# Evaluation of the Special Educational Needs Regional Partnerships

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**National Foundation for Educational Research**

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# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

## Background

The Special Educational Needs Regional Partnerships (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 innovatory. 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.

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 SEN 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. The present report 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.

## 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.

## 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.

# 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.

**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
- 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.

**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 fieldforce 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.

# 1    Introduction

This report represents the final stage in the evaluation of the Special
Educational Needs (SEN) Regional Partnerships (RPs) undertaken by the
National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) for the Department of
Education and Skills (DfES). It makes reference to two previous interim
reports presented to DfES in January 2004[1] and February 2005 (Fletcher-
Campbell *et al*., 2005) respectively. The second of these reports was to inform
Ministerial decision-making, early in 2005, about the future of the
partnerships, whose present funding cycle was due to end in March 2006. On
account of considerable changes in the relevant policy context, the
government's reform of regional working, including consideration of the brief
of Government Offices, the period of policy suspension prior to the General
Election and the changes in ministerial responsibility following the Election,
the decision regarding the future of the SEN RPs was subject to a series of
delays. An announcement was finally made at the National Steering Group[2]
(NSG) on November 8th, 2005 to the effect that:

- funding for the partnerships was to continue for 2006/07 and 07/08
- DfES team leadership responsibility for the SEN RPs would pass to
  Government Offices
- the focus of the SEN RPs would embrace 'vulnerable' children.

At the time of the announcement, further details about these arrangements
were not available and were under discussion when this report was being
prepared.

The announcement came just as the present report was being prepared for
presentation to the project steering group at the end of November 2005 and the
report must be read in the light of this. The programme of interviews in the
final phase of the evaluation (January to December 2005) had been delayed in
the hope that a decision would be made and, thus, it would be clear as to
whether the focus was on plans for development or exit strategies. As time
went on, it was clear that the evaluation programme could be delayed no
further; hence facilitators were, inevitably, asked about the effect of the delay
on partnership working and what would happen if funding were discontinued.
These data are included in the present report as, though ostensibly irrelevant
now that the decision has been announced, they give messages to those
responsible for policy about the effect that uncertainty about the future has on
those most affected but with no power to do anything about it.

On the grounds that this report may be read independently, without reference
to the previous interim reports, it starts with a brief background to the

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[1] http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/regional/evaluation
[2] for minutes of the meeting see: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/regional/nsg

partnerships and summary of the position at the respective stages of the two interim reports. However, the main body of text refers to the state of the partnerships at the end of 2005 as we suggest that some of the early findings represent 'history' and may not be useful with regard to the present state of the partnerships, even if it explains how they arrived at this present state.

## 1.1 Report structure

This report considers the identity of the SEN RPs among regional fieldforces, particularly in relation to other such fieldforces; the role of the facilitator; the profile of those involved with partnership activity; and the nature of the activities undertaken under the aegis of the partnerships. It concludes with recommendations which are aimed at maintaining the strengths and addressing the weaknesses of the partnerships. These recommendations are made in the light of a policy context which is fluid and rapidly developing. The exact profile of the SEN RPs will to a certain extent depend on other developments in Government Offices and Children's Services. However, the NFER team recommends that those responsible for this policy and the development of new structures and processes under the *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury, 2003) and Safeguarding Children agenda, have regard to the implications of the findings from this present evaluation for their area of responsibility and the way that the areas which are under their provenance can best utilise the considerable resource represented by the SEN partnerships in each region.

## 1.2 Brief history of the regional partnerships

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 SEN RPs are now reaching the end of their second evaluation phase and third funding period.

Following the pilot phase, the first phase in which the whole country was involved was largely innovatory. Although RPs had a broad remit to develop means of better 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 literature tends to emphasise the difficulties of multi-agency work, such as non-coterminous boundaries, different professional cultures and training, and uncoordinated/ competing budgets (and, to add to the complexity, these can operate differently at different levels within agencies) (Easen *et al*., 2000). While regional meetings and networks of particular interest groups – for example, SEN officers – were well-established nationally, the multi-agency

activity tended (with some exceptions) to be local, or even limited to case work, rather than regional. The field was thus open for creativity as the RPs had room for establishing their own structures, and responsibility for identifying their own needs and engaging in planning and activity to meet these; they had scope for all the different activities associated with 'multi-agency partnership' – collaboration, coordination and joint working. There was evidence that this freedom from any expectations established in existing professional practices was a significant factor in all that the partnerships have achieved (see Easen *et al*., 2000). The RPs were not given a set constitution or management structure; the shape of the multi-agency work was theirs to forge in each case. They were, thus, in a strong position for responsiveness but, arguably, were only able to optimalise the opportunities by virtue of the strong leadership of the facilitator – a post which they had been 'given'. That such flexibility was possible and funding should be available without conditions was noteworthy at the end of a 'target-driven' decade focused on accountability but understandable in the light of the voluntary nature of all engagement within RPs.

The RPs came into existence at different times (November 1998 – April 2000). Although the later partnerships were able to learn informally from the earlier ones, the lessons were limited in that they were opportunistic and unsystematic. Whether or not strong lessons could have emerged at this point, even if opportunities had been created to facilitate them, is debatable, given the diversity of practice among the volunteers: evidence about the different implications of (as distinct from descriptions of) different ways of working are only beginning to emerge. Furthermore, on account of the voluntary nature of the RPs, the position in one region is not necessarily able to be reproduced in another if the same profile of volunteer partners does not emerge. It may be that now there is evidence, gained from experience, of the nature of the profile of partnership that seems to deliver what is valued regionally and nationally, there is an argument for having guidelines to which RPs adhere unless they have good reason to take an alternative path.

The present aims of the RPs (agreed in April 2002)[3] 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; and
- to improve inter-agency working locally and regionally.

These aims are to be reconsidered at a future National Steering Group early in April 2006.

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[3] see http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/regional/role/

## 1.3 The evaluation of the regional partnerships

The SEN RPs have been subject to two evaluations: the initial report (Ainscow *et al*., 2002), following the first phase of their development, when the idea was being piloted, considered their initial achievements impressive and drew attention to their potential for development and contribution to provision for SEN. Most of the recommendations from this report were implemented in the subsequent phase. For example:

- the aims and voluntary nature of the RPs remained unchanged
- the National Steering Group was reviewed, resulting in a clearer statement of roles and responsibilities
- a national adviser was appointed
- longer-term funding enabled three-year action plans to be drawn up.

Other recommendations were implemented, at least to some extent, during the course of the present evaluation. For example, RPs were:

- addressing their choice of objectives
- beginning to ensure activities had clear outcomes
- developing cross-partnership work and
- beginning to develop means of self-evaluating their impact.

In autumn 2003, the NFER was commissioned by the DfES to undertake the evaluation of the SEN RPs up to December 2005. The specific aims and objectives of the evaluation are listed in Appendix 1. A schedule outlining the data collection methods and the number and range of sources can be found in Appendix 2. The present report draws on the complete data set but, in particular, reports developments during 2005 – that is, since the second interim report – during which time the research team undertook:

- two interviews with each regional facilitator – or pair of facilitators in those regions with two
- two rounds of stakeholder interviews, representing a total of 41 interviews
- an interview with the national adviser
- ten interviews with officers engaged in regional fieldforces, either at the level of the national team or at regional level
- observations of meetings in each of the regions.

Members of the team also attended the first national conference in June 2005 and most of the NSG meetings, together with the NSG evaluation sub-group.

Over the evaluation period as a whole:

- the facilitators were interviewed on six occasions (66 interviews)

- there were five waves of stakeholder interviews (108 interviews)
- 25 meetings were observed
- the national adviser was interviewed on three occasions
- ten regional field force officers were interviewed.

Further details can be found in Appendix 2.

## 1.4 The scope of the evaluation

It is important to understand the scope of the evaluation. The evaluation was focused on the model of the partnerships; while this entailed a degree of comparison in terms of the different ways in which different regions fulfilled the original brief from DfES, the evaluation did not undertake direct comparisons between regions. Rather, it used the comparative data to show the implications of different ways of working and different approaches to the brief. Partnerships chose different developmental routes on account of the local and regional context, the constitution and interests of steering groups, resources (especially human resources) available and so forth. The evaluation was not necessarily looking for the best or the worst in each partnership: rather, at a range of approaches, areas of special education, and stakeholder involvement. Overall, the evaluation team tried to collect a variety of 'stories' in order to assess the degree to which the model of the partnerships could be sufficiently flexible to make an adequate response to both nationally and regionally determined needs and demands. The team was interested in the reasons that stakeholders became involved in partnership activity, and the consequences of this for local and regional practice; and in stakeholders' perceptions of the value and value-added of the partnerships. The evaluation team was not applying a set of predetermined criteria or success indicators for, it has to be remembered, the SEN RPs are entirely voluntary, operating, in the main, on goodwill and opportunity. Whilst using public money, the SEN RPs are not answerable for the precise spending of that money in relation to progress towards targets – and in this respect they are unusual among regional organisations (see section 2 below). The bottom-line question at this stage is: Are they making a difference?

## 1.5 A framework for evaluation

At a meeting of the NSG (March 2004) and, subsequently, with the partnership facilitators, the NFER team presented an evaluative framework whereby the partnership activities might be considered. There were three categories:

- **outputs**: the immediate, tangible, 'products' resulting from an activity such as a report, a protocol, an instrument/toolkit

- **outcomes**: the medium term changes in professional behaviour, attitude or understanding, possibly on account of use of a product but also in relation to greater understanding or confidence as a result of participation in an activity (e.g. a working group or a conference); as, in the case of the SEN RPs, the relevant professionals will be working directly or indirectly in providing for children and young people with SEN ('end-users'), these behavioural changes are likely to be of benefit to the end-users
- **impact**: the longer-term effect on end-users (children and young people with SEN and their families/carers) which can be shown to have a discernible and mutually agreed benefit for this cohort. Latterly, this impact would be couched in terms of *Every Child Matters* 'outcomes'.

For example, the production of an agreement among a group of authorities, if not across the region, about out-of-authority placements (the product) may result in professionals reviewing the way in which placement decisions are made, minimising moves for children and ensuring the quality of any placement to which a child is moved. These behaviours (the outcomes) will, in turn, alleviate some of the difficulties faced by young people needing specialist provision and make their transitions less traumatic and better planned (impact).

It is the impact that is, at the same time, the most important and the hardest to assess. Products are 'cataloguable' (see [4]) and easily locatable. Outcomes are more dispersed but a range of relevant professionals can talk about changes of behaviour and, if they cannot, there is evidence that the product has had little effect and remains locked in its catalogue, as it were. The impact, however, is both highly dispersed and the evidence may need to be teased out of those affected (the end-users) over the course of time and by a range of people working with those end-users; it is not something that can necessarily be captured in a 'snapshot'. Any 'effect' or 'impact' rarely has a singular causation. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the RPs (derived from the facilitator role) was that ostensible single initiatives were inter-related: facilitators were instrumental in putting people in touch with each other and suggesting ways of task execution that had been tried and tested in other areas of the partnership work. In addition, outcomes and impact need to be monitored over time. Some products very obviously come to the end of their shelf-life – and several of those developed early in the life of the SEN RPs were mentioned, in the later interviews, as having done this, often as a result of changes in the external policy-contexts. Others, however, remain 'fresh' but their effect, in terms of outcomes and impact, loses momentum after the initial celebration of their production. Many evaluations show a 'wash out' effect as staff move on and their replacements no longer own the product, not having been involved in its generation.

Moreover, data collection during 2005 showed that the SEN RPs were becoming increasingly organic so that, in some cases, it was difficult to

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[4] http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/regional/products/

separate out 'products' from 'outcomes'. Some facilitators and stakeholders, for example, regarded conferences and seminars as 'products', while others regarded them as events that brought together, celebrated and shared, the range of changes in professional behaviours that had occurred as a result of another impetus (or product) in a way that would suggest that they were evidence of impact. Similarly, working groups produced a product and then went on to plan its implementation, while working on a multitude of issues that subsequently arose as a result of it. An example of this might be the report on autism produced early in the life of one RP (one of the original 'projects'). The product itself was acknowledged by the facilitator to be 'dated' in that it was not the sort of thing that would be produced five years on in the life of the RP – not least because the facilitator would no longer be able to devote the time to it. However, the content of the report was still valid, it had spawned other products and outcomes, and the RP was able to work systematically through its recommendations in order to implement it. Moreover, the work was taken up at a national level, via the National Working Group on Autism[5] so its impact was, in the future, likely to be pan-partnerships. Another example cited where the inter-relatedness of developments was apparent was the SEN officer accredited training. Here, there was a self-evaluation tool (useful in its own right) which brought about greater confidence ('we know what we are about now') which enable the identification of gaps in training, to which managers were able to respond by formal training, shadowing or development exercises. This then fed back into the evaluation cycle.

The implication of all this is that the NFER evaluation team was interested in the SEN RPs' own capacity to undertake their own evaluation of impact. We regarded this capacity as being represented either in their own dedicated systems and mechanisms (e.g. evaluation/feedback forms) or in the very structures of the RPs (e.g. the regional networks, the relationship with DfES, the links with other regional field forces, the common *Every Child Matters* agenda).

By the time of preparing the present, and final, report, the team decided that it might be more profitable to base scrutiny of SEN RP activity around the idea of 'difference' and value-for-money. The fundamental questions at this stage were:

- are the SEN RPs making a difference?
- what is the nature of the difference?
- could the difference be achieved in more efficient and effective ways within the RPs?
- does the difference begin to address some of the persistent problems within special education and improve the educational experiences of pupils with SEN?

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[5] http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/teacherlearningassistant/asd/

- are the RPs able to respond to a policy context which has demands and structures which are different from those when the evaluation began?

