SKILLS for LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Developing skills for essential public services

Human resource issues arising from new and collaborative ways of working

A study based upon the South West Wales Workforce Development Network

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Introduction and acknowledgements

This report is based upon a study of the issues facing human resource (HR) learning and development (LD) professionals and other managers in supporting the achievements of the South West Wales Workforce Development Network (SWWWDN), specifically in relation to its leadership of a regional collaboration project funded by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). The focus of the SWWWDN is to improve collaboration in local authority workforce learning and development across seven councils in south-west Wales. The purpose of this report is to provide some coverage of the challenges they have faced and lessons learned which may be of benefit to others.

Meeting the current and future challenges of change in local government, including public sector spending cuts, the imperative of the efficiency agenda and the associated need to embrace the re-design of both council services and organisational structures, provides the back-drop to this work. In reflecting both the focus of the project and the membership of the Network, the report that follows aims to identify the issues arising from this work, by drawing on the perspectives of HR/LD practitioners engaged in the leadership of local authority workforce learning and development.

It is important to note that the report is not intended to present an evaluation of the HR services of the participating authorities in relation to local learning and development provision. Rather it aims to identify the HR issues that have arisen in the course of collaborative working across the region. Analysis and discussion of these issues, together with examples of practice shown to be successful in developing a joined-up approach to HR service design within the learning and development function are therefore presented as a learning tool for others interested in exploring integrated regional solutions to HR service provision at the local level.

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- Gaynor Jeremiah, Management Development Co-ordinator, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
- Alex Machin, Principal Corporate Learning and Development Advisor, Carmarthenshire County Council
- Sarah Powell, Principal Learning and Development Officer, Powys County Council
- Lois Poynting, Regional Project Officer Learning and Development, Carmarthenshire County Council
- Khan Prince, Senior Organisational Development Officer, City and County of Swansea Council
- Sue Swan, Learning and Development Manager, Pembrokeshire County Council

We hope that the findings shared in this report will help inform the thinking and practice of HR professionals and all those working in local government roles with an interest in exploring the potential of collaborative approaches to HR service re-design and delivery within the workforce learning and development arena.

Executive summary

The work of the SWWWDN which is taken as the specific focus for analysis in the commentary which follows, relates directly to the identification of HR issues arising from new ways of working in the context of a WLGA funded project centred upon improving regional collaboration in workforce learning and development. In reflecting this emphasis, a core aim of the SWWWDN project is to develop a holistic approach to learning and development across seven participating councils and, in the course of achieving this, enhance and strengthen collaborative working practices between HR/LD practitioners at a regional level. Within this framework, the report that follows provides an overview of the background to and focus of, the SWWWDN project and identifies the following HR issues arising from this work:

- **The critical role of planning in creating shared vision and direction for HR development**
- **Establishing an informed evidence-base for decision-making about HR service provision**
- **Developing a more strategic response to collective HR learning and development issues**
- **The importance of voluntary participation in collaborative HR service re-design**

After exploring the issues identified above, the discussion turns to a consideration of the challenges and drivers for new ways of working in implementing collaborative HR practices at the regional level. These include:

- **Developing a cross-authority response to HR recruitment challenges**
- **Meeting the HR challenges of regional working through a solutions-focused approach**
- **Rising to the challenges of change in local authority HR/LD service provision**
- **Overcoming the barriers to shared HR learning and development service provision**

In conclusion, project successes and lessons learned from new ways of working are summarised by highlighting key aspects of learning in relation to the HR issues and challenges previously identified. This summary analysis explores the following four themes, illustrating the key learning points identified within each theme:

- **Cementing success for cross-council working in HR learning and development: Recognising the importance of a shared HR project management resource**
    - Maintaining cross-authority relationships
    - Co-ordinating a collective evidence-base for action
    - Building change-management capacity

- **Developing an integrated response to HR learning and development priorities: Jointly designing and delivering learning and development provision**

    - Connecting cross-council priorities
    - Spreading 'smarter' ways of working
    - Joining-up service design and delivery

- **Connecting HR policy and practice at operational and strategic levels: Building the collaborative capacity for new ways of working**

    - Creating connectivity between policy and practice
    - Securing strategic engagement at regional level
    - Extending practitioner engagement at operational level

- **Sharing expertise and resources to enhance efficiency and effectiveness: Recognising the skills required of HR practitioners in modelling new ways of working**

    - Adding value by sharing expertise and pooling resources
    - Increasing efficiencies and effectiveness through a regional 'hub' approach
    - Up-skilling HR/LD practitioners for new ways of working

It is hoped that this overview of the HR issues identified, the challenges faced and the lessons learned by the SWWWDN will provide a useful learning resource for others.

