
EVALUATION OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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Introduction

In autumn 2003, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to undertake the evaluation of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Regional Partnerships (RPs) up to December 2005. A previous evaluation (Ainscow et al., 2002) had discussed the first phase of their development, when the idea was being piloted. This research brief represents the final stage in the evaluation; it makes reference to previous interim reports presented to DfES in January 2004 and February 2005 respectively. The second of these reports informed Ministerial decision-making about the future of the partnerships. However, the decision was delayed and the announcement about the SEN RPs' future was not made until a meeting of the National Steering Group at the beginning of November 2005. The final year of the NFER's evaluation, reported here, was, thus, conducted amidst a considerable degree of uncertainty in the partnerships but it should be noted that this uncertainty had minimal effect on those stakeholders who were already committed and active: this can only be explained by the strength of the networks and collaboration established by the facilitators.

Key Findings

The SEN RPs have made a substantial and marked contribution to the government's agenda regarding provision for pupils with special educational needs. The relatively modest financial input to each region by DfES has released a considerable degree of professional time and expertise across authorities which, in turn, results in outcomes which improve professional practice and quality of provision, and extend the repertoire of strategies and approaches in relation to services for young people with special educational needs. It is doubtful that activity would have occurred without this catalyst. There is growing evidence of trans-regional activity which contributes further value for money. The national communications strategy has raised the profile of the SEN RPs across the country.

While partnership activity is infiltrating a wide range of multi-agency fora which attend to children and young people with special educational needs and, increasingly, children in care and safeguarding issues, there are a number of factors which are, collectively, peculiar to the SEN RPs and have seemed to generate their success.

These include:

- nurturing positive partnerships at local and regional level: giving a means - via engagement in task groups and networks - of professionals understanding each other's thinking and way of working, and admitting to dilemmas and areas of weakness (and seeking solutions corporately)
- enabling policy-makers (via fluid task groups and effective action-planning) to get immediate and reliable feedback from practitioners and end-users and, in turn, enabling good practice on the ground to be disseminated and, where appropriate, more formally established in policy
- facilitating positive partnerships between regions and national government by mutual engagement in a developing agenda and sharing of ideas without any formal obligations or management

- formalising partnerships by developing products (e.g. protocols, information packs, data sets) which offer a framework for action/provision and have a high degree of acceptability on account of their ownership within the partnership; and establishing services which meet local needs (having emerged through a consultative process)
- ensuring relevance, viability and quality of initiatives by involving a range of stakeholders representing multiple perspectives
- ensuring partnership activities/initiatives are adequately 'serviced' (usually via the facilitator), have progression, and interact
- maintaining open and transparent ways of working which promote honest and trusting relationships which allow difficulties to be acknowledged and addressed.

More specifically, the effectiveness of partnerships depended on:

- their voluntary nature - engagement was generally by desire or interest
- the layered nature of involvement - from senior managers who could influence strategy to those offering practical solutions on the ground
- the creativity and management skills of the facilitators
- democratic action-planning generated by regional stakeholders and made coherent by strategic management
- positive, innovative and mutually beneficial relationships with statutory agencies
- responsiveness - through 'short', direct and practical channels of communication fit for task
- fluid, committed and high quality stakeholder input mobilised by facilitators sensitive to the needs of the task and the needs of those offering the resource
- local and first-hand identification of the (largely human) resources needed and available to fulfil regional needs

- the assurance, via the facilitator, of task completion and positive outcomes.

While SEN RP management groups varied in composition and brief, there was evidence from all the evaluation data that they were most effective where they:

- were multi-agency
- represented all relevant regional fieldforces
- had consistent chairing
- had regular membership
- had strategic capacity
- had operational capacity
- acted as 'eyes and ears' as well as a 'sounding-board' for the facilitator
- contributed positively to decision-making and supported the implications of decisions made (e.g. promoting the RP within their own networks, seeking opportunities for adopting partnership-developed processes, and disseminating partnership work).

Within the SEN RPs, a model of working groups had emerged which was central to partnership effectiveness. Groups were effective where they:

- carried out work relevant to their members' (or members' colleagues) interests and responsibilities
- had the authority to carry out tasks within the RP and within members' services
- had a sound infrastructure - including facilitation, administration and planning
- had clear expectations of the contributions from all members while taking into account external pressures
- ensured a range of potential contributors to lessen the load on any one person
- had the flexibility to alter the group profile to suit the task or amend the task in the light of emerging evidence

- had a clear strategy for exit and/or progression.

