



Evaluation of the Regional Networks Fund

Learning papers series

Developing the influence of the third sector through regional networks: funding to increase Voice through the Capacitybuilders' Regional Network Fund, 2009-2011

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Capacitybuilders' Regional Network Fund (RNF) invested £1,166,000 in 17 generic and black and minority ethnic (BME) voluntary and community sector regional networks across the nine English regions between April 2009 and March 2011, as a succession programme to the Regional Infrastructure Programme. The programme's aims were to develop third sector influence in specific policy areas and in relation to targeted organisations, and to improve the capacity of regional networks, through developing leadership, income diversity and efficiency.

These following regional networks were funded:

Region	Regional Network/ Organisation	Type of network	2009/10	2010/2011	TOTAL
Phase 1 decisions					
East Midlands	One East Midlands (OEM – generic sector influence)	Single platform	40,000	27,500	67,500
East of England	Community and Voluntary Forum Eastern Region (COVER)	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500
East of England	Minority Ethnic Network East of England (MENTER)	BME	42,500	25,000	67,500
London	London Voluntary Service Council (Third Sector Alliance)	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500
London	Race on the Agenda (MiNET)	BME	42,500	25,000	67,500
North East	Voluntary Organisations’ Network North East (VONNE)	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500
North East	Black Minority Ethnic Community Organisations Network (BECON)	BME	42,500	25,000	67,500
North West	Voluntary Sector North West (VSNW)	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500
South East	Regional Action and Involvement South East (RAISE)	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500
South West	South West Forum (SWF)	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500
South West	Black South West Network (BSWN)	BME	42,500	25,000	67,500
West Midlands	Regional Action West	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500



Region	Regional Network/ Organisation	Type of network	2009/10	2010/2011	TOTAL
	Midlands (RAWM)				
Yorkshire & Humber	Yorkshire Humber Regional Forum (YHRF)	Generic	42,500	25,000	67,500

Phase 2 decisions

East Midlands	One East Midlands (BME)	Single platform	17,500	50,000	67,500
North West	1 North West*	BME	42,500	25,000	67,500
West Midlands	brap*	BME	15,000	40,000	55,000
National (focus on South East and Yorkshire & Humber)**	Voice4ChangeEngland for development support with YH Panel and SE UNI in year 1, development support to all BME networks in Year 2	BME	16,000	40,000	56,000

Phase 3 decisions

South East	UNI	BME		42,500	42,500
Total awards recommended			641,000	525,000	1,166,000

There are six papers designed to capture learning from the programme. The papers focus on how the regional networks have been able to use the achievements gained during the RNF grant period to meet the changes brought about by the dismantling of regional structures and the focus on localism introduced by the coalition government.¹

The series comprises the following:

¹ This focus was a response to the views emerging from a regional network meeting in September 2010 that, in the light of the substantial changes in the regional landscape since the May 2010 general election, learning could most usefully be derived from evidence, not just of how regional networks had enhanced their Voice and policy position, but how this was being used to position themselves in relation to new structures and agendas.



Paper 1: The Regional Network Fund in a changing regional landscape

Paper 2: Retaining policy influence in a changing landscape/in a dynamic

Paper 3: Influencing economic development

Paper 4: Making action on equalities issues central to policy

Paper 5: Developing leadership to increase Voice

Paper 6: Strengthening Voice through collaboration

The full report of the [evaluation](#) of the Regional Network Fund is available.

Paper 1: The Regional Network Fund in a changing regional landscape

Capacitybuilders' Regional Network Fund (RNF) invested in 17 generic and BME voluntary and community sector regional networks across the nine English regions between April 2009 and March 2011, as a succession programme to the Regional Infrastructure Programme. The programme's aims were to develop third sector influence in specific policy areas and in relation to targeted organisations, and to improve the capacity of regional networks, through developing leadership, income diversity and efficiency.

Introduction

Networks were well-established and already operating in most regions, albeit working with different arrangements and mixture of funding streams and amounts. Some networks were more established, with dedicated posts working in specific areas of policy development; by contrast one BME network had a single funded post. These differences affected how the RNF was used, whether as core funding, to add value to existing work areas, or as a sole contribution to policy influence.