Background to the South West Wales Workforce Development Network

The SWWWDN comprises: Bridgend County Borough Council; Carmarthenshire County Council; Ceredigion County Council; City and County of Swansea Council; Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council; Pembrokeshire County Council; and Powys County Council. The Network is a forum for sharing good practice and ideas, and exploring the potential for collaborative approaches to the planning and implementation of learning and development opportunities. In recent years, the Network has built a strong tradition of collaborative working on an informal and ad-hoc basis across participating local authorities in the south-west region of Wales. In ter ms of governance, the Network links with, and is supported by, the Central and South West Wales Heads of Human Resources Group.

The work of the SWWWDN, which is taken as the specific focus for analysis in the commentary which follows, relates directly to the identification of HR issues arising from new ways of working in the context of a WLGA funded project centred upon improving regional collaboration in workforce learning and development. The Network's project was developed in response to WLGA's aim of seeking significant and strategic areas of collaborative work in response to the Simpson review of public services in Wales.1 The remit of the Simpson review was to *'examine how local government might perform better if it were to review and align the commissioning and delivery of some of its functions'* (2010:3).The review outlines how '*greater collaboration could enhance local democracy and deliver as a minimum better*

[1] Simpson, J. (2010) Simpson Review - *Local, Regional, and National: What services are best delivered where?*

value for money and/or improvement in services'.[2] Amongst the functions identified for attention in terms of improved service delivery through co-operation and joint service provision was the HR function (i.e. recruitment, pensions, pay roll and training).[3] It is within this specific field of enquiry that the achievements and lessons learned from the SWWWDN are set, where it is acknowledged that:

> "*New research in response to the Simpson review of public services in Wales has found that for shared services to work successfully it is critical that collaboration reflects local circumstances…there is no 'one size fits all' answer…good outcomes can be achieved by concentrating on what works best at a local level and utilising existing local government powers to work collaboratively*." (2012: 15)[4]

In reflecting this emphasis, a core aim of the SWWWDN project is to enhance and strengthen collaborative working practices between LD practitioners at a regional level across each of the seven participating councils. Intended outcomes of this work include, assessment of the sustainability of cross-council collaborative working in the design and delivery of workforce training, learning and development, together with the adoption of a solutions-focused approach to identifying and overcoming barriers to such working.

Focus of regional collaboration in workforce learning and development

Lack of capacity has historically prevented the SWWWDN from taking forward substantial programmes of work in partnership and at the time of the project's inception in 2012, the Network had taken the collaborative agenda as far as was possible without a dedicated resource. As a result of funding from WLGA to support HR related collaborative change projects, a Regional Project Officer (RPO) was appointed (on a 16 month contract to December 2013), to provide project management support to the SWWWDN and co-ordinate project work on behalf of the HR/ LD managers in the region. A core function of the RPO role is to co-ordinate communications to support project governance within the Regional Partnership Forum for Central and South West Wales Heads of Human Resources Group. In this regard, a central remit of the RPO is to ensure that outcomes from the analysis of current learning and development provision are used to inform the future development of collaborative learning and development products and service provision across the SWWWDN region.

The central aim of the project is to develop a holistic approach to learning and development across the seven local authorities in the South West Wales region. In order to identify and then implement key opportunities for improved collaborative working amongst HR/LD practitioners across the region, the project has built upon on an initial mapping exercise conducted across the Network's participating authorities. This allowed the project to focus on refining the raw data from the mapping, turning it into effective HR management information in the following areas:

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[2] Association for Public Service Excellence (2011) *Briefing 11/38,* APSE, August

[3] Van Elk, S. (2012*) Regional collaborative areas in Wales, Policy Briefing 18*, Centre for Public Scrutiny, July

[4] Reynolds, A. in Association for Public Service Excellence (2012) *Shared services and collaborative working in a Welsh context: Applying theory to practice*, APSE Direct News, March/April

- **'What'** resources are currently invested
- **'What'** learning and development is currently delivered
- **'What'** collaboration already takes place and by what arrangement
- **'How'** learning and development is delivered (courses, e-learning etc.)
- **'Who'** delivers it (i.e. internal or external commissioning)

The collation and analysis of this management information has been a key focus of the Network's project activity, with the RPO providing a crucial co-ordinating role in facilitating cross-council co-operation and collaboration in conducting this baseline review. Beyond the initial focus on the completion of the mapping exercise outlined, the SWWWDN has embraced four key strands of project activity and associated areas of work, namely:

1. The evaluation of joint service provision within the Managing Change Successfully Programme.
2. The joint design and commissioning of equalities learning and development provision.
3. The analysis of current and future priorities for leadership and management development provision to lay the foundation for collaboration on common areas across the region**.**
4. The identification of leads/specialists for e-learning to reduce duplication across the region.

