

“Now’s the time...”

Conference Report

Regional Forum Annual Conference
Monday 4th February 2008
Best Western Monkbar Hotel, York

Over 100 delegates gathered in York on the 4th February for “Now’s the time”, the Regional Forum’s Annual Conference.

Those who attended heard Rosie Winterton MP, the new Regional Minister for Yorkshire and the Humber, give her first speech in her new ministerial role. She was followed by different perspectives of the Sub-national Review (SNR) from Chris Megainey, the chief civil servant who oversees the implementation of the SNR, local politician Cllr Peter Box, Chair of the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly and Leader of Wakefield District Council and Martin Sime, Chief Executive of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Rosie Winterton MP makes her first speech as the Regional Minister

Reflecting on personal family experiences, Rosie spoke of her past associations with the voluntary and community sector - her Uncle ran a home for the blind during the 30s. She was happy to speak to the sector again after her close involvement with it whilst with the Department of Health. She highlighted that during that health consultation, the popular views held by the statutory sector, that the third sector was often not properly organised or resourced were quite the opposite.

Referring to the SNR, Rosie said that the next few months were uncertain but there was now an opportunity to take things forward, to ensure all views were heard and she was delighted to be playing a role in that process. She was sorry that plans for a regional government hadn’t taken off - for her regional devolution meant proper accountability, transparency and organisations that reflect local principles.



She also acknowledged the enormous contribution that the sector and the Regional Forum makes, reflecting something of the “Yorkshire Spirit”, adding that we all need to celebrate what the region is about and to ‘talk it up’. Above all Yorkshire and Humber is a great place to do business and a great place to live, and we should say that ‘loud and clear’.

Rosie’s Headlines:-

Happy making first speech to the sector

Wants to ensure all views are heard during SNR process

A strong region matters in Whitehall

Challenge is disengagement and falling voting

The region is a great place to live

The national perspective - What is the SNR?

Chris Megainey began his speech with a brief outline of the SNR. The SNR led by the Treasury and published in July 2007 has examined economic development and regeneration. Its aim is to encourage economic growth and tackle deprivation. It will do this by making changes to the roles and responsibilities of different bodies. Key proposals are:

The devolution of 14 -19 year old skills/ learning responsibilities from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to local authorities

A Single Regional Strategy

Regional Assemblies will not continue in their current form

Greater devolution of powers to regions to influence investment priorities

Multiple Area Agreements

City Regions

It was originally intended that the SNR would be consulted on at the end of 2007 and he conceded that there were still big issues to be resolved that needed further discussion. He acknowledged that central Government doesn't know all the answers.

Chris' speech covered:

- how local authorities might organise themselves - it is envisaged there will be a Forum in each region but they will be left to come up with their own proposals;
- each region will decide on the future of Social, Economic and Environmental Partnerships (SEEPs) and Chris was particularly interested for views on how this proposal could be taken forward;
- Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) will change and it is important that they have the right structure, with the right skills;

- Regional Strategies need to be developed and delivered. The question is what are they for and whilst they will maintain the economic focus they should be informed by other legislation like the Climate Change Bill.

Above all, he said that the SNR needs to be a concise, focused document that must include stakeholder input.

Chris' Headlines:-

Government doesn't know all the answers
Wants views on future of SEEPs
RDAs must have right structure & skills
What are Regional Strategies really for?



A local perspective

Cllr Peter Box has a unique position in that under the SNR his role as Chair of the Regional Assembly will disappear yet the local authority he represents will take on new responsibilities.

For Cllr Box the key issue facing the region is transport and he hoped Rosie as Minister for Transport would agree.

Partnership

He spoke about his strong belief in working with partnership organisations, that was the experience in Wakefield - problems aren't simple and they cross boundaries.

The examples he gave here were housing and crime - issues that aren't local authority responsibility but are real concerns to people in the city.

For him, the Regional Assembly had achieved a great deal since it was created and by working in partnership with groups like the Regional Forum it was able to let the Government know that its work reflected the view of the region - partnership gives their work legitimacy.

