



Evaluation of the Regional Networks Fund

Learning papers series

Paper 6: Strengthening voice through collaboration

Capacitybuilders' Regional Network Fund (RNF) invested 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.

Introduction

An essential component of regional networks' developing influence was working effectively together with other organisations with a common focus. Regional networks also brought together different clusters and networks to increase influence and share good practice. As regional networks enhanced their own leadership capacity and that within the wide sector, they were frequently instrumental in drawing together voluntary and community sector clusters and networks and also increased their lead role in cross-sector task groups and partnerships (described in paper 5). However, one network noted the issues that could undermine effective collaboration, including failure to deliver on tasks and responsibilities, competition for resources and individual rather than collective lobbying.



Making connections between public bodies and the voluntary and community sector required skilful relationship building. Networks learnt that there was a need to take full account of individual partners' issues and agendas, taking care to ensure a balance between taking a lead as a sector while being mindful of their usefulness to the regional public sector.

Developing regional and sub-regional links

Regional networks' Voice was substantially strengthened through joint working in a number of different ways: through cross-sector networks, close work with individual organisations, supporting emerging VCS structures and co-organising conferences. Equalities was one area that evidenced substantial successful partnership working:

- Voluntary Sector North West (VSNW) connects its work through to different equalities strands through the North West Infrastructure Partnership (NWIP), which it facilitates – a partnership of regional and sub-regional VCS infrastructure organisations. Specific work has included support provided to enable the Lesbian and Gay Foundation and Merseyside Disability Federation to deliver work on a personalisation research contract.
- In the West Midlands, brap worked with other equalities bodies, such as the Consortium of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Voluntary and Community Organisations, Gender Matters and WMSIP (West Midlands Specialist Infrastructure Partnership) to develop 'The Collective'¹ and build a collective approach to commissioners and regional stakeholders.
- MENTER developed strong partnership working with individual organisations in the East of England to pursue more focused agendas. For example, the network joined with the Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG) and the Windsor Fellowship, through a project funded by the Big Lottery Fund and the Commission for the Compact. This developed from previous work on

¹ The Collective was established in early 2010 for 'influencing' BME networks in the West Midlands.



inequalities facing young black Caribbean and African men. MENTER also developed a new initiative with Children Matter East (including a successful January 2010 conference) to take safeguarding information to BME organisations working with children and young people.

Developing BME influence through collaboration in London – MiNET

In London, MiNET was in a position to use collaboration to effect in its recession work, for example:

- through its relationship to its host, Race on the Agenda (ROTA)
- in work synchronised with that of Third Sector Alliance, the generic regional network
- reaching sub-regional groups.

MiNet has been facilitated and hosted by ROTA since 2002 with mutual benefit; MiNET has been able to benefit from ROTA's policy remit while strengthening ROTA's policy work, for example through its recession-related research.

MiNET was able to launch its recession-based report, *The Economic Downturn and the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Third Sector* (which pointed up the BME sector's particular lack of financial resources and political influence in the face of recession) at a June 2010 NCVO event, mutually reinforcing campaigning around the recession and its effects in London. (See paper 3.) In November and January 2010, MiNET and London Funders had successful meetings, drawing on MiNET's recession survey findings, and these were followed up with sub-regional discussions, in partnership with networks such as Southall Community Alliance in West London, the Refugee and Migrant Forum in East London, North London CVS, and the London Civic Forum in South London.



The working relations between generic and BME networks had a varied track record and frequently reflected the historical development of each. Networks had been in existence for different lengths of time and the strength of their funding base differed, resulting in different capacity.

One source of collaboration between generic and BME networks was through mutual presence on panels and boards, and through specific pieces of work. Black South West Network (BSWN) and South West Forum (SWF), although doing a limited amount of joint work, were both represented on the Strategic Leaders Board, with SWF holding its secretariat, and the two networks were both involved in securing the National Compact Award. In the West Midlands, RAWM and brap built a good working relationship, both being members of WMSIP, the regional infrastructure equalities network. RAWM and brap also carried out a peer exercise, to reflect what both had achieved, to identify similar goals, and to clarify areas where they had similar roles. In the North East, VONNE and BECON Chairs and Chief Executives had a constructive joint meeting. In the South East, RAISE and UNI looked at new ways of providing mutual support, sharing workplans and joint working, for example around responses to consultation.

COVER and MENTER in the East of England developed strong partnership working across the region through the Eastern Regional Infrastructure Network (ERIN), which brought together a wide variety of networks and clusters. ERIN hosted a conference showcasing the value of small community groups in June 2010. Although an action plan was agreed in January 2010 to take forward ERIN's influence role in regional governance, this was put on hold after the May 2010 election. Sharing of good practice continued, with COVER, the generic East of England network, developing a knowledge bank, linked to the ERIN website.