HR issues identified and progress to date

The following summary identifies the key HR issues arising from the project work of the SWWWDN and describes the Network's progress to date in addressing these.

- ### The critical role of planning in creating shared vision and direction for HR development

The role of planning was identified as critical to success in creating a shared agenda for the HR learning and development activities undertaken by the Network. The emphasis placed upon robust project planning and project management provided by the RPO, was seen to be key in "establishing a clear structure and set of priorities for the Network". The co-ordination of a collaborative planning process and the co-construction of the project initiation document (PID) - by the RPO working in close partnership with Network members - were credited with providing "a shared vision and direction for our work". Establishing core purpose was central to this:

> *"Cross-authority collaboration on learning and development service design and delivery needs to have a core purpose to drive meaningful outcomes. The SWWWDN has taken control of the collaboration agenda, providing a clear direction and an evidence-base to identify what we need, and the confidence to know what we want in terms of focusing on outcomes for service users."*

It was also recognised that without the co-ordinating capacity provided by the RPO in fulfilling the planning function "*providing a clear steer to keep us on track and maintaining momentum… we wouldn't be where we are now in terms of project outcomes*". In this regard, HR/LD managers engaging with the Network describe it as *'A strong, cohesive group, which knows where it wants to go and what it wants to achieve*". Building on the Network's history of strong cross-authority working relationships, developed over time, undoubtedly assisted in facilitating the joint planning processes adopted, where Network members identified the need for a co-ordinated approach to bring more structure and focus to their work - *"It helps that the Network is 'on the same page', but the difference is…now we have a clear, shared agenda and a strong intention and commitment to making it work".*

- **Establishing an informed evidence-base for decision-making about HR service provision**

The Network's commitment to establishing an evidence-base to inform HR decision-making regarding future cross-authority learning and development provision was demonstrated clearly from the outset. In conducting a detailed mapping exercise focused on the delivery of HR learning and development services across the Network's seven participating authorities, the aim was to add value to subsequent HR decision-making across the region. This focused on developing a greater understanding amongst participating LD practitioners of what was being delivered across the region and of the potential to work more collaboratively in the future.

> *"Having a forum to feedback the outcomes of the mapping exercise directly to the HR Directors' Group has been a definite advantage, especially in looking at duplication - where we are doing the same things at different venues - and therefore identifying where we could work more 'smartly' to deliver services on a more collaborative basis across the region."*

The collation and analysis of this management information has been a key focus of the Network's project activity, with the RPO providing a crucial co-ordinating role in facilitating cross-council co-operation and collaboration in conducting this baseline review.

> *"The RPO was the key conduit for extrapolating the relevant information from each authority and building this into a coherent pattern, rather than an ad-hoc listing, which is what we had before. We are all different shapes and sizes…like apples and pears…and we needed someone to co-ordinate the analysis to help us in untangling the information. This enabled us to move forward more quickly and be more forward thinking as a result."*

Although it is acknowledged that the complexity of this task necessarily required significant investment of time in the early stages of the project, the outcomes of the mapping exercise were seen to have real benefits in providing a valuable evidence-base for HR decision-making regarding the next phase of regional working: *"The mapping exercise has enabled us to put substance behind supporting decision-making about what we can and cannot collaborate on - it's provided the evidence for decision-making about future developments".*

- **Developing a more strategic response to collective HR learning and development issues**

A key shift in the working practices of the Network resulting from the WLGA project focus is the development of a more co-ordinated strategic response to collective HR learning and development issues at the regional level. This has been characterised as a positive and impactful development, in providing HR/LD practitioners from each participating local authority with a means of 'joining-up the dots' between the national imperative to address improved HR service provision through joint working, and translating this into tangible plans for collaborative action at the regional level.

> *"The strategic focus has taken our work to a different level. It isn't about content design for individual training programmes, but about developing a common approach across authorities which has been really beneficial as it has enabled us to address over-arching issues in service delivery. We are now identifying key priorities that we need to address in learning and development provision across the region as an innovative approach to joint service delivery which we have not adopted before."*

In shifting the energies of the Network to a more strategic level and bringing "*a sharper business focus*", the project has escalated the engagement of participating local authority members so that the Network has been transformed from "*a talking shop - getting together to air difficulties and explore training and development issues*" to *"an action-centred group focused on clear strategic priorities for the region*". A key aspect of the shift in the nature of this engagement within the Network is a desire to *"…ensure we do not lose sight of what's important…it's not about jumping on the band-wagon, collaboration is not always the best route…it's about developing a collective strategy for prioritising where learning and development service quality can be improved through joint working*". In this respect, the experience of the SWWWDN clearly reflects the benefits of addressing the potential opportunities for the delivery of learning and development services at a regional level, from a strategic as well as operational perspective. This requires both a 'helicopter' view of the big picture across the region, together with an action-oriented approach which enables high level strategy to be grounded in the operational practice of HR/LD practitioners at the local level within each authority.

