant that practical training was delayed for the first cohort of learners.

I think we were a little bit ambitious with some of our KPIs... the shame in it is that because we've had to wait for the building projects to be completed, we haven't been able to scale up and facilitate [meeting] some [of the on-site training KPIs]

Wider partner, SDF area

Projects around curriculum development have also largely been completed, with course delivery being well underway. However, several courses were not delivered as originally planned, with their scope changing over the SDF funding period. This was mostly due to new employer needs becoming apparent during delivery, which caused providers to adjust their provision/offer accordingly. The SDF process allowed providers to further engage with employers, which in turn enabled them to identify previously unknown gaps in delivery and to promptly address these.

"Initially pulling together the bid it was with relatively limited understanding of where opportunities could come from compared to now. One of our course offerings now is about electrical vehicle awareness for emergency services personnel which was never on the radar until some of these discussions [with employers]"

Lead Provider, SDF area

Performance against planned outcomes

Project-specific outcomes

Most projects were described as largely successful, with a few exceeding their planned outcomes. These were generally: courses which had much higher demand than anticipated, where the initial course offer was expanded during delivery (e.g., some STEM areas, specialist health-related courses, and a niche area of engineering); projects where investment in digital kit resulted in increased learner reach by enabling hybrid learning; or subject areas where employer engagement was greater than originally anticipated (including zero-carbon construction, green technologies, and electric vehicles).

"The opportunity from this project [SDF] is that it has enabled us to have a greater number of employers that are actually engaged with us and working with us... what we've set up is something that will enable the... constant flow of employer need into curriculum"

Lead Provider, SDF and LSIP area

On the other hand, a few projects did not achieve their outcomes. These were mostly projects struggling to achieve anticipated demand on courses, although there were no clear patterns by subject area or level. Anecdotally, one course mentioned as being under-subscribed was an introductory social care course, whereas another focused on a

very specialised green technology. In the latter case, it became apparent that employers were unable to afford to invest in the new technology for their own businesses, so were not sending staff on associated training. However, only one lead provider expressed a mostly negative view of their project, blaming difficulties in achieving planned outcomes and volumes of learners on a lack of collaboration between partners. The lead provider attributed this lack of collaboration to different working practices, differences of opinion, and some partners being very rigid around procurement and contracting. In all other cases, lead providers mentioned positive aspects to projects.

Several projects which focused on recruitment of new staff and training of existing staff struggled to develop and deliver on their planned outcomes, due to recruitment challenges or limited staff time and capacity. In some cases, these struggles forced providers to find creative solutions in order to achieve planned outcomes, such as adopting new approaches to recruitment. These approaches included offering golden hellos, recruiting interns to support existing teams, and using an Industry Teaching Scheme, whereby people with industry expertise deliver training on a part-time basis. While these approaches helped to meet some staffing gaps, providers reported significant competition for staff, and the disparity between salaries in industry and Further Education (FE), as ongoing barriers to delivery.

Wider SDF outcomes

Wider partners – both providers and employers – provided feedback on whether they felt the SDF pilot had achieved its wider outcomes. Overall:

- Stimulating demand for new courses in priority skills areas was felt to have largely been achieved across the board, although some courses struggled to stimulate and / or maintain demand.
- Stronger collaboration between providers and partners was also perceived as being achieved for the most part. A couple of partners were more cautious in their assessment of success in this area.
- Changing curricula to focus on specialised provision was seen as a very successful outcome of SDF.
- Aligning staff skills to specialist provision was mostly felt to have been achieved successfully. One partner reported training more staff than expected. Another partner felt this was not successful on one of their projects, but was for the other project they oversaw.
- Equipping facilities to meet demand of new curricula was also reported as mostly achieved. However, one partner commented that despite very strong planning and consultation around the equipment to purchase, delays due to tight timescales meant that they fell short on the actual delivery of equipment.

- Increasing appetite for innovative approaches by employers was perceived as a strongly and clearly achieved outcome by most partners. However, one partner said their project was a good first step towards innovation, but that they could have gone further, and they felt that employers did not value their innovative offer. Another reported having witnessed employer appetite for training, but they were unsure about whether this was linked to innovation or not.

Key enabling factors in achieving against project outcomes

Having a history of established cooperation between colleges was a major facilitator in successfully achieving outcomes. Areas which had developed strong new partnerships had dedicated time to building positive working relationships, and sought to work collaboratively, rather than the lead partner adopting a top-down approach to the project.

Working collaboratively with employers, including smaller private sector employers who may not have dedicated training or workforce development teams, was also key to achieving outcomes. Employer engagement enabled providers to identify local skills needs so that the project could meet local demand effectively.

"I think that kind of bookending of consultation at the beginning, dialogue throughout and the kind of "you asked, we did" thing at the end [made the projects successful]".