These factors demanded members who:

- were able to both give and gain from participation
- had specific expertise combined with representative authority and access to relevant resources
- had direct communication with task group chair/facilitator and other group members
- understood when to 'hand over' to another colleague.

Groups could be led effectively by paid consultants when and where the consultant:

- was sensitive to the particular requirements of the working group
- had existing networks locally and local knowledge
- had the necessary 'authority' to encourage local authority staff to produce data (as appropriate)
- had good communication and negotiation skills to maintain a working group's sense of ownership
- was a constituent member of the working group
- was able to return the product to the working group on task completion.

The facilitator was critical to the effectiveness of the partnerships for:

- keeping the RP alive, active, moving forward and responsive
- encouraging ownership by a wide range of stakeholders
- keeping abreast of developments nationally and locally and disseminating this intelligence to colleagues
- establishing, maintaining and using networks to gather and disseminate information and

comment, and to encourage interest and involvement in the partnership

- ensuring that administration was undertaken efficiently and effectively and being sensitive to capacity issues here
- attending working groups to encourage 'ownership' and a sense of the corporate nature of the RP
- getting working groups going - acting as a catalyst
- participating in other regional networks and using these as an opportunity to see how the SEN RP fitted with, could learn from and could contribute to, other agencies
- liaising with other facilitators to identify common concerns, issues and areas of work.

However strong as a model, the SEN RPs could not flourish in a vacuum. They, in turn, were dependent on support at national level. The national adviser was as critical nationally as the facilitator was regionally for:

- maintaining an overview of all partnership activity
- putting different RPs in touch with each other where independent work needed to relate
- liaising with central government policy-makers and officers to ensure the RP work linked with the 'formal source' of national strategy and to alert these colleagues to the RP capacity for delivery as appropriate
- supporting individual facilitators as necessary.

Background

The SEN RPs were established following Meeting Special Educational Needs: A Programme for Action (DfEE, 1998), which was a response to the Green Paper Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs, (DfEE, 1997). The Partnerships came into existence at different times (November 1998 - April 2000). Following the pilot phase, the first phase in which the whole country was involved was largely innovative. Although the RPs had a broad remit to improve regional coordination of SEN provision and services, in particular for low incidence needs, and ensure the general availability and efficient provision of such services, there was no guidance about, and little precedence for, the processes involved in

fulfilling this remit at a multi-agency, regional level. The present aims of the RPs (agreed in April 2002 but subject to reconsideration by the National Steering Group early in 2006) are:

- to develop more inclusive policies and practices and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of special education processes and services
- to respond to, and engage effectively with, government initiatives
- to improve inter-agency working locally and regionally.

Methodology

The evaluation was focused on the model of the RPs rather than, the contrasting performance of individual regions. It took into consideration the fact that, although funded by public money, the SEN RPs were voluntary organisations and had the freedom to develop as they wished in the light of local and regional circumstances and the decisions reached by their regional management groups.

Over the course of the whole evaluation period (October 2003 - December 2005), data were gathered as follows:

- the facilitators were interviewed on six occasions (66 interviews)
- there were five waves of interviews with a range of stakeholders (108 interviews, involving local authority officers (inclusion officers/managers; heads of SEN/inclusion; SEN/inclusion advisers; educational psychologists; data management officers; SEN support services); teachers (from senior managers to classroom teachers in special and mainstream schools in both the primary and secondary phases); representatives from the Health Service, Social Care, the voluntary sector, Higher Education, Parent Partnership Services, Government Offices and Connexions; and independent consultants and parents
- three interviews were conducted with the national adviser
- ten interviews were conducted with regional fieldforce workers

- 25 regional meetings were observed
- members of the research team attended meetings of the National Steering Group (a sub-group of which was formed to steer the evaluation) and the national conference in June 2005
- regional documentation, products and websites were examined.

