

Policy transfer between local regeneration partnerships

A variety of government, non-profit and private sector organisations have sought to encourage the flow of ideas and experiences between regeneration initiatives across the country. A new survey of regeneration partnerships examined what use local policy-makers make of this information. It found:

- f** While leading officials in regeneration partnerships did pay attention to what was going on elsewhere, only a minority did so more than occasionally.
- f** The desire to win bids is a major stimulus to officials to look at experiences elsewhere.
- f** Government publications and conversations with officials from other partnerships were the most frequently used sources of information about the experience of others.
- f** While some printed forms of information – such as government publications – were regarded as very valuable, conversations with colleagues from other regeneration partnerships – particularly those nearby – were regarded as providing the most *useful* information.
- f** The emphasis that officials place on seeing things for themselves when looking at the experiences of other partnerships means that there is a bias in favour of learning about physical development initiatives rather than about social or economic development initiatives.
- f** Professional contacts and networks are extremely important conduits for disseminating good practice. The provision of more discussion forums bringing together colleagues from different authorities was the most popular option for improving dissemination.
- f** The evidence suggests that the Government's emphasis on promoting contacts and networks among partnerships, especially local networks, is likely to be fruitful, yet points to the need for targeting those bodies with limited financial and personnel resources.
- f** The evidence from those sending out information as well as those receiving it suggests that more attention needs to be paid to proper evaluation of urban regeneration initiatives and disseminating the resulting lessons. This is especially necessary as regeneration objectives give greater prominence to 'joined-up' issues relating to social exclusion rather than to physical development alone.

Introduction

Government policy has increasingly incorporated a learning dimension into its regeneration programmes through the identification and dissemination of 'good practice', government-sponsored seminars, study tours and encouraging practitioner networks. Indeed, so seriously does the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) take the need to learn from the experience of others that it has established a 'Dissemination Unit' to disseminate good practices to regeneration partnerships. A range of other organisations, such as the Local Government Association and the Planning Exchange - as well as publications like *Urban Environment Today* and *New Start* - contribute to the flow of information and ideas about regeneration. This report examines the extent to which, and how, officials learn from the regeneration experiences of others. The findings are based on a postal survey of directors of regeneration partnerships and in-depth interviews with a select group of such officials.

Learning from others

Nearly all of the regeneration officials acknowledged the importance of learning from the experience of others; a large majority, 92 per cent, answered that such experiences played a role in decision-making in their area at least "occasionally". As the director of a large development corporation observed, "I'm a firm believer in not reinventing the wheel", a phrase which was frequently used. Indeed, when this director first accepted his position, he travelled around the country looking at the activities of other development corporations. Another respondent, a director of a local regeneration partnership, said the rationale for looking to other authorities was to see "what works and what doesn't, how can we apply it, how can we avoid reinventing the wheel, and how are we doing relative to other authorities". Another, from a regeneration partnership headed by a small local authority, noted that: "Usually we get an idea for an activity or initiative first, then we try to find

out who else is already doing it, and look to see how they are doing it".

However, most respondents also admitted that they did not put a great deal of systematic effort into seeking information from elsewhere and that it did not often play a significant role in their actual decision-making. As one respondent put it, "ideally I would like to have a greater awareness of what's happening elsewhere. But that's very constrained by time and resources."

Resources not only affected the ability of a partnership to devote time and effort to learning from the experience of others, they were also important in shaping what partnerships expected to get from their efforts. As one director said, "we looked at the projects of other local authorities ... to see what was most likely to be funded" and another stated "we're more interested in where central government is going so that we can position ourselves to get more money to benefit the city". Another observed that "When we first applied for SRB, we looked at the projects of other local authorities under City Challenge to see what was most likely to be funded".

In interview it emerged that one of the main reasons for the popularity of information disseminated by the DETR and the Government Offices for the Regions was that they were perceived to be a major source of information about how to construct a successful bid for funding from the SRB and, above all, the European Commission and provided hints on what has worked to get funds in other places.