- **The importance of voluntary participation in collaborative HR service re-design**

In acknowledging both the achievements of the Network and the solutions-focused approach it has adopted in meeting the challenges it has faced (detailed in the following section of this report), due attention must be paid to the importance of voluntarism over prescription in pursuing a cross-council, collaborative approach to HR learning and development provision. Prior to the current UK economic crisis and the attendant focus on public sector spending cuts, Network members indicated that "*There was no burning platform or imperative to promote or support cross-authority working in HR learning and development beyond that undertaken on an informal voluntary basis by LD practitioners in the region".* Whilst the current national imperative of the local government efficiencies agenda in Wales (informed by the outcomes of the Simpson Review) has undeniably endorsed an enhanced climate of cross-council working within the HR (LD) function across the region, it is the voluntary nature of SWWWDN membership that has been central to the Network's success in building a shared commitment to, and ownership of, its collaborative work:

> *"It has been voluntary not forced collaboration, building solid professional relationships, where we are not threatened or scared about taking work away from each other…it's more about recognising that we have more work than we have the capacity to deliver individually and it makes sense to work together*."

The notion of voluntarism in contributing to the development of a regional agenda for HR learning and development is key in that, although the 'leaner working' strategies suggested in the Simpson Review, and subsequent guidance from Welsh government, have undoubtedly had an influence in bringing a regional focus to new ways of cross-council working: *"The key drivers for joined-up working across the authorities have come from the Network itself, not from above. The key to this has been voluntary rather than compulsory participation…where the Network has been able to identify the most effective ways of delivering HR learning and development services, tailored to the analysis of need at the local and regional level".*

Key challenges and drivers for new ways of working

In exploring the issues identified above, consideration is given here to the challenges and drivers for new ways of working in implementing collaborative HR practices at the regional level.

- **Developing a cross-authority response to HR recruitment challenges**

One of the most significant early challenges experienced by the Network was the development and implementation of a collaborative approach to the joint appointment of the RPO. The recruitment of the RPO as a shared post across the seven participating authorities was initially hampered by the WLGA bid requirement to identify a 'lead authority' within the appointment process. There was a clear recognition that "*This was not the route the Network wanted to take*" as there was a strong commitment to modelling a collaborative approach to new ways of working, which was distinctively different from previous recruitment practice. Specifically, it involved all Network partners working together through the processes of job evaluation, job definition and agreement about pay and grading, prior to the appointment of the RPO. Persevering with a cross-authority approach to the appointment was challenging, particularly in overcoming the disparity between the HR policies and procedures in place within each contributing authority within the Network. As one SWWWDN member described it:

> *"The recruitment process was a bit of a nightmare. We all had different recruitment and selection policies and procedures, job descriptions and terms and conditions. It was a real challenge in co-ordinating HR practice in order to make the appointment on a joint basis."*

Nevertheless, the group dynamic of the Network dictated "*a determination to work through this and solve the problem, where we were able to challenge practice within our own authorities*". There was clear acknowledgement from Network members that the joint solution which ensued "*was pretty unique from a local authority perspective, in that we worked through how to conduct the recruitment process together*". Working through this problem and addressing the obstacles presented by the different LA recruitment policies and processes provided an opportunity to model joint working at an early stage in the project. This had the additional benefit of building the confidence of SWWWDN members in their collaborative capacity in terms of "*seeing how it was possible to make our collective efforts work, even in the face of diverse policy challenges*".

- **Meeting the HR challenges of regional working through a solutions-focused approach**

> *"(SWWWDN is)…by far one of the best groups I have been involved in. It is a dynamic, real 'doing' group…well worth the travel and worthy of the commitment. I have been excited from the outset to look at what we can do collectively in terms of translating priorities for learning and development within our own teams and sharing ideas on meeting the challenges of this."*

Managers acknowledged that addressing the co-ordination of different policies, practices and procedures in each authority can present a real challenge when planning for shared LD service provision in that *"…it often gets dropped into the 'too hard to do' box".* In this regard, the Network's solutions-focused approach has been characterised by focusing upon the identification of "*What makes a difference? Where are the collective wins?"* A key outcome here has been the creation of opportunities to join-up learning and development provision

within a co-ordinated strategy. This has extended beyond the strategic level, to productive links between participating authorities in supporting each other in key administrative functions which have underpinned efficiencies in delivering joint training and development activity across the region.