## 1.6 Overview of developments during 2005

Across partnerships, the following were commonly reported:

- a burgeoning amount of partnership involvement not just in internal tasks (i.e. those activities over which the RP had total control, were clearly identified and resourced in the action plan and which, thereby, implied regional ownership) but also in external tasks (i.e. those activities in which the RP, usually but not always via the facilitator, was involved because of its growing presence and reputation and the fact that it was seen as an effective network or delivery method)

The RPs were, thus, having increasing influence on, and involvement in, activities around policy and provision for children and young people (and young adults in the case of the work on transition) with special educational needs. They were not only taking the lead but also using the resources to which they had access via the networks maintained by the facilitator. They were also able to offer the specific expertise accumulated in the facilitator role (through 'hands-on' experience – there was no prototype) to contribute to, and enhance, other SEN-related activity. Furthermore, more work was generated for the RP as others began to see the partnership's potential resource. One of the results of this was that any strict demarcation between 'RP' and 'other multi-agency, cross-authority' SEN work was becoming harder to apply. Indeed, there was some evidence that stakeholders who were more at the practice/operational end than at the policy/strategic end, were unable to do this. While this indicates 'embeddedness' and cultural change, it yet has implications for partnership action planning.

- a greater degree of multi-agency working – though not necessarily at all levels

The multi-agency work grew what might be described as 'healthily' in that people wanted to be involved, realised that they had a contribution to make, were empowered to make it, and knew that the outcome(s) would be positive for a community (i.e. the outcomes would be multi-faceted).

- a more strategic approach on the part of the facilitator

The facilitator was able, with confidence, to draw in and use others where appropriate and allow him/herself to move into new areas where his/her particular facilitation skills, expertise and experience were needed. This was, essentially, evidence of capacity-building.

- continued energy put into 'facilitating', even if others were assuming executive roles by way of minute-taking and chairing meetings, for

example: facilitators were still regarded as, and regarded themselves as, 'the glue that holds it all together'

There was evidence that the RPs would not have developed as they did had the facilitator post not been funded. As the facilitators had no guidance as to how to shape their role, the fact that facilitators became such a strength of the RPs was, arguably, by good luck rather than good management – though the original appointing panels must bear some credit for perspicacious selection and, as time went on, the role was reinforced by effective steering groups (see below). In the final year of the NFER evaluation, when the future funding of the RPs was awaiting decision, a number of stakeholders expressed doubt that the RPs would survive were the facilitator post to be withdrawn.

- continued use of consultants, and the 'stable' use of the same consultants who were, consequently, taking on a quasi-facilitator role in some cases

This freed the facilitator to move into other areas while giving the working groups the same 'servicing' and leadership.

- a greater awareness on 'marketing' the RPs in order to increase strategic involvement

Here, the overt marketing (in some cases influenced by the national strategy developed by the consultants – Silent Wave) reinforced the marketing that resulted from the greater spread of the RPs' influence. Arguably, the two strands complemented each other and the RPs benefited from this approach at this particular time in their history.

- a greater degree of trans-partnership activity and collaboration

This meant that more effective use was made of the resources inherent in the individual RPs and there was a means of overcoming the twin dangers of, on the one hand, reinventing the wheel and, on the other, good practice remaining locked in one area.

- increasing awareness of being a nationally recognised force which was central to the development and delivery of special education provision.

There was evidence of harmony between regional and national operations which was more than that created by the regional implementation of national policy or the meeting of national targets – it was more in the nature of a dialogue.

Nationally, there was a significant amount happening in the RPs during 2005 – too numerous to list here but most things can be found on the individual websites as well as on the list of products[6]. The activity falls into the following dimensions which the evaluation must respect insofar as different dimensions

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[6] http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/regional/products/

have different criteria of assessment, some 'harder' than others. The dimensions are not necessarily exclusive: for example, a 'product' (e.g. a protocol) must relate to a 'process' and may have grown from, and in turn contribute to, networking. Similarly, some activity may only be successful because of the existence of other, prior or parallel, dimensions: for example, a number of interviewees referred to the fact that network groups had emerged from task groups in which 'addressing the common enemy' (i.e. a persistent problem or something hitherto deemed too hard to tackle) had led to the development of collegiality and trust which developed into mutual support networks. The dimensions, which were not so identifiable previously – probably because the volume of engagement was not as great – were as follows:

- networking
- information sharing with end-users
- protocols, agreements and common policy
- data sharing (professional)
- services and interactive enterprises
- training courses.

These dimensions and the sort of thing that the partnerships were doing are discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

It has to be remembered that the policy-context was changing significantly during the year: in particular, authorities were addressing internal reform with reference to the *Change for Children* agenda within which multi-agency partnerships were assumed. However, facilitators reported that this agenda could also have a negative effect insofar as local authority officers were having to engage in so much local reform and address so many new challenges in terms of structures and strategies, that they had less time to engage in RP activity.

The previous interim report commented in some detail on the tensions implicit in the RPs. These tensions included:

- the different partnership sizes (from 33 to six)
- the engagement of voluntary agencies, but not in a systematic way
- the 'free' agenda alongside some requirements from central government
- the importance of networking but only as part of a wider set of activities
- the RPs' considerable influence despite their lack of formal authority
- their public funding without this being tied to specific targets.

These tensions persisted through 2005, caused by the fact that the RPs remain entirely voluntary with no statutory authority but increasingly in the public regard as a significant regional presence. The fact that they were the subject of

Ministerial decision-making does, perhaps, indicate something of their status as, arguably, had they less voice, they would have been phased out as have many other time-limited initiatives. However, in some ways, during 2005, the tensions became part of the context rather than an issue in their own right. The RPs have, after all, evolved despite these tensions and have not allowed them to inhibit their development. Nationally, over the past year the internal tensions were, perhaps, subsumed by greater structural anomalies. For example, as discussed below, the RPs have an unusual status among regional field forces. At the same time, they are intimately involved, with other agencies and organisations, in the *Change for Children* programme aimed at delivering the *Every Child Matters* outcomes.

# 2    The regional dimension

Compared with the situation at the beginning of the evaluation period (Autumn 2003), in 2005, the SEN RP facilitators were engaging in more interactions with other regional fieldforces. Arguably, many of these links were generated by the facilitators: in some cases, they directly forged the links themselves, by finding out about (from their extensive networks), and asking to attend, other regional meetings; in other cases, they were invited to attend but, it should be noted, this was generally only because the facilitators had made the SEN RP a notable presence in the area and not because they had a token invitation on account of the RP being part of the accepted statutory structures.

The SEN RPs are not technically a regional fieldforce but they share some of the same characteristics (e.g. location, facilitator/coordinator role, multi-agency dimension, operation via local authorities, networking) and were being perceived as one by stakeholders, even if incorrectly and only informally. The relationship of the SEN RPs to regional fieldforces and the facilitators to regional field workers has become more complex as the evaluation has progressed, not least because of the growth in use of regional fieldforce workers to implement national strategies. Evidence suggests that, now funding has been secured, one of the issues which needs to be addressed is that of the status of the SEN RPs and, in particular, of the facilitator, in relation to the Government Office, around which, presently, other regional fieldforces tend to revolve, even if they are accountable to national direction.

The present situation in the SEN RPs is that there is a range of relationships. Some facilitators were physically located in, and felt part of, the Government Office while others felt more isolated from it; much of the difference can be explained by the previous history and structure of the Government Office – for example, whether it had previously had an education officer.

## 2.1    The SEN RPs among regional field forces

While, as suggested above, the SEN RPs share some features of other regional field forces, there is evidence that they have a unique profile which both facilitates and inhibits what they are able to achieve. While regional field forces are a heterogeneous group of entities born at different times for different purposes, most, albeit not all, have a clear agenda underpinned by targets at national level, and can often rely on some higher authority even if this is not grounded in statutory obligation: as one regional worker interviewed said, 'I can be assertive'. Furthermore, they are generally facilitating or ensuring the local delivery of national policy, with the regional element being an administrative convenience rather than something driving the agenda as in the case of the SEN RPs. Project plans are translated to

regional scenarios and local authority delivery. In contrast, an SEN RP interviewee commented:

> *The SEN RP sets itself on a different footing from other regional development workers because a lot of work they have is about the statutory elements. We are completely different ... sometimes it is more difficult to get people engaged because they feel that, if we are voluntary, then do we carry as much clout?*
> *Relations [with other fieldforces] are gradual and not embedded. You have to remember that the [SEN] RP is voluntary while other players are driven by their agenda. The regional partnership is ground up ... when people realise that you're not pursuing the same agenda as they are, they move on to talk to those who are.*
>
> <div align="right">Facilitator</div>

Some of the things for which the SEN RPs had to strive were taken-for-granted foundations of other regional fieldforces. For example, in one case, what was, essentially, a steering group was obliged to have a multi-agency membership as a condition of funding. Elsewhere, Public Service Agreement, Primary Care Trust, or Local Government performance indicators were considered to raise the profile of the organisation. Because formal public targets had been set, some other coordinators were able to speak directly to chief executives and ensure the presence of first tier officers on partnership boards. This senior management 'buy-in' was widely considered to be critical to successful implementation and interviewees cited inappropriate delegation to lower tier officers as an inhibitor to effective strategic decision-making. This mirrored the situation in the SEN RPs which did not, however, have the necessary 'clout' to *guarantee* chief officer attention or political ownership.

However, where this was available in the SEN RPs, through effective marketing, prompting from lower tier officers, advocacy of 'same level' colleagues in other agencies, or the personal interest of the chief officer, (sometimes from first-hand experience of the partnership in another post), it was extremely valuable in that it facilitated the integration of relevant RP activity into the core business of the local authority's SEN provision (or in other regional work as the case might be). Arguably, given the way in which the RPs have developed and the evidence of what contributes to their effectiveness, Chief Officers/Directors of Services ought to be expected to make arrangement for authority/organisation-wide participation in the SEN RPs. There was evidence that the same approach had become necessary at the national level with regard to the SEN RPs.

However, a difficulty cited in some fieldforces which was not encountered in the voluntary SEN RPs was that of senior officers paying lip-service to the initiative: in the SEN partnerships participant commitment was generally high, as those who were not interested simply did not participate and, moreover,

there were other supporters who were interested in principle and keen for an activity to be successful, even if they were prohibited by 'day job pressures' from active participation.

The structures whereby support was offered the SEN RP facilitators were apparent in other fieldforces and were appreciated by staff involved. This suggests that they ought to be maintained in the RPs' future. The following were cited positively, for example, across fieldforces:

- KIT (Keeping in Touch) meetings
- opportunities for the regional coordinators to get together as a group to pursue their own agenda
- meetings in which the input was from national level personnel to update the regional coordinators on the latest policy developments and expectations
- information-sharing
- sharing of good practice
- opportunities for 'creativity'
- induction for new coordinators at national level.

These strategies did, perhaps, show that the value of regional staff was recognised. There was a degree of recognition that effective regional coordination was pivotal to the success of implementation of national policy not only to ensure support at chief executive/director level but also in cases where local coordinators did not have senior manager support. Several interviewees made the point that some national policy strands were relatively esoteric and individual project coordinators could be very isolated; thus the networks which were commonly set up by regional field force workers were valued – as they were in the SEN RPs. While the language used by interviewees was sometimes rather different from that used by SEN RP facilitators, the ideas were very often the same. For example, others spoke of arrangements to identify a problem and work together to solve it: this reflected the work which went on in many task/working groups.

The SEN RP facilitators' perception of the locus of accountability was notably different from that of their regional colleagues, who, generally, regarded national level meetings as a point for reporting on progress, and on what they had done and achieved in supporting the implementation of national policy with local authorities in 'their' region. While SEN facilitators were, particularly towards the end of the evaluation period when the future of the partnerships was to be decided, keen to publicise developments and action in their region, their accountability was to the stakeholders in their region rather than to anyone at national level. They enjoyed a more collegial relationship with the national adviser, whom they regarded highly in terms of someone to

keep them up to date with national policy, to put them in touch with each other, to identify overlapping or similar areas of work and so forth.

Since DfES links have been attending SEN RP steering group meetings, they have been highly regarded and the opportunity for mutual information exchange valued. DfES personnel were respected for the fact that they listened to what practitioners on the ground were saying. This use of regional networks as sounding boards for national policy implementation was also commented on by other regional workers: they mentioned that they had a 'trouble-shooting' role and a function in assessing whether national policy was realistic on the ground.

Particularly valued was the 'shortness' of the communication link to national (DfES) teams. This was an assumption of regional fieldforce workers who differed from the SEN RP facilitators in that they were, essentially, extensions of DfES teams. While those in the SEN RPs were aware of, and, used, other consultation mechanisms, the value of the DfES links with the RPs was that they were permanent and regular (at best, when the regional steering group met, though commitments meant that this was not always possible). There was also the opportunity of informal contact between times (picking up the phone to a 'known' person is valued more highly than 'going through the system') and an immediate response: intelligence could be transferred from central government to region and *vice versa* as and when it emerged – rather than having to wait for formal announcements or explication.

The actual DfES links to the SEN RPs having now been severed in the light of capacity issues in the central SEN/Disability Division, it would seem to be important to develop alternative structures to maintain the dialogue, particularly if the SEN RPs are to have more 'given' functions. This issue, and that of links with statutory bodies generally, is discussed further below.

Interviewees cited some of the potential pitfalls of regional working: many of these reflected issues arising in the SEN partnerships. For example, the matter of overlap of work with other agencies was mentioned, particularly where the issue was wide-ranging and complex, such as transition or inclusion.

Interestingly, the lower the degree of performance management, the greater the opportunity for values-driven enterprises and for challenging the conventional way of doing things and the normal lines of bureaucracy especially where these have not proved to be the best means of delivery in the past. Arguably, the SEN RPs are in one of the strongest positions to make use of these opportunities and they give evidence of what can emerge if organisations are allowed some of the freedoms and flexibilities that the SEN RPs have enjoyed. The evidence to date is, probably, that what they do best is address persistent problems in the area of special education and 'innovate' by way of seeking a consensual solution (examples here might be the work on out-of-authority placements or a lower threshold for statutory assessment)

although there are indications of the sort of innovation that only thrives if there is sufficient dedicated time (for example, the In On It project[7]). This type of innovation is strong because its viability and its desired output are being constantly scrutinised by those who would be responsible for its operation. It is a process of innovation very different from a top-down approach which may be impelled by values (e.g. political or social) one stage removed from the immediate relevancies of the situation.

