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# Understanding the impact of the College Development Network

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## **Executive Summary**

This evaluation explores the impact of the College Development Network (CDN) on staff within Scotland's colleges, as well as its broader influence at the institutional and sectoral levels. Drawing on the experiences of college staff and leaders, the study demonstrates the unique and valuable role that CDN plays in enhancing the capacity, confidence, and coherence of the Scottish college sector.

### **Purpose and Methodology**

The purpose of the evaluation was to understand the impact of CDN's activity—how it has contributed to improved practice at the individual and institutional level and supported systemic improvements across the sector. The research used a qualitative methodology involving 10 focus groups and 7 in-depth interviews with 34 participants from 15 colleges. The analysis focused on identifying patterns of engagement, examples of impact, and the conditions that enabled impact.

### **Impact on individuals**

CDN's most direct impact has been on the professional development of individual staff. Participants described CDN's training as relevant and grounded in practice. Staff consistently reported increased confidence, stronger skills, and a greater ability to translate learning into action, resulting in improved practice.

Importantly, CDN's safe and supportive learning environments enabled honest discussion of challenges and peer-to-peer exchange—creating spaces where staff could build resilience and confidence.

Leadership programmes were especially praised for supporting strategic thinking, self-reflection, and the creation of valuable professional networks. The collaborative learning approach fostered trusted relationships that continued well beyond the formal training and enabled cross-institutional learning and peer support.

Through its extensive networks and communities of practice, CDN has facilitated a powerful platform for knowledge exchange, innovation, and the amplification of best practice. Participants highlighted that these networks create connections and relationships (and reduce isolation, especially for specialist roles), building peer networks which provide on-going support to people in their day-to-day jobs, and improve practice at the college level through sharing of good practice and collaborations across the system. At the sectoral level, the networks provide a platform support for identifying and navigating shared themes and challenges, giving the colleges a collective voice in navigating these issues, and developing collective solutions.

### **Impact on Colleges**

At the institutional level, CDN has helped colleges to address strategic goals, enhance staff engagement and morale, and support cultural change. Colleges valued CDN's capacity to deliver bespoke training that aligned to their specific priorities, and the flexibility in delivery of programmes which ensured that the inputs were appropriate to each college and supported their own internal

priorities. The CDN approach and the skills and experience of CDN staff are highly rated among college staff.

Case studies demonstrate the impact of CDNs approach and illustrate the role CDN played in building skills and confidence but also in catalysing cultural change: Through ideation workshops, staff were empowered to develop and implement actionable ideas, increasing staff engagement and resulting in improved learner outcomes.

CDN's external position—combined with its deep sector knowledge—means it can act as both a credible facilitator and a strategic partner. This dual role enhances buy-in among staff and enables colleges to accelerate their change efforts.

### **Impact on the Sector**

CDN's influence extends well beyond individuals and individual colleges. It has played a pivotal role in driving forward sector-wide initiatives, fostering coherence, and enabling a shared response to collective challenges.

The Trauma-Informed College Programme, and the wider Changing Learner Programme, exemplify how CDN identifies emerging challenges, catalysed a strategic focus for the sector and builds collaborative responses at the operational level.

Flexible support through the Trauma-Informed College Programme has supported wider understanding of changing learner needs, and has driven systemic and cultural change in colleges as well as supporting improvements in practice for staff and learners.

### **Conclusion**

CDN is seen as a trusted and essential partner in the Scottish college sector. Its strengths lie in its ability to offer relevant, timely, and context-sensitive support, while also helping to shape strategic responses to emerging sectoral needs. By providing both practical tools and strategic insight, CDN enhances individual capacity, institutional effectiveness, and sector-wide resilience.

As colleges continue to navigate financial pressures, evolving learner needs, and the imperative for innovation, CDN's relational approach, professional expertise, and deep sector integration position it as a cornerstone of improvement and transformation across Scotland's Further Education landscape.

# 1. Introduction

## **Background on CDN**

The CDN strategy 2023-2026 positions the CDN as the improvement agency for Scotland's colleges. Its purpose is to deliver the professional learning pathways to support and enable that improvement.

The CDN's offer aims to support systemic change across the network, driving transformation by equipping colleges and their staff with the knowledge and skills to transform their practice, which in turn will improve outcomes for learners.

Overall, CDN plays a key role in strengthening the quality and impact of further education in Scotland.

## **Purpose of the evaluation**

CDN programmes have engaged over 6,500 participants in the last year. While there is anecdotal evidence that participation in CDN programmes has leveraged significant changes in practice, there is a need to better understand the difference that CDN makes to the capacity of staff and to colleges, and how that contributes to better outcomes for learners.

The purpose of this research was to explore the value and impact of CDNs activity on the staff of colleges and on the college network. The evaluation explored:

- The outcomes of participation in CDN programmes on college staff
  - what difference has the learning made at the individual level
- What has happened as a result of those changes
  - What is the impact of those changes on practice, for the individual, college and for the sector.

It also explored the factors in the CDN approach that contribute to impact.

## **Scope of the Evaluation**

It is important to note that this evaluation does not constitute a systematic or comprehensive review of the impact of all services provided by CDN. Rather, it is based solely on the experiences and perspectives shared by participants in the focus groups and interviews.

## 2. Methodology

### Approach

The approach aimed to balance rigour with the practical challenges of engaging busy college staff in the evaluation. We aimed to involve 40–60 college staff through two primary data collection methods: focus groups and in-depth interviews.

We aimed to deliver 10 focus groups, engaging between 40–60 staff members who had participated in any of CDN's training programmes. Focus groups were structured to maximise participation and value, with sessions limited to one hour and group sizes of 4–6 participants.

In addition, we aimed to carry out in-depth interviews with college staff to explore 'impact stories' and provide richer insights on the impact of CDN and create case studies that illustrate how staff and colleges have applied the learning in practice, highlighting impacts on professional practice, on culture, and in catalysing systemic change.

### Engaging participants

CDN advertised and recruited to the focus groups through its own communication channels.

- 48 individuals signed up to the 10 focus groups, delivered over two weeks in May-June 2025
- A total of 34 individuals attended the focus groups.
- The participants came from 15 colleges across the network (and included 2 participants from partner agencies)
- Participants were self-selecting and came from a range of academic, support and managerial roles, with a preponderance of middle and senior managers.

We also carried out 7 interviews with staff from various colleges. Participants were identified through the focus groups and through CDNs internal networks.

### Data collection and analysis

Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. We carried out a thematic analysis to identify key patterns of engagement and impact.

We developed eight case-studies based on interviews with college staff to demonstrate impact on practice, and wider impact at college and sector level.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1 Participation in CDN**

As part of this research, participants were asked to indicate which of the programmes and services provided by CDN they had accessed. In addition, they were invited to share their perceptions of the overall value that that CDN contributes both to individual practitioners and the wider college sector. The findings offer insights into the reach, relevance and perceived impact of CDN's provision.

