# Methods of learning and development in regeneration partnerships

Attention and action are now focused on the ways in which the skills, knowledge and support available to people involved in neighbourhood renewal can be improved.  New initiatives include strategies outlined in the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's Learning Curve.  This research, by Kelvin MacDonald of ROOM@RTPI, reviews ways in which renewal partnerships gain information, training and support and recommends how the process can and should be improved.  Unless new initiatives are designed with an understanding of current practice, he suggests they will not be effective.

- People in regeneration partnerships are eager to learn. Any lack of activity does not derive from a lack of desire to engage in learning and development or from any lack of awareness about the potential value of doing so.  Poor resourcing (time, financial, staffing, information) is a key difficulty in obtaining adequate training and support.

- There is little clarity of what skills are needed by people working in, or managing, regeneration.  Learning and support priorities tend to be given by partnerships to those activities that best serve the needs of key inputs to the system – such as evaluation and appraisal – rather than the outputs and outcomes.

- The allocation of responsibilities for regeneration, partnerships and resources amongst national and regional government departments tends to be confusing and unnecessarily compartmentalised.  It takes little account of the training and support needs of practitioners and Board members.

- The researcher suggests that people setting up networks need to be clear as to their purpose, and that networks need to be focused, supportive of partnerships, independent, active and inclusive: networks are unlikely to function effectively if they are imposed by some external agency with no degree of ownership by those they are designed to serve.

- The researcher concludes that the following could improve practice: partnerships could have a clear 'menu' of the range of skills and knowledge they wish to develop; the allocation of funding under emerging programmes could rely on recipients having a clear strategy for training and support; and responsible bodies might set up pilot schemes to test new regimes for funding partnerships in which the onus is on encouraging effective practice.

## Background

This study examined the strategy and proposals contained in *The Learning Curve*, published by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit in October 2002. It used interview-based research about the networks in South East England and in Yorkshire and Humberside that were already utilised by regeneration partnerships for training, information and support. The study raises some practical points related to the implementation of that report.

*The Learning Curve* is one of a linked series of actions designed to improve the skills, knowledge and practice of neighbourhood renewal. For example, steps have been taken to establish regional Centres of Excellence, whilst the web-based service renewal.net has provided a much needed, easily accessible source of information on effective practice.

The work of the Regional Development Agencies and the strengthening Government Offices for the Regions has led to an increasing emphasis at the regional level on exchanging better practice and on improving skills and practice in regeneration and in capacity-building for community involvement. The new task force on built environment skills, led by Lord Egan, demonstrates the importance of this subject to Government.

## The interviews

The interviews focused on some issues in greater depth than others and raised additional issues according to the interests and views of the interviewee. It is clear that the findings from the interviews are not universal truths that can be applied to all the 1000 or so partnerships in England. The findings are, however, valid in terms of a record of the perceptions of senior practitioners involved in a range of partnerships in the two case study regions.

## Key themes

### The importance of differences in the size and type of partnership

The study found that the approaches taken to learning and networking and the need for support are conditioned by the size and type of partnership involved. The range of staffing of partnerships interviewed included one person working 26 days a year, through a part-time worker doing 20 hours a week, to between some 16 and 20 core staff. They included partnerships run: by local authorities 'in-house'; at arms length but as part of a local authority; as free-standing partnerships but using the local authority as the accountable body; and, in two cases, as community-based partnerships which acted as their own accountable body.

This shows the potential value of developing policies and approaches that are sensitive to the different groupings of partnerships. It also highlights the values of assessing successes and failures against the performance of similar partnerships rather than against some national 'norm'. There is, for example, a feeling of isolation amongst a number of smaller partnerships.

There were clear differences between the large metropolitan local authority-led partnerships and other partnerships. The economies of scale that can be achieved in the larger cities allows local authorities and related partnerships to use their own resources for training and networking and to tap into networks and sources of funding that others cannot. The gap between the largest and the smallest partnership in terms of resources and approach is enormous.

All the partnerships interviewed had some degree of community involvement and all stressed the key importance of this. Several interviewees were keen to dispel the myth that professionals provided the source of expertise and that community representatives were simply recipients of such expertise. Degrees of community involvement included: local authority-led partnerships where there was no Board; a partnership where community representation was not established until 14 months after the project had started; a partnership where the public, business and community sectors each had an equal number of seats on the Board; and a community-based and led partnership where members of the Board and staff were drawn as far as possible from the local community.

### Innovative partnerships

Partnerships that had tried to improve practice through innovative work saw themselves, willingly or unwillingly, in the role of imparters, rather than gainers, of knowledge. This has implications for the value of generic training events and networks and for the amount of time that such partnerships spend (and will increasingly spend) in giving advice, support and information to other partnerships.

The potential exists for innovative partnerships to extend their remit in passing on knowledge and experience – if properly resourced to do so – by focusing more on generic issues such as 'mainstreaming', the workings of local strategic partnerships, and approaches to training itself.

### Resources

The study found that time was the most important resource in networking, training and support for partnerships. Finance came second. Only two interviewees suggested that financial resources were insufficient, but it was not considered that this should be taken as meaning that financial resources are adequate – more, that pressure of work and a lack of commitment by some Board members and practitioners were more pressing obstacles.

