

## GB NATIONAL NETWORK PUTS POLICY IMPACT FIRST

***The approach to thematic networking in Great Britain combines thematic with cross-pillar work. The network has permitted a systematic national approach to the use of EQUAL funds to build the sector. A key role has been to define a thematic mainstreaming strategy, whose implementation is delegated to a sector consortium, with strong capacity building effects.***

### **A LINK WITH POLICY FROM BEFORE THE START**

Like most EU Member States, Great Britain has set up a national network for each EQUAL theme, and this means it has eight in all.<sup>1</sup> The government planners took a far-sighted view when they designed the structures. So that they could better exercise their planning function, they were actually set up in 2001, before EQUAL started. They comprise the managing authority and national support structure, all the development partnerships (DPs) active in the theme, and, importantly, other policy-makers relevant to the theme. In the case of the social economy (theme D), this meant that the group was chaired by the Department of Trade and Industry rather than the Department of Work and Pensions, which manages EQUAL as a whole. The chair thus provides the crucial mainstreaming link between practice and policy, between the experimentation being carried out on the ground by the development partnerships and the policy makers. It



***Thematic network participants***

is a two-way link, as the chair briefs projects on policy developments as well as learning about work on the ground.

Fortunately, leadership of the network has been consistent despite departmental restructuring. At its inception, it was chaired by the Social Inclusion Unit of the Small Business Service (SBS), part of the Department of Trade and Industry. In 2002, the Social Enterprise Unit (SEnU) took over when it was moved to the SBS. Then in 2006, SEnU moved back to the Cabinet Office, to form part of the newly-created Office of the Third Sector, and it retains the chair of the network. The network's

principal tasks have been to select participants for each action of EQUAL, help the development partnerships to identify good practice, and draw up a thematic mainstreaming strategy. It was also encouraged to take up specific policy issues with the relevant policy makers. It offers the projects the chance to update themselves on policy developments, share expertise and benchmark their work against their peers. Most importantly, they offer individual DPs a platform to launch their own mainstreaming messages

During the first round of EQUAL, DPs found the cross-pillar networking useful, and so this remained a feature of the meeting design. It has been helped by the establishment of the on-line repository of EQUAL outcomes and products.

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<sup>1</sup> They are called 'thematic networking groups' (TNGs) rather than NTN, and one group covers the whole equal opportunities pillar.

The established format is that all eight NTN's meet every six months in the same venue, typically the prestigious Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre opposite Westminster Abbey in London, although some have been in Birmingham. The morning is given over to a plenary session and is followed by parallel meetings by theme in the afternoon.

## STRATEGIC ALLOCATION OF FUNDS

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The context is that the social enterprise sector is something that is under construction. The government launched its strategy document *Social Enterprise: a Strategy for Success*<sup>2</sup> in 2002, and all the relevant families of organisations – co-operatives, social firms, development trusts and others – came on board, though voluntary organisations were reticent. EQUAL, which was taking off at that time, played an instrumental role in building the sector's infrastructure and actions. In the first round there were nine DPs – two 'national' (for Great Britain as a whole and for Scotland) and seven regional. These implemented the three pillars of the strategy:

- creating an enabling environment for social enterprise
- making social enterprises better businesses
- establishing the value of social enterprise.

As of 2006, and following a review of the progress made in implementing the strategy, the government published a social enterprise action plan, *Scaling New Heights*.<sup>3</sup> This has four priorities for action:

- foster a culture of social enterprise
- ensure that the right information and advice are available
- enable social enterprises to access appropriate finance
- enable social enterprises to work with government

The strategy review has also brought social enterprise together under one roof with the voluntary sector, under the aegis of the Office of the Third Sector.

Ten second-round DPs are under way. Though there is no GB-wide project in this round, the regional DPs are carrying on some of the work done in round 1 and there is a significant degree of continuity.

In this context, the national network has become an effective national system for applying Structural Fund resources to developing the social enterprise sector and monitoring their use. It works at two levels, as it promotes regular liaison between the DPs within the theme, but within a framework of a meeting of all the DPs in all the themes. This preserves the coherence of EQUAL as a whole and means that shared initiatives such as the online product database can be launched to all DPs simultaneously and all can get a feel for what is happening throughout EQUAL. One of the network's key tasks has been to develop a thematic mainstreaming strategy.

## A BOTTOM-UP MAINSTREAMING STRATEGY

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The meetings are run by the technical assistance contractor, Ecotec, but have also developed a consistent support role for a dialogue partner who is definitively within and of the social enterprise sector – the Social Enterprise Coalition (SEC). The Coalition is running a national mainstreaming programme to distil learning from the partnerships and their projects, in order to ensure a lasting legacy for the programme. This is a genuinely useful, capacity building exercise, and is by far the most effective way to coax a sector that is jealous of its independence from the state to increase the contribution it makes to social well-being.