Much of the policy work was targeted on Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Government Office(GOs) and Strategic Health Authorities (SHAs), and their associated task groups and panels.



The significant changes following the election of the coalition government in May 2010, including the change from regional to more local structures, meant that both the rationale and nature of the engagement with partners changed rapidly during this period and required new approaches.

The loss of the regulatory framework and the actual or impending loss of regional structures in some cases pulled the direction of policy work off course or reduced its relevance as known influence routes closed down. A lack of clarity about new emerging structures, combined with funding uncertainty, made it difficult for regional networks to plan ahead, although substantial efforts were made to refocus activities.

Networks had developed their policy influence in part by identifying sympathetic individuals within credible agencies to open doors. Even where the agency has not disappeared, in others key officers have left and roles have not continued, meaning a loss of supportive and developed relationship and no appropriate postholder to work with.

At the same time, continuing reductions in public expenditure threaten the sustainability of regional networks and their members. Despite these external, and consequent internal, pressures, the skills and gains assisted by the RNF enabled some resilience, and in some cases an opportunity to maintain influence in the changed landscape.

New opportunities

In some instances, new structures emerged to replace those previously created or part of the RDA. For example, in the West Midlands new panels replaced the West Midlands Task Force, which had been created to support regional businesses, and Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) continued to input to these two panels. Many of the networks found that their increased influence put them in a good position in relation to emerging structures and for new collaboration. For example:

- Third Sector Alliance's (3SA) early engagement in the new Health Inequalities Strategy groups ensured that London's voluntary and community sector was engaged in the priority setting process and in deciding and contributing to the workplan. London Voluntary Service Council (LVSC), on behalf of 3SA, received written assurances that there would be voluntary and community sector representation on the new structures in London.
- One East Midlands (OEM) found that its work on the Sub-National Review meant that it was well placed in the new environment. For example, it explored future work with East Midlands Councils. OEM used the research that was informing the Sub-National Review to articulate the role of the sector in wider economic development and sustainability.
- RAISE, the South East generic network, supported the South East Forum for Sustainability (the regional environmental network) to continue influencing work across the region in the absence of the RDA. It also worked with other regional networks to identify national funding to work together and bring unique regional dimensions.

The distribution of the RDAs' economic portfolio has remained unclear, beyond allocating some resources to emerging Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Many networks reported developing their work with LEPs and the Regional Growth Fund as 'an organic development' of their work in the new context.



LEPs' forward planning will not be clear until June 2011 and effort has been put into securing representation on the new partnerships, with some concern to stave off a narrow definition of economic growth that will sideline the voluntary and community sector.

Responding to changes in public health funding

The coalition government is currently consulting on major changes to public health and social care. The abolition of SHAs, primary care trusts and the planned change to commissioning through GP consortia have brought a necessary change in approach, and networks have briefed the sector on the implications of the changes. RAWM, for example, found that all work on refreshing a Regional Health Strategy had ceased pending the outcome of the NHS White Paper *Equality and Excellence: Liberating the NHS*, but was able to open up discussions with Health Watch, the new service for patient and public involvement in health.

Big Society

Government Offices had been a key agency for influence in relation to third sector agendas, for example around community cohesion, Local Strategic Partnerships and equalities, and providing a voice into central government. The removal of national indicator targets and Local Area Agreements meant that work being undertaken with local authorities was less relevant or less clear, and needed to be refocused. Where key agencies to influence, such as the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) and Third Sector Leaders Boards were not closing down, relations have become uncertain.



Using advantage gained – RAWM

RAWM, for example, was engaged with the PSA21² board until it stopped in May 2010, and was subsequently able to incorporate many of the PSA21 activities into another programme, Every Voice Counts, enabling sector engagement with local authorities across the West Midlands. RAWM also entered discussion on taking on the oversight of the Compact Group until 31st March 2011 as part of its RNF work.

Building on its increased profile with strategic partners, its diverse policy areas, good communication channels and improved internal systems, RAWM has felt in a good position to work within the changed environment and to step in where other agencies were in the process of being dismantled.