### Sources of information

Partnerships use a wide variety of sources of information. These include websites, exchange visits, personal contact, events and networks. The networks and contacts that were mentioned in the interviews have been divided into three types: formal, semi-formal and informal. Formal networks are defined as those set up by others which the partnership felt eligible to join. Semi-formal networks are created by the partnership or by others in a similar position. Informal networks are those which the individual practitioner or Board member will use in order to seek advice and support but which lie outside formal and semi-formal networks - these ranged from using former work colleagues to contacting people mentioned in the press.

Interviewees saw four main but distinct roles for networks. These were sharing (improving practice through the exchange of practice), learning, feeding back/lobbying, and support. The distinction was raised between active and passive networks: networks that sought to move agendas forward and promote and guide change, and those that served as an exchange network for information and practice. It was considered that informal networks set up by practitioners themselves best delivered what practitioners needed, rather than networks set up by others with their own agendas.

The establishment of regional Centres of Excellence is progressing at different paces in different regions, without any clear overview as to their role, focus, relationships with other bodies, funding sources and degree of independence. There is concern that the opportunity may be lost to design them to be as effective as possible in aiding regeneration at the neighbourhood level.

### Other bodies

The interviews coincided with the changing role of the Regional Development Agencies and produced a largely negative reaction. In both regions there was very varied knowledge of the networks and training provided by the agencies. The frequency and regularity of network meetings was raised in both regions. The RDA role that appeared to impinge most on the partnerships was that of the 'controller' of resources rather than the promoter of better practice.

Interviewees considered that the Regional Development Agencies have largely failed to arrive at a considered, rigorous, comprehensive and consistent approach to the support needs of the partnerships. RDAs and other bodies responsible for guiding the work of partnerships are encouraged to ensure that they establish a culture in which partnerships are encouraged to seek advice and help.

Partnerships had much less contact with Government Offices for the Regions. There was a significant lack of understanding as to how the changes in the allocations of responsibilities between the Government Office and the Regional Development Agency would affect the operation of the partnership. One perceived implication of this change was that the RDA and the Government Office would have to work much more closely together.

Many partnerships had no formal links with universities in their area or region. The barriers were often financial, with difficulties over a lack of a budget for research and limited resources for training.

### The value of training

In the course of interviews, some values of training were raised which are not always recognised. Notably, there is the value in simply getting a staff group or Board to spend time together to gel and achieve common goals. Exposure to training also leads to a form of 'ripple effect', with people going away from training with a greater awareness, demanding that their own partnerships should fund such training and development. Some mechanism to retain the 'capital' of skills and knowledge that has been built up in an area – particularly by the community representatives on the Board – would aid training. This could range from a more structured 'handing over' of information as members changed, to the resourcing of community-based neighbourhood information centres which act as a resource to partnerships.

### Training budgets and plans

The source of funding for training most often cited was the 5 per cent allowance for management built into the Single Regeneration Budget allocation. However, a number of partnerships stated that the amount derived from this was barely sufficient to employ a member of staff, let alone provide any training budget. There was a strong desire for more

training to be undertaken and embarrassment on the part of some interviewees that this was not being achieved. One of the key issues was resources.

Approaches to training and to the types of training achieved varied greatly. These included providing staff with time to write a manual on a particular procedure, and pairing/shadowing as part of the 'Investors in People' process. They encompassed in-house and self-directed training, use of external consultants and attendance at events and, in fewer cases, training specifically for Board members.

*Training and skills required*

A number of specific needs were cited in interviews. These ranged from financial accounting to housing law and from project management to working with communities. It was, however, apparent from the interviews that the priorities expressed for training, such as evaluation techniques, are often those driven by the immediate requirements of the Regional Development Agency's appraisal and evaluation process rather than by longer-term, more generic needs.

Several interviewees expressed the view that partnerships, and in particular the community, themselves provided a resource to provide training for other partnerships, groups and individuals. One general theme behind this was that the voluntary sector was seen by some as being better at partnership, with the view expressed on more than one occasion that local authority officers can see partnership working as a threat.

*Recommendations*

The report contains 33 recommendations as an aid to more effective practice. The researcher concluded that the following steps could significantly improve practice.

- Partnerships could encourage projects to be set up which specifically address the training and capacity-building needs of people involved directly in a partnership. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit could demonstrate in its training and support strategy how funding is to be dispersed to all partnerships which undertake to fulfil a wider training function.

- The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit could develop material on the value derived by partnerships in undertaking programmes of training and learning, derived from examples from practice. It could disseminate this alongside other effective practice work.

- Partnerships could establish clear procedures for the training needs of staff and of Board members.

- The Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices for the Regions could require partnerships to build staff and Board training outputs into delivery plans and to issue joint guidance encouraging a wider and less compartmentalised view of what constitutes a valid output from regeneration funding.

- Universities could work with partnerships to develop an outreach strategy and to undertake an active outreach programme to engage with local partnerships in a variety of ways (according to local and regional needs), including research, secondment, in-house and modular training, management support, evaluation and appraisal services.

## About the project

Two regions were chosen for the interviews for this study – the South East and Yorkshire and Humberside. They were selected on the basis of their comparative economic performance; the fact that at the time both regions were at about comparable stages in the evolution of networks for partnership support; and that each region had about the same number of partnerships - some 300.