Lead Provider, SDF area

One lead provider explained that employer forums, originally formed to inform their training needs analysis, were so helpful in establishing networks and having conversations that they decided to continue them beyond the SDF. The same provider also observed that thinking outside the box and flexibility were important to maintaining relationships with business.

Strategies used/actions taken to ensure planned outcomes were achieved on time

The significant investment from DfE was seen as a key enabler, with providers acknowledging that they would not have been able to achieve what they did if it weren't for the SDF funding. This was both because the SDF funding allowed purchases of new equipment, retraining of FE staff, and staff time to develop course content; and also because providers were encouraged to collaborate with each other and identify areas where their expertise could support partners to develop complementary provision, rather than compete. In addition, given the elapsed time since SDF pilot bids were developed, being adaptable and flexible in the activities delivered was also very important to achieving planned outcomes. Providers had to be able to respond and adapt to a changing external environment, including the COVID-19 pandemic and associated

lockdowns, during project planning and delivery. In this context, it was also important for providers to be flexible and creative with the upskilling of existing staff rather than just focusing on recruitment.

Key barriers to achieving against project outcomes, and mitigation

Tight timescales and delays

Lead providers saw the relatively short delivery window for pilot projects as their biggest barrier, with some feeling they had to rush their projects.

“As a sector we just have too many of these where you do things at ridiculous pace and you have to remember we had seven weeks I think to bid for this project, and then six months to deliver it, and I know that got extended but you can't do anything really meaningful in that time [i.e., in the six months], and of course there's SDF 2 that didn't allow us to bid to continue to do this”.

Lead provider, SDF area

Providers and partners noted that DfE and their partner organisations sometimes took significant amounts of time to provide decisions (for example, on valuations of buildings). Some also noted delays in receiving their grant offer letters, with some colleges reluctant to start spending before signing contracts.

Staffing

Staffing was a very commonly mentioned barrier to achieving outcomes in full or on time. Several colleges struggled to recruit qualified staff to deliver their SDF pilot projects. This was due to skills shortages in some of the more niche/cutting-edge industries (such as cyber industries, solar panel maintenance, and electric vehicle maintenance), resulting in higher private sector salaries which could not be matched by colleges with limited budgets. The short-term nature of the SDF pilot funding further complicated recruitment, as often posts could not be guaranteed beyond the end of the funding, and so were less attractive to job seekers than permanent roles elsewhere. These factors also made it difficult to retain new staff once recruited.

“Not all [staff] have stayed, because of the attraction of money on the employer side of the business. They're quite well-paid jobs, engineers and cyber... compared to what we can pay in FE. They'll stay for a bit and then realise that actually I could be earning four times this much money without having to deal with 18 year olds, so they will”.

Lead provider, SDF and LSIP area

One lead provider highlighted challenges around the scarcity of specialist staff and what this means for providers in their area.

“The challenge for us and I think the challenge for all businesses is recruiting staff. We're in quite a limited locality so it's particularly a challenge for us I think. If you get an experienced staff it usually means you're taking them from another provider in the locality so somebody gains and somebody loses”.

Lead provider, SDF and LSIP area

Colleges also experienced issues with the limited capacity of existing teaching staff. This was not unexpected, as existing staff generally had other targets and responsibilities to meet as part of their usual roles.

“We could be delivering 3 or 4 times the training that we are currently if we had more staff to deliver it.”

Lead provider, SDF area

Repurposing and upskilling existing staff was a common strategy to overcome the issue of finding new staff. One lead provider offered overtime to existing staff, which they said worked well. Another area overcame staffing issues by working with employers and using their resources to open up capacity, for example through employer guest speaking and having a programme of guest staff delivering short term modules.

Employer engagement

Most colleges were working with micro-employers and small to medium enterprises (SMEs). Building relationships with small employers can be very difficult given limited time and capacity on both sides. A lead provider explained that, despite around 70 engineering employers coming to their business centre, only a handful took them up on their training offer (despite the provider offering a mobile training facility). A staff member who had been leading on engaging with these employers also left their role, which meant the provider lost some personal connections to employers. The local area has a very high proportion of small employers, who often struggle to release staff for training given time pressures.

“Even when you offer them [small employers] a free course delivered on their premises free of charge on a topic of their choice, they still don't take it up.”

Lead provider, SDF area

Another provider suggested that short-term business needs may be taking precedence over upskilling staff, where benefits may only become apparent in the medium- to long-term.

“Businesses have continued to be less than enthusiastic about releasing their staff to support our staff... in the sectors that we're looking to support, there remain significant workforce challenges. The long game is clearly, if you release your staff to support development, there'll then be more chance of a throughput of talent, but the short-term necessity of having people on the floor has outweighed that.”

Lead provider, SDF and LSIP area

One lead provider suggested DfE consider an incentive for employers to engage in the future to help address and overcome barriers to employer engagement.

