

The South West Signal Panel report

We tested the questionnaire on 6 people from the following organisations, altering the questions slightly as we went.

The Age and Employability Network
Director, South West Regional Observatory
Sector Skills Council for Construction
Learning and Skills Development Association
Head of Economy and Tourism, Exeter City Council
The Economist, South West Regional Development Agency

First, I make a few general comments about my experience of the process and people's feedback about the questionnaire. Following this I have condensed the main thread of their responses to the questions and summarised this into each of the discussion topics. I attach the questionnaire in the annex.

The people we spoke to enjoyed the opportunity for 'Blue Skies thinking and talking' and so the questions brought out interesting reflections. They liked the broad overarching nature of the questionnaire and the openness of the questions. People feel there is not enough time in their working life to think in this way. One person suggested a quick follow up phone call a week or so later to see if they had had any more thoughts. All except one person preferred to see a copy of the questions while I was talking to them. Some people thought they would have liked to see the questions in advance.

Our region is large and diverse and relatively recently formed compared to Ribe County, so the answers tend towards being generalisations when talking about the region. When people refer to local decisions and policy making they are usually referring to county level or smaller. If we were to conduct this with a wider panel it may be useful to include a question to do with people's understanding of 'the region'. We had slightly reframed the questions to suit our region, but were also keen to retain the comparability with the other regions in this project. We spent 45-90 minutes with each person, so this report only captures an overall summary of views.

As our sample group are already fairly well engaged with the regional processes the answers they gave reflect a lot of the discussions that have been going on in the region for 5 or so years in order to develop the regional strategies. So most of the content of the answers should sound familiar to people in the region.

One key, overarching point is that there is a sense that people feel that they are having to operate *despite* national policies rather than national policy being there to help us succeed.

People's overall responses

Globalisation

We had a broad understanding of Globalisation ranging from the very succinct 'integration of economic markets across the world' to the poetic 'butterfly effect' referring to the interoperability of all aspects of our social, economic and cultural fabric.





With the understanding that globalisation is inevitable, people on the whole saw more opportunities than threats both for their organisation and for the region. The opportunities were to do with growing markets, increased flows of information, new design and the increasing numbers of migrant workers. Even the threat of homogeneity, characterised as 'the boring towns' problem, was seen as an opportunity as there is a strong reaction against it with people in the community being more keen to develop local distinctiveness, sourcing local products and services.

Not surprisingly, the main threat was seen to be in increased competitiveness and the challenge for the businesses in the region is to make the most of the bigger market place. Some see there being a short term threat as we lose jobs and businesses, but in the long term globalisation is good for the world economy as a whole and therefore good for the region.

In order to prepare our region for the future most people felt that it was neither desirable nor feasible to compete on labour costs and the way forward is to aim for higher skilled higher value added employment.

In order to prepare the region for globalisation the political initiatives people saw as relevant were those developing the infrastructure, promoting localisation, helping businesses increase their added value and developing tourism. We should also be working more effectively with our migrant worker populations, as many of them are highly skilled and under valued.

Work and Learning

Everyone felt that the work life balance was important, and that flexibility of work conditions, family friendly policies and pleasant work environment were the way forward.

In order to attract the best people to the region and to retain them, if we can't offer the big salaries we can offer the whole package of good conditions.

Aspiration was seen as lacking in the region and that if we are to compete in the global market place we will need a step change to address this somehow - most likely through the education system.

Happy and unstressed workers are more productive, and more likely to be able to carry out the higher value work. For instance it is hard to design a washing machine under slave conditions. If we have a happy vibrant place to work, people will want to stay and more will want to come here.

The skills and qualities for the future workforce are seen to be flexibility, open-mindedness, readiness to learn, and language skills.

The workforce of the future will be knowledge based, so continuing updating of skills is important

There was a fairly wide ranging sentiment about the adequacy of our education system. Most felt there were major problems to do with the parity of esteem in academic education versus vocational training. There is the problem that vocational occupations and training are seen to be of lower status.



It is generally felt that language skills will become increasingly important in the future, and that they are not well taught or properly valued.

Education should address the enthusiasm and ability to learn, as we move to a more knowledge driven society, where continuous training will be required, and adaptability to the changing nature of employment. There needs to be a clearer understanding of lifelong learning.

Governance and policy making

Local government is not strong and has been weakened by the last two national governments. The main feeling is that most policy is formulated at a national level, with only a small amount of flexibility at local or regional level. It is felt that there is a need for strong leadership, in such a diverse region and that this is lacking in the South West.

Most people felt it would be better to have more locally relevant policy making, so flexibility needed to be built in to the national strategies. *'...unless one looks at what is feasible at local level the grand plans won't work'*. However, this depends on the policy area. For example, education policy is one seen as best made nationally. It is also an area most people felt was fragmented, schools and colleges are not well joined up with the labour market.

