

Developing Regional Networks for Participation Support

Executive Summary



Report produced by EMVY and VYSER/Young Lives

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Research into participation support needs within the East Midlands
and East of England Regional Networks



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1.0 Executive Summary

In a number of aspects both the East of England (EE) and East Midlands (EM) networks have common features, namely coordinators hosted by contracted VCS regional infrastructure bodies (EMVY and VYSER/Young Lives) with limited infrastructure and resources including time, funding and admin support. However, the two networks work in quite different ways and in quite different contexts.

In the EM there is a regional strategic participation leads group, hosted by the GO. It has main membership of Children's Trust / local authority participation leads and some VCS representatives, as well as local interagency participation networks in most county/city structures, which are part of or linked to the Children's Trusts. EMVY hosts its participation work within its half day Forum meetings held quarterly. Participation is a key element of the EMVY Action Plan and joint Action Plan for the East Midlands Partnership Group (EMVY, Youth Work Unit and Regional Y & C Training Providers).

The EE network (YIPPEE) predates PWNE and exists separately from the contract holder. In the EE there is little evidence of local participation specific networks and no formal participation leads group, although YIPPEE has a strategic remit within its Terms of Reference. There does not seem to be any obvious reason for this disparity other than the fact that there are no clearly identified Participation Leads in the EE; work is developing though, around an IYS Leads group which is replacing LAYSER as a regional body. Whilst the GO East supports participation activity through hosting YIPPEE meetings and working with them, including some funding, around regional participation conferences, there is no strategic participation relationship or plan.

Membership also varies with the EM having a mixture of larger VCSs, infrastructure and frontline organisations and the EE having smaller frontline providers. Both have statutory members, and membership has increased significantly since the introduction of PWNE support. In both regions the profile and role of the VCS has increased with their involvement in event and training delivery and consortium work and this offers further opportunities for VCS support. One of the strengths of the networks is that they are multi-agency as participation is seen to be about working together. This encourages a more integrated approach whilst recognising differing agendas. There is still space though to look at developing a VCS targeted offer within the annual programme of events and training.

"Participation is about integration and working together. If we can't do it then who can?"

Members in both regions recognised the same core benefits: information sharing; networking; access to training and resources; learning from best practice; learning about work of other sectors. It was seen as a valuable route to influencing strategy. Interestingly, it is a useful platform to increase awareness and understanding of the VCS and associated

outcomes were around increasing capacity and access to funding through partnerships and informal workforce development.

Requests for development included updates via newsletters and speakers, and more opportunities to ask questions and for signposting. In the EE further targeted training, which they valued.

"Lots of contacts, including Proaction now working with them on project. Also info and listening in on what's going on LAs, hearing their comments. Behind the scenes view."

Needs and improvements were mostly based around funding and keeping meetings to half days, perhaps with a clearer theme (EE). Also, some rotation of location as well as easily visible clarification and relevance of emailed information. Mention was also made of inclusion of YP in meetings (this is already done via events and training in the EE). In EM the half day Forum events run in different venues, improvements include more showcasing of individual work. For the Strategic Participation Leads Group a need was recognised for strategic links with the participation agenda, and flexibility of time and frequency of meetings linked to the tasks to be completed.

Training provided by both Participation Works and other organisations had been utilised by several of the respondents, who felt it was of good quality but there still seemed to be issues for many around time constraints, cost, backfill and distance. Amongst training needs, the request for support around diversity and embedding participation across service provision seem particularly pertinent to evolving agendas and issues.

Parity between membership of the regional networks and the PWNE database was not consistent. Although PWNE membership was high amongst respondents, this is likely to have occurred because the respondents were the most active network members. There is still a significant number on contacts on the mailing lists that are not necessarily PWNE members. Response to the website was positive in terms of available information, though access and search issues were raised, including those who wanted to find members in their area being unable to. Respondents needed simpler routes into participation, perhaps through a more accessible introduction/awareness raising page on the Gateway, or perhaps a specific user guide. There could also be better use of the PWNE database in terms of networking between members and making the training more accessible to VCOs should be considered.

From visits and discussions, coordinators recognised that there were distinct cultures and different approaches though – not just between the VCS and statutory members but also within the range of VCOs. Uniformed or very small volunteer only organisations (cadets, guides, scouts, neighbourhood based organisations) have different staffing from a youth centre or sexual health centre and each needs a different approach. It was felt that some of the information and meeting agendas in the EE may be too advanced and potentially off putting: VCS focused events were suggested as useful, especially for allowing VCS to think outside the box (one of their strengths) and potentially offer their skills and harness their resources more effectively through partnerships.

"The meetings can feel quite heavy on statutory services side. Vol orgs can often be innovative and bring about change through their flexibility, opportunities to explore this and partnership working with vol orgs only may be interesting."

The EM themed Forum style was accessible to all, and the Strategic Participation Leads Group offers an opportunity for more detailed discussions. There would be greater benefits if its membership could be opened up to become multi-agency including VCS focusing upon the participation agenda.

This project actually helped to share common issues but also to realise differences between regions that had appeared similar. The improved knowledge and understanding will directly impact on the future of the EM and EE networks in terms of planning, meeting design, membership recruitment and support and development of the strategic role. It also offers the wider PWNE programme evidence of need, good practice, outcomes and development ideas such as partnership, profile raising, strategic advocacy and entry level participation support work in relation to the VCS and in particular small VCOs. Most of all though it highlighted the significant role PWNE plays in our regions to support participation and that in recognising this and developing our role to meet it, we have to be flexible and responsive – like the VCS – appreciating that one size certainly does not fit all.