



Response to Regional Consultation

Moving towards a new single regional strategy

Submitted: Wednesday 29th July 2009

This is COVER's response to the EEDA / EERA consultation on moving to a new single regional strategy. COVER is a representative body for the Voluntary and Community sector in the region. Our Vision is of a just and inclusive society for the East of England that recognises and supports the value, and values, of the community and voluntary sector. Our Mission is to increase voluntary and community sector regional influence, activity and recognition.

Note: Due to the short timescales involved, we have not consulted our member networks about this response, as we would usually prefer to do. Regardless, this response reflects wider issues around voluntary sector engagement in the region, rather than COVER's immediate interests. Some of our member networks and organizations may be responding separately.

General comments

COVER feels that the voluntary and community sector has an important contribution to make at the regional level in policy making and setting the direction for the region. We would like to see a more meaningful engagement proposed, with an effective and valued role for the voluntary and community sector.

A report (attached) published by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) this month highlighted a swathe of reasons why voluntary and community sector organizations feel that their contribution is important. These include:

- An understanding of community circumstances
- A voice for the excluded
- An understanding of the realities of service delivery, and of what options would be most likely to work
- An ability to identify important gaps in policy
- An early warning system for emerging social issues
- A commitment to keeping unfashionable issues on the agenda
- Playing the role of a critical friend, and challenging received wisdom
- Linking together of social and economic issues

We are concerned that the current proposals will drastically reduce the potential for meaningful input from the voluntary and community sector, and thereby reduce the contribution that can be made against each of the points above. In many ways this seems like a significant step backwards.

IPPR report recommendations

The report emphasized the need for regional governance structures to value and improve their engagement mechanisms with the voluntary and community sector. We would welcome further consideration of these issues in the East of England.

We also recognise that there are things that could be done by the voluntary and community sector to improve its contribution. The report has suggested for instance that the public sector would like to hear a more united, coherent voice from the voluntary and

community sector. COVER is prepared to take a lead in developing the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to respond in a coordinated, meaningful and relevant way.

We therefore suggest, in line with the report's recommendations, that the public sector and the voluntary and community sector at the regional level in the East of England work together to develop a service level agreement regarding the new structures, establishing clear responsibilities and commitments.

Responses to consultation questions

Do you feel that the proposal for Governance is the right one? If not what do you propose?

This proposal is similar to those being developed in other regions, and seems to generally align with the requirements of the Bill. A Regional Strategy Board with key representatives is necessary, and final sign off should be at the Leader's Board and EEDA levels to ensure ownership and accountability of these bodies.

Going back a step, from a voluntary and community sector perspective there are wider concerns about the overemphasis on economic and political / local interests in the proposed governance structure. We hope to see evidence that other important elements are given their due weight in the development of the new integrated strategy. Sectors such as health, environment, and social society need to be valued for their own sake, not just for their contribution to the economy.

Although this consultation doesn't specifically ask for input on the Leader's Board, there are a few comments we wish to make.

It is likely that the Leader's Board will largely represent local and political issues. There are however other voices at the local level, which may not be represented here, including those of voluntary and community sector organizations. We refer you to the arrangement that has been set up in the North West, where members of the leader's board (4NW) typically include council leaders, business leaders and other opinion formers in the Northwest (including voluntary and community sector organisations).

If this arrangement is not possible in the East of England, we would like as a minimum to see some kind of mechanism to require Leaders to actively engage these other interests, and represent them on the Leader's Board. Although local interests meet through LSPs and LAAs, we would like to see a definite mention of their representation by members of the Leader's Board at a regional level – perhaps in the terms of reference or constitution of the board. If the Leader's Board sets up subgroups to look at the different areas under its remit, we would hope to see voluntary and community sector engagement in these subgroups.

Do you feel that the proposal for Stakeholder Involvement is the right one? If not what do you propose?