However, the fact that regional boundaries may put limitations on access to cutting-edge practice, a sufficiently wide range of effective practice, and the greatest expertise, was mentioned in the course of the evaluation. Several SEN RP stakeholder interviewees pointed out that the best practice might not necessarily be located in every region so only depending on regional networks for developmental work could have its disadvantages. Regional fieldforces gave examples of other organisational models whereby regional coordinators were responsible for an overview of practice in a region but took national responsibility for a specialised area in which they had particular expertise. In interview, the danger of the SEN RPs not knowing the limits of their expertise was identified. A protocol might represent improved practice within a region but it might, at the same time, ignore good practice across the country. Thus fieldforces which had a rather tighter brief and which, thus, could be headed by personnel with in-depth knowledge of the national situation, might ensure greater consistency and dissemination of the best practice nationally rather than 'improved practice regionally'.

In the light of the greater volume of RP activity, the greater number of people involved (at all levels and across agencies) and the greater trans-region collaboration, there would be grounds for an agreed national programme for the RPs – 'national' insofar as individual regions could take responsibility for a particular professional area of development (e.g. autism, transition, visual impairment). The way in which this national programme was determined would be critical. It would need, first, to allow time for the type of consultation to which those in the RPs have become accustomed. Second, it would need to involve discussion within and among partnerships, and between partnerships and national government and would have to involve regional steering groups, the National Steering Group, facilitators, the national adviser and DfES.

Such a programme would address the suggestion that inter-authority differences in quality could be reproduced as inter-regional differences so that the 'post-code lottery' manifested itself at a higher level. Moreover, one fieldforce interviewee pointed out that regional staff could get diverted by local definitions of 'a problem' and the identification of work to focus on. If the regional worker was not a specialist in a particular area and did not fully understand the issues involved, it was hard for him/her to challenge the local

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[7] See section 5.3 for further reference to the In On It project

authority as to whether it was a good point of investment of resources. This relates to the issue in the SEN partnerships as to the degree to which facilitators needed to use consultants and the way in which they used networks to ensure that the most appropriate colleagues were leading working groups. Facilitators were accustomed to seeking out expertise.

If adopted to fulfil a national function, these centres of leadership within one region could provide guidance and support to other regions where practice may not have been so developed. Clearly, because regions have different profiles of provision (and, it will be remembered, partnerships' original brief was to scrutinise this regional provision – rather than to develop the situation to national standards) different regions might wish to pursue activity in a professional area which was distinct from that of the national leadership activity. The evidence from the RPs to date is that there are occasions when activity discrete to a region is valued regardless of what is going on elsewhere because it 'fits' the local scene and meets local needs. However, this 'lower level' activity might be enhanced by reference to the corpus of expertise and experience available in the 'lead' authority.

The stress on outcomes – central to performance management – was the hard side of a realisation that services and provision vary in quality across the country. It should be remembered that the SEN RPs were originally born of the identification, in *Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs*, (DfEE, 1997), of unacceptable inter-authority differences in terms of access to, and quality of, provision for children with SEN. The SEN RP facilitators were unusual among regional field force workers in not having a performance management function. Latterly, this function had fallen more to the SEN Regional Advisors who covered the regions but were not allocated on a one-per-region basis as in other initiatives. At the time of writing, relationships between the advisers and the partnerships were developing, although the adviser posts were only originally funded to August 2006 and, at the time of writing, their future was undecided. While some were referred to more positively than others, this was probably on account of the fact that the advisers were relatively new to post and had pursued different priorities. However, it is, clearly, something that needs to be kept under review with the changes that will undoubtedly come about in the next few months. Meanwhile, the facilitators' lack of a performance management function was, of course, linked to the voluntary nature of the partnerships. Whilst this voluntariness depended for its efficacy almost entirely on the skills and expertise of the facilitators in 'getting people on board', and, thus, put a tremendous onus on them (although the whole enterprise was underpinned by rigorous planning and consultation at a preparatory stage) it was universally considered a strength in that all participation was by willing consent of the participant. Time and time again interviewees spoke of the fact that they would not be involved in SEN RP activities unless they thought that they were worthwhile: it was all carrot and no stick.

The final point of comparison between the SEN RPs and regional fieldforces was in the matter of the regional agenda. Fieldforces were pursuing national agenda and there was little room for a regional agenda which emerged from a pooling of ideas among the authorities in that region. The fact that the SEN RPs generated their agenda from 'the bottom-up' and 'are trying to move forward together' and, moreover, that they counted these as reasons for their success, was in many ways an alien concept for some other regional fieldforce workers. The extent to which the regional agenda may be subsumed by the national, and the way in which regional agenda become national ones would seem to be a challenge for the next phase of the partnerships.

> *We sit outside the regional field force because we want to sit outside it. We want to remain a voluntary partnership. We want to be outside the fieldforce structure but be there somewhere. The current challenge is: how can we put ourselves in, with that brief?*
>
> Facilitator

## 2.2 The role of the national adviser

Discussion about the regional dimension of the partnerships is also pertinent to the relationship of the SEN RP national adviser, first, to the facilitators, and, second, to central government departments. While both are to a certain extent dependent on decisions about the partnerships' role in delivering the national priorities, they can usefully be discussed here in the light of the evaluation evidence.

Earlier RP evaluation reports have commented on the way in which facilitators valued the work of the national adviser. While she understood the particular demands of the role, having held one of the initial facilitator posts, she was yet able: to maintain an overview of all that was happening in all the partnerships; put groups in touch with each other; take messages back to DfES; act as advocate for the RPs within national government; alert national policy-makers to activity in the regions, the concerns of the region and the resources represented by the RPs; and disseminate and explain developments in national policy in the regions. Her commitment to attending a wide range of regional events and meetings was commented upon positively, as was her ability to make connections and to challenge and support. Some facilitators considered her almost as a line manager: this is important given the relative isolation in which facilitators were working and the fact that they were not all assured line management support (see section 3 below). As was pointed out in prior interim reports, the role of the national adviser developed since its inception, exactly as the role of the facilitator did. In many ways, the national adviser did, at national level, what the facilitators were doing at regional level: keeping an overview, keeping things together, short-cutting information exchange, enabling the sharing of good practice. As the facilitators had been

drawn into an increasing amount of regional work so, latterly, had the national adviser been drawn into an increasing amount of work at national level – and for the same reasons. In a developing scenario, it was critical that the SEN RPs should have a voice and a presence in embryonic multi-agency fora and planning sessions. However, as this stretched the capacity of the facilitators, so it stretched the capacity of the national adviser. There was evidence that the demands of the role need to be reviewed with possibly new structures and functions for the partnerships.

Furthermore, as the work of the partnerships develops and extends, so do the demands on national coordination. Several initiatives have now started with a single region – or with single regions working independently – and then been taken up by other regions (either as a product or in the course of development). An example might be the benchmarking or the out-of-authority placement work. Once such initiatives reach a critical mass, there are national implications. Elsewhere, national policy has been interpreted by practitioners regionally and this work has then proceeded upwards and outwards again and reached national proportions. An example might be that of the work on the P scales. Both types of work represent a formidable national resource but, concomitantly, neither is without potential dangers.

In the first instance, the work may slip easily into national policy while retaining its regional flavour and depth. An example might be that of the work on autism in one RP. This was a very early piece of work in one of the original 'project' regions which took many turns, in the course of which, it informed the National Working Group on Autism. Provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders was on the national, regional, local and institutional agenda and, being one of the SEN for which the incidence and awareness seemed to be increasing rapidly, benefited from a range of developments. It is, perhaps, not insignificant that the work was steered by a facilitator whose own specialism was autistic spectrum disorder, had stable and long-term input from an internationally recognised centre at a regional institute of higher education, and involved, from the start, multi-agency input. It was well managed so the level of commitment and interest was maintained. This work (and many other similar initiatives across the RPs) took, as it were, a linear path. It also retained its identity within the region and led to a range of other subsequent developments (for example, a training framework and a parents' information pack).

But the situation may not be quite as straightforward and the work may take more of a circular path. For example, provision for children in public care is a critical issue for which there has been national guidance and attention (DfEE and DoH, 2000) and, indeed, a regional fieldforce (Quality Protects) albeit now discontinued. Local authorities and regions are challenged by the agenda and it has come under the SEN RP remit via the 'inclusion' route although not technically a 'special education' issue – and, of course, it is entirely within the

'vulnerable' remit. It is well established that children in public care can be poorly served by ill-planned placement moves, particularly those out-of-authority, for which monitoring and review can be problematic. Thus the developments to produce protocols were an obvious focus for SEN RP activity. However, in a situation such as this, it may be that national examples are needed in order to identify the range of practice which can be shared to encourage 'effectiveness', and that regional work needs to be carefully tested against national criteria before instruments are finalised and offered to colleagues in other regions. Without this national 'reality check', there is the danger that some aspects of practice will have been lost sight of. Yet this is difficult without established structures and opportunities for liaison with those working at national level, this is not possible. Again, as there is evidence that children in public care can be moved on anywhere – not just regionally – it would seem important for national application. But an SEN RP can only *encourage* colleagues to attend to its work. And there is no real reason that relevant personnel at national level should necessarily be aware of potentially powerful developments in the SEN RPs unless their attention is drawn to them. The pitfalls are clear. The implications are that the challenges for the national adviser are growing as it would seem that, increasingly, the role must embrace the resolution of these potential problems in order to use the rich resources available regionally most effectively and efficiently.

Another example might be that of the P scales, which represent a nationally developed initiative which had to be applied locally. As the practice was innovative, practitioners at the local level understandably sought support and a number of initiatives evolved under the aegis of SEN RPs. Work was undertaken fruitfully and enthusiastically. However, again, without the 'reality check' of liaison with the parent organisation (in this case, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) there is the danger that the product remains unauthenticated and, possibly, misleading to practitioners. This is an example of another instance where it would seem that the national adviser's role needs to extend to effecting communication between RP working groups and relevant statutory agencies – essentially, 'keeping the balance'. The value of bottom-up development for innovation was frequently referred to: one interviewee contrasted the situation to the traditional one in which 'the great and the good generate received wisdom'.

> *You have to start from where you are to develop; you can't come in from the top down and expect folks to join in.*
>
> Facilitator

If this function is developed successfully, national agencies can regard regional resources as a powerful development and delivery mechanism (as, for example, with the Mediation Services). Interviewees in the SEN RPs valued having a voice in the development of national policy. However, the relationship needs to be one of mutual respect: there is evidence that a degree

of commitment and motivation would be lost were the SEN RPs to be regarded as merely a means of delivery of national policy. Maintaining the balance for mutual benefit – and, ultimately, to deliver most effectively the outcomes for children – requires sensitive brokerage. Sensitive brokerage needs time and it may be timely to review the demands made of the national adviser, and the facilitators qua regional field force workers, in the light of the identified requirements of the future.

# 3    The role of the facilitator

In the previous report (Feb 2005), the role of the facilitator was examined in some depth and analysed with respect to the literature. There was evidence that the core functions of the role were common across RPs, though the balance was different on account of the different sizes of the partnerships (e.g. London with 33 authorities in comparison with South East and Greater Merseyside with six), geographical structure (e.g. compact Greater Merseyside compared with dispersed Yorkshire and Humberside), resources available in the RP (the different starting points have been noted in all three evaluation reports and their effect seems to have persisted, for various reasons) and the different interests and pursuits in the different RPs. This situation continued in 2005 and this report will not retrack territory that has already been delineated in some detail (Fletcher-Campbell *et al*., 2005). But the different approaches of the facilitators revealed not only the sensitivity with which they had analysed their own area of responsibility but also the underlying frailty of the SEN RPs as presently constituted.

Aware that they had no 'clout' – particularly in relation to other regional field force workers in similar positions – all facilitators accepted that they had to make things attractive for colleagues. They went about this in different ways. Much depended on the capacity in the local authorities in the region: for example, in a small authority, a special education officer may be responsible for the vast majority of special education issues and may, thus, lack both the time and, more importantly, the access to specialist expertise in-house that is available in a large authority where a number of officers work as a team. And, if there are only six authorities in a partnership, 'if only two turn up, it's hard!'. Moreover, the mobility within local authority posts, particularly in a time of turbulence, as was commonly reported to accompany the reforms to accommodate *Every Child Matters*, meant that some relevant personnel might be new to post or the area of posts might be vacant. One facilitator estimated that, at any one time, there might be five small authorities in the partnership without a head of special education.

While some facilitators set up task groups with an expectation that members would take on responsibilities and fulfil them before the next meeting, others felt that it was important to let people know that they could come to a meeting and then not do a lot before the next one if they lacked the capacity. Each approach has its benefits. The former maintains a momentum, while the latter ensures that potential partners/contributors/resources – and, indeed, implementers – are not alienated; both thus nurture commitment and ownership.

> *It is about owning a piece of work where they have had the opportunity to influence the action plan and been encouraged to amend it.*
> Facilitator

*There is something about it being done in our areas, and people feeling that they have done that piece of work and getting excited about it.*

Facilitator

Bearing in mind what has been said above about the importance of changes in behaviour following the production of an 'output', this is significant. It is also pertinent to the issue of where an activity is generated, undertaken and, ultimately, passed on  (i.e. regionally, trans-regionally or nationally) – an issue which was taking increasing prominence in the final year of the evaluation, having been very much a side-issue in the earlier stages of the SEN RPs.