Partnership issues

One of the main challenges to achieving successful outcomes was the complex relationship between partners. Providers came into the partnerships with their own working practices, goals and views, which sometimes clashed with each other. Partnership working is discussed in more detail below.

While in most areas there was good partnership working, a small number of providers in LSIP areas mentioned that joint working between LSIPs and the SDF partnerships could have been more effective. One provider noted that the LSIP report did not provide the detailed information needed to make strategic decisions for colleges, while another pointed to the fact that their area's SDF pilot bid did not align with the gaps identified by the LSIP (the LSIP was produced after the SDF bid). However, in most areas there was good alignment between the skills priorities identified in SDF bids and by LSIPs.

In order to overcome partnership tensions, one area decided to put a formal written SDF partnership agreement in place for colleges for SDF 2. However, one partner was reluctant to sign such an agreement. Another area, where the Higher Education (HE) partner did not engage as anticipated, decided to reallocate their funds across engaged partners, which worked well.

Supply of goods and construction issues

There were some supply chain-related barriers and logistical issues which were mentioned as barriers by a couple of lead providers and partners. These tended to be very project-specific and reflect that SDF funding was used to purchase new (to the provider) equipment and technologies; for example, one wider partner explained that the wind turbine that they ordered and installed turned out to be too noisy to be kept running all the time. This had a subsequent impact on their ability to set up an off-grid system, which was one of the project outcomes they did not achieve on time.

Sustainability

Continuation of SDF pilot projects post-pilot funding

Collaboration between providers and wider partners was seen as a fundamental part of the SDF pilot projects that would continue long-term. In most cases, lead partners were confident that collaboration between providers would continue and become embedded into ways of working moving forward. Several providers felt that continuing collaboration, particularly with employers, would require some form of ongoing funding as FE colleges could otherwise not spare any staff time away from teaching. Others felt that SDF funding had been used to pump-prime joint working, and that collaboration between providers had been embedded and could continue without additional external funding.

Some lead providers highlighted the value of the employer engagement work that they had started as part of the SDF pilot project, but expressed concern about funding the continuation of this work. SDF 2 was helping to fund this work in some cases, and one provider had self-funded the employer engagement forum between SDF rounds as they found it so valuable. Other SDF partnerships will continue this work as 'business as usual', but had concerns that employer engagement activity would slow down once funding ends.

'We've probably kept at the same pace because of SDF 2, but we also knew there was a gap because there was a gap in funding. We also continued it in that gap because of the value that we saw in that in that employer sort of network and set up I guess.'

Lead provider, SDF area

For providers delivering SDF pilot projects focused on investment in equipment and facilities, many felt positively about how the equipment would be used in the future. For some, equipment and facilities were already being used in new and unexpected ways across providers, departments, and courses. For example, electric vehicle technology purchased and course content developed by one provider has been shared with another provider, so they can expand into electric agricultural vehicles without sourcing further external investment. Such pooling of resources avoids providers duplicating effort (e.g. developing very similar content from scratch).

Funding plans and financial viability

Generally, funding plans and views on timelines for when SDF pilot projects could expect to become financially viable had remained unchanged since the previous round of fieldwork in September 2022. Most providers will continue delivering courses using a mixture of funding sources, including Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding, setting training fees for employers so they cover the full cost of delivery, and (sometimes) self-

funding by learners. One provider, who had designed new course materials alongside their local NHS Trust, will continue to use a combination of AEB and NHS funding.

Securing future funding

Providers that designed short-term courses for employers had concerns about the future funding for such courses. They indicated that funding options for this type of provision are limited, and that the AEB would not be a suitable funding option due to restrictions around funding non-accredited courses and workplace courses. There was some frustration that LSIP recommendations in some areas did not consider availability of funding for different types of courses. For example, one LSIP recommended bite-sized courses for employers, but the college felt they would be unable to fund provision of this type because the funding rules considered this too close to basic skills provision. This was a particular issue for courses aimed at SMEs, who are unlikely to have a large enough training budget to pay for the full cost of training.

"Unfortunately, there are not ongoing funding sources outside of the SDF to provide the training. It is still in demand and we do still provide it but because there are not funding sources available we have to offer it on a commercial basis which means full cost to the employer."

Provider, SDF area

Some providers felt concerned that their access to funding was dependent on whether or not they were located within a devolved area and, if they were, whether that devolved area was 'on board' with their training plans. For example, one provider felt they were less likely to receive funding to deliver professional qualifications because they are not in a devolved area, while another voiced concerns about accessing funding if their devolved area were not flexible enough with the funding they provided.

"I think one of the key barriers will be the funding route, so we are in a devolved region and if they're not on board [the devolved area] with granting us flexibilities and the right level of funding for the qualifications it won't work."