> *"Having a 'can do' approach is a mind-set which exists in the SWWWDN. There is a genuine commitment to adopting a solution, rather than problem-focused approach. The Network has encouraged risk-taking where LD managers are 'up for' learning and desire to see it work because they can see the benefits of collaborative working and they identify with the values of the Network as being genuinely collaborative."*

The adoption of this solutions-focused approach by LD managers has required a flexible response to the diversity of HR needs and priorities across the region. Therefore, in addition to focusing energies in identified areas of shared priority for service provision (managing change, equalities, leadership and management development, e-learning), it has also been necessary to nurture the confidence amongst Network members to say "no" when collaboration is not the best route to adding value at the local level: *"The Network is respectful of this and there is recognition of differing circumstances…there is no collective pressure to conform".*

- **Rising to the challenges of change in local authority HR/LD service provision**

In the current climate of change across the public services generally and in local government specifically, it is unsurprising that the Network's activity across the region has not escaped the impact of internal organisational change within participating councils. In highlighting the challenges this presents, Network leaders clearly recognise that "*The rate of change has the potential to de-stabilise project activity and we need to accommodate this within our action plan to accommodate on-going changes in context as they arise".*

Undoubtedly local authority re-organisation, structural change and service re-design have featured strongly in the experience of the managers within the SWWWDN and this has created personal challenges for some *"…in terms of time commitment to the Network, when there have been significant pressures internally…having to juggle with job evaluation and equal pay."* In the light of structural change and the need for service re-design it is recognised that new ways of working are being demanded internally within local authorities as well as externally. This has proved to be a particular challenge in some of the participating local authorities where there is "*pressure to get internal collaboration right first before you look outside your own authority*". This has required perseverance from HR/LD practitioners in overcoming resistance to change in moving to more integrated cross-authority HR service provision, particularly "*where there is a lack of will from above (i.e. senior leadership) to look outwards beyond your own authority and there is an emphasis on 'getting your own house in order' first"*.

Whilst Network members were keen to point out that cross-authority collaboration "*provides a strengthening basis of mutual support for those going through change",* at the same time it also creates more complex demands on internal decision-making processes which can get in the way of achieving 'buy-in' at the local level when it comes to considering shared HR service provision.

> *"Local authority re-organisation is out of our control, but it has a massive impact on our ability to deliver. Handling uncertainty internally is a real challenge and makes decision-making difficult e.g. achieving buy-in to joint service arrangements such as a shared*

procurement framework, especially when this involves more complex decision-making across a number of authorities rather than just one."

The Network has met these challenges by building an enabling culture amongst participating LD managers across the region characterised by the adoption of a 'bottom-up' change management model. This has focused on developing a more empowering approach to taking charge of change, captured in the following sentiment: *"Let's not wait to have it done to us. Let's show how it can be done and perhaps potentially present a model for others".*

> *"It is interesting that our drive to collaborate was not driven from the top. There is a sense that we are driving the direction in the Network and guiding the agenda…The risk is that parameters need to be placed on how HR Directors take forward Network initiatives at a strategic level…It's great that we have been able to say this and use the core objectives of the project to steer a collaborative rather than competitive response to managing change."*

- **Overcoming the barriers to shared HR learning and development service provision**

The active use of the management information provided by the Network's initial mapping exercise was identified as key in enabling participating local authorities to categorise their priorities for progressing joint LD service provision. Working from a robust evidence-base, rather than relying on anecdotal or ad hoc data on learning development delivery across the region, has provided a co-ordinated means of overcoming strategic barriers to shared service provision across the participating local authorities.

> *"It is about recognising the potential for collaboration beyond areas that are 'unique' to an individual authority. The mapping exercise is helping us to categorise areas of overlap and duplication (e.g. IT/e-learning; customer service training; leadership and management training) and look at ways we can work more flexibly to share resources across the region to meet shared needs and priorities."*

At an operational level, it will come as no surprise that the issue of travel time as a function of regional geography was frequently identified as a barrier to successful shared learning and development provision. It was recognised that training venues therefore need to be carefully considered for example: *"In the Managing Change Successfully Programme we tried to solve this by moving around venues and that seemed to work in securing high levels of participation/attendance".*

> *"There are multiple solutions to this which we are experimenting with, including equidistant venue planning, trainer/s travelling from their local authority rather than the participants, and looking at the possibilities of webinars and e-learning alternatives to avoid travel."*

As one Network member described it: *"Overall the benefits outweigh the barriers…in terms of efficiencies and savings where it is cheaper to work together than singularly in shared areas of provision and where it is beneficial to network with other LAs and learn from them".*

Key successes and lessons learned from new ways of working

Project successes and lessons learned from new ways of working are outlined below with a view to highlighting key aspects of learning in addressing the HR issues and challenges identified above.