All the facilitators recognised, and considered critical, their facilitating role ('the glue') and there was consensus that the partnerships would not survive without this. There was confirmatory evidence from elsewhere. For example, stakeholder interviews extolled the virtues of the facilitators and, as one facilitator commented, previous track record also gave evidence: 'In the past, there were groups of professionals with energy but nothing to channel it.' That facilitation was 'the day job' rather than 'something additional to the day job' was considered key. This was largely because, as was generally pointed out by both facilitators and stakeholders, 'additional' activity such as that for the partnership was the first to go in times of stress. In previous reports, Ofsted inspections, illness and departmental changes were cited as reasons for stakeholders to ease out of regional work, albeit temporarily but, in 2005, all local authority personnel were having to address structural reform caused by the *Change for Children* agenda, posts waiting to be filled at both local and regional level (e.g. Directors of Children's Services and Directors of Children and Learning) and new forms of scrutiny (e.g. the first round of Joint Area Reviews) were taking place.

Even where facilitators had delegated task/working group support functions (e.g. chairing, minute taking), they commented that colleagues still 'like us to be around' and that they tried to attend events wherever possible. In some cases, administrators had taken on responsibility for booking venues and arranging meetings: their support was considered to be invaluable and, indeed, a critical area of development, were the partnerships to have further demands made of them in the future.

*The facilitator is the focal point; a person whom they can ask and through whom they can network.*

Facilitator

*There are key people or 'champions' in local authorities who do their best to support regional initiatives, but that is not enough. It is very difficult for anyone working in one authority to devote time to regional work because of the pull on them for their authority work. In* [this RP]

*they have seen ... despite having champions and a very active steering committee chairman, that was not enough. You need someone in the background making sure that the right people keep meeting, the pieces of paper and the emails keep moving around. If that is their job it will get done but if it is an add-on to somebody else's it may not. In* [our] *experience, it didn't.*

<div align="right">Facilitator</div>

The fact that the facilitators all had a special education background, understood the working of local government and were respected professionals/ practitioners in the area prior to their appointment continued to be something that was highly regarded. 'Facilitators have credibility. They have knowledge and expertise.' The point was that this knowledge and expertise allowed them to do the things which encouraged participation such as 'pitching things appropriately' and 'ensuring that whatever is going on is meaningful and appropriate'.

*When people come to us they come tired but they know that what we are doing is being done for them. It is regenerating.*

<div align="right">Facilitator</div>

Facilitators pointed out their 'supporting' rather than 'judging' role (although they acknowledged that the latter included challenging via task). While this had always been the case it is, perhaps, more noteworthy in 2005 than previously in the light of the anomalous position which the facilitators hold *vis à vis* regional field force workers (see section 2).

There were subtle changes here, too, in response to the increasing pressure on local authority colleagues:

*I used to say "here's a piece of work! Who is interested?" and we'd have a discussion and I'd write a paper as a result of that but now I write the paper and use the meeting as a sounding board.*

<div align="right">Facilitator</div>

Increasingly, facilitators were enabling links with other networks even if they were not directly involved in them. For example, one spoke of the fact that RP work on evaluating support services brought in the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD). It was the frequent references to this sort of incident that gave increasing evidence of the impossibility of tracking all the positive effects generated by SEN RP activity. Such references also bore testimony to the burgeoning demands on facilitators' communication strategies. The networks needed to sustain RP activity were becoming increasingly complex, involving:

- 'active' links for task/working groups within the RP and across RPs where work was being shared

- 'passive' links for RP-generated information-sharing networks within and across RPs
- links with statutory agencies at both local, regional and national levels.

In addition, facilitators had to ensure that, either directly or indirectly, links within local authorities (to achieve the 'layers' of involvement referred to above) were effective.

Once established, electronic networks could be maintained by administrators but there was evidence to suggest that it needed the particular skills of the facilitators to identify appropriate partners and establish the networks in the first place.

There was a feeling that, once the current *Change for Children* restructurings had settled down, stakeholders would have greater capacity to return to partnership activity. However, there was also evidence that this would only happen most effectively if the partnerships' existence and role were acknowledged in the new structures. As pointed out above, the interview programme for the final phase of the evaluation took place at a difficult time insofar as the decision regarding the partnerships was pending for many months. The announcement, when it finally came in November 2005, was both positive and enigmatic in its brevity: positive insofar as the RPs were assured of a further two years' funding; and enigmatic with reference to their role *vis à vis* national priorities. The initial, and very quickly-gathered, RP response to the national priorities was that they were all readily accepted – unsurprising given that they formed the local government agenda anyway – but that regions would want to prioritise and could not take them all on board equally at the same time. Discussion regarding how this might work – for example, regions might take the lead for different aspects – were at a very early and tentative stage and there is no value continuing them here. However, the evidence from the evaluation, particularly from the way in which, over the course of the three years, partnerships have engaged in action-planning and consultation in order to secure the ownership and commitment which, in turn, ensures effective delivery and subsequent implementation, suggests that it will be to the mutual benefit of government and the partnerships if clear decisions and expectations are made, with due but timely consultation, as soon as possible. That delay erodes commitment and motivation was evident both from stakeholder comments about times between the departure of one facilitator and the arrival of his/her successor, and also with regard to the delay in the decision about the RP continuation. The effects of the latter were encapsulated in the following comments in interviews in 2005:

- 'loss of energy'
- 'high level of demoralisation'
- 'things withering on the vine'

- 'restricting and impeding'
- 'more and more of a struggle to maintain momentum'
- 'riled the management group'
- 'caused time to be wasted'
- 'caused introspection'
- 'this is careless … how could it happen …. people do not want to be attached to a dying initiative.'

Despite these comments, the positive approach of the facilitators, in particular, was noteworthy, especially as they were the ones most likely to experience a fairly radical change in personal circumstances if the decision had been to cease SEN RP funding. Some, for example, had been issued with redundancy notices. Commonly, the attitude was that 'one shrugs one shoulders and gets on with it'. As one remarked, 'people in local authorities are used to uncertainty. If they stopped every time they were reorganised, they'd get nowhere!'.

Generally, the management and steering groups supporting facilitators were becoming broader in scope, although there were regional differences here, as there were in the degree to which membership had changed over the years. Ensuring that these groups functioned effectively and efficiently was a key facilitator skill. Facilitators 'knew' their own scenario well and responded accordingly. There was increasing evidence of facilitators preparing for meetings – either by doing some explicit initial work or by taking more time to become thoroughly familiar with relevant regional activity (by, for example, attending other regional networks) or taking time for reflection so that they were able to inform the group authoritatively. Some facilitators made reference to the fact that some steering and management group members were questioning whether they were the right people for groups given local authority restructuring and changes in agenda. Current members were reported 'not to have the autonomy they once had' and, with budgetary reform, some were no longer budget holders and, thus, had reduced ability to make decisions which carried financial implications. As many procedures were at an embryonic stage, facilitators identified some confusion in Government Offices – for example, over regional commissioning and procurement. These issues will, clearly, be a challenge for the future. The present capacity and nature of management within the partnership tended to dictate whether there needed to be 'redefinition' rather than 'just flex'.

Facilitators had differing views about how welcome the gradual inclusion in the Government Office would be. Some were already firmly embedded (both physically, in offices, and with regard to working practices) and welcomed the 'regional discourse' and opportunities for networking that this afforded. Others saw a distinction between their work and way of working and that of colleagues in the Government Office who were regarded as 'civil service',

working to a top-down agenda and 'bidding for every piece of work'. However, 'this does not necessarily get in the way'. Others were aware that relations had to be forged carefully – 'we are increasingly drawn into the Government Office but I am firm about not doing things inappropriately' – and there was concern that the reality check of working with local authority personnel, albeit on a regional agenda, might be lost within the Government Office, and that there might be less capacity to be responsive – 'having to run in a predetermined direction'. It was considered important that any agenda not generated from within the partnership should be 'presented, communicated and explained properly to get ownership and interest'. In some places, there was concern that specific special education issues and focus should not get lost in the broader *Every Child Matters* agenda at regional level. Some interviewees (stakeholders as well as facilitators) commented that there could be lack of awareness of what 'special educational needs' involved – for example, the mistaken perception that it was 'all about dyslexia'. It was, perhaps, easier for those whose starting point was special education, to move out into 'vulnerability' and more general 'inclusion', than it was for those in the latter areas to move into the more focused area of special education.

# 4 Professionals involved in regional partnership activity

This section describes the people who were interviewed who were directly engaged in RP working either as a member of a task group, steering/ management group or member of a project team. The section details their backgrounds; how they became involved in RP work; and outlines their various roles within RPs.

## 4.1 Who was involved?

One of the characteristics of the SEN RPs is that they are fluid, with ever-changing membership. The way in which stakeholders moved in and out of partnership activity, contributing as and when appropriate to the task, was highlighted in previous reports. In the final year of the evaluation, the NFER team continued to undertake stakeholder interviews, first, to follow through narratives about partnership activities and, second, to continue to examine the structure and nature of participation.

The stakeholder telephone interviews carried out in the final part of the evaluation captured information from a range of professionals and service-users who were involved with RP activity in some capacity – on a management, steering or task group. Some had multiple involvement – a testimony, perhaps, to the value which they placed on it. They included representatives from the following groups (see Appendix 2 for a detailed breakdown):

- Local authorities (education)
- Health Service
- Social Care
- Voluntary sector
- Higher Education
- Parent Partnership Service
- Independent consultants
- Government Office
- Parents
- Connexions
- Teachers.

This is a wide ranging group representing a wealth of expertise. Not every group was represented to the same extent across the RPs, on regional steering groups or within particular working groups but the group as a whole represented a resource which could be used appropriately. Across the

interviews – which reflected the partnerships as a whole – education, health and social care were represented, together with the voluntary and private sectors.

Some interviewees were more involved than others in multi-agency working. Education was still the core professional background in many working groups. In some cases, different agencies had been invited to attend but their attendance was sporadic or lacked continuity and, at others, it was difficult to get to the 'right' people due to the different structural arrangements between the various sectors and agencies. The evaluation did not find evidence that a task remained incomplete on account of the lack of a particular professional input. This may have been as much to do with the judicious selection of initiatives (i.e. those which had stakeholder 'buy-in' at conception), which was part of the partnership's action-planning, as with the range of actual participants. As regards the scope of participation, much seemed to depend on perceptions of the immediate relevance of the group's objective to the potential participant's regular job and the perceived viability of securing certain inputs. For example:

> *I know they are constantly trying to get people from all the different agencies but it's very difficult to get people from health for example because they haven't got the time or the manpower to release people for that sort of thing.*
>
> Parent

One of the facilitators' skills was working with resources available. There was evidence that those areas of special education which by their very nature demanded a multi-agency approach (for example, autistic spectrum disorder or transition) found it much easier to get a range of professionals than those where it was merely 'desirable' or was a minority interest spanning a range of professional roles (rather than being a clearly identifiable area of responsibility in another agency).

As has been pointed out before, while some RP task groups had been in existence in some shape or form for some time, new ones were constantly appearing and, as they did so, they presented fresh challenges for those unaccustomed to multi-agency working. The 2005 round of interviews was still giving evidence of the steep learning curve involved in having a multi-agency group and the demands of understanding each other's perspectives. For example:

> *When starting to work with different agencies you don't have an in-depth understanding of their role and where they're coming from. This is not a negative but it can be a challenge to understand everyone's perspective.*
>
> Health professional

Despite this, there was an increasing number of examples of effective multi-agency working. For example, task group membership with a range of 'social services, Connexions, youth workers, mainstream schools, different kinds of special schools, universities etc' was becoming more common. The key to success in multi-agency working within the RPs seemed to be the definition of a common aim or set of aims together with an agreed outcome that produced wide-reaching benefits either to practitioners or service-users and which transcended specialised interests of the different agencies.

Most professionals who were involved in RP activity had a background in SEN either through their current role, previous work experience or personal circumstances. They all had a particular interest, expertise or desire to move things forward which influenced their task group or steering group involvement. As suggested in earlier reports, this feeling that each group member had a particular role enhanced commitment and ownership as members felt that their particular strengths were being utilised and they were 'necessary' to the group. For instance, a member of a task group which focused on parent participation said:

> *I have a lot of interaction with parents who have children with special needs so it's not just my own experiences. I am able to bring forward other people's thoughts and experiences.*
>
> Parent

The fact that different 'layers' of participants were involved in working groups was noted in previous reports. This layering continued to be evident in 2005 and there was increasing evidence that it was a critical characteristic of SEN RP working. The layering occurred across different agencies (that is, strategy managers and those working in the field were equally necessary) and within agencies. It meant that innovative ideas were given a chance, as it were, but reality was never far away: practitioners, working alongside policy-makers, could point out practical difficulties in new strategies while, at the same time, policy-makers could consider strategic solutions to practical problems.

In some cases, participants were fairly senior managers who were able to provide a strategic overview of policy and practice, while in other cases they were at a practitioner level and offered a more 'grass-roots' perspective. It was the complementary nature of their input that was critical. This was commented on by some interviewees, for example:

> *Getting the right people at the right level, I think that's quite difficult because every local authority structures their services slightly differently…and it will be quite hard for the RP to put groups together.*
>
> Head of SEN

*Maybe it depends what level you are looking at it and where you want to see the impacts. If you look at an LEA level then you might want LEA people, if you are looking at it having an impact in the classroom too then there's a need for teachers.*

<div align="right">SEN teacher</div>

This was a view reflected by others that the combination of professionals and service users who participated in the RPs should be such that it facilitated purposeful and productive meetings which in turn delivered the most appropriate outputs with the maximum impact. Where there were gaps in the chain, there could be difficulties.