Provider, SDF area

Support needed to sustain SDF pilot projects

Lead partners were asked what support they required to sustain pilot projects beyond the end of the next academic year. Most felt they did not require any further support, with some commenting that it is now up to providers to continue this work under their own steam. Of the lead partners who felt they needed further support, the majority identified that they needed further support from DfE around sourcing flexible funding streams and aligning SDF activity nationally.

Partners who had expressed concerns about accessing funding for new courses for employers were most likely to respond that the support they required was to access funding streams with sufficient flexibility to provide the courses that employers want. They indicated that loosening restrictions around funding would allow them to meet employer needs more easily.

“If we were able to deliver them to the people that wanted to study them without having to check 30 pages of eligibility requirements, then yes, but the rules are so restrictive and you asked why employers don't like what we give them. It's because the rules prevent us so often from giving them what they want”

Lead provider, SDF area

Other lead partners highlighted the need for more support to align SDF activity across areas. These requests for support included:

- Reassurance of how new curricula would be inspected for quality and consistency, given that there is no pre-set uniform standard across the country for some topic areas.
- A national framework or standard for conducting a Training Needs Analysis so local areas do not have to start from scratch.
- The sharing of learning between SDF projects.

Partnership working

Views on partnership working

Working together to deliver pilot activity has led to the development of strong partnerships in most areas. Partners identified that successful collaboration led to cohesive delivery with good knowledge sharing and flexible working to ensure successful delivery. Some wider partners explained that existing relationships have been strengthened due to being involved in the development of both SDF projects and LSIPs. For example, one Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) partner highlighted that they were brought closer to the local Chamber of Commerce, giving them access to a wider stakeholder network, which supported their external engagement.

Where strong partnerships have been developed, partners have been able to work creatively to overcome delivery barriers. For example, one partnership was struggling to fully engage HE partners in the development of SDF projects, so they worked together to successfully re-allocate funds to other projects. In another area, partnership working has enabled shared access to employer contacts. This meant that providers could overcome staffing issues by having guest speakers from industry come into colleges to deliver short

modules, or by gaining access to PhD researchers from the engineering sector who came to teach in colleges.

There is evidence that some partnerships have embraced new ways of working together, despite the initial challenges for FE partners in moving from a competitive mindset. This joint working has exceeded initial expectations for some partners. For example, one lead provider highlighted how learners have benefitted from providers collaboratively offering career support. Another partner explained that providers were able to use each other's facilities to upskill staff on different specialisms.

Levels of partnership working tended to be consistent throughout the course of the pilot. Some wider partners reported that the extent of their involvement diminished a little as projects approached delivery, but did not feel this led to partnerships losing momentum.

Key enabling factors for effective partnership working

There are good examples of wider partners feeling well supported by lead providers. This was attributed to lead providers fostering inclusive ways of working (in line with SDF's aim to foster collaboration), as well as defining clear parameters for pilot delivery. For example, the establishment of steering groups meant that responsibilities were clearly outlined, so everyone understood their role. Smaller FE colleges tended to be especially appreciative of the strength of co-ordination provided by leads in ensuring that pilot projects ran smoothly, with smaller partners protected from bureaucracy.

Making sure that the right people were included in the development of SDF projects has been key to success. One wider partner identified that it was helpful to initially engage with employer engagement leads within FE colleges (i.e., people who have strategic oversight of relevant initiatives and approaches to employer engagement), and then work together to identify a subject specialist within the college who can consider their needs and establish how curricula could be adapted to best meet them.

“The right person engages the employer, but then the specialist comes in for the conversation. And I think matching that is important.”

Wider partner (sector body), SDF and LSIP area

A key enabler for successful delivery was partners overcoming their normally competitive ways of working to the point that they felt able to share expertise. This relied on identifying mutually beneficial projects and initiatives, and building trust over time. Partners believe that the capability of providers to share knowledge and best practice will be a lasting legacy of the pilot.

Key barriers to effective partnership working

Switching from a competitive mindset has, however, been challenging for some FE colleges, and this has been a key barrier to embedding good levels of partnership working in some areas. One lead provider explained that working in true partnership for delivery of SDF projects was challenging, as not all partners were fully committed to open collaboration. Another lead provider explained that some providers had been hesitant to share access to learners, links to employers and knowledge, as they perceived that doing so would expose them to risk in the normally competitive FE sector.

"The hardest thing has been working in partnership and collaboration, that has been quite tough. Because we're not used to doing it to this degree. So one of our outputs that we didn't manage to do was having a formal collaboration agreement in place. The intention was to get to the end of SDF 1, sign this partnership agreement and continue working together. We haven't quite managed to get to that bit, we've all agreed to work together for SDF 2 but there's no formal partnership agreement at this stage."