Where information comes from

Officials received information from a wide variety of sources, but informal personal contacts with peers from other regeneration partnerships and local authorities were exceptionally important. Respondents were asked to give marks out of ten for how often they used different sources to find out about the activities of other authorities (see Table 1). 'Government publications', 'conversations with officials from other authorities', 'good practice guides' and 'practitioner

Table 1: Sources of information on relevant activities of other local authorities

Source	Frequency of use		Usefulness*	
	Average score	Respondents	Average score	Respondents
Government publications	6.07	281	6.28	275
Conversations with other officials	5.86	281	6.73	276
Good practice guides	5.45	280	6.09	266
Practitioner journals	5.13	280	5.82	247
Newsletters	4.91	281	5.20	261
Presentations at seminars	4.87	282	5.45	278
Electronic information	3.43	277	5.18	217
Conversations with researchers	3.09	277	4.88	234
Academic journals	2.69	271	4.46	183
Study tours	2.04	271	5.21	168
Conversations with councillors	1.86	264	3.82	168

*Average excludes those who never use the source

journals' topped the list. The availability of written materials means that they can be more frequently consulted than colleagues in partnerships nearby. However, contact with officials from other partnerships was the most useful source of information by a significant margin when measured in marks out of ten (see Table 1).

The importance of local contacts

With the importance of face-to-face contacts, it is not surprising that many respondents tended to look to neighbouring or proximate areas for ideas. The most commonly cited authorities were Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield. Yet a large percentage of respondents, 57 per cent, cited predominantly *local* or *regional* neighbours as authorities from which they learn. Thirty-six per cent cited authorities predominantly outside their areas, while 7 per cent cited similar authorities (e.g. 'other former mining towns') from outside their areas. These informal personal contacts are often buttressed by personal visits that permit the official to observe the physical results of activities. As one official said, "You go physically to see how other authorities approach things – personal contacts and visits are where we learn what's going on elsewhere".

Learning from colleagues in neighbouring or regional partnerships does not necessarily imply a 'parochial' or limited approach to learning from others. Since those working in partnerships have limited time and funds to engage in elaborate searches, locally based examples offer information that is more easily assessed. One respondent replied that she knew the people in the neighbouring authorities, knew the area and thus found it easier to assess the success of their initiatives. Another respondent, in inner London, pointed out that any SRB proposal was likely to be in competition with other London proposals; knowing what was going on in London authorities was probably more important than keeping abreast of developments further afield.

Lessons from abroad

Respondents were also asked which single country outside of the UK they were most likely to look to for ideas or activities that might be useful for their own regeneration activities. Respondents were less likely to make direct use of foreign experiences of regeneration; over three-quarters felt foreign experiences had very little or no effect on their own decisions. Nevertheless, the USA topped the list of countries believed to have the most to offer British regeneration partnerships, although France came a very close second. In part the answers to this question may reflect regional perceptions of similarities; respondents from London were more likely to look to the United States, while respondents in the South East outside London were more likely to look to a European country for useful ideas.

The value of others' experience

Respondents reported that lessons drawn from the experiences of other UK localities had only a modest

impact; while most (69 per cent) said they had "some effect", more said that they had "very little" or "no effect" than a "big" or "significant" effect. As one official commented: "There are many factors that are much more important. Our projects have to be very sensitive to local circumstances ... Good practices elsewhere don't matter that much". Another noted, "In the immediate and short-term decision-making it's not that important. The regeneration programmes are locally made to deal with local problems. We devise a custom-made solution."

