

One East Midlands Impact and Legacy: Research Findings

One East Midlands' role

One East Midlands is the regional network for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the East Midlands with a mission to maximise the VCS as an influential, valued and equal partner in all policy development. It aims to ensure that all elements of the VCS play a valued role in the development of policies and strategies that impact on the individuals and communities in our region. In particular it aims to prioritise support to those parts of the VCS with specialist perspectives and knowledge or working with those communities facing most disadvantage.

The research

As a result of changes to former regional geographies and structures, the role of VCS infrastructure and the reduced funding climate, One East Midlands has decided to close its operations at the end of 2015. It commissioned *Ideas to Impact* to review the value of its work over recent years and identify any gaps in support that, if not filled, would be detrimental to the success of the VCS in the future. This report sets out the findings obtained by a survey with 112 respondents and interviews with 26 key stakeholders.

One East Midlands' activities

One East Midlands has been active in a number of areas of policy, particularly economic development, European funding, and health and social care; consistent with its aims to influence policy development and inform the sector of changes that affect it. This aim is reflected in its strapline - 'getting voices heard and shaping change'. It has also provided some general infrastructure support and some targeted support around BME and youth.

Value and impact findings

The research investigated what had been valued from the support provided by One East Midlands, and the impact of that support on VCS organisations and their beneficiaries.

Information provision was the most used service by survey respondents followed by work around European funding and health and social care. One East Midlands' role providing support to infrastructure organisations was least used, although this is likely to be because it is targeted at a subset of VCS organisations. Other functions that were valued were building relationships between decision makers and commissioners and the VCS to enable greater participation in the delivery of services, and the vision and foresight to enable the involvement of the VCS in various programmes.

Most organisations (68%) thought that One East Midlands had achieved or partly achieved its purpose. Frontline organisations were the most positive as were respondents from Derbyshire, Derby, Nottinghamshire and Nottingham – the D2N2 area where One East Midlands have been particularly active.

The **most important infrastructure roles at regional level** were considered to be:

1. Being able to support engagement with regional or sub-regional commissioners and decision makers and other bodies
2. Building cross sector relationships and partnerships
3. Coordinating tenders and funding applications for programmes that are above local level, e.g. two or more cities / counties.

There were a few **suggestions for learning** where things could have been done differently, for example a more consistent relationship with local infrastructure organisations across the region, greater awareness about One East Midlands' role, and some work with colleges that wasn't as successful as other initiatives.

Future gaps

Most respondents (68%) thought that there would be a gap left by One East Midlands' closure. No one thought that existing local or national bodies could fill this role completely, although 17 organisations answered that they would be partly able to.

Government and public sector organisations were the most likely to agree that there would be a gap. Reasons included loss of knowledge, networks and relationships, (including about the East Midlands) that national organisations don't have, the loss of functions that are most effective at regional level for economies of scale, geographic proximity or critical mass, and the independence and impartiality of One East Midlands.

There was a consistent view across all interviewees and many survey respondents that **local infrastructure across the region was patchy** and in some places non-existent and not able to fill in gaps. There was **no suggestion that generic national infrastructure would be able to step in and undertake the role of regional infrastructure**, nor a wish from national infrastructure to do so. Comments about national infrastructure included that it was too remote, was mainly focused on the needs of larger organisations and it just did not have the local knowledge to be of practical use on the ground nor to build relationships with local commissioners and decision makers.

There was a feeling from many that loss of One East Midlands is **likely to affect small and medium local VCS organisations** rather than national or regional level ones that may be big enough to have the expertise required or links into national umbrella bodies.

VCS challenges

Future challenges facing the sector included:

- Developing consortia or partnership working and responding to commissioning, particularly for larger bids, including the need for facilitation and brokering of this.
- Undertaking strategic or policy work at a regional or sub-regional level or interpreting and influencing national initiatives - particularly regarding EU funding, devolution, health and social care transformation and cuts, and new commissioning models.

Geographical level

A major reason One East Midlands was created was the development of regional Government. While formal regional structures have been abandoned, **Government still has an important regional footprint, local Government has regional representative organisations and there are important regional initiatives** – Midlands Connect and Midlands Engine for Growth. The future may bring more sub regional structures like D2N2 either through reorganising LEPs or creation of larger combined authorities.

Commissioners' needs

Commissioners wanted to hear the voice of the sector and to be able to increase its capacity and capability by providing information, advice and training, which fits with the purpose of One East Midlands. One East Midlands provided an effective level of access for the commissioners and a knowledgeable partner. There is a danger that **commissioners will not take the trouble to contact local infrastructure** (their resources to do this are also being reduced) and that **local infrastructure will not have the capability** (in terms of knowledge, expertise or relationships with their local VCS) to undertake that engagement effectively.

Future requirements for regional VCS support

Based on the findings from this research the elements below would appear to be important in considering future VCS infrastructure:

- **Geography** – any new arrangement would need to cover a large area to meet the requirements of commissioning/decision making bodies for scale and reach, but not necessarily the current East Midlands; being able to overlap other regions would be beneficial to cover emerging structures. It should not however not too large that it loses the elements below.
- **Trust** – it must have the trust of organisations in its area, particularly trust of VCS organisations. This research indicates that One East Midlands has been a trusted organisation as a result of the competencies of the staff but also because it is a “pure” infrastructure body that aims to not compete with frontline or local infrastructure VCS organisations.
- **Relationships, connections, and networks** – it needs to be able to talk to the right people and to be able to broker relationships within and between sectors, including being able to link local and national levels.
- **Expertise, capability and capacity** – can talk the language of commissioners and VCSE and be a credible representative of the sector.

Conclusion and next steps

Overall One East Midlands is thought of highly amongst the VCS and its partners including decision makers and funders. This research has demonstrated a role for regional infrastructure (with potential changes to geographical remit) and VCS organisations and decision makers / commissioners alike will miss One East Midlands' role. There are activities that are needed at a sub-regional or regional level, but no easy answers to the problem of funding, particularly that of core funding to be able to continue providing functions such as information, foresight, intelligence and relationship building that mean that other opportunities can be identified and pursued. **These findings could provide impetus for the VCS and its partners to come together to shape what is needed for the future.**

The conference on 26 November can be used to test the appetite for holding discussions and finding a solution. Perhaps organisations collectively need to consider what they will lose in order to identify whether there is an appetite to either identify how to keep One East Midlands or to put something else in place to adapt to the future environment.

For commissioners, decision makers, funders and other partners:

- Is it important for commissioners to have an organisation with wide scale and reach it can work with efficiently to do what One EM have done?
- What extra work will it cause funders as a result and what will it cost them to undertake it themselves?
- What will the impact be on communities and services of not involving the VCS?

For VCSE organisations:

- What will the VCS lose as a result of the loss of One East Midlands?
- Might regional / sub-regional and national commissioners decide that engagement with a range of VCS organisations at different levels is too complex and time consuming and so not involve the VCS at all?
- How would VCS organisations, particularly infrastructure organisations, need to organise themselves at levels above local to be able to open up opportunities for the VCS across the region?

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