Many participants described extensive and wide-ranging engagement with CDN with multiple engagements across the range of CDN programmes and support.

Many of the participants had engaged with CDN programmes on a long-term and recurring basis. This sustained level of participation underscores the value and significance that practitioners and colleges attribute to CDN's programmes and support.

#### **3.1.1 Participation in professional development programmes**

A significant proportion reported involvement in professional development programmes at the individual level, as well as experience of CDN's support and programmes at the college level.

CDN input at the college level include training to support Continuing Professional Development (CPD) days. It also included bespoke training and input to support internal college priorities (e.g. delivery of ideation training to support curriculum redesign). In addition, many had participated in specific programme offerings, including training in areas such as artificial intelligence and trauma-informed practice.

The impact of professional development programmes and CDN input at the college level is discussed in section 3.2. The section details the impact on individuals, on colleges and on the sector.

Case studies in the Appendices provide examples of impact and highlight the factors in the CDN approach which have contributed to impact.

#### **3.1.2 Participation in networks and communities of practice**

In addition to engagement in professional development programmes, most participants were also members of networks or communities of practice facilitated by CDN. These networks were highly valued, with participants recognising their pivotal role in supporting them at the individual level, creating connections across the network, building knowledge and confidence, but also the value they bring at the college level through sharing of good practice and enabling collaboration across the network.

Participants also recognised the impact of Networks in supporting colleges to address shared challenges and in strengthening the wider community.

The impact of the networks is discussed at section 3.3.

### 3.1.3 Engagement with other CDN services

CDN provides a range of additional services, including LearnOnline, its website, publications, conferences, and the Annual Awards.

While these services were less frequently cited as having direct personal impact, participants acknowledged their value and relevance.

- **Research and publications**

Participants valued research outputs for helping them understand emerging issues and challenges in the sector:

“There's just a wealth of resources that are available for us to utilise with the CDN”

“It keeps you up to date with what's happening in the sector”

- **Website**

Participants reported mixed use of the website. While some participants reported that they used the website to source information, most participants referenced the direct mailings as their primary source of information about CDN.

“I do use the website. I've got it bookmarked, so I go to it. But it's not always intuitive to find what you're looking for.”

Participants also commented that they had good contacts in CDN and were more likely to ‘drop an email’ to their contacts to source information.

- **Annual College Awards**

Several participants highlighted the motivational value of the Annual College Awards. By recognising both colleges and individuals, the Awards helped raise awareness of innovative practice and inspired peers across the sector.

### 3.1.4 Perceptions of value of CDN

From individual learning and professional development to supporting cultural and systemic change at the college and network level, CDN is consistently regarded as a vital and valued partner across Scotland's colleges.

CDN has established itself as the trusted provider of choice for colleges seeking professional development and training in a highly competitive marketplace.

“When we're looking at training opportunities, for example in management and leadership type training, there is so much out there to choose from, but our staff recognise that CDN is a trusted resource as well as a relevant and current”

This reputation is built not only on the consistently high quality of its programmes but also on CDN's deep understanding of, and connectedness to, the college sector. This sector insight ensures that CDN's training remains highly relevant and responsive to the real-world needs of colleges and their staff.

CDN brings a wealth of experience of the college sector. They understand the issues and challenges that staff face and add value by bringing experience and examples from other colleges which make the training more relevant and relatable.

Participants also highlighted CDN's significant role in driving improvement across the sector. While CDN plays a key role in supporting staff with curriculum, assessment, and teaching requirements through professional development training, CDN's impact goes further — fostering the culture, professionalism, and systemic change essential for effective practice.

*"It's relatively easy to support lecturers with curriculum and awarding body requirements—but much of what CDN offers focuses on the equally vital, less tangible aspects of the role: professionalism, culture, and the values needed to do the job well."*

The skills of CDN staff were recognised as a critical success factor in the delivery of training. As well as skills and expertise, participants commented on the CDN approach as being central to its success.

CDN staff have built relationships with staff across the college sector and there is a sense of openness and accessibility of the staff. Many participants commented that CDN staff were their first port of call if they needed help, advice or access to information.

*"There's always somebody available to reach out to and give you support"*

CDN extensive connections across the network are highly valued.

*"They put you in touch with other people in the network who are doing similar stuff - they are connectors - they broaden your network"*

CDN is also valued for its connections to other agencies. Participants reported that CDN had 'connections' to key organisations which facilitated access to advice and information which colleges would not otherwise have.

*"If you need advice, they link you up with people and into other agencies"*

*"CDN was able to get information in a way that we couldn't directly. It's the connections that CDN have into other organisations that we can benefit from."*

In addition to the quality of the content, participants highlighted the significant added value of CDN training particularly through facilitating opportunities for networking and peer support. Many reported on the considerable benefits from connecting with colleagues across the sector, sharing experiences, and learning

from one another, which contributed to a sense of professional community and ongoing support.

Additionally, the value of the Networks cannot be underestimated. They play a key role in supporting staff to do their jobs, but also in improving practice through shared learning and collaboration.

At the college level, leaders valued the 'personalised approach'. CDN's willingness to 'go out to the colleges' builds connections and confidence that CDN understands local issues and capacity.

They valued CDN's capacity to deliver tailored/bespoke training that aligned to their specific priorities, and the flexibility in delivery of programmes which ensured that the inputs were appropriate to each college and supported their own internal priorities.

"They understand that colleges are different... the programme offer is not 'one size fits all' but supports colleges to achieve their objectives."

Participants reported that CDN had designed bespoke/tailored training inputs to support organisations priorities.

"We met beforehand and [CDN] just got exactly what I was trying to achieve [through the training]"

Participants also highlighted the flexibility in the offer from CDN. Again, CDN's experience of the sector means that they 'understand that colleges are different' and that colleges have different priorities and different capacities.

For example, while CDN has developed a programme approach to key issues in the sector (e.g. development of trauma-informed practice) participants highlighted that flexibility in delivery ensured that the 'programme' was delivered in a way that aligned with their priorities and reflected their specific contexts and capacities of each college.

Descriptions of CDNs role and contribution included:

"Invaluable"

"Offers support, allows growth opportunities and provides invaluable networking"

"Supportive and collaborative"

"Responsive, supportive and helpful in taking forward common themes across Scotland's colleges"

This strong foundation of engagement underpins the findings on impact discussed in the following sections.

## 3.2 Impact of Professional Development programmes and support

As reported above, participants in the focus groups had engaged in a wide range of CDN professional development programmes and had experience of CDN support and training input at the college level.