Differences between partnerships

The research did reveal some important differences between regeneration partnerships in the extent to which they seek information about the experience of others and in the manner in which they do so. In particular, partnerships that participate in networks are significantly more likely to engage in above average efforts to find out about the experiences of other regeneration partnerships (as measured by their greater use of sources of information). Inexperienced partnerships (those whose regeneration funding is limited to SRB as opposed to those with additional revenue sources) were less likely to engage in learning efforts, more likely to search only locally, and more interested in receiving more descriptive material about the regeneration activities of others than was the average partnership (suggesting less familiarity with existing sources). Partnerships in local authorities with smaller populations and smaller labour forces (indicative of lower slack resources) showed similar tendencies.

Conclusion

When read in the context of the other evidence about the extent to which and why partnership officials seek out information about the experience of other local authorities, it appears that the overall statement these officials are making is: while it is good to know what is going on elsewhere so that one can get good ideas and not reinvent the wheel, nonetheless, the problems of any locality are so unique that there's not much to be learned from the experience of other local authorities. A researcher who has served as a consultant over a long period of time to several local authorities summed up his views on this topic: "Much of this is highly politicised. Mostly this kind of information is used for legitimisation rather than analysis."

The fact that officials tend to emphasise the need for their own custom-made solutions is not incompatible with learning from the experience of others. However, spreading the lessons of experience in ways which officials can find useful might require a more analytical approach to assessing the achievements of different initiatives in their original locations and the conditions necessary for their success in other areas.

When asked what dissemination activity they would like additional funds to be spent on, the top choice was networks for discussing regeneration issues and experiences with colleagues from other local

authorities. Good practice guides were also cited in the survey as being widely used and as second choice for additional funding, but the in-depth interviews revealed scepticism about their usefulness.

Those who receive information as well as those who send it must, implicitly or explicitly, assess the quality of information they handle. Nonetheless, when the question of assessing the quality of the information was raised in interview, many respondents reacted with surprise, observing "I haven't really thought about that" or "that's a good question". Most of those interviewed also indicated that they had not thought greatly about the trustworthiness of the information. Indeed, providers of information, such as journals and newsletters, acknowledge the same difficulty in assessing the quality of the information they provide. As a consequence, those who receive information tend to rely most on what they themselves see or hear, particularly informally and particularly from people or sources they trust. This emphasis means a bias towards physical development, which is readily visible.

This bias towards drawing lessons from physical development initiatives contrasts with the thrust of recent policy initiatives which have focused on the problems of social exclusion and neighbourhood deprivation. The Social Exclusion Unit, in its report *Bringing Britain Together: A national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*, focused attention on the poorest neighbourhoods with related 'joined up' problems, including poor job prospects for residents, high levels of crime, and a rundown environment. In reviewing previous regeneration programmes, it criticised the emphasis on physical development rather than on social problems and on the prospects of people living in the area.

Implications for policy

The findings suggest some lessons for future policy:

- The importance given to informal contacts and networks as a source of information suggests that greater emphasis should be given to promoting such networks as well as other opportunities for face-to-face contact and that current government policy to do so is on target. Efforts should particularly be directed at inexperienced partnerships and those in areas of low population and small local authority workforces. The in-depth interviews in particular suggest that the current emphasis on 'good practice' guides be revisited.
- The difficulties partnership officials experience in assessing and evaluating the information they receive about the regeneration activities of other partnerships suggest the need for more attention. More intensive efforts are required (by government

as well as other providers of information) to fund and conduct the evaluation and assessment of so-called 'successes' and 'good' and 'best' practices, using appropriate social science techniques. The results should then be widely disseminated in readable and understandable form to regeneration practitioners.

About the study

The study is based on a self-administered questionnaire sent to directors in 569 regeneration partnerships receiving SRB funding in spring 1999. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of interviews with partnership officials in the Manchester region, followed up by interviews with the most prominent sources of information cited. Completed surveys came back from 293 respondents, a response rate of 51 per cent. Finally, the survey was followed up with several other personal interviews in other parts of the country.

How to get further information

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The full report, **Learning from the experience of others: Policy transfer among local regeneration partnerships** by Harold Wolman and Edward C. Page, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 72 5, price £10.95 plus £2 p&p).