Routes to Models of Engagement

There were a number of key questions; how will the arrangements work? How will the voluntary and community sector fit in? How will the needs of rural and BME communities be included? Also, responsibility shouldn't be given to the Regional Development Agencies, accountability should remain in the region not with Whitehall, he believes it is all part of a move to create bigger local authorities at a time when power is supposed to be devolved down. The outcome might also be more bureaucracy. Chief Executive posts at the City Regions have already been advertised at £75,000, add £25,000 for administrative support.

Yorkshire Forward is willing to work with partners but, Cllr Box said, it wasn't fit for purpose if its core business changes - social partner representation is needed. He added that there were little details on how the SNR was going to work on the ground, but it was not too late, he mused that if the consultation document does ever see the light of day it was vital that we make our views known. John Healey MP has said that he will listen.

Cllr Box's Headlines:-

Key challenge is transport
Partnership working is key to success
SNR a move to create bigger authorities
Make sector views known



Towards a civil society - the Scottish experience

Our final speaker, Martin Sime focused on what is 'civil society'. As head of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations he has a very different working relationship with the key decision makers in Scotland than do his English counterparts.

For him there is too much focus on governance and structures and what is needed is a shift in the agenda to meet the needs of the people that we serve. In a Civil Society, organisations play a role in society's development building a strong society with good economic prosperity. A sense of community is expressed through the work done by voluntary organisations.

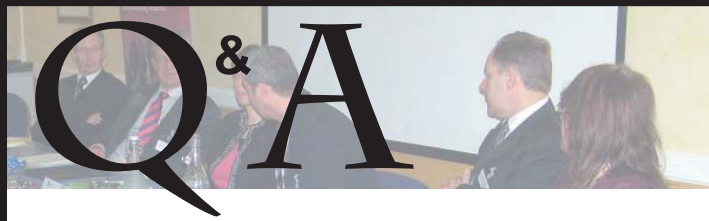
In Scotland, where the focus is on participative development policy, the third sector has to engage with all levels of government and by being involved from the start of the process the third sector has been successful. The recent Homelessness Act, started by the voluntary and community sector, is widely regarded as the best Act of its kind in Europe. Issues remain, as always, around resources and the sector needs resources to do the job well.

'de-cluttering'

A phrase that Martin often used was 'de cluttering', particularly of governance, making things simple along with passing power and resources to communities. People make change happen.

Martin's Headlines:-

Too much focus on governance
Participative development policy in Scotland
Sector lead Act 'best' in Europe
People make change happen



Cllr Box and Martin stayed for the afternoon Question & Answer Panel, where they were joined by Simon Foy, Chief Economist of Yorkshire Forward and by two delegate volunteers, Stephen Hyde from Friends of Queen's Park and Rikki Arundel from Gender Shift.

The questions posed were:

- How can we make sure the VCS can drive the making of the Regional Single Strategy?
- How can communities be better represented on regional agencies?
- Should the sector focus on what it wants rather than focusing on structures?

Cllr Box was quite clear in his answer to the first question, that the Assembly should not be abolished, acknowledging that it was inevitable though that some of the Assembly staff would be given roles at a 'new' Yorkshire Forward. Simon Foy added that Yorkshire Forward also shared some of the concerns raised about the SNR and this was shown in the rethinking and delayed consultation on the SNR already. In terms of scrutiny it was essential that it shouldn't be a centralised imposed model rather each region needs to develop its own scrutiny arrangements as the SNR wasn't focused in each region and some regions are not so well developed in working in partnership with their regional development agency - as in this region.

On community representation and regional agencies, there was a consensus that there was a need for informed communication with wider representation on regional boards. Inviting people to engage in the current structure would alleviate problems and there was also a need to develop community agendas that could be brought to the table. The question was raised here on who

actually wants to get involved in local authority structures; the quest is to find ways of inviting people if they are really committed to it.