### 3.2.1 Impact on individuals

This section demonstrates the outcomes of participation at an individual level, highlighting how engagement with these programmes has contributed to the development of skills, confidence, and the application of learning within professional practice. Participants also reported that participation in training had extended their networks which provided ongoing support in their jobs.

- **Skills, confidence and the capacity to put learning into action**

Participants reported that beyond the quality of the training input delivered by CDN, the approach and quality of facilitation was critical to building skills and confidence.

“They help you understand strategy, management skills, but also to reflect on your own practice.....it gives you confidence in your approach.”

“They challenge you. They help you to look at things differently”

Another key outcome for participants was reassurance.

“It can be lonely being a manager. It really helps in re-framing your problems and realising that it’s ‘not just me’.”

The approach was described as supportive and encouraging and made the training a safe space to explore real issues and challenges.

“People actually talked about the difficulties they'd been having and got advice from other people. .... just having that place to air some of those difficulties they've been having and just being able to speak openly and ask questions. Absolutely crucial”

Participants also highlighted that the training focused on change which was practical and do-able.

“... confidence-building, supportive.....and not just the theory, it was always integrated with the practical”

As a result, participants could provide examples of how they used the training in their own practice, and the impact on others.

“We are taking a more coaching approach with staff.....staff are now coming to us with problems but saying, I’ve thought about this and coming up with ideas themselves”

Examples of impact in relation to the AI/Digital training included:

"Staff were a wee bit cautious of it. They didn't quite understand it, but attending these sessions .... It's given them the confidence to embrace the use of AI to support their daily work"

"I've got a back house team who weren't really utilizing AI tools - The team has been attending the AI workshops, and you genuinely should hear the chat in the office, virtual and face-to-face, around the difference it's making to them."

- **Building a peer-support community**

Participants also commented on the networking and peer-support element of the training they had participated in. Individuals built trusted networks of "critical friends" feeling less isolated and more supported in their roles.

"I met great people through it. It extended my network"

They identified improvements in their own practice sharing of good practice.

"You see what others are doing ....and go back to your own college with ideas and information on good practice...that's really useful"

The case study 'Building Leadership capacity' at Appendix 1 demonstrates the impact of CDN's Leadership Programme (and VP Curriculum Network) on building individual leadership skills and capacity, and on strengthening the leadership pipeline in the sector.

### 3.2.2 Impact on colleges

- **Improved staff capacity, confidence and morale**

Participants reported that CDN training, CPD inputs at the college level (such as AI training, ideation training) and sectoral wide approaches such as the trauma-informed college programme contributed to upskilling staff while significantly boosting their confidence and motivation:

" The workshops have given me more confidence to support my staff..... gaining understanding, and I think it's just confidence and that reassurance ..... and again, the peer network - if I didn't understand something you can go back and chat about it and get clarification"

The qualities of the CDN staff were identified as key factors in the success.

"The staff bring something special. Such enthusiasm and dynamism.....you catch it"

- **Staff engagement/empowerment**

Participants reported that the CDN approach of 'reflection and challenge' supported continuous improvement but also supported staff to take ownership of improvements.

"They're not afraid to challenge you – to think about 'what are the things that stop you from changing'?"

Several participants reported that ideation training delivered by CDN had empowered staff to identify issues and develop solutions themselves.

"The sessions have really helped to make the lecturers feel empowered."

The case studies at Appendix 2 and 3: (Appendix 2: Supporting Curriculum Redesign at Dumfries and Galloway College and Appendix 3: Impact of ideation Training) demonstrates the impact of CDN's ideation training to support curriculum redesign, but also the impact on empowering staff.

The case study at Appendix 4 (Supporting culture change at UHI Moray), describes how bespoke input from CDN supported a participative, staff-led approach to change in the college.

- **Supporting innovation/new developments within colleges**

Participants reported that CDN provided expert support which has supported to develop new projects/initiatives with their colleges which otherwise wouldn't have happened, or which would have taken much longer to develop.

"[CDN provides] an external support that enables you to do things that would be difficult to do on your own in your college"

Participants highlighted the skills and resources that CDN bring to support colleges to develop things that they couldn't achieve alone.

"Because they've got the different staff who specialise in different areas, they've got the time, the resources, the contacts..... which you can't ever get in your day job. So, for me they're a friendly face who will drive things forward, help you to network with people and actually make things happen that otherwise wouldn't happen."

The case study at Appendix 5 (Edinburgh College – Advancing racial justice with CDN support) demonstrates CDN's role in developing new initiatives and in accelerating change in colleges.

- **Supporting organisational priorities**

Participants gave examples of bespoke training that CDN had delivered at staff CPD days to support organisational priorities.

"The training was completely in line with what we were trying to achieve internally - so everything they did at the training was supporting and reinforcing the things we were doing internally"

Participants also highlighted the flexibility in the CDN approach. For example, several participants reported on the delivery of the Trauma Informed College Programme. CDN's approach was tailored to reflect the priorities and current stage of developments within each college.

“The approach was tailored to our institution – it recognised that every college was at a different place. And they came up with a toolkit – and that could be adapted depending on where the college was on their journey”

The case study at Appendix 6 (Supporting the development of the nurture approach in Glasgow Clyde College) demonstrates how CDN’s support through the Trauma Informed College Programme has helped to develop and embed a trauma informed culture which underpins the nurture approach at Glasgow Clyde College.

Participants gave examples of how the tailored support from CDN was supporting changes in culture and practice.

“... I think the good thing about the Changing Learner workshops is people are still talking about it.”

“The Changing Learner [programme] is helping us to inform our practice. [The training] has been tailored to the whole college. It was a big part of our staff development in November, and we’ve also done Changing Learner [training] with Managers.

At the individual level, it’s helped me have a deeper understanding of the changing learner .....but for a lot of the staff, they don't have access to learners so they're not aware of the implications and the changes that are happening, so it has actually been quite fundamental in giving everyone a deeper understanding of what's actually going on in the front-line.

So, it’s helped us inform our practice - we’ve updated student charters, our positive behaviour policies – but also put a focus on how we can actually support staff with these learners.”

### 3.2.3 Impact on the sector

CDNs work at the individual and college level also impacts more widely on the sector, through:

- Collective capacity building
  - For example, the Leadership Programme, which has helped to build the individual capacity of leaders have also contributed to building the breadth and strength of leadership across the sector.
- Shared learning and collaboration
  - Examples of effective practice have been identified and scaled across the network, improving practice.

- Collaboration has resulted in new developments and reduced duplication.

Additionally, CDN's strong connections across the college sector enable it to identify shared challenges and provide coordinated support. Its close links with key agencies give it a strategic overview, allowing it to anticipate sector needs and proactively drive solutions at the sector level.