*The people who were at the meeting were very much at a strategic level, [there were] no practitioners there…I do think you need both to be involved.*

<div align="right">Professional from voluntary agency</div>

Another interviewee said:

*If it had been all heads of service on this group and this document had come from the heads of service saying that this document had to be used, the chances are it would have been used more widely that it is now.*

<div align="right">Head of SEN support service</div>

Working group effectiveness depended on the appropriate dissemination of information for three main reasons. First, the right people needed to be recruited to working groups to produce the high quality product/outcome. Second, the capacity of the group needed to be extended as much as possible with potential contributors influencing the progress of the task as it happened – this occurred where there was a lot of sharing of ideas and draft materials. Third, dissemination had to ensure that relevant colleagues knew about the product/outcome so that it influenced policy and practice as relevant. Dissemination often depended on the 'layers' of contacts within an authority, as mentioned above. For example:

*[…] things like that tend to go a bit higher within Connexions to the Chief Executive and they get sent down the chain, so you rely on other people to give you the information.*

<div align="right">Professional from Connexions</div>

And:

*It filters down in the end but it's not something that comes automatically. It might come to the director and to the head of section.*

*What he's started doing now is email it round to people so information is now becoming better.*

SEN data management professional

It appeared that in some local authorities and other organisations there was a propensity for fragmented and selective communication about RP developments. Systems of communication were usually excellent where controlled by the facilitator (for example, discrete email lists for network or task groups, regional websites or regional newsletters) but less secure for those who either did not have any formal or direct involvement themselves or did not take the initiative to find out themselves but to whom the information would have been useful. For example, one task group member said:

*Unless you are actually in the know or you are contacted directly sometimes it is hard to find things out, it tends to be word of mouth.*

Professional from Connexions

This may be of particular concern if there is to be a move towards greater multi-agency participation. If RP representation amongst sectors such as health or social care is limited then it could follow that professionals in these sectors may be less likely to come into contact with colleagues who are directly involved in RP activities and therefore do not have the same access to RP information.

Some RPs recognised this and were proactive in trying to ensure dissemination was as wide as possible; they encouraged group members to be proactive within their own local authority or organisation and use the networks and communication routes available to them there. One task group member said:

*I've been saying to the individual members of the group that they are charged with taking it back, not only to their direct line management and team but also to spread the net further, either directly themselves or through their line management and communication route.*

Professional from Government Office

A way of addressing the problem of communication had been introduced by one task group who had produced a briefing sheet which detailed their work and could be circulated via group members to other people who were not directly involved in the RP. In this way the work of the group was disseminated to a wider audience and, because everyone used the same briefing sheet, the information remained consistent. Partnership newsletters fulfilled a similar function at the more strategic end.

## 4.2    How did people become involved?

Professionals and service users became involved in RP activities through a variety of mechanisms. In most cases, they were invited to attend either by a facilitator or by someone who already participated in RP activity, such as their line manager or a colleague – this reflects the way in which RP activity was gradually becoming embedded. People were usually invited with reference to the distinct contribution that they could make where it was felt they could bring insight and knowledge to a piece of work, either because there was evidence of them addressing a particular challenge in their day-job at the time or by virtue of past experience and accumulated expertise. Contributions were various, from strategic overviews to planning and policy formulation, to trialling and piloting. In some cases this experience had been acquired in their current post whilst others had developed an area of expertise over a number of years working in different local authorities or agencies and were able to bring more of a strategic overview or direction to an area of work perhaps as a consultant. Some were approached because they had expressed a personal or professional interest in a particular area of work and wished to pursue it further, for example:

> *I have a previous history of being an appraisal coordinator, so I've a great interest in ongoing professional development.*
>
> Inclusion officer

Other professionals were not directly approached to become involved but volunteered by expressing an interest in a certain area of work. For example:

> *I was proactive in seeking involvement and I identified the projects that would be suitable to my brief and what I'm doing.*
>
> Professional from voluntary agency

Generally this was because they were already involved in another area of RP work and wished to extend their involvement or they participated in a group or network which was external to the RPs but where they had perhaps developed links with people who were directly involved and this had been their avenue into the RP itself.

Where parents were involved in RP working they tended to have some direct involvement or experience of SEN either through work with a voluntary organisation or as 'end-users', as the parent/carer of a child with special needs and their unique perspective and experience as someone accessing SEN services themselves.

Members of RP groups had been involved with RP work for varying lengths of time. One of the main influencing factors appeared to be how long they had been in their current post. Those who had been in post for a number of years were more likely to have been involved with either a task or steering group

since the inception of the RPs. However, those who were new to their present position were more likely to have been handed the role from someone else. This tended to be a colleague who moved to another job or for whom other work commitments in their existing role had perhaps increased and they asked if someone else would be willing to carry the work forward. This suggests that there was increased institutional commitment to the RPs rather than the involvement being a purely personal decision and, thus, rather frail when an individual's circumstances changed.

## 4.3    What was expected of task group members?

As stated above, the input of different individuals to the different types of groups within RPs varied enormously. For instance, in the case of task groups, individuals were often seconded to work on a particular brief in a project group which had been assigned. Membership of either task or steering groups usually required attendance at regular meetings and, frequently, some commitment to carry out a particular task between meetings. Members kept in contact with each other between meetings mainly through emails and there was often a steady flow of information, relevant literature and documentation, or draft materials.

> *You can be given your own part of a leaflet to look at. We are given tasks to do and then meet to discuss them.*
>
> Parent

And she went on to say:

> *We email things to the regional facilitator and he might email things to us that we have discussed, so we can follow things up we discussed at the meeting via email.*

The facilitators (or consultants) fulfilled a vital function in servicing these groups so that the tasks were achieved as easily as possible.

As stated in the previous evaluation report (Fletcher-Campbell *et al.*, 2005), time commitments for those who were involved in the various task and steering groups varied and were very much dependent on the specific needs and remits of each particular group. Generally, a timetable of core meetings was agreed at the outset of a project by group members; these usually took place at a central venue within each region. Some series of meetings were frequent and short; others were less frequent and lasted longer (for example, where a day was taken to develop some materials). Finding a common time and suitable location for people to meet were both factors in deciding how often meetings took place. For some, particularly those in the geographically dispersed regions, attendance at a meeting required a significant amount of

travel and this was eased somewhat by arranging less frequent meetings of a longer duration.

Time commitment was also determined by the nature of the work at any particular time – for example, action planning time was busy (though scheduled in advance); and sometimes a group had to meet to give feedback to another before the latter could advance. Facilitators had to exert a considerable degree of discretion in order not to alienate useful contributors by, on the one hand, being too rigid about attendance and, on the other, by being too lax so that the task was not accomplished.

While facilitators spoke of the importance of keeping to schedule so that there was no drift or loss of momentum, and not compromising in the light of the voluntary nature of participation, equally they acknowledged that progress could not always be anticipated, simply because the work was often exploratory and entered into uncharted regions, trying to address a 'stubborn' problem which had exercised past generations of officers working in the field of special education.

In some cases professionals spoke of the need for firm boundaries between their participation in RP working and their day-to-day responsibilities. For instance, one interviewee said:

> […] *although there's been some really interesting stuff going on I have had to be really strict and not leap in and say I want to be part of everything. I have had to be involved with things which are closely related to my day job.*
>
> SEN adviser

When time commitments were proving particularly difficult for an individual, an option was to share the role with other colleagues. However, although this seemed an option for occasional lapses in attendance, it had repercussions for continuity and group cohesion. There were a few instances where the group task seemed to have 'drifted' and become unfocused as a result of too many changes in group membership. Continuity in chairing and the circulation of detailed minutes from meetings were highlighted as ways of ensuring that people who could not attend were able to keep informed and abreast of developments.

Despite the fact that involvement in the RPs required professionals to take time out from their day-to-day responsibilities, relatively few mentioned that they had encountered any problems gaining permission to do this within their own authority or organisation. The main barrier appeared to be their own workload rather than any discouragement from within their own service. Other barriers included a lack of CEO commitment. As mentioned earlier, CEO commitment was an important factor in integrating RP work into the core

business of the local authority and the facilitation of RP work within authorities. One interviewee pointed out:

> *Having worked in an authority where they didn't want you to go out to do anything because they panic when they see you are not at your desk* […] *people get worn down and they don't go. So I do think it's about CEO commitment.*
>
> <div align="right">Head of SEN</div>

Another interviewee (an educational psychologist) spoke of the particular problems in small authorities where officers usually had a range of responsibilities and no one to whom to delegate anything: 'If it's really, really mega important then I get there but because I have no time allocated to it I can't get there otherwise'. Elsewhere, working arrangements prohibited some attendance at meetings. For instance, one interviewee had a job-share and found her attendance at meetings was dictated by the day of the week on which it was arranged. If it was a day when she was not in the office then she did not attend the meeting.

In the main, those who were involved in RP activities found that it was a case of making time and shared the view of the following interviewee who said:

> *It's difficult because it's asking busy people to do another job and think "oh, what's this now?", but the thing is it does make a really big difference.*
>
> <div align="right">Head of SEN support service</div>

A common thread through all the stakeholder interviews was the fact that colleagues would not attend the partnership meetings, because everything was voluntary, unless they really felt that they were contributing to something valuable to their own colleagues and their own area of work. With the vast majority of partnership activity, the assumption among participants was that it was going to be unquestionably worthwhile. There were a few occasions where things had not run smoothly (interestingly, usually when a facilitator was not in post) and these caused minor negative comments but never to the extent that people became disaffected, largely because they realised that it was a temporary lapse and their expectations were of excellence.

# 5 Regional partnership activities

## 5.1 Networking and building relationships

In the previous evaluation report (Fletcher-Campbell *et al*., 2005) it was noted that the RPs were:

> *Increasingly successful networks and there was evidence that they contributed to more effective communication within local authorities and regions, and greater knowledge of the work and culture of other agencies which itself fed back, directly and indirectly, to planning and provision. Practitioners valued the opportunities for informal consultation and information-exchange afforded by networks and interest groups and considered that it enhanced their own work.*

The evidence collected during the 2005 evaluation confirms this outcome and it also suggests that this benefit may be to a wider group than just those actively participating in a working group. The substantive networking opportunities that the RPs provided were felt to be hugely beneficial to a whole range of professionals from many services and working at many levels. There were many comments like 'it has helped bring people together who normally wouldn't have got together; there is a dissemination of ideas' and that the RP has created 'an ethos of sharing'. Another interviewee commented that the RP 'legitimises the importance of networking'. A facilitator spoke of 'the community' of authorities. It is important to note that the professionals felt they could admit to their weaknesses within the RP networks; there was a high degree of trust and confidence within groups and across RP networks.

This year's evaluation showed that it was not just those who were involved in the working groups or steering groups who appreciated the networking opportunities that the regional partnership work had created; it was also those who had attended events organised by the regional partnership who were grateful for the networking opportunities that were available. For example, a teacher from a special school had attended a RP event:

> *It was good for sharing good practice […] networking as well, it was good to see what other people were doing and…being able to see practical examples of what other people were doing and talking to other people in similar situations in another authority, that was really helpful.*

The networking was, in itself, viewed as a benefit to the individuals involved, but there were outcomes from the networking that were also valued. These included the sharing of good practice leading, in some cases, to changing working practices, and the benefit of professional support provided by regional colleagues (see sections below).

There was evidence that networking and building relationships with regional colleagues had led to other positive outcomes. Through attending regional partnership meetings, a local authority head of SEN had developed a closer working relationship with a neighbouring authority, which had led to the two authorities collaborating on other work, 'it gave us a platform to be able to do this'. The collaboration included the two local authorities sharing an appointed teacher for children with a visual impairment over the course of two years, something that had not occurred between these authorities before this relationship had been established between the two SEN officers, although, arguably, the possibility or need had existed previously.

### 5.1.1  Sharing good practice

Linked to the networking was the added benefit of sharing good practice between agencies and across authorities. This was not only within RP meetings but also by other means facilitated by the RPs, such as through email networks and RP newsletters. A headteacher in a mainstream primary school made use of the RP newsletter to share good practice and also to network with other schools that were developing new or innovative practices. This also occurred at local authority level through working group meetings:

> *The benefit for me personally is that you're not an island […] having the work connections has helped me enormously because we've been able to share practice across the region.*
>
> Head of SEN support service

Again, opportunities to share good practice through the RP work were, in themselves, valued, but there was also evidence that the sharing of good practice had led to changes of practice within some organisations, which had then made a difference to the support provided to some young people (see example below).

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**Example: a training course that also provided opportunities for the sharing of good practice**

A working group had collaborated with an HE institution and created a training course aimed at specialist personal advisers. This was a 120-hour course run over a number of months. Those who had attended the course who were interviewed were very positive about the experience and were able to identify a number of direct outcomes from attending the course. Part of the course involved two one-week placements within schools with an assignment to record information about the school management structure and their review and transition processes for young people. The course attendees then met as a group and 'we discussed our experiences and shared good practice and that was very insightful'. One attendee had found this experience so useful and explained, 'as a result of that we have built it into my training plan and each year I will spend a minimum of two days in different schools in our

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locality. I have done that this year.' This professional from Connexions commented that this had been:

> *Hugely useful, partly just to build relationships with schools and the staff in school but also to have the opportunity to spend time with the young people. A lot of the time I might only see them when it's their annual review so to be able to spend a whole day with them and just see the level they're working at and put a face to them before their review has been really beneficial.*

The final part of the training course involved attendees completing an assignment which involved producing a product to support their service. One attendee had produced a suite of group work sessions to facilitate discussions with young people. One was to help young people with choices and decision-making. This interviewee had worked with a young person who found it very difficult to express a negative response and to state that he did not like something, but with the support from this group work:

> *through that he was able to start expressing a negative…seeing it in that way made it much more powerful […] if we haven't worked on basic choice-making, how can we work with someone on choices for the future, on where they want to live and go to college and things?*

Course attendees also shared their assignment products – those who worked with similar groups of young people took copies of the group work sessions and the other products – there was a real sense of sharing ideas and resources. This attendee noted that she also:

> *shared it with some of our local schools because some of the sessions were things that could support the careers curriculum in school so they've taken some of those sessions for teachers to use within schools.*

This training course, developed by agencies collaborating through the RP network, had clearly benefited both the Connexions service, through professional development, and some of the young people in this locality, through product outputs being implemented. Furthermore, as the course was run regionally, one interviewee commented that this meant the cost to her service was lower than that of a national course and this had enabled a greater number of her colleagues to attend.