Much of the Panel session was taken up by answers to the third question.

Whilst structures are necessary, as without them there would be a lack of focus, there shouldn't be structures just for the sake of having them. For Martin the need was for engagement through partnership within these structures and Rikki spoke about her experience with projects in Hull that have a more fluid form, hierarchical structures that change with needs, as projects come and go. It was acknowledged too that whilst Yorkshire Forward was the best Regional Development Agency at working with people already the sector has to be wary about scrutiny of it being concentrated in the hands of a local leaders' group when there are so few local leaders and as had been previously warned, there may actually be less but bigger local authorities. It was important that the process should get more resources diverted into the region.

Discussions then turned towards a point made by Rosie Winterton earlier about engagement in the political process. Again here there was consensus that people are fed up with politics. A delegate pointed out that people don't often understand how their neighbourhood works let alone the region or on a national level and that they would be unlikely to engage in something that is distant and confusing. One solution is holding community sessions explaining how neighbourhoods and towns/cities work, as happens in Sheffield and Hull and the Regional Forum holds a number of Information Sessions entitled 'How the region works'.

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“Now’s the time...”



Conference Briefing Paper

Delegates who attended “Now’s the time...” received a comprehensive range of documents relating to the Sub-national Review (SNR), giving differing views on it. This briefing takes you to the next stage setting out to signpost readers to the principal players in the SNR and its consultation, explain some of the jargon and let you know how you can get involved.

The Sub-national economic development and regeneration review - known as the Sub-national Review (SNR)

The SNR led by the Treasury and published in July 2007 has examined economic development and regeneration. Its aim is to encourage economic growth and tackle deprivation. It will do this by making changes to the roles and responsibilities of different bodies. The full SNR can be viewed and downloaded from:

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/5/subnational_econ_review170707.pdf

Communities and Local Government Department (CLG)

The Communities and Local Government Department (CLG) sets UK policy on local government, housing, urban regeneration, planning and fire and rescue. It has responsibility for all race equality and community cohesion related issues in England and for the implementation of the SNR. More information about the work of CLG can be found at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/>

Yorkshire and Humber Assembly

The Yorkshire and Humber Assembly is a partnership of all local authorities in the region and representatives of various economic, social and environmental sectors. It currently has a role in scrutinising planning, housing and transport that will disappear when the Assembly is abolished under the proposals in the SNR. Information about the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly can be found at:

<http://www.yhassembly.gov.uk/>

Related documents

SNR Briefing

The Regional Forum has produced a Briefing paper on the SNR which sets out what is happening, its implications for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and what the Regional Forum and its members are doing. The SNR Briefing can be viewed and downloaded from:

http://www.regionalforum.org.uk/publications_resources/knowledgebase/500/540/257.pdf

Regional Structures Guide

This updated version of our popular Regional Structures Guide introduces readers to the agencies which make up the Yorkshire and Humber region. Produced in partnership with Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber the guide lists all the principal regional organisations along with a brief description and general contact details. The Regional Structures Guide can be viewed and downloaded from:

http://www.regionalforum.org.uk/publications_resources/knowledgebase/500/540/257.pdf

Or a printed copy can be obtained from the Regional Forum Office, contact details are given at the end of this briefing.

The Age of Regions? Rethinking governance in England

Following on from the SNR, this new publication from the New Local Government Network (NLGN) brings together leading participants to debate the challenges facing regional and sub-regional governance in England. The essay collection offers the first reactions to the SNR, and the hopes and concerns of the local and regional community. This can be purchased directly from NLGN at:

<http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/press-releases/first-reactions-to-sub-national-review-in-new-nlgn-pamphlet/>

How can I be involved in the SNR consultation process?

CLG anticipates publishing a consultation document on the SNR in the next few weeks. The “Now’s the time..” conference was a starting point for a formal voluntary and community sector response to the SNR with views and comments being collected.

If you are interested in contributing to the final response then please contact the Regional Forum at:



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