- **Strategic initiatives**

Through its research around the 'changing learner agenda,' CDN has brought critical attention and legitimacy to an issue impacting front-line staff across the sector. In doing so, CDN has successfully elevated the matter to the strategic level, positioning it as a priority requiring cultural and systemic change across the sector. CDN has also developed the tools to support colleges to operationalise approaches to responses at the college level.

Case studies at Appendices 7 and 8 demonstrate how CDN is driving cultural and systemic change across the sector through the 'Changing Learner' Programme. The case studies demonstrate that CDNs approach is tailored to align with priorities and capacity of each college, and that CDN provides support at the strategic and operational level:

- CDN engaged both senior leaders and frontline staff, ensuring alignment and buy-in.
- CDN provided practical tools (diagnostics, frameworks) to support implementation
- CDN also supports implementation through networks provide peer-support for college staff and facilitate sharing of good practice across the network.

"The Changing Learner [report] was really a driver for examining what we do and how we do it. It spotlighted it, made everybody stop and take notice of it, [and realise] you can't keep pushing it aside."

"It has made us examine our own practice"

"CDN has been both driving and supporting the journey"

### 3.3 Impact of Networks

Most participants were involved in Networks and highlighted the importance of networks at the individual level and college/sectoral level.

The impact of the Networks

- At the individual level, the peer networks have built confidence, skills, and knowledge
- At the college level, the networking and peer learning has supported sharing of good practice
- At the sector level, the networks:
  - foster collaboration and
  - support the development of solutions to collective challenges.

At the individual level, participants reported on the importance of Networks for connecting practitioners across the college sector and creating a peer network to support them in their role.

"I'm the only person in my college doing this job. I can be quite isolated, so the Network has been critical for me in finding other people who do the same job, building relationships, a peer network....it starts that connectedness"

Involvement in the networks creates a peer network that supports people in their day-to-day work.

"The channels that there are there are really helpful. Just to be able to ask questions. If you're not sure about something or want to know how something is done somewhere else, you can just put a question out there and you'll always get response."

The Networks were described as 'safe spaces' to ask questions, share experiences and learn from each other. Participants reported that this resulted in practical learning which helped them to improve their own practice, but also a sense of reassurance in finding out that they were 'not alone' in the challenges that they were facing.

"They're safe spaces - you can ask questions and get a lot of guidance and support - really practical stuff like 'have you had this situation?' or 'have you got a process for this?' and you can learn from other peoples' experience"

"Speaking to counterparts across different colleges and just seeing what worked, what didn't work"

"Keeping your finger on the pulse in terms of what's happening across the sector. And sometimes just that reassurance that what you're doing is the right thing and that the challenges that you've got are mirrored across the sector... and that you're not alone"

"It can be such relief to know that you're not the only one [facing a particular challenge]. Just getting that reassurance makes such a difference"

Participants highlighted the importance of the Networks for new college staff. Joining the networks gave new entrants an understanding of the college network

"If you've never worked for a college before, you don't know anything about how colleges work, or funding or where to go for things, and there's no sort of formal training for that sort of thing..... so, we encourage people to join these networks because they will get support for their job, so it's direct impact"

Participants identified real impacts from the networks. This ranged from sharing processes, practical solutions and resources to sense-checking what they were doing against other colleges and learning from best practice.

“It's not just the benchmarking; it's actually the learning and the development that comes from it.”

“From the professional point of view, it's business critical. We really are taking best practice and learning from other people's experience. That's really powerful, particularly when we're talking budgetary constraints around professional development.”

The Networks foster collaborative responses to shared problems collaboration on new developments.

“You build relationships with people in other colleges. It builds up collaborative work - whether it's on developing a new course or speaking about a unit that lectures may have an issue with”

“The real impact comes through the collaboration”

A further impact of the Networks is that they provide a forum for developing solutions to collective challenges. In this context, CDN adds value through its 'deep understanding of the college sector, and its connection to external agencies:

- CDN understands the issues and challenges facing the colleges and brings knowledge /experience from across the sector,
- CDN acts as a conduit to information, keeping colleges abreast of issues and developments in the policy and practice arena that individual colleges wouldn't have access to,
- CDN can also connect the networks to external agencies to inform or support resolution of collective challenges.

“Where there's an issue with an external agency, CDN could get them along to a network meeting and we could get a direct update on the situation. We couldn't have got a response from them as an individual college..... And your concerns are taken seriously [because of context i.e. collective voice of sector]. CDN is a vital link with these external agencies”

The Networks give the sector a collective voice on issues. CDN has been important facilitating the collective voice and providing external support which enables networks to develop solutions.

“A lot of what CDN supports [through the networks] is around working through challenges that we're all facing, finding ways of navigating what's happening and having a collective voice to challenge it”

Participants recognised the key role of CDN role in supporting the Networks.

“It would probably fall apart without CDN support – we just don't have the time”

“I was a chair of one of the Networks. I got a lot of support from them [CDN] about you know, what we were trying to achieve and how to go

about it, all that kind of thing. So, I found that was useful. I felt I could go to people if I needed to know what needed to be done in that role.”

Participant responses on the Networks and Communities of Practice were overwhelmingly positive. Staff value the Networks/CoPs in relation to the support they provide at the individual level and the impact on improving practices across the sector through shared learning.

- Only two participants had negative experiences of a Network (the same network). They felt that there was a lack of purpose or clarity around what the Network was trying to achieve.
- Another issue raised was the potential for duplication within networks “sometimes one network can be discussing something and we're discussing the same thing” and a suggestion that a mechanism for communication between networks might be valuable.
- One participant identified a gap in provision and suggested a new network should be developed for learning technologists.

## 4. Conclusion: The impact of CDN

### 4.1 Impact Summary

It is important to note that this evaluation was not intended as a systematic or comprehensive review of impact. Rather, it provides indicative evidence drawn from the experiences and reflections of participating college staff.

The findings offer valuable insight into how CDN programmes have influenced individual practice and organisational culture. While the scope of the evaluation was necessarily limited, it is clear that CDN is highly valued by colleges, with staff consistently recognising its positive contribution to professional learning and sector-wide development.

#### **Impact on Individuals (College Staff)**

The CDN has had a profound impact on the college staff across Scotland. CDN's training and development opportunities were consistently described as confidence-building, skills-enhancing, and practically applicable. Staff reported improved skills and understanding, motivation, and competence—often citing direct changes in their day-to-day practice as a result of CDN inputs.

A key theme was the peer-to-peer support embedded in CDN's programmes and networks, which supported people in their day-to-day jobs. The networks created safe, collaborative environments for learning and reflection. Participants cited examples of sharing of good practice and of collaborations with other colleges which impacted on their own practice but also increased the capacity of the college to meet the needs of learners.

