



Ten steps to improving regional to local connections



Good connections are central to sustainable development in the English regions. Good connections mean that Local Strategic Partnerships and Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships get to know about funding opportunities in good time, and can learn from the experiences of other partnerships in their region. Good connections can move key local priorities such as transport onto the regional agenda. Above all, they avoid duplicating effort.

But good connections can be hard to achieve, as a startling survey from Regional Futures -the learning network for the English Regions – has revealed. The network, drawing on work from the East Midlands Assembly and the survey, ran a well-attended seminar to identify solutions. And here Ann-Marie Brouder from Regional Futures draws on this learning to come up with 10 basic steps to improve your region's connections.

Step 1 Focus on what brings people together

Regional to local connections is complex and confusing. So concentrate resources on what brings people together rather than trying to understand the whole picture. Mechanisms can include identifying common aims, policy and project development, funding, monitoring and appraisal, and engagement with stakeholders.

Step 2 Clarify roles

Organisations at the regional level and partnerships at the sub-regional and local level need to clarify their roles, and communicate them. This includes differentiating the roles of regional organisations.

One mechanism is a concordat, which sets out the roles of two or more organisations. For example the Regional Assembly, Government Office and Regional Development Agency in the North West have signed a concordat, which sets out how the organisations work together to improve the quality of life for people in the North West. A regional concordat should be extended to partnerships and organisations at the sub-regional and local level, and communicated widely within the region.

Step 3 Identify existing and potential links

Organisations should identify where new links are needed by looking at the potential benefits to both parties.

A mapping exercise is a good way to set out the relationships between different organisations and it can help to link the "joining-up" mechanisms such as community and regional sustainability strategies. It could be used to develop tailored covering letters to go with documents, explaining the relevance of the documents to the audience, organisation or area. It needs to be well communicated of course, and kept up to date.

Step 4 Government guidance

Although Central government set up the regional organisations and encouraged the formation of partnerships, it has not given clear guidance on how the organisations and partnerships should be working together. Regional Futures is pressing for this, and asking that it should be flexible to enable the regions to manoeuvre within it and determine their own local situation. This guidance should of course be communicated to staff within Whitehall, for example through the Government's policy hub website (www.cmps.gov.uk/policyhub)

Step 5 Common integrated regional strategy

Having a set of integrated economic, social and environmental objectives for a region helps ensure that organisations and partnerships are working in the same direction and helps join up other strategies within a region. An example is the East Midlands Integrated Regional Strategy, which also doubles as the region's Regional Sustainability Framework.

(<http://www.eastmidlandsassembly.org.uk>)

However there is a clear need for ownership of a common regional integrated strategy from the regional to local level. This involves liaising with all levels from the outset. In addition the shared objectives in the strategy need to be broken down into or built up from usable indicators at the regional, sub-regional and local level. It should also be clear how the strategy will be used within the region and who should use it. There should in particular be an initial commitment to use it by regional organisations. A database of community strategies and contacts can help with networking and could be used to help encompass local issues within the regional agenda.

Step 6 Beyond seats on boards to networks

Good relationships with organisations or partnerships often entail seats on each other's boards and constant direct communication, but lack of resources means this is most likely to happen because of a particular project or funding relationship. Then such relationships need to ensure that representatives feed back the results effectively to their own organisation and once started, try to keep relationships on going rather than purely project based.

Networks of LSPs or SSPs with regular contributions from regional organisations would provide opportunities for partnerships to support each other and have regular and consistent contact with regional organisations. Then they all hear the same regional message at the same time, and holding network events helps regional organisations to concentrate their resources rather than trying to visit each partnership. This would include both Neighbourhood Renewal Funded (NRF) and non-NRF funded LSPs within a region. An example of an effective network is the network of LSPs run by the Yorkshire and Humber Government Office which meets once a month and allows all regional organisations to contribute regularly.

Step 7 Joined up approach from regional organisations

Many organisations think that direct links with the local level are not their responsibility – but using intermediaries can mean that intelligence is lost. For example its is often thought that relationships with the LSPs are the responsibility of the Government Office but it is not clear how messages get back to the RDAs and Regional Assembly.

A joined up approach from regional organisations to support LSPs and SSPs and in particular their networks can help provide coherent support for partnerships. It can help clarify indirect relationships and provide a contact point for partnerships. This could take the form of a jointly funded post

between regional organisations to liaise with partnerships. It could also take the form of key contact points for LSPs and SSPs within regional organisations. These contacts could answer queries from any local or sub-regional partnership including directing them to a relevant department or organisation.

Step 8 Clarify scope at sub-regional level

Sub-regional partnerships have often been set up by the RDA with economic development in mind but also told to take account of environmental and social objectives. This has created confusion amongst SSPs on the scope of their role. Ask your RDA to provide some clear guidance on what outcomes a healthy economic, social and environmental sub-regional partnership could deliver, including examples of ways to work. This can be developed in conjunction with other regional organisations using an independent facilitator.

Step 9 Ensure effective delivery

Effective consultation with local and sub-regional groups from the outset of regional policy formulation results in better policy and more effective delivery.

Do involve key decision makers, the people who 'make things happen' because they are in a position to actually link resources with delivery.

Step 10 Evaluation and monitoring

To maintain good regional to local connections, keep checking how the relationships are working and thinking about how they can be improved. Make this evaluation and monitoring the responsibility of one individual or section of an organisation – often the section that already deals with relationships with external organisations.

What do you think?

We want to hear your ideas or experiences, so that we can share solutions which have worked with our network and beyond. Please use email address below.

The role of Regional Futures

Regional Futures is the learning network for the English regions, and part of the sustainable development charity Forum for the Future. It was launched in July 2002 and members include the Government Offices, Regional Assemblies, Regional Development Agencies and the voluntary and health sectors. Our mission is to inspire good regional policy and delivery through sustainable development. As well as disseminating solutions for improving regional to local connections, we seek to influence key decision makers and government.

13/03/03

Contact details

Lorna Berry
Regional Futures Co-ordinator
E-mail: l.berry@forumforthefuture.org.uk
Tel: 01242 266766
www.regionalfutures.org.uk