Transport and infrastructure are areas people tend to get very involved in at a local level whereas often decisions should be made at regional or national level. This is particularly relevant in the South West where we have access issues in many parts of the region and decisions would have to be made outside the region to improve this. An example to illustrate this was that of improving Reading station (Reading is in another English region, the South East, but links through to London & beyond) could improve greatly the train service to the region, but this would mean decisions having to be made in the South East and nationally.

In principle the Regional Assembly is the 'voice of democracy' in the region, as it is comprised of all the elected members of local authorities, but in practice, very few people know of its existence and function. Funding is mainly administered at local and national level so that, policy making at regional level can only be a template to help people and institutions work together and in the same direction. It is generally felt that the Regional Economic Strategy is a good start.

There is some attempt at holistic and evidence based policy making in the region within the limited powers at regional level to deliver. The local authorities have the funding for delivery so the regional bodies can only act as catalysts or coordinators.

Everyone said that good policy making requires evidence and real consultation and that policies must take into account the broader and long term consequences. Most felt that this was improving in the region and that the RDA had consulted widely for their recent Regional Economic Strategy review. The general feeling, however is that policy making is fragmented, particularly in education.

In order to prepare for globalisation, some felt that policy should be helping to make businesses in the region more competitive, however others felt that we ought to be

careful about trying to compete as part of the strength of the region is the slower pace, and too much high tech industry could threaten the nature of the region.

Everyone felt we should be developing policies that encourage developing local identity, sourcing local foods and products.

Informed and engaged citizens

Nobody felt that citizens were engaged. Most felt that in principle people should be engaged, but that we didn't really have the avenue for their engagement. Some suggested the regional institutions weren't sufficiently developed for people to get involved at regional level, so the involvement would have to be at local level. Generally there is the sense that people get engaged when something affects them directly, such as planning issues and clean streets. It was pointed out that if people could see that their involvement had an effect and that they were being listened to, then they are more likely to engage. People need to be involved at local level in order to have engagement at regional level

Only one person mentioned that the media plays a role!
Generally people don't see the South West as a region with a regional identity as it is so diverse.

Society

The social attributes people generally see as describing society in the South West are;

- satisfied with the quality of life
- complacent
- more homogeneous in terms of ethnic mix than most regions
- not actively exclusive but not really inclusive either
- friendly and cooperative

The Gypsy population here causes a lot of tension and society is divided regarding how to deal with them.

We are better placed than most to achieve a healthy region.

The main income disparity is between the West and East of the region with the more lucrative industries in the East towards London.

We should promote the qualities to do with collaboration and cooperation, connectivity and networking and environmental awareness

Despite the regional strategies trying to encourage the region to be more competitive, the overall impression is that generations of limited horizons leaves the region fairly laid back and complacent.

Ageing Population

Most people see the ageing population less as a problem than as one of the few certainties of the future and one that we can prepare for. It is well recognised to be more of an issue in this region than others both because many people move here late in life either to retire or to slow down and because many young people move out of the

region to seek more lucrative employment and a faster pace of life. Some saw the fact that people choose to move here as a sign of the region's success.

As we have a generally healthy ageing population, people saw this as an opportunity to develop and encourage lifelong learning, gradual retiring, mentoring schemes, and possibly to extend people's working life. In the construction industry, where many do retire early, they are trying to encourage the older more experienced workers to move into less physically strenuous areas such as inspection and teaching and mentoring. We have a very well qualified population, and these people often become active in their local communities.

Cultural and Environmental Heritage

People all felt that the main strength of the region was its environmental heritage. It is a good place to live and visit and this should not be forsaken in the process of development, it must be seen as part of the regions identity. The South West is the only region which has the Environment as an economic driver in the Regional Economic Strategy.

Some thought we could make a lot more of our coastline.

There is a tension between economic growth and safeguarding our environment, but as it is one of the main regional competencies and seen as one of the economic drivers, people seemed determined that we will look after it.

Regional development

There was a range of views regarding the direction the region is heading, Most people felt that the Regional Economic Strategy and the Regional Skills Partnership had the right priorities and that if these were adhered to, we should head towards economic growth within the environmental limits.

We are heading towards local sourcing local distinctiveness. We are not necessarily the most competitive region but we have a stable society with relatively low crime and high skill levels and a healthy environment.

We need to recognise that the region is diverse and priorities vary greatly between sub-regions. We do have some pockets of deprivation, but years of investment hasn't really helped, it is better to invest where there are opportunities rather than continue to try and patch up problems without making a long term difference.

A 'Key Regional Competency' is our natural environment, we have more Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty than any other region. One problem identified was that the facilities for tourism are not good. For example many of the tennis courts in the popular sites have been poorly maintained or are no longer there. We could do with a coastal survey of facilities. It is more expensive to stay on holiday in the South West than other countries where the weather is more reliable, so we need to offer the facilities.