Lead provider, SDF area

Joint working could be challenging in practice. In one area, colleges were all recruiting to fill the same job role. The original plan was to do so collaboratively, using the same job description and remuneration, then to assign suitable candidates to the college that was the best fit. However, one provider did not want to do this, and there were subsequent delays in recruitment. In another area, the HE partner was not able to deliver their planned contributions, which meant the partnership had to apply to DfE to allow the funds to be used by colleges instead. The funding was reallocated, but there was then disagreement between college partners on how best to allocate it.

Sustaining ongoing commitment between all providers in the partnership has also been challenging in areas where there were senior leadership changes during the pilot. This did not result in partners disengaging from pilot activities, but rather led to a change in pace of engagement whilst new senior leaders came into post.

"With changes in leadership - there was some turnover in senior leadership and principals. Things became a bit stop-start."

Lead provider, SDF area

Plans for future partnership working

There are clear indications that partners can see the benefits of working together and are keen to continue. For example, in one area, partners are already working collaboratively outside of SDF projects on large capital investment projects. Pilot activity has also been

identified as a catalyst for driving stronger and more meaningful collaboration between local providers and wider partners, which will continue post-pilot. In one area, for example, the principal of an FE college now sits on the board of a local business and technology forum as a result of a partnership established during the pilot. This has allowed all partners access to the skills forum, which will in turn allow for sustained partnership working.

Reflections on LSIP development process

Some wider partners felt that they had played a pivotal role in the development of LSIPs. For example, they had input directly into LSIP plan development by supplying labour market information (LMI), sharing analysis around skills gaps and growth forecasts, and providing evidence about key issues faced by the sector they represent.

“Having really good engagement [in the development of the LSIP] in the sense of actually feeling like we’re a part of making some change which I think is really important.”

FE provider, SDF area

One MCA described how being involved in the development of the LSIP plan helped to inform their own work.

“We saw drafts [of the LSIP plan]. They asked us for our input into that, so we’ve been given the opportunity to not only feed into it, but also identify how it can add value to our own employment and skills plan and add some of that granular evidence and understanding. That’s helped inform and shape some of what we’ve been doing as a combined authority.”

Wider partner (MCA), SDF and LSIP area

LSIPs and identifying priority needs

This section begins with reflections on how well priority skills needs were articulated in the Trailblazer LSIP reports and the extent to which they were perceived to match employer needs. It outlines how far partners have been able to use LSIP reports to help them to develop new provision, and any challenges that they faced whilst doing this. It ends with lessons that pilot participants feel can be learnt for national rollout of LSIPs.

Articulation of priority skills needs in LSIP reports

Those interviewed generally felt that the LSIP Trailblazer reports successfully articulated employers’ priority skills needs in ways that were meaningful to providers. In some areas, the content of the LSIP reports confirmed what providers already knew about skills gaps

and, where this was the case, the scope of SDF pilot projects matched the needs outlined in the reports. There was, however, some concern about the depth of information contained in some of the reports and that there was insufficient detail for FE providers to make clear strategic decisions. Some partners also reported that there were instances where priority areas identified in the Trailblazer reports highlighted a gap in current FE provision. Where this is the case, there was some uncertainty about how to meet this need without additional funding and resources for new provision.

Use of LSIPs to develop new provision

LSIP reports identify priority thematic areas, and development work to support new, aligned provision was reported to be at an early stage. Providers acknowledged that the LSIP reports provided a good roadmap for delivery, but there were some questions about how all the actions could be taken forward. As a result of the LSIP reports, some FE providers have been involved in employer roundtables to gain more granular detail in order to develop new curricula and revise existing courses in alignment with LSIP findings and priority areas for action. However, other providers explained that they needed to reflect on how they could continue employer engagement activities so as to implement the LSIP plan recommendations effectively.

"Is there something you can do similar to this [SDF project activity], that ... you can continue this work by seeking alternative sources of funding to have a project manager to continue to link employers, education providers to look at the LSIP road map for change and do what you can to move that forward."

Lead provider, SDF and LSIP area

There were also concerns that the some of the momentum gained by providers after the publication of the LSIP reports had been lost due to the focus on SDF2 development activity.

National rollout of LSIPs

Providers and partners identified several factors that they believed would support successful national roll out of LSIPs. Most agreed there needed to be a mechanism in place to make sure that the reports were regularly refreshed, so they are living documents that retain their relevance.

Some of respondents said it could be useful for different areas across the country to collaborate in order to achieve LSIP outcomes, for example, by establishing talent pools to share learning and best practice.

One wider partner identified the importance of a proactive approach to employer engagement. They explained how, in their region, partners were producing a highlight report for employers to outline activity that providers had undertaken so far to meet the

priority needs identified in the LSIP report. They hoped this would help maintain links with existing employers, as well as encouraging additional employers to become involved in an open dialogue with providers.