Cross sector collaboration

Regional networks' collaboration with business and public sector bodies through regional structure sub-groups is discussed in paper 2 and paper 3. Other effective work was done through co-organising or involving different sectors in events and conferences and through policy round tables:

- One East Midlands held biannual standing conferences on areas of cross-sector interest to provide an opportunity for sectors to decide best approaches collectively and build trust, understanding and more sustainable approaches. Events have included the role of the third sector in Health and Social Care, Volunteering and Thriving Third Sector, targeting the public sector as well as the third sector.
- BECON held a criminal justice event with IAG (Independent Advisory Group) and the probation service.
- MENTER leads on a regional VCS Equalities Group (VEG). The VEG is a sub sector of the East Regions Infrastructure Network. In 2010, the VEG commissioned a comprehensive report on equalities in the East. The report – launched at national and international conferences – identified for each equality strand the issues, key contacts, socio-economic roles and recommendations for development. MENTER also leads on a public/private/third sector partnership for coordinated equalities work, the Regional Equalities Working Group (REWG).
- Third Sector Alliance has worked with the London equalities and human rights network, HEAR, to develop a policy roundtable in early 2011 bringing together commissioners with representatives of London's voluntary and community sector. Representation on the London Strategic Migration Partnership resulted in engagement in the development of the Partnership's Strategy and a discussion about dovetailing this better with the London Employment and Skills Strategy.



Influencing social care policy – VONNE

The personalisation agenda was one of VONNE's three influence outcome areas set for the RNF, to ensure that decision makers took account of the impact of individual budgets on voluntary and community sector service users. VONNE had held two personalisation workshops for the sector, together with the Care Services Improvement Partnership and In Control before the RNF period.

During 2009-2010 VONNE worked on ensuring that personalisation was linked to the commissioning agenda. VONNE secured representation on the Valuing People Board, submitted a response to the 'Big Care Debate' on the Social Care Green Paper, and linked with Mental Health North East and the North East Equalities Partnership on the personalisation agenda. The network developed a group of North East Learning Disability Providers, responding to a suggestion by four individuals heading up learning disability organisations, and culminating in launch of a network – demonstrating the ability of infrastructure to harness the drive of frontline providers to attract the attention of funders and policy makers. The network subsequently obtained three-year funding from April 2010 from the Regional Valuing People Board and Department of Health.

It remained critical to maintain this policy focus in the face of an uncertain future for many third sector organisations during transition to a fully person-centred way of work. VONNE convened a Health and Social Care Forum event on personalisation in June 2010, joined by the transformation lead for the Department of Health North East, and by the policy manager from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care Services.



Looking forward – managing change

With many of the structures for regional collaboration being dismantled, regional networks put effort, where possible, into gaining access to new and reformed structures during the emergence of decision making bodies in the context of joined up localism.

MENTER benefited from two Big Lottery Fund projects for strengthening infrastructure work. The network worked with East Hertfordshire and Broxbourne Council for Voluntary Services on a joint statement and framework on the added value and separate roles of joined up generic and specialist infrastructure support. MENTER helped set up a multi-agency Chairs' Forum which linked with national organisations dealing with migrant workers and refugees such as the National Migration Group and the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum. The information MENTER gathered through the outreach activities (BASIS funded) helped identify where generic and specialist infrastructure were joined, leading to a better defined understanding of need.

BECON has also been involved in co-organising several conferences with national bodies that promote the Equality agenda, such as the 2010 Human Rights conference. RAWM has been involved as part of Regional Voluntary Sector Network Forum with delivering a national project at regional level as a strategic partner of Department of Health

In July 2010, Third Sector Alliance (3SA) worked in partnership with the London Regional Consortium, Second Tier Advisors Network and the National coalition for Independent Action to host an open space event 'What Next?' which looked at the needs of voluntary and community sector organisations in London in the light of reductions in public spending. 3SA's Steering Group considered three issues arising from the event, one being the need to better engage with the Government's big society agenda.



BECON shared its research report with the Big Lottery Fund's North East office through the network's engagement with the Strategic Third Sector Forum and fed it into the evidence base to campaign collectively with Voice4Change England and other BME regional networks on behalf of the BME voluntary and community sector.

Abbreviations

BECON	Black Minority Ethnic Community Organisations Network
BME	Black and minority ethnic
brap	West Midlands BME Network
BSWN	Black South West Network
BTEG	Black Training and Enterprise Group
COVER	Community and Voluntary Forum Eastern Region
ERIN	Eastern Regional Infrastructure Network
HEAR	The London equalities and human rights network
IAG	Independent Advisory Group
MENTER	The Black and Minority Ethnic Network for the East of England Region
MiNET	Minority Ethnic Network
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations
NWIP	North West Infrastructure Partnership
RAISE	Regional Action and Involvement South East
RAWM	Regional Action West Midlands
REWG	Regional Equalities Working Group
RNF	Regional Network Fund
ROTA	Race on the Agenda
SWF	South West Forum
UNI	South East BME network
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector



VEG	VCS Equalities Group
VONNE	Voluntary Organisations' Network North East
VSNW	Voluntary Sector North West
WMSIP	West Midlands Specialist Infrastructure Partnership
3SA	Third Sector Alliance