

Regional Voluntary and Community Sector Networks

Championing the voluntary and community sector in the English regions

Regional champions

In each of the nine English regions there is a generalist network which champions the engagement of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in regional policy and strategy. They develop and support the contribution of the sector to regional progress and raise awareness and understanding of the sector's roles.

All the networks share common core purposes and they also reflect the particular nature of their own region. All are independent organisations accountable through their membership to the voluntary and community sector. They work closely with specialist networks in their region such as those concerned with black and minority ethnic organisations, disability issues and social enterprises.

The regional networks link local involvement and experience with the decision-making structures in the regions by providing an informed and independent voice for the sector. The regional networks are a critical connection between national and local infrastructure.

The regional networks - in brief

The regional networks were set up because voluntary and community organisations recognised they needed a strong and coherent voice at regional level to ensure their contribution was recognised and valued. More detail on the roles of the networks plus some brief examples of their work appear on the following pages. In summary through, regional networks contribute to the development of regions in a very wide range of ways but in particular, by providing:

- **vital connections** – linking together the work of voluntary and community groups and public sector partners,
- a democratic, member-led and **accountable regional voice** for the sector,
- mechanisms for **effective representation**,
- **regional leadership**,
- opportunities for **collaboration and partnership**,
- services which require regional **economies of scale** to be effective and viable,
- support and advocacy for improving the **effectiveness of the sector**,
- **research, intelligence and “signposting”** for and about the sector; and
- a leadership role in **infrastructure development**.

The regional context has changed since the networks were set up. But the growth of regionalised agencies such as the Strategic Health Authorities and the Learning and Skills Councils as well as the expanding roles of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Government Offices and Assemblies means that the role of the regional networks is more important than ever before.

National influence

The nine regional networks come together nationally in the Regional Voluntary Sector Networks Forum (RVSNF). The Forum is crucial to ensuring the Office of the Third Sector, other national government departments and agencies such as Capacitybuilders as well as national voluntary organisations get regional perspectives on their policies and programmes. The regional networks have close links with both infrastructure and front-line organisations and help to ensure intelligence on what is happening on the ground is fed through into national decision-making. The Chair of the National Forum is currently Judy Robinson, Director of Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum. Contact her or any of the individual network Chief Executives (details over) for more information.

Vital connections

Regional networks perform a vital role "connecting" the work of national voluntary organisations with the needs and experience of local groups. This has been especially important in the ChangeUp programme where the regional networks have helped to ensure that the services of the national hubs are brought into the regions and keep focussed on the needs of front line groups. Regional networks collaborate with a wide range of national organisations to ensure their services are accessible to and understood by front line groups.

Cover in the Eastern Region is in the fourth year of producing a fortnightly email briefing which goes to more than 600 voluntary and community organisations across the region encouraging awareness of, and involvement in, the regional agenda.

Member-led networks

The most fundamental relationship the regional networks have is with the voluntary and community sector. The networks engage with a substantial proportion of voluntary and community groups in their region which ensures the networks' championing of the sector is informed by experience and practice on the ground. The governance of all the networks is based upon democratic accountability to the sector and the trustees of each network are elected by its members.

London's Third Sector Alliance has mapped voluntary and community sector engagement in the Every Child Matters agenda in London. The regional arm of VCS Engage, the DFES funded national programme, has used this initial research to pilot a range of activities to provide support to local representatives and workers.

Effective representation

All networks play a key role in enabling the voluntary and community sector to be represented at regional level. This includes, in most regions, electing people to the VCS seats on the Regional Assembly. Networks ensure there are transparent mechanisms for voluntary and community sector representation and engagement on regional bodies such as RDA advisory groups, European Union fund monitoring committees and Regional Skills Partnerships. Networks work closely with regional agencies to ensure that regional strategies, like the Spatial Strategy and the Regional Economic Strategy, recognise and understand that the sector as employer, provider of services and a means of engaging the most disadvantaged communities, makes an important and valued contribution to regional progress.

In the West Midlands RAWM is leading the creation of an infrastructure strategy for the region and is supporting sector engagement on the West Midlands Regional Assembly through a secretariat role for the 'other Stakeholders group' - a group of 16 partners.

Collaborative approaches

Regional networks collaborate closely with a range of regional partners including social enterprise bodies, black and minority ethnic voluntary sector networks, regional diversity and equality groups, specialist rural networks and regeneration centres of excellence. Staff in regional branches of national voluntary organisations are important links and networks work closely with them. Partnership agreements and protocols with regional organisations provide a framework for collaboration on joint projects.

Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum's 'Building Bridges' project piloted a learning programme to link voluntary and community sector members and regeneration professionals focussing especially in the built environment.

Regional leadership

Leadership roles in new initiatives feature in the work of networks and include: centres of excellence in sustainable communities, region-wide equalities bodies, regional infrastructure consortium, funders' forums and funding advice networks.

Voluntary Sector North West has led on the voluntary and community sector contribution to the regional Well Being Fund proposal, resulting in the sector leading on management and delivery of 85% of the proposed projects.

Adding value and economies of scale

Some initiatives, leadership training for example, need a region's economy of scale to make them work. National events and programmes are often too remote and expensive to engage in whilst the equivalent at local level might be too parochial or simply not large enough to be viable. Working across a region creates a breadth of experience to share and is a better use of scarce resources.

VONNE (North East) created a Regional Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Champion post to promote ICT to the sector and ensure developments meet the needs of the North East VCS. The ICT Champion is working with other regions and the National Hub to define similar roles for champions in all the other English regions.

Promoting effectiveness

The regional networks are all about effective and vibrant voluntary and community organisations meeting the needs of the people and communities. Some of this work is best undertaken at regional level and this forms a critical mass of experience. This work ensures that national resources are accessible and relevant to groups in the region. It may also test new approaches.

The South East regional network RAISE has developed a series of toolkits to help voluntary and community organisations improve their capacity and performance. These have covered compact development, leadership, governance, equalities and most recently, social audit.

Research, intelligence and understanding

All networks are a source of independent advice, intelligence and research on voluntary and community sector development. Networks work closely with their regional observatory. This helps voluntary and community groups both to access comprehensive data and research to use in planning, developing and evaluating their work *and* to contribute to regional knowledge. Networks work with NCVO and other partners to disseminate data about the voluntary and community sector, so raising understanding of the sector's contribution to regional progress. Through their extensive "reach" networks have a valuable "signposting" role for regional and national agencies.

Engage East Midlands has commissioned a study to explore a shared regional third sector research service

Infrastructure development

The strengthening and modernisation of voluntary and community sector infrastructure is a priority. Networks are actively involved in the ChangeUp programme and have established close working relationships with Capacitybuilders. Specific roles vary but include: facilitating regional consortia, supporting sub regional consortia, mapping and research and leading the development of regional strategies.

South West Forum has led the creation of an infrastructure strategy for the region (Infrastructure Strategy South West) and is leading and supporting a cross-sector partnership responsible for the strategy's implementation.

Regional networks and the third Sector

The core and common constituency for all regional networks is the voluntary and community sector but all networks are also involved in the development of the wider third sector and have good links with specialist social enterprise networks and development agencies. It may be helpful to note the government's definition of the third sector as comprising "*...non-governmental organisations which are value-driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. It includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals.*" [Office of the Third Sector.]

More information

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