Partners believed it was important to coordinate with LEPs and MCAs while developing LSIP programmes of work so that there was not a duplication of effort. For example, some partners described how a collaborative way of working had been established with the LEP, which meant their objectives had been well aligned. Others felt that it had been easier to coordinate LSIP development activities in MCA areas. One MCA partner explained that this was because MCAs have more resources at their disposal, such as access to government funds through, for example, Skills Bootcamps¹ and Multiply (adult numeracy basic skills programme)².

“If the MCA is put really at the heart, then they can oversee the wider join-up, the wider skills system, and the links that there might be for community groups, younger people, people just entering the labour market.”

Wider partner (MCA), SDF and LSIP area

SDF 2 delivery plan process

A new process for developing SDF delivery plans was rolled out for SDF 2. SDF areas set out agreed plans to provide a focal point for sustaining SDF 2 activity beyond the initial funded period. The plans were agreed by all SDF partners in the area and were designed to be monitored and used by SDF partners to drive forward and maximise the impact of SDF 2 investment in their area for a period of at least two years and nine months.

Views on the differences between the pilot and SDF application processes, including the requirement for a delivery plan, varied. Responses were broadly evenly divided with some partners finding no difference from the SDF pilot project, others finding it a clearer, more helpful process and some finding the process more restrictive.

“SDF2 is far more tangible, and you can see exactly what you're doing as a partner”.

Lead provider, SDF and LSIP area

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/find-a-skills-bootcamp#contents>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multiply-funding-available-to-improve-numeracy-skills>

“The [SDF2] rules were a lot tighter ... we had to prove that we would deliver impact for three years going forward with six months’ worth of money³. So the only reason we did it was because I didn’t want to let the other ... colleges down and they kind of wanted to do it”.

Lead provider, SDF area

Some providers acknowledged that DfE had considered feedback from the pilot project and adapted processes accordingly. Several providers found value in the new SDF 2 delivery plan process and commented that they felt that it had helped them develop clearer targets for sustainability. Furthermore, one provider commented that keeping the same management structure for SDF 2 had worked well.

Some lead partners felt that the SDF 2 delivery plan process could have been improved. There was a common perception among these partners that the new process placed more pressure and expectation on lead providers. One provider commented that they almost did not bid for SDF 2 due to this perception that it would require much more work. Some providers also conflated the SDF 2 application process and the requirement for a delivery plan.

Another common complaint among partners was the timeline for bidding for and receiving SDF 2 funding. Partners commented that the process felt rushed and ‘*start-stop*’, which increased uncertainty among staff that funding would continue and in turn impacted staff provision and quality. Some providers found it difficult that timelines for SDF 2 did not align with college academic years. For example, some decisions were made in Summer 2022 whilst staff were on school holidays. Another provider commented that the delivery plan requirement came out after funding had already been awarded, which meant sustainability was considered as an afterthought of project design.

“I think there’s definitely value in it and I can fully understand why it was introduced. I think because the application process was very similar to the year before, and then the delivery plan requirement came out after the funding was awarded, we kind of ended up looking back and we gave a slightly shoehorned version.”

Lead provider, SDF area

Suggested changes to SDF funding process to best support sustainability

Lead providers were asked what changes they would like to see made to SDF funding processes to better support sustainability. In general, providers welcomed access to both capital and revenue funding, with high levels of flexibility around spending compared to

³ This perception is not quite correct; bidders were asked to provide details on how new provision would be sustained for three years following SDF funding, but this sustained impact was not a condition of funding

other FE funding streams. The majority of lead providers felt that the most helpful changes to the SDF funding process would be around delivery timelines. Some lead partners felt that timelines should be more aligned with the academic year and that SDF projects should have longer to spend the money and develop projects.

When asked about how long SDF projects would ideally last, to embed new facilities and services and allow them to become financially viable, the majority of lead providers and partners felt a realistic length of time would be three years. This would include a year to plan the project, a year to deliver it and a year to grow it, establish it and learn from findings. Some providers highlighted that this would help with sourcing staff who were less likely to be attracted to very short-term contracts.

Conclusions

This section builds on the conclusions in the full skills accelerator pilot evaluation report, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-accelerator-pilot-evaluation>. It largely reinforces the conclusions in the full report, and adds to these where the research provided additional evidence around objectives and progress. It is structured as follows:

- SDF pilot project delivery and sustainability
- Partnership working
- LSIPs and identifying priority needs
- SDF 2 delivery plan process
- Programme outcomes achieved
- Future funding and sustainability
- Issues for consideration.

SDF pilot project delivery and sustainability

All planned capital SDF pilot projects were delivered, although many experienced delays, and sometimes significant ones. Projects around curriculum development were also largely delivered, albeit with some changes to scope and scale reflecting actual rather than anticipated demand.

Several projects which required new staff to be recruited or existing staff to be upskilled struggled to deliver on their planned outcomes, due to recruitment challenges and limited staff time and capacity.