COVER feels that these proposals significantly limit the involvement of stakeholders, taking a backwards step from the current arrangements.

Firstly and most basically, it would be much better if all members of the Strategy Board had a vote, as it seems to be something of a meaningless gesture to allocate vote-less places. Non-voting members may feel there is a lack of incentive to engage and offer their specialist advice, if they have no vote – voting members could simply ignore the advice they are given.

There are some questions over the delivery agency representation, as there doesn't seem to be a watertight rationale behind which particular agencies are represented. For example, why are there two environmental organisations – but not the third obvious choice, English Heritage? Why is there no representation proposed from the emerging Young People's Learning Agency, and the Skills Funding Agency? What about a voice for arts/sports/tourism councils? The voluntary and community sector is a large deliverer of services in the East of England, and arguably COVER as their representative should also have a seat on the strategy board.

Instead of just allocating places to the largest or most influential organizations, it could be an option instead to have one representative nominated to the Board from each of the different advice forums (see below). This person would be responsible to act on behalf of the whole sector that they represented, rather than the interests of one organization.

Most importantly, COVER feels that a substantial amount of work needs to be done around formulating the specifics of what the proposed stakeholder partnership would look like, how it would be funded (crucially!), and what it would actually do. The concept itself needs further consideration, as grouping together all the other regional interests outside of the economy and local/political interests seems to be a very broad arena! Within the concept further details need to be developed as soon as possible, before meaningful input can be given about whether the proposals are sound or not. I attach the terms of the South West Stakeholder group, for reference as a starting point.

COVER would like to offer to play a leading role in developing the details of what this group would look like, in partnership with EEDA and EERA. We may be able to offer to host or provide the secretariat for the group, depending on the outcome of further discussions with the region.

Do you feel that the proposal for regional advice to the Regional Strategy Board is the right one? If not what do you propose?

Clearly it is necessary to have some supporting groups for the Strategy Board, and to base them around the different themes seems the most obvious option. However, it would be good if each of these groups operated independently, and nominated one representative each onto the Strategy Board. Each group should have representatives from relevant stakeholders, including voluntary and community sector organizations.

One particular point is that the groups shouldn't simply be hosted by the dominant partner in each category, as that could risk skewing the message to their agenda – the dominant partner usually does not represent all the interests in any one sector. A solution that would ensure consistency between the groups, help them to stay focused, and provide a (relatively) neutral chair would be for a member of the EEDA Board (or as a second best the Leader's Board) to act as the chair for each group. A similar solution has been used in the North West.

The themes in the implementation plan don't cover the whole regional agenda. An alternative set of themes could be:

- Health and social care
- Environment and sustainability
- House building, Planning, Transportation and Utilities (this is a wide remit, but really so are the others!)
- Skills, enterprise and innovation, business
- Equalities
- Communities (the social agenda), including social elements of the housing theme

Some groups around these themes already exist (e.g. the East of England Environment Forum) and instead of creating new groups, existing groups could be developed to meet the requirements of the new structures. This will avoid increasing the number and complexity of groups meeting in the region!

In addition, a voluntary and community sector infrastructure network is already in operation – ERIN. This group could potentially be considered to be part of the regional structure, and be used to represent the voluntary and community sector. Voluntary and Community sector agendas cut across all themes, and all local areas. They are a valuable contribution, and should be heard separately, as well as as part of the themed message, and as represented by councilors acting for local interests. Investment into this group and discussion about the development of its remit would be welcome.

Do you feel that the proposal for delivery of the Single Regional Strategy is the right one? If not what do you propose?

The above groups could also be responsible for implementation and reporting against an action plan for their area.

Are there any other suggestions that you would wish to make on the proposals overall?

COVER would welcome the opportunity to work with EEDA / EERA to develop these arrangements further. As stated at the beginning of this document, we would be interested in discussing the possibility of developing an SLA with the region, to clarify commitments on both sides.

Any queries about this consultation response can be directed to:

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