#### **Impact on Colleges**

At the college level, CDN has supported colleges to address strategic and operational priorities. CDN has provided external expertise, bespoke training, and facilitation that has improved morale, supported cultural change and accelerated innovation.

CDN's support enabled colleges to trial new ideas with confidence, align change initiatives with strategic objectives, and increase the speed and quality of transformation.

#### **Impact on the Scottish College Sector**

CDN plays a critical strategic role in shaping and advancing the college sector in Scotland. Through networks, action research, and national programmes, CDN has contributed to:

- Collective capacity building
- Increased coherence across colleges through shared best practice approaches and collaboration.
- Capacity to respond to shared challenges
- Catalysing sector-wide cultural and systemic change, responding to collective challenges.

CDN has acted not only as a support provider, but also as a catalyst and convener—spotlighting emerging issues, curating best practice, and mobilising collaborative responses at scale.

## 4.2 Critical success factors in CDN's approach

The evaluation has identified a number of key factors that have underpinned CDN's ability to generate impact:

### 1. Relevance and sector insight

CDN's activities are grounded in an in-depth understanding of the Scottish college sector. Their offers are not only timely and responsive to sector challenges, but also deeply contextualised. This relevance increases engagement, credibility, and the likelihood of sustained impact.

### 2. Trusted relationships and credibility

CDN is widely regarded as a trusted partner. Staff across the sector view CDN not just as a service provider but as a reliable ally—someone to go to for advice, connections, and support. This trust facilitates openness, collaboration, and deep engagement.

### 3. Tailored and flexible delivery

Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model, CDN consistently tailors its delivery to reflect the unique needs, priorities, and capacities of individual colleges. This flexibility ensures that programmes are not only relevant, but also actionable and achievable within each local context.

### 4. Network building and connectivity

CDN's facilitation of networks and communities of practice provides vital peer support, knowledge exchange, and professional reassurance. These forums foster collaboration and help to scale innovation across the sector. CDN also serves as a connector—linking individuals and linking colleges to other institutions, sector experts, and national bodies.

### 5. Support for innovation and change

CDN provides both the 'permission' and the 'process' for change. By offering tools like ideation training and action research support, CDN helps colleges to think creatively and implement practical solutions. Their external position provides the necessary distance to challenge assumptions while still being informed enough to be credible.

### 6. Strategic influence

CDN contributes to shaping national agendas. Through research and sector facilitation, CDN helps ensure that colleges have a collective voice and can respond coherently to external challenges. Their insight into the political and funding landscape also allows CDN to anticipate needs and offer timely support.

### 7. High-quality staff and facilitation

The skills, professionalism, and interpersonal style of CDN staff are consistently praised. Their expertise, combined with a relational approach, ensures that training and support are engaging, effective, and valued.

### **4.3 Final Reflections**

CDN's impact is multi-layered—spanning individuals, colleges, and the sector. It is not only the content of what CDN delivers that matters, but also *how* it is delivered. Its strengths lie in its relevance, relational approach, and responsiveness to the evolving needs of Scottish colleges.

The organisation's unique position—embedded in the sector but with external perspective—enables it to act as a bridge, a catalyst, and a strategic enabler. As Scotland's colleges face ongoing structural, financial, and learner-related challenges, CDN's role as a facilitator of professional learning, innovation, and system-wide coherence remains vital.

# Appendices: Case studies

## Appendix 1: Building Leadership capacity

### Building Leadership capacity

#### **CDN Leadership Programme**

The CDN Leadership Pathway programme has had a valuable impact on individuals within the Scottish college sector, fostering not only professional growth but creating a 'community of practice' which supports continuous improvement and collaboration across the sector.

At the individual level, the programme has delivered tangible benefits contributing to career development. The programme helped leaders strengthen strategic thinking, refine decision-making, and build confidence, particularly through reflection on their personal leadership style.

A key strength of the leadership programme lies in its mode of delivery. Beyond the quality of its content, the programme provided opportunities to 'connect with people that you wouldn't otherwise meet' offering access to a range of expertise and new insights. It provided a safe space to engage in open, candid dialogue and critical reflection with peers facing similar challenges. The process creates genuine and lasting connections—forming a trusted network of "critical friends" and creating a greater sense of community among emerging leaders in the sector.

The collaborative environment enabled reflection on complex challenges and the ability to test and validate decisions with an informed and trusted peer group — essential in a time of significant financial and structural pressures.

The 'community of practice' provided inspiration to emerging leaders as well as opportunities to learn from others across the sector – participants could compare approaches on everything from strategic to operational approaches, providing 'toolkits and short-cuts' to best practice and ultimately increasing sector-wide efficiency.

At the sector level, the impact is equally significant. The Leadership Programme has significantly strengthened interpersonal relationships, resulting in the formation of a dynamic, supportive, and collegiate group of leaders, which supports collaboration and enhances the sector's overall coherence and effectiveness.

#### **VP Curriculum Network**

The 'networks' supported by CDN also support the development of leaders in the sector and facilitates continuous improvement in the sector.

The VP Curriculum Network is a platform for VPs to connect, collaborate, and address issues relevant to their roles and the wider college sector.

The VP Curriculum Network is a supportive, collegiate group which is aligned to a shared vision and common goals. For leaders, the network facilitates

peer-to-peer learning, knowledge transfer and practical support, supporting a culture of continuous improvement.

At the strategic level, the VP Curriculum Network creates a structure for strategic decision-making across the sector:

- The network offers a platform to gain early insight into national policy and funding decisions, reducing duplication of effort and enabling coherent responses.
- It also fosters collaborative planning across the sector, enhancing the sectors coherence and effectiveness e.g. negotiations around reducing duplication, discussions on sharing of resources, etc

The shared purpose and collaboration among leaders contribute to a more unified and resilient Further Education sector—positioning it to respond more effectively to emerging challenges.

### **Impact of CDN**

CDN plays a valuable role in supporting the leadership ecosystem. Leadership Programme has helped build the individual capacity of leaders and has helped to build the breadth and strength of leadership across the sector.

CDN adds value to the VP Curriculum Network by supporting it to develop an informed perspective on key sector and practice issues. Their broad links across the college sector also help to identify common challenges and provide co-ordinated support.

CDN also directly supports improvement by driving forward solutions to issues identified by the VP Curriculum Network: for example, following discussions around learning and teaching pedagogy and the need for support for upskilling and retraining on pedagogy in the 21st century, CDN developed a training package around pedagogical development.

The strength of relationships built through the training and network has proven valuable for making collective strategic decisions. Trust and mutual understanding underpin the working relationship and resource-sharing allowing for decisions that serve the broader interests of Further Education across Scotland.

CDN's deep integration with the college sector—its understanding of funding pressures, learner needs, and political realities—means it not only hears sector challenges but actively responds.