High skill base is another strength that we don't yet take advantage of. We could develop a Beacon mentoring system with people on the verge of retiring as broadly speaking we do have a healthy ageing population. We are moving in the right direction

towards the knowledge economy. We don't yet take advantage of the environmental expertise we have in the region such as the metrological office and marine sciences.

Motivation is seen as lacking, as many businesses are not really interested in engaging in the global market place. (This is perhaps not unexpected as we have a relatively low level of imports in the region)

Institutional Performance

The group we talked to are already engaged in the regional development process. They all agreed that the key institutions who's 'energy needs to be harnessed for effective regional development' are the Local Authorities, the Regional Assembly, Central Government, the RDA and the Voluntary Sector. Some feel it is not always clear who does what in the region. There are a plethora of organisations that in theory support the Regional Assembly but many are too caught up in their own local issues and don't necessarily engage at regional level

Several people suggested that the NHS as a large high-tech knowledge intensive employer and trainer should be much more actively engaged in the process.

Katie Kelsey
July 2006

Interview Guide to The Regional Signal Panel

In this exercise we are interested in your answers to the questions but the exercise is about developing the questionnaire as a tool, so we are particularly interested in your feedback on the questionnaire.

The signal panel is a tool which is being developed by an Article 6 project. We are looking at Regional Key Competencies as a way of managing structural change. We are looking at a wider definition of Regional Development, looking at social capital and developing the concept of 'regional wellness'.

1) Globalisation

- a) How do you understand globalisation?
[your organisation]
- b) What do you see as the main challenges of globalisation to the organisation you work in?
- c) What do you see as the main opportunities?
[the region]
- d) Do you see globalisation as an opportunity or threat to the region? Why?
- e) What kind of political initiatives do you think are needed for the region to benefit from the globalisation

2) Work and Learning

- a) What kind of values within the work environment and the labour market do you think are important to enrich the economic development?
[If the respondent has difficulties in answering, the following ideas could help
 - i. Healthy work environment
 - ii. Balance between work and private life
 - iii. Flexible working hours or longer / shorter working hours
 - iv. Autonomous working methods
 - v. Early retirement vs. later retirement
 - vi. Flexible labour market (e.g. interim workers, project workers etc.)]
- b) Why are these values important?
- c) How do they contribute to the development of this region?
- d) What kind of qualities would your organisation and your staff, need to meet the challenges of globalisation?
- e) Do you think that our education system offers the right qualifications/training for the future?
- f) Can you suggest any changes?

3) Governance and Policy making

- a) For the development of the region (social and economic), do you think it is important to have strong regional / local strategies and politicians, the development be lead via national initiatives? [That is bottom up or top down]
- b) Do you think we have strong regional/local strategies and strong politicians?
- c) ..Or are we mainly lead by national and international initiatives?
- d) Do you think that the policy making in the region is holistic or fragmented? Can you give us examples of key areas which are fragmented and could be joined up?
- e) What is good policy making and what do you see as being the best way to develop policy in order to meet the challenges of globalisation.

4) Informed and engaged citizens



Regional Key Competencies

- a way to manage structural changes [AT6]

- a) Do you think that citizens are engaged and active in the regional decision making process?
 - b) Do you think it is important that they are?
 - c) If yes, what are the important factors which can make citizens more engaged in their local / regional society? [What steps can we take?]
 - d) If no, explain.
- 5) Society
- a) What do you see as the social attributes or elements which make up our society in the South West.
 - b) Which of these attributes should we be promoting for the 'Health of the Region',
 - c) How well do the social values you have elaborated fit with the imperative of economic growth
- 6) Ageing population
- a) Do you see the ageing population as a problem?
 - b) Is it more or less of an issue in this region? [How can we be more prepared?]
- 7) Culture and Environmental Heritage
- a) Is the cultural and environmental heritage important to regional development?
 - b) In what ways?
 - c) Do you see any tensions between safeguarding heritage and regional development?
- 8) Regional Development
- a) What are your main concerns within the development of the region, what direction do you see the region heading in?
 - b) How would you like the future to be for the region?
 - c) What do you think should be done to create the future you would like to see for the region?
 - d) What assets/characteristics do you think the region has which could provide it with the competitive advantage in the global competition? E.g. within Labour market, Education, IT competences, Industrial sectors, Health, Social work, Culture, Environment, Nature
 - e) [Does the region have special competences or structures which could be worthy developing to strengthen the region]
- 9) Institutional performance
- a) What are the key public institutions whose energy needs to be harnessed for effective regional development.
 - b) Do you think that they provide a good service towards enterprises and citizens?
 - c) Can you suggest any changes?