The training course had fulfilled a need within the region and perhaps the questions that now need to be asked are a) whether there is a similar need nationally and b) could this course become a national resource?

### 5.1.2 Professional support

Some interviewees were able to provide examples of how involvement in RP work had directly provided professional support to them as individuals. This was particularly the case for professionals who worked in a small service, such as in a small unitary authority or a small parent partnership service, where they could be relatively isolated. As one parent partnership officer commented:

> *The importance of the regional partnerships is even greater to me now because of working in a small authority where I work on my own* [...] *although I have a good line management system where I am now, it's not the same as talking to people who know what you're talking about.*

This comment makes the point that it was the exchange of ideas about very practical things, at an operational level, that was valued. This is an important aspect of the RP work that was welcomed, along with the more strategic capacity of the RPs. Following support provided by regional colleagues, this parent partnership officer had also organised and run a parenting conference which had benefited her service in many ways, by collecting information about how parents felt about particular issues. She surmised:

> *I don't believe that I would have gone for it, if I hadn't had the inside information and the true understanding of that little bit of work that I could do. So, enormously helpful.*

Interestingly, although the parent partnership officers met as a regional group independently from the RP, it was the networking and support provided through the RP meetings that she felt was particularly useful:

> *We do have our own parent partnership meetings too, which is another area of support, but this is actually a bit wider than that. It's not just parent partnership officers, there's quite a number of educational psychologists and SEN officers from across the region so you do get that broader view and that's vital to me.*

A similar point was made from a specialist who worked within the area of sensory impairment within a local authority where he felt he worked in isolation for the majority of the week and appreciated the opportunity to meet people from other authorities. He commented that 'as a support network it's been excellent'. And another interviewee from a small local authority said:

> *It's helped to develop my own thinking because I am the only SEN adviser in the authority and it gives me some like minded people who are working in the same area.*

### 5.1.3 Reputation

Over the years, as the RPs have gained recognition amongst professionals in the field of SEN, they appear also to have developed status and credibility, particularly within some local authorities. The RPs were felt, by some interviewees, to give credibility and influence to working practices. A number of local authority representatives commented on the fact that if a project was being undertaken regionally it gave more authority within their local area. For example:

> *Once it's got the quality accreditation of being part of the partnership then other boroughs will be influenced by it and we'll be able to make wider change than just saying as one authority "we had an idea and what do you think?"*
>
> Head of SEN

> *One LEA…would have had great difficulty politically getting a* [local authority] *statement agreed by their cabinet but because it was a* [regional] *agreement agreed by all* [regional] *authorities it went through very easily.*
>
> Consultant

> *It actually gives us a bit of clout when we go back to our managers and say they're doing this in* [x authority]*, or they're doing this in* [y authority]*. It gives a little bit more strength to your argument.*
>
> SEN support service

Similarly, the following comment was made by one of the facilitators: 'the regional partnership has a kudos to it. It has more authority than it did at the outset'. One local authority officer also commented that this made a difference in discussions with parents:

> *It helps to show something that you are doing across* [the region]*. It gives it more authority. Sometimes parents will say "well it's only you who is doing it" but if it's the authorities across* [the region] *they seem to take it more seriously.*

This comment was made in relation to a framework for statutory assessments, where thresholds were agreed and shared across a number of authorities which helped to clarify the process to parents. Similarly, a parent who had direct involvement in RP work felt, more generally, that the RPs 'are able to influence and what they say is valued by professionals more than some organisations [are]'. However, in contrast, one of the challenges of implementing a protocol across a region was felt to be the lack of authority that the RPs held:

*My issue with it is the fact that because it hasn't got the weight of the DfES,* [the RP] *can't implement it and make it a requirement, they can only make it a recommendation.*

<div align="right">Head of SEN support service</div>

More simply, if all relevant partners do not sign up to a regional protocol, there is little point in its existence. This issue is explored further in section 5.2.2.

### 5.1.4 Gaining knowledge and a shared understanding

Many professionals appreciated the extensive amount of information that they gathered from the RPs that had furthered their knowledge. Some referred specifically to being well-briefed on national policy agendas; others mentioned knowledge about regional projects or other local work. For example, a health representative noted that she had contributed knowledge and experience gained through the RP work to other multi-agency work in which she was involved. For some practitioners, the RPs provided an avenue for keeping up to date on national government policy: 'we do see it as a tool for keeping updated with what's happening out there' and 'I'm a lot more aware of the range of issues and more aware of different ways of solving difficulties than I would otherwise have been'. Similar comments included:

*It has also helped me to assimilate some of the national work going on, and when you are a team of one it's good to have people like* [the facilitator] *to tell me about it and make it manageable for me. So it's made some aspects of the job a lot easier.*

<div align="right">SEN adviser</div>

*It puts my thinking up into that bigger picture. Much of the focus of my core work is at practitioner level, so it's important that we bear in mind the bigger picture and what is going on.*

<div align="right">Professional from voluntary sector</div>

This professional worked across more than one RP region and noted that on taking up the post she had made a point of meeting all the facilitators for the regions she worked in. She explained, 'I wouldn't expect the facilitators to know all the small charities in the area and I do think it's up to us to make the contact initially'. This professional was proactive in seeking involvement in RP projects that were suited to her brief. This was unusual as, particularly in the early days of the RPs, it was often down to the facilitators to 'recruit' appropriate members for the tasks in hand. Furthermore, a parent who was involved in a working group commented:

> *It's been useful for me in my parental capacity and professional
> capacity to learn about guidelines, laws, strategies, government papers
> and people I wouldn't have known about.*

Some RPs were particularly appreciated by parent partnership officers (PPOs) for keeping them up to date on policies and initiatives. As one PPO commented, 'the more ahead you are in this game, the better it is for parents, so the knock-on effect is good. We are up to date with information, parents are kept up to speed and children benefit'. Others interviewees found the RP working group meetings a useful mechanism for reaching a shared understanding on particular SEN-related issues, as a professional from an HE institution commented: 'it has moved on the understanding of SEN and collaborative working in the region'. And:

> *The main thing that's come out of the whole process is that wider
> discussion about what we mean by inclusion and how we are getting
> there. I think the LEAs who gained most from it were those who set up
> those groups and started dialogue amongst people in the LEA.*
>
> Consultant

Work emanating from one RP working group led a shire county to set up a multi-agency group to address strategies for autism across the county:

> *In* [this area] *it set off a lot of strategic work which was really good. I
> think it was the first time that everybody sat down together and shared
> what everybody else did across* [the area]*".*

This led to changes in practice to ensure that training and diagnosis were comparable across the area.

Evidence was collected about one working group that had adapted the format of their working group meetings to include a workshop after each meeting aimed at practitioners and covering topical issues 'designed to support the development of skills'. This ensured there was the opportunity for practitioners to share practice and gain knowledge and these were felt to have 'started to have a bigger influence on practice' and influence a wider group of practitioners.

## 5.2  Outputs

The RPs have produced a number of tangible outputs and these have been cited on the national SEN RP website[8] and some were described in the previous evaluation report (Fletcher-Campbell *et al.*, 2005). This section does not attempt to produce an exhaustive list of all the RP products and activities

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[8] http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/regional/products/

(as this can be obtained from elsewhere[9]) but it uses examples, gathered from the research data, to highlight wider issues emerging from the evaluation evidence. As stated above, the research team followed through 'stories' in the course of the evaluation, gaining different perspectives on the same 'events' and on different stages in the stories. We have selected examples of the dimensions to RP activity identified in the introduction to this report. These dimensions show the diversity and 'layers' of RP activity and show that influences from RP work spread across a range of practice.

## 5.2.1 Information-sharing with end-users

**Example: ASD information pack for parents/carers**

One RP produced an information pack for parents and carers on autism spectrum disorder. The pack was aimed at parents/carers whose child had recently been diagnosed with autism. A launch event was held to publicise and disseminate the information. Parent groups from across the region were invited as well as stakeholders from a range of agencies. Those attending the launch were asked where they thought the main information distributions points should be – the aim was to identify the centres where a diagnosis might take place. One voluntary agency representative commented on a challenge that this presented: 'the problem is, when you're working regionally everybody has different practices'. In some areas, the child development centres were the main diagnostic centres, whereas in other areas, diagnosis was the responsibility of the psychology services, or the psychiatry teams, so the distribution points were different across the region. A regional voluntary agency supporting parents/carers of children with autism also held copies for distribution to the families with whom they had contact and who had not received a copy via their distribution point. The initial distribution of the information pack was generally felt to have been effective, but challenges arose when the pack was updated. Initially, each distribution point received a certain number of packs free of charge and local authorities then had the opportunity to purchase additional copies. Some local authorities purchased packs for each school whereas others did not. One special school even purchased enough packs for every member of staff, but this was not the situation across the region. As distribution was erratic across the region, this presented problems when the pack was updated. Some areas reordered and paid for packs for their distribution points, but other areas did not, which left a situation where some families would receive an updated pack and some would not, depending on where in the region they lived:

> *That is a huge challenge. It's regional which is great but the authorities are so individual. Everyone will say it's fantastic, it's lovely and it's hugely important but then nobody seems to have the money to carry it on. Then there's the inequity in that not everyone is going to have access to it.*

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[9] http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/regional/database/

| |
|---|
| Voluntary agency representative |
| |
| The RP had also begun an evaluation of the information pack, taken forward by the working group from which the idea for the information pack originally developed. The distribution points and parent support groups were being asked to provide feedback from parents on the pack, but the emphasis was not on feedback from newly-diagnosed parents as this was felt to be insensitive; nevertheless, this was the key group of parents/carers whom the pack was aimed at. Some of the professionals involved in working with the parents in the region noted that they had received some feedback from parents: 'all I can say is that the parents who we've spoken to who have had the Pack have found it very useful' and: 'I can think of several people who have said to me that it's been very useful'. Questions that need addressing now are how to overcome the cost barrier to ensure that all parents across the region receive an updated information pack at the time of diagnosis, and how to evaluate whether the information pack has an impact on those it is aimed at – parents and carers of children recently diagnosed with autism. |

## 5.2.2  Protocols, agreements and common policy

| |
|---|
| **Example: Sensory impairment 14+ transition protocol** |
| |
| One RP developed a protocol and set of guidelines for transition for pupils aged 14 to 19 with sensory impairment, to address issues of disparity across the region and to highlight the intention that the 14+ review was just one part of a continuing process to support the young people rather than it being an isolated process. The protocol and guidelines were disseminated in September 2004. The facilitator disseminated copies electronically via email and it was published on the RP website. Local authorities were encouraged to circulate the documents to colleagues within their authority. As one local authority officer noted: 'it was circulated in the [local authority] through internal emails, [to] Connexions advisers, SENCOs in schools, every relevant personnel that deal with that age group'. |
| |
| The production and dissemination of the protocol and guidelines occurred relatively quickly – in less than one year – but the implementation of the protocol seemed to be more problematic, perhaps because the RP had less control over this aspect. As one professional who had received the protocol commented, 'I would think we would probably all have got it and implemented it in a different way…you can't just change something overnight, it has to be worked in and worked through'. Furthermore, as the protocol affected a range of agencies involved in the transition review for young people with sensory impairment, it required changing practices in many teams in each area. A social care professional explained: 'we've certainly incorporated it into what we are doing, but I cannot speak for the schools in [the authority] or for colleagues outside my immediate area'. The agreement and production of a protocol or guidelines was really only the beginning and to implement the changes in practice to all systems in a range |

of agencies within a region was perhaps a more challenging task than that of producing the protocol itself. The interview evidence suggested that the protocol had not been implemented right across the region – there were areas that had made changes to practices, but in contrast, there were areas where the work did not appear to have been fully taken on board. This is interesting because the evidence in the RP action plan suggested that the guidance was known to be in use in 25 local authorities. Given this discrepancy, it may be necessary for RPs to consider the most appropriate methods for monitoring take-up of protocols across a region. Obviously, as the number of RP projects increases, the greater the task of monitoring the use of products and protocols.

What seemed to be crucial for ensuring implementation of the guidelines and protocol was obtaining the support and cooperation from the appropriate professionals who were in a position to influence practice. One professional made this point: 'it's only a recommendation that people can ignore because they're too busy. So they either have to give it some clout or there was no point in having the piece of work really'. The issue of time was mentioned as a barrier by a professional in one authority that did not appear to have taken the protocol on board: 'As to what the authority have taken on with transition arrangements I'm not aware because I'm too busy to be able to find out. It sounds dire but that is reality'.

There were other factors that affected the implementation of the protocol. Within local authorities, it was necessary for it to be built into existing structures. However, as noted earlier in this report, local authorities are currently undergoing significant restructuring in relation to the *Change for Children* agenda which made other changes to practice more problematic:

> *Everything keeps shifting. We've had a major upheaval in our service, just as we thought it was settling down it was all up in the air again in March. The shortfall is that there is no established firm structure, it depends on the 'flavour of the week', then next week something new comes in and we try to deal with it all.*
>
> SEN support service

Feedback from those using the protocol and guidelines was being collected by at least two of the participating authorities that were following the protocol by looking at what difference it had made to individual cases. This feedback was not available at the time of the evaluation, but there were more general comments suggesting that there had been successes: 'it's raised awareness within the whole team…it has informed everybody's practice in [my authority]'. And: 'I'd like to think it's raised the profile of the work we do, particularly at secondary school level'. But not all comments were as positive:

> *We know we've hit everybody in* [the authority]*, and you collar people on your rounds and they've obviously received it*

> *but not taken it on board. I'm not quite sure how you overcome that.*
>
> <div align="right">SEN support service</div>

Issues concerning implementation of protocols and agreements were not so evident previously – probably because most were still at development stage – however this may now be an issue that the partnerships need to address, to ensure that the work and dedication of those involved in RP activities are providing maximum impact on the young people. Similarly, methods for monitoring take-up of regional agreements may become more problematic, given the increasing number of projects RPs are involved with.