At the meeting in March 2006, SEC's Kirsten van den Hout presented a set of initial proposals for mainstreaming actions that DPs had suggested. They cover the following issues:

- trading opportunities – public and private procurement: replication models / partnership models / public service contracts / new social firms development structure

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<sup>2</sup> [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third\\_sector/documents/social\\_enterprise/se\\_strategy\\_2002.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/documents/social_enterprise/se_strategy_2002.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third\\_sector/documents/social\\_enterprise/se\\_action\\_plan\\_%202006.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/documents/social_enterprise/se_action_plan_%202006.pdf)

- workforce development and training: mentoring model / 'internal brokers' to reform procurement practice / entrepreneur development
- access to finance: loan readiness / access to mainstream loan finance
- quality and impact measurement: pilot social licence / social accounting training package / tools for public sector
- growth of the social enterprise sector through innovation
- social economy support practice: improved range and delivery of business and organisational support

### Three key actions

Subsequent work filtered these wide-ranging proposals down to three substantial pieces of mainstreaming work, grouped under the headings of visibility, networking and influencing government. The visibility aspect includes publishing a quarterly bulletin entitled *Other Things Being Equal* as well as a monthly electronic newsletter and website content.

As far as networking among DPs goes, Ms Van den Hout organises period networking days – in September 2006 one of these was held in Leicester and included a presentation from Nottingham City Council on public procurement. She raises the profile of EQUAL's work among social enterprises by operating an EQUAL stand at the *Voice* conference, the country's main social enterprise gathering that takes place in Manchester each January, attracting more than 800 participants.

To buttress SEC's work, the thematic network has other dissemination tools at its disposal:

- the *EQUAL Works* online repository,<sup>4</sup> launched in 2006, gives each of the 174 British development partnerships its own 'micro-site';
- the booklet *Footsteps2Equality – an eclectic look at the Social Economy projects in the Equal Programme*.<sup>5</sup> This 40-page booklet gives over a two-page spread to all 18 DPs across the two rounds of EQUAL, introduced by forewords from the Minister for the Third Sector, Ed Miliband, and the Head of EQUAL GB, Ian Forsyth.

Influencing government is the final goal of the network's mainstreaming strategy. In 2006 a paper arguing for a braided system of business support<sup>6</sup> was submitted to the Office of the Third Sector and the Department of Trade and Industry, and one on the role of social enterprise in health and social care<sup>7</sup> was submitted to the Department of Health. The recommendations on business support are as follows:

#### **SEC's recommendations on business support**

- Ensure sufficient resources are allocated for appropriate business support services for social enterprises as well as appropriate means of delivery.
- Develop and build on existing diagnostic tools to ensure that they can meet the needs of social enterprise.
- Ensure that all publicity and information materials are 'social enterprise proofed' for mainstream business support.
- Devote extra time and resources into learning the lessons from the Phoenix Fund.
- Develop and apply consistent quality standards to the information and diagnostic process for both advisers and support organisations.
- Develop sector specific targets for support provision where these do not currently exist (taking into account the triple bottom line).
- Develop local, sub-regional and regional business support services with specialist sector representatives.
- Provide clarification on the Government's business support simplification agenda.
- Develop a coherent approach across all publicly funded business support activities and Business Link funded services.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.equal-works.com>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.equal.ecotec.co.uk/themes/d\\_social.asp](http://www.equal.ecotec.co.uk/themes/d_social.asp)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/Page.aspx?SP=2037>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/Page.aspx?SP=1938>

## THEMATIC WORK IN THE CROSS-PILLAR CONTEXT

The meeting held on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2006 shows how the two-level networking method works in practice. The morning was given over to a joint meeting of all eight thematic networks, chaired by Karl Held of Ecotec, the national support organisation. It comprised three main presentations.

- The first, by Jeremy Harrison from the Last Mile DP, introduced the *EQUAL Works* digital repository – an online database of EQUAL projects and their products. The 76 first round development partnerships were the first to be processed, and have between them generated 226 projects and 833 products. The website includes video clips (but not entire CDs) and also policy papers and a forum called ‘Insights’ for discussion papers. It can be updated by project promoters themselves. One shortcoming is that it has no European dimension yet.
- The second speaker was Dave Simmonds of the Centre for Social Inclusion, which is managing a programme of support activities for EQUAL projects. Activities included an EQUAL exhibition and fringe meeting at the ‘Welfare to Work’ conference in June, ‘Working Brief’ – magazine for over 1,000 policy-makers and deliverers, and training in effective lobbying and mainstreaming, which took place in July.
- The final speaker was Steve Arnott of the Department for Work and Pensions, who outlined the future of the European Social Fund.



*Thematic networking venue – The QE II Centre, Westminster, London*

The social economy benefits from its characteristically strong federal structures, and the EQUAL thematic networking group continues to make use

of this strength. The national representative body, the Social Enterprise Coalition (SEC), has taken on the responsibility for carrying through a national mainstreaming project for the theme. This has been a far-sighted move which builds the capacity of the sector’s own institutions at the same time as influencing government effectively.

| <b>EQUAL Thematic Networking Group: Theme D – Social Economy</b>  |   |
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