- **Cementing success for cross-council working in HR learning and development - Recognising the importance of a shared HR project management resource**

In reflecting on the key factors that have contributed to the Network's successes in adopting a collaborative approach to the design and delivery of HR learning and development provision, Network members from all seven participating authorities resoundingly stressed the importance of the Regional Project Officer (RPO) in providing a dedicated HR project management resource devoted to fulfilling a co-ordinating function across the Network. As one Network member described it: "*The Regional Project Officer is the cement for making the project work*".

- **Maintaining cross-authority relationships**

In identifying the perceived value-added by the RPO role in cementing the successes of the SWWWDN in the future, there was a view that: "*An absolute requirement is the retention of the RPO role, as it is the key to future success in building, facilitating and maintaining the relationships between the participating authorities in the Network*". A key element of this relationship building function was identified as securing 'buy-in' to the Network's core streams of project activity. This is illustrated with reference to work undertaken in the area of equalities provision described below:

> *"The major achievement of the SWWWDN working group on equalities has been to develop a common approach across authorities which will provide a blue-print for future work. It has genuinely been a shared, collective approach, which has 'buy-in' from all parties…this would not have happened without our Regional Project Officer, who has been out there and built relationships with each of the local authorities."*

- **Co-ordinating a collective evidence-base for action**

As acknowledged earlier in this report,although Network members previously collected evidence on learning and development provision within their own authorities, in the past this proved to be a piecemeal process "*with no capacity to follow through for change in a joined-up way across the region*". As a result, there was an identified need for a more tightly co-ordinated approach which would enable the Network to turn plans into action in relation to the re-design of HR learning and development services. Success in achieving this was described as "*The significant value-added by the RPO role in taking things forward across the Network's authorities*".

- **Building change management capacity**

The co-ordinating role of the RPO was identified as crucial in building change management capacity amongst Network partners and enabling them to make the transition from an informal group "*dealing with learning and development issues on an ad hoc basis*", to a more formalised partnership "*distinguished by a co-ordinated programme of collaborative work*". Here the RPO role was described as "*pivotal"* in enabling the Network to move forward more quickly, and be more forward thinking, than would otherwise have been possible. Central to

this was a view of the RPO as operating from "*a neutral position, not driven by the vested interests of any one authority".* This was seen to be critically important in enabling the RPO to *"bring objectivity and challenge"* to project activity, both within individual authorities and across the Network regionally.

- **Developing an integrated response to HR learning and development priorities - Jointly designing and delivering learning and development provision**

The success of the SWWWDN project in developing an integrated response to HR learning and development priorities was characterised in general terms as *"showing that you can make the collaboration work in meeting the needs of each authority"*. For the HR/LD managers involved in the project's four streams of activity - leadership and management development, e-learning, equalities and managing change successfully - there was a clear sense of collective commitment to developing collaborative models of service design and delivery. Achieving this aspiration was an important motivator for Network members in maintaining the momentum of project activity:

> *"I am really excited by the project, it's been highly motivating...I really like the Network's aspiration to create a leading edge model for learning and development in the region...We have some good things in the mix we have agreed on as priority areas for joint working and as a result we have built a much closer relationship around the training and development agenda between the LD managers."*

- **Connecting cross-council priorities**

In developing an integrated response to the design and delivery of learning and development provision across the Network, the strengthening of cross-authority working relationships between HR/LD managers was identified as an important outcome of the collaboration. For example, the use of a co-trainer model in the design of the Managing Change Successfully (MSC) programme, was identified as beneficial in "*learning about the process of co-designing a development programme with local authority partners...especially in connecting programme delivery to the strategic priorities of each council, as this was needed to get 'buy in' from each of the partners*".