Although Government Offices were working with a reduced staffing, some networks were able to continue to work closely with them around the Big Society. OEM, for example, had maintained regular contact with key contacts in the Government Office East Midlands, and continued a joint working programme with its Communities Team to develop an activity and event programme on the Big Society. Secondment opportunities with OEM were advertised to Government Office staff, with the Head of Jobs and Skills providing policy support around LEPs.

Demonstrating continued relevance

Most networks put effort into briefing the sector about how its environment might change, and how to prepare for the new commissioning and decision-making landscape, and encouraging responses to consultation on the Big Society.

² PSA21 was a combination of National Indicators 1- 8.



The East Midlands BME networks (OEM BME), for example, which had been working in this area, diverted its work into producing a briefing on the Big Society agenda, developing a paper to articulate the BME sector's role in contributing to Big Society principles.

The uncertainty and impact of changes on the sector, and the need for information, increased the membership of some networks correspondingly. Networks enhanced their communications, vital to inform their membership about change. RAWM found that active use of different communication channels and attendance at briefing events has increased over previous years. Black South West Network's development work on empowerment was linked to its increase in membership over the previous 12 months.

Becoming more valuable – OEM

Many of the networks have shown political awareness and provided leadership, adjusting activity, looking for new contacts and keeping members well informed. For some networks the changes, while problematic, provided an opportunity for a new direction and focus.

OEM reported a 'stronger trajectory', with a surge of membership, as the loss of structures, landscape and mechanisms made the network more valuable. As a result, there was a re-stimulation of interest, outward focus, stronger relationships, and an increased offer – in events and briefings, for example. Although downsizing and working within restricted resources, OEM made sure that activity was aligned to the new workplan, and developed a forward paper for its board. OEM also reported that its communications were the best they had been, with specialist networks maintaining their engagement and welcoming the representation and leadership.



OEM identified a need to engage with specialist networks and thematic group members at a local level, while also directing work to a national level through NAVCA, NCVO, Voice4Change and other national agencies.

Looking forward – managing change

The latter part of 2010 was turbulent for the wider voluntary and community sector. While some networks found an active response to the situation, others reported membership as static or reducing, as organisations folded or focused on survival, retrenching and guarding of territory. Many networks reported that funding streams were ending during 2010, with more funding coming to an end in March 2011. 3SA, as it lost its dedicated development worker and relied on members to contribute to influencing work, found members unable to provide previous levels of input. The BME sector was particularly vulnerable to spending cuts, and some BME networks reported an increased challenge to BME members to continue to engage in an uncertain environment and with decreased capacity to be involved.

Regional networks themselves anticipated loss of funding from the RDA, Capacitybuilders and other funding streams from March 2011. Even where there had been funding from diverse sources, the future was uncertain. Networks are not abandoning their influencing and delivery agendas, but with a relatively low capacity to work at local level with local authorities, there has been a degree of shift of focus to the national level, with some collective work across regional and national infrastructure bodies to influence the Office for Civil Society (OCS). Larger ones are restructuring, with some major loss of posts. The challenge for networks in this context is to continue some of the work developed, which often requires a greater capacity or funding to take it to the next level. Networks are also taking forward lessons learned to find new business models, to strengthen existing relationships and develop new collaboration.



Abbreviations

BME	Black and minority ethnic
BECON	Black Minority Ethnic Community Organisations Network
brap	West Midlands BME Network
BSWN	Black South West Network
COVER	Community and Voluntary Forum Eastern Region
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LVSC	London Voluntary Service Council
MENTER	The Black and Minority Ethnic Network for the East of England Region
MiNET	Minority Ethnic Network
NAVCA	National Association for Voluntary and Community Action
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations
OEM	One East Midlands
OCS	Office of Civil Society
RAISE	Regional Action and Involvement South East
RAWM	Regional Action West Midlands
RDA	Regional Development Agencies
RIEP	Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships
RNF	Regional Network Fund
ROTA	Race on the Agenda
SHA	Strategic Health Authorities
SWF	South West Forum
VONNE	Voluntary Organisations' Network North East
VSNW	Voluntary Sector North West
YHRF	Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum
UNI	South East BME network