Its unique value lies in being both a responsive partner and a strategic enabler for change—helping to build leadership, strengthen the sector, and future-proof Scotland's colleges.

## Appendix 2: Curriculum redesign at Dumfries and Galloway College

### Curriculum redesign at Dumfries and Galloway College

#### **Context**

Following a leadership transition at Dumfries and Galloway College, the new team engaged CDN to support the Curriculum Leadership Group in curriculum redesign. After an introduction to ideation training, the College saw its potential to empower staff and promote ownership of curriculum development to better meet learners' needs.

#### **What did CDN do?**

CDN designed and delivered a 2-day programme of training for all curriculum staff.

- The training motivated and supported staff to 'think differently' about current challenges. It was also focussed on developing practical solutions.
- At the end of the 2-day session, every work group had identified 3 ideas that they wanted to action, and had a developed a clear plan for each.

3 months later, CDN delivered a follow up session for staff aimed at putting the plans into action. After a further 6 months, CDN also attended a showcase and evaluation session to review the progress that college staff had made.

#### **What happened as a result of the training?**

Each business unit has made changes to improve learning and teaching based on the ideas that they developed in sessions. Some examples include:

- The Construction Department has completely redesigned assessment and has developed a paperless process. Lecturers designed an app for students (that links to Moodle) where students can record their progress. Lecturers record live feedback to support assessment.
- Health and Social Care developed a new course which responded to employer needs.
- The Business and the Computing Departments have streamlined their assessment process, significantly reducing the number assessments.

CDN also followed up with ideation training for support staff. This has also leveraged innovation and changes to practice, for example the External Development Department is trialling on-line proctoring.

#### **What difference has it made?**

A curriculum manager commented that the input had supported a sense of empowerment among staff.

"The sessions have really helped to make the lecturers feel empowered. It started to get people thinking 'we could really do this.' But also, to think outside the box and not be constrained, and just to go with it. You know, if it doesn't work, we can review it and we can change it. But don't be afraid to go with that idea."

The training has driven significant changes in practice. These changes have been driven by staff, and the early successes have sustained motivation and engagement.

This has resulted in change in the culture of learning and teaching at Dumfries and Galloway college.

“There are different conversations in the college. People are talking about learning and teaching in the queue in the coffee shop!”

### **What worked and why?**

- **Alignment and support from Senior Leadership Team**

The training supported the Leadership Team's strategic aim to enhance staff responsibility in driving improvements in learning and teaching. Their active endorsement created a climate in which staff felt both empowered and encouraged to initiate meaningful change.

- **CDN provided the catalyst for change through the ideation training.**

CDN understood the brief—recognising both staff disempowerment and the Leadership team's goal to foster accountability and empowerment. They designed a tailored session that encouraged staff to ‘think differently’ but also provided a structure and process to generate practical ideas and action for change.

The CDN approach, aligned with the visible support from the Leadership Team created a climate of ‘permission’ for the staff involved.

CDN offers a unique value as a training provider by combining deep understanding of the college context with the credibility of an external expert. Their position enables them to deliver relevant, network-informed insights while bringing fresh perspectives that staff are more receptive to, enhancing the impact and credibility of the training.

“This wouldn’t have had the same impact if we’d delivered this internally – the staff wouldn’t have responded in the same way”

The success is also attributable to the CDN team, who are recognised not only for their expertise as facilitators but also for the passion and commitment they bring to their roles.

## Appendix 3: Glasgow Clyde College - Impact of ideation training

### Impact of ideation training

#### Context

Glasgow Clyde College took up the offer ideation training from CDN.

#### What happened as a result of the training?

Each of the teams involved left the session with actions to improve learner outcomes, but also with a sense of ownership of those actions.

But one of the key outcomes has been a shift in mindset. Staff feel more empowered to innovate, within a culture where change is encouraged and viewed as a learning process—recognising that not all approaches will succeed, but each attempt contributes to ongoing improvement.

#### Example of impact

In one department, involvement in the ideation training resulted in staff working together to explore poor learner outcomes. They identified that while students were achieving their learning outcomes in some elements the course, they were under-achieving in others.

Staff have developed more flexibility in timetabling to provide more time and input in elements of the curriculum where students were falling behind.

This 'small change' has had a significant impact on learner outcomes (improved PIs).

The process of working together to resolve the issue has also resulted in improvements in staff relationships and morale.

#### What worked and why?

- **Alignment and support from Leadership Team**

CDN worked with the Assistant Principal to develop a tailored programme which was grounded in the current issues facing the College and aligned with the College's aspirations for change.

- **Relevance**

The time spent on preparation ensured that CDN staff brought up-to date knowledge of the issues and challenges that College staff were facing and could tailor examples to the needs of staff. This ensured that the CDN input was credible and relevant to staff.

The Assistant Principal had also prepared staff for the session – setting out the aspirations and expected outcomes for the day. This again reinforced the relevance of the training. Staff went into the training with an expectation that it would result in 'change' that would ultimately improve their experience and the student experience.

- **Underpinned by sector experience**

The CDNs knowledge of the college sector gives them an ability to contextualise the challenges that the college is facing – and bring examples of how other colleges are addressing the challenges. This enables CDN to deliver relevant, network-informed insights that staff can relate to.

- **Outcome focused**

While the sessions are focused on idea development, they are also outcome focused – teams were encouraged to come up with practical solutions which they could take forward.

- **Ownership**

The other critical factor is ownership. Staff teams identified their priority issues and actions, which created ownership of the solutions.

## Appendix 4: Supporting culture change at UHI Moray

### Supporting culture change

#### **Context**

Following a period of significant change at UHI Moray—including loss of staff and organisational restructuring—there was a need to re-establish a shared sense of purpose, to strengthen staff connection and confidence, and give colleagues a renewed sense of belonging and voice.

A small group of staff who attended CDN's on-line ideation training recognised its potential to support this process. They approached CDN to explore how the training could be used to improve staff confidence, connection and ownership at UHI Moray.

#### **What did CDN do?**

CDN recognised that the aspiration of this work went beyond staff involvement in curriculum redesign; it was fundamentally about supporting cultural change across the college. To support this, CDN worked with the small staff group to co-design a whole-college approach which engaged staff from senior management through to support staff.

CDN delivered ideation training—initially with the Senior Management Team, then cascaded the training through the curriculum staff and to support staff.

Staff involvement in the College Development Days was outstanding, with high-quality contributions and overwhelmingly positive feedback reflecting the strength of staff engagement and commitment to the process.

#### **What happened as a result of the training?**

This bespoke programme was not just about delivering training—it laid the foundation for a participative, staff-led approach to change.