- **Spreading 'smarter' ways of working**

Designed as a 'pilot' for joint working between the Network's authorities in a shared area of training and development need, the success of the MSC programme in "*modelling collaborative working*" was described as "*laying the foundation stone for the broader SWWWDN project*". In this way, lessons learned in meeting the challenges of developing an integrated response to HR learning and development priorities through the MSC programme (as illustrated below), have had wider application in informing the Network's approach to jointly designing learning and development provision in the other three streams of project activity:

> *"It was tough to get off the ground at first...it was challenging and time consuming...especially as it was developed from the bottom-up (e.g. in developing the design, content etc.), but then we had to work out a more strategic focus to pull the programme together across the Network...If we were starting over and did it again now, we would be a lot quicker at doing this."*

- **Joining up service design and delivery**

The collaborative model adopted in the delivery of the MSC programme has also enabled those involved to build relationships with other trainers and managers, where there has been significant learning from working with others and sharing practice with other authorities. Another outcome of joint working on the programme has been the development of a common language to articulate a shared understanding of learning and development priorities across participating authorities, which has supported increased consistency in programme delivery: *"We are now in a position where we can develop a more integrated approach to joint training and development...Working together on this programme has also helped us in developing a common language and an increasingly consistent approach".*

- **Connecting HR policy and practice at operational and strategic levels - Building the collaborative capacity for new ways of working**

> *"The SWWWDN project has undoubtedly resulted in improved communications between authorities in the region on shared workforce learning and development issues. This has provided us with a clearer sense of direction in terms of where we can most usefully work together...how our efforts can best be co-ordinated in making the most of joint LD provision in the future...It has really helped get away from a position where as individual authorities we were fumbling along, all trying to achieve the same things, but doing things differently."*

As illustrated above, the successes of the SWWWDN project in striving to achieve its core aim of improving regional collaboration in local authority workforce learning and development include: improved cross-authority communications on HR/LD development issues; increased clarity of direction in focusing collaborative efforts in shared areas of priority for joint service provision; and enhanced coherence and consistency in achieving local authority objectives for service delivery. The Network's HR/LD managers attributed the achievement of these outcomes to a number of key factors, amongst these, the need to proactively connect HR/LD policy and practice at operational and strategic levels was identified as most important, together with the need to build collaborative capacity for new ways of working.

- **Creating connectivity between policy and practice**

Network members acknowledged that creating a connected agenda for cross-authority workforce development has been a challenging task, particularly in aligning HR/LD strategy and operational practice on the ground with multiple policy initiatives at national level. In this regard, the Network collaboration was seen to have provided a source of support to participating HR/LD managers in enabling them to collectively "*steer through the muddy waters created by a multiplicity of national policy initiatives*." Building the collaborative capacity of the Network to create increased coherence and connectivity between policy and practice at the local level was therefore identified as crucial in enabling participating authorities to 'take charge of change'. This was driven by a shared imperative to: "*...be proactive in taking control of our own destiny by developing a sustainable model for future development across the region...There is an incentive to want to continue (with the regional collaboration) because it is making a difference, because it is self-designed and there is ownership in determining what it looks like at the local level."*

- **Securing strategic engagement at regional level**

The positioning of the SWWWDN project at a strategic level through the regional Heads of Human Resources Group (HHRG) has been critical in maintaining the momentum of collaborative working across the participating authorities. More specifically, the involvement of the HHRG in the governance of the workforce learning and development project has

proved to be particularly important in securing strategic engagement with project outcomes at an operational level.

> *"We now have a stronger presence at the HHRG which has given us the opportunity to strategically position the work with Heads of HR…We are having conversations that we haven't had before...it's meant we have been able to influence at higher levels and this has been helpful in developing a core objective for the group around the implementation of cross-authority strategies based on project outcomes."*

Connecting the development of cross-authority policy and practice at both strategic and operational levels was therefore seen to be fundamental to the successful implementation of collaborative approaches to the re-design and delivery of workforce learning and development across the region. A key factor in achieving this was identified as "*Modelling collaborative behaviours within the project's governance structure by focusing on consensus building at both strategic and operational levels in order to inform more joined-up decision making*". Additionally, the adoption of a solutions-focused approach was also recognised as important in establishing a 'can do' culture of engagement characterised by "*a like-mindedness which is focused on making things happen*".

- **Extending practitioner engagement at operational level**

In extending the reach of the SWWWDN project in implementing new ways of working in the future, there is a recognised need to engage a broader base of participants at the operational level. Here the Network's managers acknowledged the importance of directly involving other practitioners and teams involved in the delivery of workforce learning and development provision within their local authorities. This in turn implies "*the need to create clear channels of communication regarding regional development outcomes which will be effective in connecting HR/LD professionals on the 'front-line' as well as those involved at a strategic level through the Network".* This has implications for the Network's HR/LD managers in terms of extending engagement with the Network's core streams of project activity through increased delegation and distribution of responsibilities for the implementation and embedding of cross-council approaches to the design and delivery of workforce learning and development provision within their teams.