Conclusions and recommendations

The present operation of the SEN RPs has emerged from a situation in which seedcorn money was made available to regions alongside a large degree of trust in their ability to manage it wisely. The background conditions had the effect of releasing a considerable corpus of energy, imaginative and innovative responses alongside skills, experience and expertise which, together, accomplished a formidable amount of work which, arguably, would not have been undertaken, or which would have been undertaken far more laboriously, had the SEN RPs not been in existence. While the SEN RPs have, being voluntary and not subject to performance management or targets, taken their own paths and developed with different operational characteristics, there is now evidence, taken from this evolutionary development, of the profile of partnership that seems to deliver what is valued both regionally and nationally. There is, thus, some justification for having not only guidelines to which SEN RPs adhere unless they have good cause to do otherwise but also guidelines to national statutory agencies in order that they may create the conditions in which the SEN RPs may flourish. The guidelines would only be effective in supporting the culture amenable to the SEN RPs - not to create structures and processes in themselves which did not relate to this culture.

Individual partnerships should:

- maintain at least one facilitator
- maintain an active multi-agency management group which includes representatives of all the relevant strategic agencies
- expect management group members to promote the partnership as appropriate in their own professional area and to identify colleagues suitable to contribute to, and take forward, agreed partnership activity

- through consultation, design and execute a regional agenda and ensure that widespread regional ownership is maintained by the processes of action-planning which yield this (i.e. involvement of a wide range of stakeholders but with strategic coordination) even if this process has itself to be carefully planned
- analyse their 'professional' strengths and weaknesses and identify particular initiatives and professional areas in which they might use available resources most effectively in offering/taking a national lead, sharing products and processes with other regions and involving national policy-makers
- consult with directors of service/agencies (including voluntary agencies) about the best way of 'filling gaps' where these are inhibiting the execution of desired tasks
- review communication strategies and consider whether it might be most efficient to share ideas and strategies with other regions regarding website design, for example
- ensure that all task groups have not only action plans (as at present) but also criteria and strategies for dissemination and for identifying and evaluating effect(s), including outcomes and impact
- maintain some administrative support to 'service' the RP and maintain the networking, information dissemination, and organisation of meetings that helps to hold the partnership together and ensures that its activities are known by as many people as possible
- engage in collaboration with national agencies and support them in the formulation of national policy and practice.
- note that, although the SEN RPs are not statutory bodies, their multi-agency work and planning ability can be severely inhibited by uncertainties and delays in decision-making
- identify senior managers who can act as points of liaison with the partnerships and enable 'short' lines of communication and act as consultants where national leads are in their professional area
- include the SEN RP in all relevant communication and consultation
- maintain the role of SEN RP national adviser, include him/her in relevant meetings and discussion at national level and ensure that the post has the capacity to maintain the level of support that has been shown to enhance the work of the individual SEN RPs
- consider the critical elements which have underpinned effectiveness in the SEN RPs and not only maintain these but also consider whether these might be applicable to other situations as new structures emerge within the Change for Children agenda
- ensure that the SEN RP facilitators continue to have access to the type of support which has shown to be valued among regional fieldforce workers (e.g. meetings to discuss facilitator issues, briefings with DfES policy leads)
- consider when it is appropriate for an 'activity' developed by a region or group of regions and taken up nationally to be formally adopted by national agencies in order to free the originating RP to move on elsewhere or to ensure that there is the consistency of application necessary and appropriate when it is embraced nationally.

National government and relevant national agencies should:

- maintain an open and mutually beneficial dialogue with the SEN RPs and regard them as a positive collaborative resource in the formulation and execution of national policy to enhance provision for children with special needs or who are in particularly vulnerable situations

Government Offices and regional agencies should:

- maintain an open and mutually beneficial dialogue with the SEN RP and regard it as a positive resource in the formulation and execution of regional policy to enhance provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, children in care, and safeguarding issues
- include the regional facilitator in regional field force fora wherever possible

- identify senior managers (in the GO/regional agency) who can act as points of liaison with the partnerships
- include the SEN RP in all relevant regional communication and consultation
- consider the critical elements which have underpinned effectiveness in the SEN RPs and not only maintain these but also consider whether these might be applicable to other situations as new structures emerge within the Change for Children agenda
- put pressure on relevant local authority directors to show positive commitment to the RP by considering the agenda, the way the authority can contribute to that agenda, and the implications of the agenda for authority policy and practice
- review what can be done regionally to monitor and evaluate the work of the RP alongside other regional level initiatives.

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills

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