

## Regional Consultations Workshops

Regional workshops are used widely in the South West for different purposes. In this paper I describe the components we have found contribute to successful consultation workshops. I refer to examples used by the South West Regional Development Agency for the development of regional strategies and SLIM as part of their 'Learning Themes' for exploring specific skills issues with researchers and practitioners from across the region. To put this into context I will briefly describe the processes we use for strategy development and in our Learning Themes.

### Strategy development process

In general the development of regional strategies in the UK are in stages of information gathering and consultation exercises and various methods of identifying and prioritising are used along the way.

The process usually runs something like;

- Evidence compiled by researchers and 'experts'
- Consultation with partners to develop priorities and actions, using workshops and meetings
- Consultation draft prepared and disseminated,
- Regional workshops as part of the consultation process
- Responses compiled
- Strategy re-written (to incorporate responses!)

The consultation workshops are an integrated part of the process. They are important for making sense of the information we have, gathering the views from our stakeholders and importantly for engaging the partners in the process, as delivery will not happen without them.

[The South West Regional Development Agency consultation process for the review of the Regional Economic Strategy is documented on their website at;

<http://www.southwestrda.org.uk/what-we-do/policy/res-review2005/draft-res.shtml>

As with many of our processes the UK government has drawn up guidelines for the process of public consultation, if you are interested these can be found at;

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation/code/index.asp> ]

### SLIM [Learning Themes](#)

SLIM use a unique method of examining current issues in the region. **The Learning Themes are a key process of engaging wider audience in research, transforming this to intelligence and then action.** The topics are chosen to reflect the priorities of strategic partners and practitioners. They take place over a period of about 2 months. Members of the team produce a research briefs summarising existing knowledge on the topic, which are sent to participants. An on-line discussion then takes place which usually takes 3 to 4 weeks. At the conclusion of the on-line discussion, participants gather in a face to face workshop to share ideas further, hear from speakers and exchange their own practice. Following the workshops SLIM compiles a report which includes lessons from the workshop, a synthesis of selected literature, good practice case studies and contributions from the on-line discussion forum. This is disseminated to the Theme sponsors, policy makers and participants.

Recent topics have been;

- § Migrant workers – Issues for the South West
- § Regional Implementation of National Sector Skills Agreements
- § Young people in employment without training



§ Age and Employability: the challenge for the South West

The workshops are an important focus for sharing and developing the ideas which have come out of the on-line discussions.

Components of the workshops,

Workshop techniques

The dynamic in a workshop is usually expansion and exploration of ideas, followed by assembling, condensing and prioritising. This process is sometimes repeated to explore selected topics in more depth.

The workshops are usually made up of the following steps;

- introductory presentations,
- discussions in smaller groups addressing particular questions and issues,
- feeding back main conclusions from discussions to the larger group
- Further discussion in the larger group.

Ideally the workshop process will generate many ideas for development, and then the skill is in capturing these ideas, ordering them in some way and prioritising them.

The Regional Development Agency has tried a number of participative 'voting' and 'ranking' techniques within workshops to try to get agreement on regional priorities. Everyone was given a set amount of stickers. These they could allocate to the policy priorities which were up on a display stand. They could allocate them in any way they liked. So that at the end of the day there was some indication about how strongly people felt about the different policy ideas. They also had specific projects up on notice boards which people could write their comments and ideas on post it notes,

There are other techniques used by facilitators which have been developed by management consultants, such as brainstorming, forcefield analysis (where issues are considered in terms of supporting and resisting forces), decision boxes (where a 2 x 2 grid is drawn with such axes as difficulty and cost and the issues are placed where people see they fit best, such as in 'low cost high difficulty' or 'high cost high difficulty') most of these techniques work best in smaller groups.

In the SLIM Learning Themes, the smaller groups are either at separate tables in the same room or in separate break out rooms. The discussions are focussed around specific questions relating to the issues in the region and the main recommendations are reported back to the larger group, and discussions are opened up.

Who is present?

Do we want, 'experts', politicians, policy makers, policy implementers (that is the practitioners on the ground), people from the voluntary sector, business leaders, people who hold the 'purse strings', researchers, and do we want the 'wildcard citizens'? Sometimes it makes sense to consult with groups separately and sometimes all together. Thought needs to be given to this in order to make sure there is a balance of 'experts' and those who will need to be engaged with the policies being developed particularly those who can deliver the actions.

In the case of the Regional Development Agency, there was a mixture of both, they held workshops with small groups of organisations on particular policy areas as well as big public consultations with organisations and individuals across the spectrum.



In the case of the Learning Themes, the invitations are open but we always try to make sure we have a balance of researchers, practitioners and policy-makers.

How do we brief them beforehand?

What information do people come to the workshop with? People will of course come with their own expertise and views, but it is also important for people to make informed contributions to the workshop, so the material we circulate beforehand can make a big difference.

In the case of the Regional Development Agency workshops, there is either the review, the draft strategy and discussion papers were the key documents being discussed. In the case of the SLIM Learning Themes, there are the bulletins and online discussions.

Who facilitates, who records?

Workshops rely heavily on the skills of the facilitator, it is important that they have sufficient grasp of the subject to keep the discussions going and make sure salient points are not missed. It is also crucial that the discussions/decisions are captured and incorporated in the process, otherwise the exercise is seen just as a whitewash PR exercise and people become disengaged.

The RDA tend to buy in professional facilitators.

SLIM have experienced facilitators in-house, and so members of the team facilitate the workshops and on-line discussions.

Workshop follow-up

The effectiveness of these workshops depends a great deal on how we use the information. If people see that their views have been taken into account, they are more likely to engage the next time and more importantly be engaged in delivering the activities in the region.

The Regional Development Agency has published a very thorough explanation of how they have used the results of the consultation exercise. This process has been referred to in our trial of the Regional Signal Panel, and the majority have been positive about the breadth of the consultation.

SLIM produce a final report following each Learning Themes, which incorporates the whole process, prior research, online discussions and lessons learnt at the workshop. The Learning themes are very highly regarded in the region and the workshops are generally over-subscribed.