Staff were supported to identify opportunities for improvement within their own areas. These ideas were collated, themed, and shared with the Senior Management Team, who then charged the College Management Team (CMT) with developing and delivering the change process.

The CMT organised a whole-staff development day, engaging around 160 staff in prioritising ideas under six key themes. These priorities formed the basis of an immediate action plan—every item on which has since been delivered.

A second staff development day with over 100 staff attending, built on this work, integrating longer-term proposals and other ideas developed at the ideation training into the college's development plan.

#### **What difference has it made?**

The college has delivered all of the actions which were on the 'immediate priority' list and is working to deliver the 'priority 2 actions'

The process has re-engaged staff and given them a voice and a sense of ownership in the plans for the future. It has also contributed to a sense of autonomy - that staff can make change.

There are also proposals to embed 'staff led change' into the culture of the college.

The next action is to set up a 'Change Champion' programme. Any member of staff can make a proposal for a 'change' that will benefit the college

- The proposals will be assessed by a Change Champions panel (of peers)
- The ideas which pass the peer assessment will be delivered on.

Early engagement of staff shows strong staff interest and ownership.

### **What worked and why?**

CDN's credibility and track record in facilitating culture change gave UHI Moray confidence in the process.

CDN's flexible, responsive approach—working closely with staff to understand the unique context—was central to the programme's success. CDN co-designed the strategy for the 'whole college approach' and developed a bespoke programme of training to support the change process.

Crucially, CDN's support extended beyond training delivery: ongoing collaboration and encouragement have given UHI Moray the momentum and assurance to continue building a culture of staff-led change.

## Appendix 5: Edinburgh College - Advancing racial justice with CDN support

### Advancing racial justice with CDN support

#### Background

As part of its wider commitment to becoming an anti-racist college, Edinburgh College set out to establish a cross-college group focused on decolonising the curriculum in October 2024. The group was established by the Assistant Principal Curriculum (Creative Industries) and brought together curriculum and support staff who had an interest and commitment to decolonising the curriculum and becoming an Anti-racist college.

#### Context

While there had been a significant amount of work in the Higher Education sector around decolonising the curriculum, there was little existing infrastructure or sector-specific guidance on the FE sector, so developing the project in a space with little existing groundwork presented significant challenges for the group.

#### Contribution of the CDN

CDN's specialist expertise, sector contacts, and dedicated resources provided the external support that was needed to drive the initiative forward. Key contributions included:

- **Providing tailored guidance and support**, drawing on their specialist expertise
- **Facilitating networking** by connecting the college with other experts and practitioners in the college network and beyond.
- **Sharing resources and best practice examples from across the FE and HE network** to shape a relevant and impactful programme.

#### Impact

CDN has played a pivotal role in supporting the delivery of a project which has resulted in the cross-college action plan to decolonise the curriculum.

CDN has also connected Edinburgh College into the Student Commission on Racial Justice, an initiative funding student-led projects on curriculum decolonisation in English colleges. As a result, Edinburgh College has been accepted into the initiative and from October 2025, this will create funded opportunities for students from Edinburgh College to carry out projects on decolonising the curriculum, expanding the reach and impact of the work of the decolonising the curriculum project.

#### What worked and why?

The support from CDN was central to the "driving forward the project, actually making things happen that otherwise wouldn't happen" also important in growing the scope and influence of the project. The CDN's role is described not only as supportive but as an agent of change that helps "push the envelope," amplifying the impact both for the college and for students.

Importantly, the partnership with CDN is not one-sided. The Assistant Principal also highlighted that CDN both leads and learns — they support individual colleges to drive forward new initiatives, but they also identify emerging good practice within colleges, which they then share across the network. This dynamic approach ensures that innovation is shared, scaled, and sustained across the sector.

[“They come out, find best practice, and take it across the network”](#)

The support from CDN has also accelerates the pace of change in colleges. The CDN has also delivered ‘ideation training’ to curriculum managers in Edinburgh College.

The Assistant Principal of Creative Industries reports that although they were already “on a road towards change” (they had started to develop alternative ways of delivering and assessing student work during Covid), the ideation training was central to driving forward changes in teaching and learning in the faculty.

[“We were on a road to change, but the ideation training has really accelerated that. It challenges people to think about ‘what are the things that stop you from changing?’.”](#)

## Appendix 6: Supporting the development of the nurture approach in Glasgow Clyde College

### Supporting the development of the nurture approach

#### **Context: The nurture approach in Glasgow Clyde College**

Glasgow Clyde College formally launched its nurture approach at the start of session 2023/24. Glasgow Clyde College's nurture approach focused on ensuring that college activities, relationships and the environment are welcoming, safe and respectful for all. The approach aims to have a positive impact on staff and student wellbeing and success.

In September 2023, CDN launched its Trauma-Informed College Programme to support the embedding of trauma-informed practices across Scottish colleges.

The programme aligns closely with Glasgow Clyde College's nurture approach. CDN's programme has been informed by Glasgow Clyde College's experience but has also offered opportunities to Glasgow Clyde College to identify further steps to develop and embed a trauma informed culture which underpins its nurture approach.

#### **CDN's contribution to the development of a trauma-informed culture**

Development of trauma-informed and trauma responsive practice is related to one of the six principles of the nurture approach that Glasgow Clyde College has been embedding in the college.

The support from CDN through the Trauma-Informed College Programme has supported GCC to develop that into a wider nurture approach.

As a result, the College has reviewed policies and processes to reflect trauma-responsive principles and focused on relationship management and person-centred practice.

Training in trauma-informed practice from CDN has enabled staff from across the college and from all departments to access to training to understand the student experience from a trauma-informed perspective. This has resulted in changes in practice in teaching in many departments and in a range of support services. (e.g. changes in the way that the Finance Department interact with students over collection of fees.)

"If you look across the teams and at the culture, the way that staff approach individual students and how they support them, that has really shifted in the last two years. "

Early indications are that the cultural change within the college has improved the student experience

"While we can't prove the direct relationship, early withdrawal rates in the college this year are the lowest they have ever been in 10 years. "

### **The Value of the Relationship with CDN**

CDN has been instrumental in advancing the college's nurture and trauma-informed strategies.

CDN's tailored training, strategic guidance, and structured learning opportunities have significantly contributed to capacity building within the college, reinforcing a culture of support and continuous development.

Critical factors in the success have been:

- The CDN research helped to contextualise the issues of changing learner needs for staff and their knowledge of emerging trauma-informed practices across the college network helped staff to understand in practical ways how trauma-informed practices could improve student learning experiences and outcomes.
- The CDN team bring extensive experience from across the network. They are recognised as experts in their field and can provide practical experience that is tailored and relevant to colleges.
- The training offer is flexible and responsive to the needs of the college. It responds to 'where the college is' on its own journey, so is relevant and actionable.