## 5.2.3  Data sharing (professional)

**Example: Use of benchmarking data**
Local authority staff who had participated in a cross-regional benchmarking project were very positive about it. The data was felt to be good quality and useful, but how it was used within individual authorities varied. One local authority representative was able to provide examples of how the data had been used: 'it helps you to know what questions to ask […] we've used the data for target setting and strategic planning'. This local authority had used the data to investigate why they were in the upper quartile for some aspects and in the lower quartile for others. When they found themselves in the lower quartile the authority staff then looked for an appropriate comparable local authority that was in the upper quartile and made direct contact to find out how they had addressed those particular issues. In this case, the outcomes were recognising what questions to ask and of whom to ask them, through the sharing of information across authorities.

Such outcomes were not evident in all cases. One local authority explained that they had not yet reached the point of being able to use the data collected to change practice, but viewed this as the next step:

> *What's important now for us is to see what our data is telling us, to look at the policies so we can use it to actually make improvements and inform policy and our best practice, our best value […] otherwise if you're not going to use it to inform policy it's a dead exercise.*

The extent to which the benchmarking data had been used to inform practices within the local authorities varied enormously, but this is expected as different authorities will always have different starting points and different priorities. Commitment from the appropriate local authority members and an awareness of how to use the data was important, as one local authority officer commented: 'we are still at the stage of having the data but not quite sure how to analyse what comes back or how to compare ourselves'.

It was suggested by two interviewees that RPs could hold regional meetings to discuss particular sections of the benchmarking data, to explore what the implications were and to encourage local authorities to use the data to improve practices. Such meetings had been held within some RPs but this is perhaps an area where local authorities would appreciate further guidance and support.

Questions that now need addressing are how the RPs can ensure that benchmarking data is used to improve practices within local areas. Furthermore, local authorities from smaller partnerships may not have regional statistical neighbours and if 70 local authorities have signed up to the benchmarking, it is already trans-regional (and available to all regions) and in order to ensure that local authorities in smaller partnerships can benefit, should it therefore become a national project?

## 5.2.4  Services and interactive enterprises

**Example: Regional training brokerage**

One RP has been developing a regional training brokerage for the past two years. During this time the service has grown quite considerably to the point that there have been a number of outcomes:

- 6,500 training places created on a range of courses in the area of SEN and inclusion and the take-up was increasing monthly
- several conferences had been held on specific key issues
- an Ofsted licence to deliver SEN In Mainstream training had been secured
- three post-graduate programmes were being delivered via an HE institution
- a newsletter to share good practice across the region, at school level.

The aim was that the brokerage would become a self-sustaining service and, after only two years, it already covered some of its costs. Those interviewed were very positive about the service:

> *I think the schools are seeing that the brokerage takes care of everything for them. It provides high quality training, value for money and added value and it is fast becoming a quality brand.*
>
> Consultant

The brokerage had primarily focused on education, but in response to *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004) and the *Every Child Matters* agenda, the focus was becoming broader and included multi-agency partners.

> *We've aimed the training at local authority officers in education, social care, Sure Start and others and we've run two programmes for adoptive parents and foster carers...we are trying to bring the health agenda through the training and delivery so schools have the broader understanding.*
>
> Consultant

The evidence showed that the regional training brokerage was clearly addressing a need in the region and providing a service to a wide range of professionals. Perhaps the question that now needs consideration is whether the brokerage should remain under the umbrella of the RP, even if it becomes completely self-sustaining. One value of it remaining within the RP structure is that it would remain subject to the scrutiny of the RP management group.

## 5.2.5  Training courses

**Example: Online training – ASD**

One RP had developed online training courses for teachers and teaching assistants, focusing on specific types of special need; one was focused on ASD. The course was self-explanatory and could be completed individually, following registration and the allocation of a course tutor (via electronic communication). One teacher explained that she had completed the autism course at home over three evenings. She described the course:

> *The autism course has got quizzes you have to complete and targets you have to set online and a forum you have to take part in...the course tutor checks to see if you are doing things and can give you support.*

This particular teacher had found the course to be very informative. She had initially found out about it through meeting a colleague from another school in the authority who had already completed the course. The teacher decided to take the course herself because she had a child with autism in her class. She commented, 'there is a lot of information and the video clips are really good and really back up what is said – you can see it in action'. In this case, a learning support assistant who also worked with the same child had also taken the course 'and we've talked about how we think it applies to the little boy in our class'. The teacher had had the opportunity to use the skills with two different children with autism – one who was leaving her class at the end of the academic year, and another who joined her class. The course had provided examples of resources, including transition booklets, to help children with autism who found changing classes particularly difficult. Another school had created a transition booklet and this was available to download and use, by making appropriate changes to the text and photos. 'The idea being that they gave photos so they can get used to things. That

was really useful.' The ideas had been applied to the classroom and were reported to have helped the children.

The facilitator also recognised the influence the training was having: 'it has a direct impact in the classroom. It's not just having more knowledge, it's causing people to do things differently'.

## 5.3   Impact at child-level

The final part of this section provides examples of where professionals, who have had involvement in the RP activities, have changed practice which has subsequently had an impact on children and young people. These are just some examples that may be of small capacity and have unintended outcomes – 'spin-offs' from the RP activities; nevertheless they highlight how practice has changed at ground level as a result of RP work.

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**Example: Pupil participation**

A working group in one RP focused on devising a self-evaluation resource pack for use in a range of settings including schools, children's services, and the voluntary sector, to help professionals review young people's opportunities to contribute to decision-making about how a service operates – something that is becoming increasingly prominent following the *Change for Children* agenda. At the time of the interviews the resource pack was just being disseminated; however, it had already had an impact on some young people. A special school that was involved in the working group had piloted the resource within their school. Feedback was provided to the working group and some amendments were made to the document but, as a result of the pilot, there had already been changes within this school's practice:

> *When the headteacher does her monitoring and evaluation of the department we now ask pupils' views as well as asking the staff, which we weren't doing before. School council has become more prominent as a result of this; we've involved them far more in decision-making and in representing the views of other pupils more than we did before.*
>
> Deputy headteacher

She also described other ways that the RP work had influenced practice at school level:

> *It's made me think a lot more about how we can involve the pupils and how we can involve those with the more severe learning difficulties as well, not just those who can listen and speak but those with far more difficulties, and we've concentrated far more on how we can give them the skills to make choices and to communicate and to participate and to*

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> *consider their views and not to always presume that we know what they want.*

This resource pack clearly has the potential to exert a wide influence on practice at ground level and impact positively on children and young people, given the success of the pilot. The next stage will involve effective dissemination and implementation across the region.

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**Example: Work experience for pupils with SLD**

One RP had set up a system for marketing regional training course information through regular mailings to schools across the region. Rather than employing an individual to undertake the packing and mailing of the information, the students in the post-16 department of a special school undertook the work as their own enterprise. The regional training coordinator explained: 'I give them all the envelopes and flyers and the labels, they pack them for me so it gives the students real life experience, and they charge me a fee.' An educational psychologist from the local authority also commented on the benefits of this:

> […] *it means the students get the opportunity for work related learning. I know putting stuff in envelopes might sound tedious but we are looking at children with quite significant learning difficulties. That's useful for them and it's a real task and not something made up by the school. So that's a bonus for us.*

Clearly, the intention of this RP work was the provision of regional training in the area of SEN and inclusion, but an unintentional outcome was that it provided a work experience opportunity for a group of young people with SEN and this positively impacted on the young people's learning through the acquisition of new work-related skills.

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**Example: Supporting the learning of children without a school place**

This is another example where pupils have benefited at the piloting stage of a project that, again, could have an impact at a wider level following the piloting stage. The RP developed ICT teaching and learning materials to be used by teachers to help in the development of attractive and interesting course materials for use with children with SEN who had been out of school for some time, to support their transition back into school. Following interest in the materials from a number of different support services, the remit was broadened to include children receiving hospital and home tuition as well as children in public care who were without a school place and traveller pupils. There had also been interest from other regional and

national agencies and this work was able to link in to that through the direction provided by the advisory group. The pilot work was felt to be successful: 'there are already teachers who have been trained and kids who have benefited from those lessons', a local authority officer commented. At pilot stage, the work was small-scale, but there was potential for influencing practice and supporting a large number of children across the region. The project was being developed over a number of years and it benefited from comprehensive piloting and having an independent evaluation built in to the development structure.

The above examples illustrate just some of the ways that the RP activities have impacted upon children and young people. What is important to note here is that many of these outcomes were related to bottom-up developments, which probably would not have occurred through a top-down working structure. Furthermore, because they were involving a wide range of practitioners working directly with young people with special educational needs, they were creating new dissemination networks. Many of the people in these networks might not have been explicitly aware of the work, even existence, of the SEN regional partnership.

# 6 Conclusions and recommendations

Evidence from the final year of evaluation suggests that the summary
statement made about the Special Educational Needs Regional Partnerships in
the NFER's interim report of February 2005, is still accurate. The points made
were as follows.

The Special Educational Needs Regional Partnerships have made a substantial
and marked contribution to the government's agenda regarding provision for
pupils with special educational needs, responding to the concerns identified in
*Excellence for All Children* and playing a considerable part in working
towards the aims and objectives in that Green Paper. The DfES' financial
input to each region acts, essentially, as critical seedcorn money which
releases a considerable degree of professional time and expertise across
authorities which, in turn, results in outcomes which improve professional
practice, the quality of provision and extends the repertoire of strategies and
approaches in relation to services to young people with special educational
needs. There is evidence that without this financial input – which mostly pays
for the facilitators and all the skills and momentum which they contribute –
much of this professional time and expertise would remain confined to local
authorities and not be available regionally. The profile of the SEN RPs has
been raised by the national communications strategy.

In the previous evaluation report, the conclusions were presented under
headings related to the specific questions posed by the sponsor. In general, the
previous conclusions apply in December 2005 and there was significant
evidence that partnership activity shows continuity, with the facilitators and
RPs having built on and refined previous years' work rather than attempt
anything significantly different. This is a positive factor in that the
arrangements for the SEN RPs have given an opportunity for consolidation
and carrying things through – opportunities which are not always offered by
rapid changes in funding streams each with different allocation criteria. In the
SEN RPs, thus, the foundations laid down have proved reliable for the
increasing scope and demands of partnership work and, therefore, future
arrangements for the partnerships should ensure that these foundations are able
to be maintained.

The conclusions and recommendations in this report will return to the core
questions to which reference was made in the introduction:

- are the SEN RPs making a difference?
- what is the nature of the difference?
- could the difference be achieved in more efficient and effective ways
  within the RPs?

- does the difference begin to address some of the persistent problems within special education and improve the educational experiences of pupils with SEN?
- are the RPs able to respond to a policy context which has demands and structures which are different from those when the evaluation began?

## 6.1  Making a difference

It can be concluded that the SEN RPs *are* making a difference but it is important to stress that they are doing so on account of the particular way in which they are working. This 'way' goes alongside, and ought not to be confused with, the multifarious multi-agency and special education work engaged in by local authorities and agencies. While, as stated above, demarcation lines between 'RP' and 'other' activity may be blurred, this is more a sign of the unique influence of the RPs and should not be interpreted, certainly until there is evidence to the contrary, as a suggestion that the SEN RPs no longer serve a purpose.

The SEN RPs are making a difference by:

- **nurturing positive partnerships (processes):**
  - by enabling policy-makers and practitioners in one professional area to understand the thinking and way of working of policy-makers and practitioners in another distinct but complementary professional area, by so doing, encouraging professionals in one agency (or part of an agency) to think of the implications of their own policy and practice for their colleagues in another agency (or part of an agency). This means that 'multi-agency' or 'multi-professional' work is more than a cosmetic exercise taking place on 'an occasion' (e.g. a meeting) and becomes a way of working, bringing about cultural change. This was achieved by the way in which the SEN RPs worked. For example, participation was by desire, recognition of need or possible contribution, and awareness of relevance to 'the day job'. The process was generally corporately creative/solution-seeking, the 'corporate body' being multi-agency or multi-professional – i.e. composed of people who would not normally work together (though it was noticeable that these 'corporate bodies' were increasingly becoming part of the landscape). People who had been task group members for some time spoke of the strong working relationships (partnerships) forged with colleagues elsewhere
  - by 'allowing' professionals to admit, in a safe but 'public' forum, to their own ignorance and dilemmas in their professional practice. By engendering trust, via working together on an original initiative where complementary inputs were necessary to complete the task, professionals were able to confront their difficulties and address them with others who were familiar with them. There was partnership: at the same level across agencies, within agencies, and among local authorities
  - by enabling policy-makers to get immediate feedback from practitioners and end-users and, in turn, to enable good practice on the ground to be disseminated and, where appropriate, more formally

established in policy. This was achieved via, first, the 'shifting' task groups – i.e. where members handed on the baton to different colleagues at appropriate stages – and, second, by effective action-planning, where all relevant perspectives were taken into account to plan something valuable for all

- by facilitating similarly positive partnerships between those working at national level and those working regionally/locally, without any 'obligation' within these partnerships – i.e. there was neither organised lobbying from the regional/local level nor formal monitoring (performance management) from the national level: both were equally engaged in a developing agenda.

- **formalising partnerships (products) by:**

  - drawing up documentation such as agreements, protocols, guidelines, information packs, data sets, which offer a framework for action/provision and which are in a strong position to be accepted, being created by a process of partnership. The process was critical as, at best, it created a strong sense of ownership and commitment and, at worst, interest and willingness to implement the product

  - establishing services (e.g. training) which met local needs (because they emerged through consultation with a range of local professionals).

