

Commentary Notes on the Value of Integration Approaches within Rural Development.

Taken during the international conference organised by the European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST) between 15-17 October 2010 at the Ventnor Botanic Garden conference centre on the Isle of Wight.

Introduction

ECOVAST is an international Non Governmental Organisation with members in 15 European countries, operating as a network and mutual support organisationⁱ.

This conference, titled 'Challenges of effective rural development and heritage', was supported by ECOVAST as well as by the Association for European Rural Universities and by the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) Networkⁱⁱ.

This conference involved representatives from all parts of the UK as well as from several other European countries. It involved study visits as well as presentations and workshops involving all the participants. In particular, it included hearing of the experiences of practitioners from the Isle of Wight.

The conference looked at the value of Integration in a very practical sense. It looked at Integration within programmes, particularly between the four axes of the EU funded Rural Development Programme on the Island and also within the work and programmes managed by the Isle of Wight Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It also looked at integration between these two programmes as well as between these programmes and other initiatives and mainstream programmes and initiatives managed by public service providers on the Island (such as the local authorities). It also looked at integration both on the basis of geographic communities and communities of interest (notably land managers).

These notes consider the extent to which this conference endorsed or challenged the conventional wisdom that Integration of the types described above are 'a good thing', leading to improved efficiency and Value For Money and improved outcomes.

Case studies

The conference visited and heard from Chale Parish Council and learnt how this council worked in close liaison with the citizens of Chale village and with local groups and with other organisations to deliver benefits for the local community. A community led plan (Parish Plan) and a Village Design Statement provided the basis for much of the proactive work of the Parish Council and other local bodies.

Their work included securing inclusion as one of 22 test bed communities for the Low Carbon Communities Challengeⁱⁱⁱ supported by the Department of Energy and Climate Change. This project, the Chale Community Project^{iv}, involves showcasing through practice the impact of sustainability on a community. It has involved addressing whole house energy solutions such as the installation of air source heat pumps on many of the local properties, as well as solar panels, insulation, water efficiency advice and measures. It has included training provision for local people to improve their employment prospects. It aims to eliminate fuel poverty within the village and cut fuel costs by up to 50%.

It has been supported by local housing associations and by the Ellen Macarthur foundation as well as by DECC and of course by local people and organisations. This has had to involve considerable partnership and integration approaches between the partners and supporters as well as between local people and householders. The project is beginning to deliver its desired outcomes.

The conference heard from the Rural Development Programme on the Isle of Wight^v and some strong examples of integrating this EU investment with national and local investments to achieve stronger outcomes. This included improved environmental management of land and also a number of other more discrete projects such as a woodchip biomass project; a reservoir project; and grain storage bin projects. Local partners for these projects included farmers and land managers and their representatives and also the Isle of Wight AONB Partnership. The Local Action Group that manages part of the RDPE investment also includes a number of relevant local organisations including representatives of farmers and landowners, the Isle of Wight Council, the Isle of Wight Economic Partnership and the Isle of Wight Chamber of Commerce.

We also heard directly from the Isle of Wight AONB Partnership. This is a broad-based independent organisation with representatives from many local, regional and national organisations and individuals with a direct interest in the AONB^{vi}.

The purpose of the Partnership is to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the conservation and enhancement of the AONB, which covers about half of the island's land area, in light of the AONB Management Plan and its policies.

Observations on Integration

All of the case studies and presentations showed the value of the lead individuals (on behalf of their organisations) in establishing strong personal links of mutual understanding and trust between each other. Having a strongly defined local geography for their work helped in this endeavour.

Moreover, successful integration was sometimes the result of opportunistic behaviour by local leaders and managers, realising that bringing together two or more partners and funding streams could deliver stronger outcomes than working separately and that worked for all the partners involved.

The quality of local leadership was also important. Leaders that were skilled at listening and at co-operating and at helping others to achieve their objectives were more likely to appreciate the value of 'Integration'.

In a workshop exploring the experiences and views of conference delegates on the value of Integration and how to encourage it further a number of additional and reinforcing points were made.

Delegates considered the barriers they faced to integrating programmes. These included the following, and there are clear overlaps between some of these categories:

- Professional perspectives and language (and in particular land use planners, lawyers and highways departments were mentioned). Sometimes different local political perspectives could also be a barrier.
- Lack of ownership and engagement from local communities and/or by other important stakeholders.
- Lack of sufficient devolution and delegation of power and influence and financial accountability to the local level.
- Conflicts of interest both within a community (different groups and different individual perspectives) and between agencies and including regulatory frameworks and positions.
- Lack of understanding of each others' points of view and a lack of effective communication and negotiation between individuals and agencies.

Delegates then discussed and agreed a number of solutions that can work to overcome these perceived barriers. These included the following:

- Good project design and management including measurable objectives and mapping the role and perspectives of relevant agencies and the scope and potential for Integration. And also, open and accessible information about the project and its progress could be helpful.
- And achieving a good start to a project or initiative.
- Designing objectives and goals that work for each organisation and participant. And ensuring that there is widespread support and ownership for the project. This includes sometimes allowing a lot of different groups to be involved and feel some ownership and attachment to the project and its objectives.
- Looking for and implementing new and innovative approaches could sometimes be an effective way through barriers.
- Relevant training, particularly for (inter-agency) teams involved in project design and delivery could be valuable.
- Strong communication skills, including sometimes listening skills and conflict resolution skills could be valuable.

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ⁱ See: <http://www.ecovast.org/english/index.htm>

ⁱⁱ For details of the conference programme and of the RDPE Network see: <http://www.rdpnetwork.org.uk/activities/all-activities/ecovast-international-conference-challenges-of-effective-rural-development-and-heritage>

ⁱⁱⁱ See: http://www.decc.gov.uk/assets/decc/what%20we%20do/supporting%20consumers/lowcarboncommunitychallenge/1_20100204144858_e_@@_decclcccbookletweb.pdf

^{iv} For more information on this project see: <http://www.chalecommunityproject.org/>

^v See: <http://www.rdpnetwork.org.uk/your-network/local-action-groups/isle-of-wight>

^{vi} See: <http://www.wightaonb.org.uk/en/partnership/members/default.aspx>