### **What worked and why?**

CDN has identified and led the development of strategic responses to sector-wide challenges.

While a number of colleges were already on a journey to develop trauma-informed practices, CDN has been the backbone in developing a collective approach for the college sector.

The Programme has been built on research but has been informed through the partnership with the colleges who were already developing their practice.

The development of the Trauma-Informed College Programme demonstrates CDN's role in using research to identify key issues and drawing on its knowledge of the network to share best practice and support the improvement of practice across the sector.

Glasgow Clyde and two other colleges were involved in a practice sharing event for the Trauma-Informed College Programme which allowed them to highlight their approaches and the impact of those approaches to the network.

## Appendix 7: Supporting City of Glasgow College to embed a trauma-informed culture

### Embedding a trauma-informed culture.

In September 2023, the College Development Network (CDN) launched its *Trauma-Informed College* programme, designed to support Scottish colleges in embedding trauma-informed approaches. City of Glasgow College is an example of how CDN's strategic support translates into meaningful cultural change.

#### Laying the Foundation for Change

Two staff members from the college participated in CDN's intensive eight-week training programme, designed to build understanding of trauma and mental health. These individuals went on to become 'trauma leads' and have been instrumental in developing the approach within City of Glasgow College.

To support ongoing development, CDN established a national community of practice, enabling these leads to collaborate with peers across the sector and share learning.

CDN also hosted a national learning event where three colleges showcased their own trauma-informed journeys, further reinforcing sector-wide engagement and peer learning.

#### From Awareness to Action

With CDN's support, City of Glasgow College developed an internal action plan to raise awareness and build institutional buy-in. A key milestone was the delivery of a training session by CDN at the College Managers' Meeting, which generated significant interest and support across departments. Further training has been delivered to staff.

The trauma leads partnered with the Organisational Development team to embed the initiative structurally, forming a cross-college Steering Group. Using CDN's trauma-informed diagnostic tool, the group identified strengths, gaps, and opportunities for development. CDN delivered a parallel session to the College Board to ensure alignment at all levels of governance.

Five strategic themes were identified, leading to the creation of sub-groups focused on:

- Raising awareness of existing student support resources
- Staff training and professional development
- Capturing and promoting existing good practice
- Embedding trauma-informed approaches within departments
- Reviewing policies and procedures through a trauma-informed lens

Student voices are being integrated into this work through planned involvement in reviewing diagnostic findings.

### **Impact and Next Steps**

City of Glasgow College is now on a journey toward embedding a trauma informed culture across the college. With a dedicated Steering Group and working groups in place, the college is now actively building capacity and developing plans for sustainable change across the five themes.

### **CDN's Contribution to Developing a Trauma-Informed Culture across the sector**

- **Evidence-Based Response to Sector-Wide Challenges**

The *Changing Learner* report provides a robust, evidence-based foundation for CDN's four-pillar approach, one of which focuses on trauma-informed practice. The approach addresses systemic challenges faced by colleges and is grounded in research, which elevates the visibility of key issues and offers practical, actionable support for colleges.

- **Building Commitment to Cultural Change**

CDN has been pivotal in building sector-wide buy-in for trauma-informed approaches. It designed an inclusive approach that engages staff, leaders, and governing boards ensuring widespread commitment across institutions. By combining research insights with real-world examples of effective practice from the network, CDN has successfully influenced colleges to prioritise trauma-informed development.

The organisation's credibility and national reach have enabled it to act as a catalyst for meaningful cultural change within the sector.

- **Enabling and Supporting Change**

Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model, CDN empowers colleges to develop trauma-informed approaches in ways that align with their specific contexts and capacities. Through high-impact tools—including professional development, diagnostic frameworks, staff training, development support, and a national community of practice—CDN builds long-term capacity across the sector. This scalable, adaptable model ensures efficient use of resources and supports sustainable outcomes.

## Appendix 8: Forth Valley College - Developing a trauma-informed college

### Developing a trauma-informed college

#### Background

In 2023, Forth Valley College and Fife College, partnered with CDN on a research project to explore the dynamics of School-College Partnerships (SCP) and their impact on senior phase learners. The study, delivered through CDN's *Step Forward* action research methodology, involved focus groups and interviews with stakeholders from both colleges and their partner schools.

The resulting *Changing Learner* report uncovered key insights into shifting learner demographics and the changing needs of students—insights that have shaped CDN's *Trauma-Informed College* and wider *Changing Learner* programmes.

#### Context

Forth Valley College recognised that the challenges identified within SCP cohorts were symptomatic of broader trends across the student population. There was a clear need for a more coordinated and strategic response to meet the increasingly complex needs of learners.

While some departments were already working in ways aligned with trauma-informed practice, the CDN programme provided an opportunity to embed this approach more systematically across the college.

#### Progress to Date

CDN's Trauma-Informed College programme has supported Forth Valley College to develop its approach at the strategic and operational level.

- **Training for Key Leaders**  
Two senior leaders—Head of Learning and Quality and Head of Student Services and Support—participated in CDN's intensive 8-week training programme on trauma and trauma-responsive practice. They are now leading change across the college.
- **Establishing a Community of Practice**  
CDN facilitated a national network for trauma leads, enabling Forth Valley College staff to share experiences and learn from other colleges.
- **Awareness Raising Across the College**  
CDN delivered staff awareness sessions to introduce the changing learner agenda and the objectives of the trauma-informed programme, laying the groundwork for wider buy-in.
- **Department-Level Training and Diagnostics**  
Two departments have received targeted training and support to use the

diagnostic tools to review current practices and identify opportunities for development of trauma-informed approaches.

- **Strategic Leadership Engagement**

CDN is now supporting the College's Leadership Management Team (LMT) to develop a whole-institution response. Using CDN's diagnostic tool, the LMT is identifying the strategic developments needed to embed trauma-informed principles across all levels and functions of the college.

### **What Has Worked—and Why?**

CDN played a pivotal role by supporting the original research on the changing learner, which was instrumental in bringing to light the underlying challenges that colleges were already experiencing. The development of the trauma-informed college programme catalysed a deeper understanding of trauma and supported the college in making strategic and operational changes to improve the student experience.

- **Evidence-Based Foundations**

The initial research was critical in evidencing the changing learner and gave the programme immediate relevance and credibility.

- **Trusted and Influential Partner**

CDN's role as a national and sector-embedded organisation brings significant influence. Their insights are valued, and their recommendations carry weight among college staff and leaders.

*"When CDN comes in [on an issue] and spends time with us, it becomes valued."*

- **Communities of Practice**

The networks fostered by CDN have been instrumental in supporting staff to develop and embed approaches. They offer inspiration, peer support, and practical benchmarking—helping colleges learn from each other and accelerate improvement.