- **ensuring relevance, viability and quality of partnership initiatives by:**

  - involving a range of perspectives in task groups which themselves emerged from effective action-planning which in turn involved multiple perspectives

  - giving consistency by the serial and interactive nature of working groups (for which the facilitator was critical)

  - engaging with others, in a public but unthreatening environment with self-determined time-lines, and thus reducing the risk of 'short-changing' or 'cutting corners'.

## 6.2   The areas of greatest impact/difference

The areas of greatest impact retain the characteristics identified in previous reports but the profile given there can be extended in the light of the most recent evidence. The most significant areas have been ones which have generated serial pieces of work, addressing on-going concerns which require constant professional input and response and which complement not only each other but also other initiatives which may fall outside the technical remit of the SEN RPs (as it was at the time of the evaluation – i.e. before it was extended to more general 'vulnerability') but with which those working with the SEN RPs are also involved. They do, thus, enhance the professional environment in a holistic way, both providing a focused piece of work and, alongside, adding value to other work. It is suggested that it is this sort of activity which best serves both regional and national agenda and would also satisfy the proposed model (albeit unconfirmed) of different partnerships taking responsibility for different aspects of national priorities.

## 6.3    The way in which the difference was achieved

The way in which the difference was achieved was a mix of skills, culture, processes and internal/external support (though, on account of the fluidity of the SEN RPs, it is often difficult to distinguish internal and external support).

Enablers included:
- the voluntary nature of the partnerships
- the layered input of a range of stakeholders from senior managers to those able to produce practical solutions on the ground
- the creativity and management skills of the facilitators
- transparent and democratic action planning generated by stakeholders in the region and made coherent by strategic management (management group and facilitator)
- persistent willingness to share
- positive relationships with formal structures and statutory agencies, manifested by information-sharing, explanation of national policy, application of professional skills to partnership tasks, and consultation and mutual feedback
- a responsive, 'bottom-up' approach supported by strategic senior management planning and 'buy in'
- direct and short lines of communication, within and across departments, and from central government to and from regions, allowing deviation from normal channels of communication where necessary for appropriateness to 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 identification of the (largely human) resources needed and available to fulfil regional needs
- the assurance, via the facilitator, of task completion and positive outcomes.

## 6.4    Partnership operation

There was evidence from the 2005 data that the features of partnership activity which were identified as effective in earlier reports were still important (see Appendix 3). Partnerships operate effectively via task-specific working groups with a set brief and life, which could, however, extend into a new phase once a task had been completed. Also important were network groups which serve as channels of communication, means of identifying latent human resources and opportunities for dissemination.

The effectiveness of **working groups** depended on their:

- carrying out work relevant to their members' (or members' colleagues) interests and responsibilities

- having the authority to carry out tasks within the RP and within members' services (including the authority to ask colleagues to assist – e.g. in providing data – and devote time to the task)

- having a sound infrastructure, including facilitation, administration and planning

- having clear expectations of the contributions from all members (including sensitivity to, and contingency arrangements for, external pressures inhibiting these contributions)

- ensuring a range of group members able to take things forward so they were not reliant on one individual for achieving their goals unless this one individual had a specific role and dedicated time (e.g. as a consultant)

- having sufficient flexibility to alter the group profile to suit the task or to amend the task in the light of emerging evidence

- having a clear exit strategy (which might include progressing the task into a new phase with a new group of stakeholders).

Effectiveness depended on having **group members** who:

- were able both to give and to gain (individual and service) from participation

- had sufficient authority within their service to represent their service/authority, and draw on the authority's resources (broadly understood) while having first-hand knowledge/expertise/experience of the issue at stake

- had direct communication with task group chair/facilitator and colleagues on the group

- had necessary support from colleagues to execute the task

- understood when to 'hand over' to another colleague.

Working groups benefited from using a (paid) consultant when:

- working group members could do the work but lacked capacity

- there was a clearly defined and delineated piece of work which the consultant could be contracted to deliver

- the work had the potential to become self-sustaining

and where the consultant:

- was sensitive to the particular requirements of the working group (and did not try to impose an external agenda, for example)

- 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 of the working group

- was able to 'hand back' the product to the working group on task completion.

## 6.5 Partnership management

Evidence suggested that effective SEN RP management groups:

- are multi-agency

- represent all relevant regional fieldforces

- have consistent chairing

- have strategic capacity (members are aware of how partnership activity will cohere with the concerns of their agency/area of work)

- have operational capacity (members will identify colleagues who can serve on working groups, or implement processes and products emerging from partnership activities)

- act as 'eyes and ears' as well as a 'sounding board' for the facilitator

- contribute positively to decision-making and give support for the implications of decisions made

- promote the partnership within their own networks and other regional fora

- seek opportunities for adopting partnership-developed processes

- engage positively in the dissemination of partnership work

- are committed to meetings, thus ensuring continuity

- are aware that, with the facilitator, they are facilitating partnership working within the region; management groups are no more 'the partnership' than are the facilitators.

## 6.6 Partnership facilitation

There was evidence that the partnerships depended on their facilitator(s) and, that although these post-holders worked in rather different ways, there were a number of core tasks and that it was important that facilitators addressed the full range (i.e. they could not limit themselves to some and delegate others). Effective facilitation included:

- 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.

## 6.7    National level support and communication links

As the facilitator was critical to the effectiveness of the individual SEN RP, so was the national adviser to the overall effectiveness of the SEN RPs as a vehicle for enhancing provision for special education nationally. The adviser is important for:

- maintaining an overview of all partnership activity
- putting different RPs in touch with each other where independent work needs to relate
- liaising with central government policy-makers and officers to ensure RP work links 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 (this aspect of the role was greatly valued by facilitators but is liable to get lost as the demands of the national agenda increase).

SEN RPs also valued the DfES links and the support available from Ofsted links where these were available to them. The latter was valued when it was focused on partnership improvement such as better action-planning and designing means of evaluating impact.

## 6.8    Recommendations

The following recommendations relate to the question of the efficiency and effectiveness of the SEN RPs and their capacity to respond to the new policy context in which 'special educational needs' are themselves being repositioned. Comments on some of the external changes, particularly those relating to the *Change for Children* agenda and the extension of the SEN RPs to embrace children in care and safeguarding issues, are outside the scope of the recommendations here. What follows are data-led insofar as they were issues which emerged from the evidence collected during the evaluation. They point to the future as they indicate those things which, evidence suggested, should be maintained or extended regardless of the particularities of the policy-context. In the main, they refer to the unique characteristics of the special educational needs regional partnerships. It is suggested that there might be other areas of regional working currently under development which might learn from the experience of the SEN RPs and consider instituting some of their critical features.

1. The SEN RPs should continue in a form which respects the critical elements of their effectiveness and singularity. These elements include the ability:

- to maintain an active multi-agency management group which includes representatives of all the relevant strategic agencies

- to require 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, to design and execute a regional agenda which is owned by the region (there is sufficient evidence that this supports, rather than detracts from, national policy)

- to identify particular initiatives which are sufficiently important and non-region specific and to act as a lead for these nationally, sharing products and processes with other regions and involving national policy-makers

- to be consulted about, and regarded as a potential resource for contributing to, the design and execution of national policy around special education as appropriate: this relates at both national and individual regional levels

- to maintain at least one facilitator

- to 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.


2. **Individual partnerships** should:

- scrutinise their management groups in the light of the elements of effectiveness presented above

- ensure that ownership is maintained by the processes of action-planning which yield this (i.e. involvement of a wide range of stakeholders but with strategic co-ordination) even if this process has itself to be carefully planned

- analyse their 'professional' strengths and weaknesses and identify areas in which they might use available resources most effectively in offering/taking a national lead

- 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.

3. **National government and relevant national agencies** should:

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

- 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 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 (for example, meetings to discuss facilitator issues, briefing sessions 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.


4. **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 children with special educational needs and disabilities, children in care, and safeguarding issues

- include the regional facilitator in regional fieldforce 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.

# Appendix 1    Aims of evaluation

The principal aim of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness, impact and value for money of the individual Partnerships.

## Objectives

The following objectives were identified by DfES in commissioning the evaluation:

## Objective 1:

To work with the Partnerships to develop robust procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of their work (at national, regional, local authority, school, parent and pupil level both in the short and longer term), building on the work of the previous evaluation.

## Objective 2:

To assess the impact of the work of the Partnerships at national, regional, local authority, school, parents and pupil levels both in the short-term and the long-term and also to include how they have influenced existing networks/structures or supported new sustainable ones.

## Objective 3:

To assess the effectiveness of the Partnerships in addressing and making an impact on the issues of local variations in the quality of, and access to, SEN services and provision.

## Objective 4:

To identify the strengths and weakness of the Partnerships, both collectively and individually.

## Objective 5:

To assess whether the Partnerships provide value for money, in order to inform the Department's consideration of future funding beyond March 2006.

# Specific questions

## Impact

- to evaluate the effectiveness of Partnership systems to determine work priorities, to monitor their implementation and to evaluate their outcomes

- to identify work that has had the greatest impact at a range of levels

- to identify facilitators of, and barriers to, positive outcomes.

## The Partnership model

- to assess the effectiveness of the model of SEN regional partnership compared to other regional initiatives

- to consider which formats and ways of working are most effective

- to identify the elements of effective management groups

- to outline ways in which LEAs effectively deploy their responsibilities

- to consider Partnership size and commitment in the face of political and cultural difference.

## Relationship with central government

- to consider whether support from government and other national agencies to the regional partnerships could be strengthened

- to assess whether the skills and expertise of the regional partnerships have been used effectively both to inform government policy, and to promote and implement national priorities and central government objectives.

## Local collaboration, communication and dissemination

- to consider the effectiveness of collaboration with other agencies locally and with other Partnerships

- to assess the Partnerships' 'marketing' of, and engagement of support for, their work.

# Appendix 2    Data collection methods and sources

During 2005, the partnership facilitators were interviewed via face-to-face or telephone interviews on two occasions and the national adviser was interviewed once. Ten telephone interviews were conducted with officers engaged in regional fieldforces and two rounds of stakeholder telephone interviews were conducted. The table below shows the breakdown of the number and type of interviews conducted as part of the 2005 evaluation.

**Table 1        Breakdown of interviews conducted during 2005**

| | |
|---|---|
| Partnership facilitators | 22 |
| National adviser | 1 |
| Regional fieldforce | 10 |
| Local Authority (education) | 14 |
| Health Service | 1 |
| Social Care | 1 |
| Voluntary sector | 2 |
| Higher Education | 1 |
| Parent Partnership Service | 5 |
| Independent consultant | 4 |
| Government Office | 2 |
| Parent | 1 |
| Connexions | 3 |
| Teacher | 7 |
| **Total** | **74** |

Local authority representatives from education included:
- inclusion officers/managers
- heads of SEN/inclusion
- SEN/inclusion advisers
- educational psychology
- data management
- SEN support services.

Teachers included representatives:
- from special and mainstream schools
- from primary and secondary schools
- at headteacher, deputy headteacher and classroom teacher levels.

Regional fieldforce interviews included representatives of: Regional Change Advisers, Teenage Pregnancy Unit, Quality Protects, Education Protects, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, Valuing People, the Local Implementation Division and the Primary and Secondary National Strategy teams.

At least one partnership meeting in each region was observed. These included working group or task group meetings that related to 'stories' being followed, or a steering group or management group meetings.

# Appendix 3    Effective Regional Partnerships

These critical questions are based on principles found during the evaluation analysis and apply to effective SEN regional partnerships nationally. Some elements are stronger in some regions than in others. No partnership is strong in all elements; no partnership is weak over all elements. The team suggest that a list of questions such as these might be useful as a self-evaluation tool.

## Does the Regional Partnership have…

- formal commitment from first tier officers in the key agencies (Education, Social Care, Health, GO)?

- clear guidance and support from DfES and Ofsted?

- administrative support for the facilitator?

- strategic representation at management group/steering group level?

- operational representation (and some strategic) at working groups? (are the right people attending and enabled to attend?)

- clear overall structure and clear roles?

- means of implementing the 'products' resulting from the working groups?

- direct and immediate lines of communication?

- contingency arrangements should the facilitator be indisposed for any length of time?.

## Do the Working Groups…

- carry out work relevant to their members' interests?

- have the authority to carry out tasks within the RP and within members' services (including the authority to ask colleagues to assist – e.g. in providing data)?

- have a good infrastructure, including facilitation, administration and planning?

- expect contributions from all members at some time?

- ensure they are not reliant on one individual (e.g. the facilitator) for work/purpose?

- ensure they are sufficiently flexible to alter the group profile to suit the task?

- have a clear exit strategy?.

## Do all *individuals* involved…

- give and gain (individual and service) from participation?

- have sufficient authority within their service to represent their service/authority?

- have direct communication with task group chair/facilitator?

- have necessary support from colleagues to execute task?

- understand when to 'hand over' to another colleague?

## Do central and regional Government…

- give cross-department (DoH and DfES) messages to all agencies on regional collaborative working, so that they minimise conflicting priorities at local level?

- give explicit guidance on expected outcomes?

- communicate policy requirements/developments as soon as possible so that they can be accommodated in partnerships' action plans?

- ensure that DfES policy leads and Ofsted links are able to give support to partnerships wherever possible?

- link the RPs and ensure that the most economical use is made of effective work in the partnerships, without imposing practice unnecessarily?

- use the partnerships to identify expertise which might be useful for the shaping of national policy?.

## Do Partnership Facilitators…

- ensure that the RP would be able to continue if they were suddenly unable to continue in post and had to hand over the facilitation to colleagues?

- develop a shared vision, make connections, encourage others?

- delegate administration to others?

- encourage working group ownership by not necessarily chairing (all) working groups?

- not see themselves or be seen by others as 'the RP'?

- link with other networks, but enable planning and work to be led/owned by others?.

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