Enabling factors included: a history of established cooperation between colleges; the significant financial investment from DfE; and adopting a flexible approach to the activities delivered. Barriers to timely delivery of outcomes included: tight commissioning

timescales and delays; staffing challenges, especially for specialist staff; the time needed for successful employer engagement; partnership issues including some partners not participating fully or delivering; and delays to supplies of goods and construction. SDF partnerships adopted a range of actions to mitigate against and these overcome barriers to delivery.

Collaboration between providers and wider partners was seen as fundamental to project sustainability. Lead partners were generally confident that collaboration between providers would continue and become embedded into ways of working. However, some lead providers were concerned that employer engagement work would slow down once funding ends. Most providers will continue delivering courses using a mixture of the Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding, full cost recovery from employers and (learner) self-funding, although some providers that designed short-term courses for employers had concerns about future funding streams.

Most providers felt that SDF pilot activity would continue without further support from DfE. However, others expressed a need for further support from DfE on sourcing flexible funding streams, aligning SDF activity nationally, and sharing learning between areas.

Partnership working

Making sure that the right partners were included in the development of SDF was seen as key to success. Partners felt that existing relationships have been strengthened through involvement in the development of both SDF projects and LSIPs. Where strong partnerships have been fostered, partners have embraced new ways of working together, and worked creatively to overcome delivery barriers. A key enabler for successful delivery was partners overcoming competitive ways of working and sharing expertise. However, this was challenging for some FE colleges, and limited partnership working in some areas.

As in the main report, wider partners generally reported feeling well supported by lead providers. This was attributed to lead providers fostering inclusive ways of working, as well as defining clear parameters for project delivery. Partners reported that the capability of providers to share knowledge and best practice will be a lasting legacy of the pilot.

LSIPs and identifying priority needs

The main evaluation report concluded that the extent to which LSIP Trailblazer reports had supported alignment between provision and employer needs was unclear. In the additional round of interviews, leads and partners generally reported that the LSIP Trailblazer reports successfully articulated employers' priority skills needs in ways that were meaningful to providers. Even at a very early stage after LSIP report publication,

providers and employers in some areas were collaborating to identify opportunities for tailoring or developing provision.

In some areas, LSIP reports confirmed what providers already knew about skills issues in the area. However, some FE providers felt that LSIP reports did not provide sufficient detail for them to make clear strategic decisions. LSIP reports were seen as providing a good roadmap for delivery, but, as noted in the main evaluation report, there were some questions about how all the actions could be taken forward. Partners suggested that there needed to be a mechanism in place to make sure that the reports were regularly refreshed.

Some respondents also felt it would be useful for different areas to collaborate in order to achieve LSIP outcomes, for example, by establishing talent pools to share learning and best practice.

SDF 2 delivery plan process

A new process for developing SDF delivery plans was rolled out for SDF 2. Provider views on this new process were very mixed, with no clear patterns by role (e.g., lead / wider partner) or area. Some providers acknowledged that DfE had considered feedback from the pilot project and adapted processes accordingly. Several providers found value in the new SDF 2 delivery plan process and commented that they felt that the process generally had helped them develop clearer targets for sustainability.

However, there was a common perception among stakeholders that the new process placed more pressure and expectations on lead providers. Some providers conflated the SDF 2 application process and the requirement for a delivery plan. Others said the application process overall was similar to that for the SDF pilot. A small number of leads and partners found the SDF2 process clearer and more helpful than the SDF pilot process, whereas some found it more restrictive.

Finally, some partners commented that the bidding process felt rushed and '*start-stop*', (i.e., an ongoing process of bidding for a round of funding, then delivery, then bidding for the next round of funding), which increased uncertainty around funding continuity, and in turn impacted on staff provision and quality.

Programme outcomes achieved

The Skills Accelerator Programme Theory of Change (ToC) was tested and refined at the start of the evaluation⁴. It sets out inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts for the programme as whole, as well as underlying assumptions and risks.

The Skills Accelerator programme achieved progress against all its intended short-term outcomes (i.e., those with a September 2022 target date) to varying degrees. The final round of interviews with SDF pilot leads and wider partners (January and February 2023) provided evidence of further progress against several of the outcomes. The main evaluation report (available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-accelerator-pilot-evaluation>) notes that there is evidence that technical education and training provision is being aligned with local labour market needs in SDF areas, and that LSIPs can play a future role in aligning provision with employer needs. The final round of interviews suggests that, following the Skills Accelerator pilot, providers have a better understanding of employer skills needs. In addition, work on aligning provision and needs, based on the findings in the LSIP reports, is already beginning to take place.