- **Sharing expertise and resources to enhance efficiency and effectiveness - Recognising the skills required of HR practitioners in modelling new ways of working**

In looking to the development of a sustainable model of cross-authority workforce learning and development provision across the region, maintaining a dual focus on increasing both efficiencies and effectiveness has proved to be important. As one Network member described "*A key driver for cross-authority collaboration is about saving money and making economic efficiencies, but it is about more than that, it is also about ensuring effectiveness and assuring the quality of service provision...they need to be seen as two sides of the same coin".* In this context, it was acknowledged that whilst the re-design and delivery of joint service provision needed to demonstrate financial savings and there was the commitment to proactively build a business case based on a cost-benefit analysis of the regional collaboration model, the key challenge was quantifying those aspects of value-added which were not easily measurable in monetary terms. That said, participating HR/LD managers were able to identify a number of tangible benefits arising from the regional collaboration which are worthy of note, specifically in exploring the lessons learned from project successes focused on adding value through sharing expertise and resources and recognising the skills required of HR practitioners in modelling new ways of working.

- **Adding value by sharing expertise and pooling resources**

The work of the SWWWDN in each of its four streams of project activity has consistently highlighted the benefits of sharing expertise. As one LD manager described "*The work we have done has highlighted that our authority is not that different to others and there are benefits to pooling our expertise, especially in overcoming duplication across the Network*". For example, the cross-authority focus on learning and development in the area of equalities provision was described as ground breaking "*in taking a legislative requirement and turning it into a coherent programme across the authorities, rather than each of us struggling to put something together in isolation*". In addition to saving on duplication of effort across each authority, sharing expertise through the equalities work was identified as being of particular benefit in reducing a dependency on in-house resources:

> *"The real benefit of the work we have done on equalities is that we have been able to identify expertise amongst personnel in the Network, rather than just being reliant on what we have in-house with our own authority. This has really added value for us as a relatively small local authority as it has meant we have been able to draw on expertise in other authorities. It's now become more of a question about how we can 'pool our energies' in developing shared training which will be transferable across the Network's authorities."*

The value added by pooling resources, especially in overcoming duplication in cross-authority learning and development provision was also highlighted in the area of leadership and management training, where the Network mapping exercise revealed that *"...one big area where there is duplication in delivery is in Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) accredited courses...where there is a large degree of overlap with multiple external providers...There are potential benefits of us joining forces here, as a key saving we can make would be a shared procurement framework across the seven authorities*".

- **Increasing efficiencies and effectiveness through a regional 'hub' approach**

The work of the SWWWDN project to date has laid firm foundations for the participating authorities to move towards a regional 'hub' approach to workforce learning and development provision in the future. As one Network member described it, *"When budgets are tight, training and development is always the first to go, so it has been really helpful for us to look at finding ways of providing training together, so we can be more efficient in securing development provision for our workforce in the future*". A key element in supporting the development of the regional hub model was identified as "*The standardisation of transferable training in order to support smoother migration, movement or transfer of employees between different local authorities in the region".* In this regard, the development of shared training provision was seen to be essential in overcoming duplication and reducing costs related to investment at induction, and in supporting the continuing professional development of the council workforce on an ongoing basis across the region.

- **Up-skilling HR/LD practitioners for new ways of working**

In drawing on the experience of the HR (LD) managers within the SWWWDN and reflecting on the lessons learned from their experience of developing new ways of working, it was widely acknowledged that operating effectively within in a cross-council context has demanded "*a more sophisticated skill-set"* than that required in the day-to-day conduct of their management roles within their own organisations.

The following list is presented as a summary of the key capabilities which most strongly reflect the experience of the SWWWDN, with a view to providing a concluding point of reflection in addressing the implications of supporting the development of HR (LD) professionals more widely across the local government sector in Wales:

- Cross-authority collaboration means finding a way of working together – taking into account others' needs in order to establish a clear understanding of how best to operate together.

- Working within a regional network provides a different context for your work as a manager – don't assume what works in your local authority will work in others.

- More sophisticated influencing and negotiating skills are required when working with local authority partners outside your own organisation.

- Demonstrating the ability to 'keep on track' and show flexibility to work with partners' own pace of change is crucial.

- Managers need to be able to demonstrate perseverance, resilience and tenacity when working as 'a broker' between their own organisation and those of partners.

- Effective change/project management skills help in being able to adapt to changing circumstances and provide a framework for joint problem-solving and decision-making.

- You need to demonstrate constant enthusiasm and role model a 'solutions-focused approach' to joint-problem solving where the emphasis is on collective outcomes for the greater good.

- When working together with other authorities on learning and development issues you need to collectively develop a single language and shared vocabulary.

- Having an infectious enthusiasm for the 'collaborative cause' helps a lot – being convinced it is the right way to go and convincing others of this.

- In responding to change and radical re-design you need to take control of your own destiny, be proactive, adaptable and enable others to do this.