LSIP Trailblazers have engaged a wide range of stakeholders in local areas to assess priority needs, laying strong foundations for a greater understanding of employer skills needs (particularly in emerging sectors), and being seen as making a valuable contribution to a responsive skills system. Lead providers were also positive about SDF's supporting greater alignment between technical education and more relevant training provision to meet employer needs through the collaborative working model of SDF pilot areas, increased engagement with employers, and the focus on high-value, emerging priority needs in SDF pilot projects,

In relation to specific outcomes:

- **Stimulating demand for new courses** in priority skills areas was felt to have **mostly been achieved** across the board, although some courses struggled to stimulate and / or maintain demand.
- **Stronger collaboration between providers and partners** was also perceived as **successful** for the most part, with examples from across different SDF areas of collaboration continuing post-pilot.
- **Changing curricula to focus on specialised provision** was seen as a **very successful** outcome of SDF.

⁴ The programme Theory of Change can be found in the full Skills Accelerator pilot evaluation report, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-accelerator-pilot-evaluation>

- **Aligning staff skills to specialist provision** was mostly felt to be **successful**, although some niche areas struggled to recruit staff as they could not compete with industry salaries.
- **Equipping facilities to meet the demands** of new curricula was also reported as **mostly achieved**.
- **Increasing appetite for innovative** approaches by employers was perceived as a **strongly and clearly achieved outcome** by most partners.

Issues for consideration

Existing relationships were critical to the early stages of development for SDF proposals and LSIPs. DfE should consider how best to support the development of new partnerships and the involvement of new partners in the skills landscape where appropriate.

Extended timelines for bid submission and delivery of projects would be welcomed by providers and partners.

During the pilot programme, there was some lack of clarity as to how the relationship between LSIPs and SDFs should work. Partners should continue to work closely together to avoid duplication of effort.

Some providers expressed concern about the depth of information in some of the LSIP reports, arguing that FE providers needed more detail to make strategic decisions, inform planning and develop new provision. It would be useful to consider how LSIPs can best balance this requirement for detail, while still remaining relevant and of interest to employers rather than providers/curriculum specialists.

The funding model design for SDF pilot projects allowed lead providers to engage in significant capital and revenue spend related to new and emerging technologies. Providers felt that the SDF model, which allowed significant flexibility around capital and revenue spend, enabled them to take 'risks' and try out new areas. It would be useful to consider how such activity can be supported in future.

Partners felt that some activity, such as collaboration between partners, some employer engagement, and continued use of new facilities and equipment, could continue without additional resource. They also identified challenges in securing funding for delivery of short term courses, recruiting staff in niche and specialist areas, and ensuring that LSIP plans did not become static documents. DfE, providers and wider partners should consider how best to ensure that the momentum from SDF funding and LSIP report production is not lost, and continues to drive collaboration and high quality provision which meets employer and learner needs.

Annex A: Methodology

The evaluation of the Skills Accelerator pilot ran from December 2021 to March 2023 in three main phases:

- **Inception phase (Dec 2021 – Jan 2022):** review of the original Theory of Change (ToC) for the evaluation, developing research materials, carrying out lead partner interviews, select of case studies, and development of an analysis plan for programme monitoring data.
- **Fieldwork phase (Jan 2022 – Feb 2023):** comprising initial interviews with lead partners and ERB representatives, plus 1-2 further key partners in each of the 18 pilot areas, depth case studies in 8 selected areas; and follow-up interviews with partners to reflect on progress over time. We also ran a small-scale quantitative survey of partners.
- **The analysis and reporting phase (Jan 2022– March 2023):** ran parallel to the fieldwork phase, and included four main reports (April 2022, June 2022, October 2022 and March 2023). This is the fourth report.

Table 1: Research timeline

Research element	Timing	Description
Scoping phase	December – January 2022	Programme Theory of Change (ToC) developed for the Skills Accelerator policy
Interviews with lead partners and Employer Representative Body (ERB) leads	February – March 2022	Interviews with lead partners and Employer Representative Body (ERB) leads in LSIP trailblazer and SDF pilot areas plus 1-2 further key partners in each of the 18 SDF pilot areas
Case studies	March – May 2022	Including interviews with a further 3-4 partners and key local stakeholders were interviewed, as well as observations of key meetings
Online survey	April 2022	Small-scale survey of wider partners and local stakeholders who were not interviewed in either the initial interviews or case studies
Follow up interviews with ERBs and lead providers	June 2022	Follow up interviews with the ERBs who led the LSIP trailblazers, and with providers who led bids for SDF2 in the LSIP trailblazer areas
Follow up interviews with SDF pilot leads	September 2022	Follow up interviews with SDF pilot leads finishing projects in July 2022 to reflect on progress
Follow up interviews with SDF pilot leads and wider partners	January – February 2023	Follow up interviews with SDF pilot leads and wider partners to reflect on progress over time



Department
for Education

© Department for Education 2023

Reference: RR1363

ISBN: 978-1-83870-472-8

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:

www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications