

Letter from Jon Bright, Regional Director

April 2009

Dear colleague

In my last newsletter, I updated you on the key headlines from our recent Stakeholder Survey and promised to write separately in more detail.



Jon Bright

Government Office Network Survey

The survey was part of a Government Office Network-wide survey. More than 1200 national and regional stakeholders took part. It was conducted by leading researchers, Ipsos MORI, and used both questionnaires and interviews to research stakeholder opinions. Again, many thanks to those of you who took part.

Positive results

Overall, the survey findings are good. They show that the Government Office Network is performing well and demonstrates a good understanding of issues at all levels. For example, the way it carries out its advocacy role is ranked well above average compared with other public sector bodies. Positive findings were also reported for our work on Local Area Agreements and Regional Strategies.

Local Area Agreements (LAAs)

The survey reports significant improvement in stakeholder perception since the last survey in 2005. In particular, it notes that the majority of respondents rate Government Offices highly for our involvement in the LAA process and regard our role in their negotiation as influential. In GOSW, we successfully persuaded Whitehall colleagues to defer those indicators most affected by the economic downturn in this year's review and refresh. This meant that the reward model has been made flexible enough to allow targets to be pinned down next year when the impact of the economic downturn is clearer.

Regional Strategies

Our regional stakeholders regard the Government Office's strategic influence highly and are more likely than the Network average to feel that GOSW makes a strong contribution to regional strategies.

We (along with other Government Offices) persuaded Whitehall not to be over-prescriptive about the new regional arrangements for implementing the Sub-National Review (SNR). In particular, we were keen to ensure regional flexibility over how stakeholders (SEEPs) were engaged in regional planning. Clear milestones for agreeing these arrangements are set out in the change management programme, which as part of SNR implementation, the Strategic Leaders Board and RDA submitted to Government earlier this month.

Key issues

In addition to indicating where we are doing well, the survey also highlights where Government Offices can do better, or where there are concerns.

Urban areas

The survey found that GOSW is perceived by some as being over-focused on Bristol and the other major urban areas. This may reflect concern about our profile in the rest of the region. It may also reflect concern about the emphasis in the draft RSS on growth in major urban areas. Forecasts accepted by the Regional Assembly and the RDA say this is where the majority of the growth of jobs will be and we all want to see a better match

between the location of jobs and new homes. But the scale of growth provided for in the rest of the region is, I think, underappreciated and we will seek to communicate this more effectively.

However, a significant part of the economic capacity of the Region, and its population, and its social and economic problems, are concentrated in the major urban centres. It would be wrong if we were not giving them significant attention. Many of our priorities will lie there. The important issue - where we need your help - is to ensure we achieve the right balance. I hope that both the strategic dialogues we are conducting with each of the region's upper tier local authorities (at which we agree shared priorities) and our increased attention to locality management go some way to addressing your concerns.

Feeding back to Whitehall

In the main, the results indicate the need for (a) more clarity about the role of the Government Offices and (b) more reassurance that we are focused on working in a joined-up way across government agendas and actively feeding back regional comments to Whitehall.

With regard to (a), it is perhaps worth reiterating the 3-fold role of Government Offices:

- to influence (national) policies
- to align (regional) strategies
- to support (local) delivery

All three are equally important and all three involve close working with regional stakeholders.

Re (b), I am aware that colleagues may not always know when or how we represent regional views to Whitehall. We need to think more about how we communicate our engagement with central Government Departments on your behalf - there are formal and increasingly effective links between the GO Network and eleven central departments.

Sometimes this is undertaken through routine contacts between senior GOSW staff and departmental officials, sometimes via GO Network-wide representation, sometimes via our Regional Minister. For instance, GOSW

acted as a 'broker' in supporting Plymouth on their 'Building Schools for the Future' (BSF) bid, which has now been included in the top priority phase for roll-out. Similar examples occur on a weekly basis. It is rarely appropriate for us to publicise these.

GOSW's relationship with our Regional Minister, Ben Bradshaw, is vital in ensuring our region's voice is heard in Whitehall. For example, last year, GOSW organised a series of events so that the Minister could feed back the region's views on the Government's emerging legislative programme.

We have also ensured that Ben Bradshaw's Regional Economic Task Group (RETG) enables key regional stakeholders to connect directly with the national machinery set up by Government to respond to the recession. This means that full attention is paid to the South West's priorities and circumstances (along with those of the other regions) as the Government develops its thinking.

For instance, the SW RETG has identified "green recovery" as a key priority because of the opportunities it brings for jobs and business and its contribution to the development of a low-carbon economy. Together with the SW RDA and Defra agencies, GOSW will be discussing emerging proposals with DEFRA and DECC both to seek their advice and to influence national policy in this important area.

GOSW staff

For many of our regional stakeholders, personal contact with GOSW staff is valuable, and the survey suggests that we are performing well in this respect. Recent downsizing (reducing headcount by over a third in the last two years) and the development of a more strategic role (see above) means that there will be some changes in the GO staff assigned to particular places. We will try and keep changes to a minimum. We hope to be able to send you an organisation chart within the next couple of months.

Collaborative working

The survey suggested we could improve internal communications and collaborative working between different parts of the Office.

Over the coming year, we expect to improve the consistency and quality of our support for

individual places in the region. The strategic dialogues help us agree shared priorities. GOSW has led a national initiative on strengthening the GO Network's analytic and delivery capability. To this end, we have developed a tool – The Places Handbook – which can be accessed here: [The Places Handbook](#). This provides practical guidance on how to improve analysis, planning, delivery and performance management in connection with delivering LAA and other targets. We hope it will be used by GOs and LSPs in a spirit of joint endeavour.

Resilience is another area where collaborative working to a consistently high standard is essential (and stakeholders have commented very positively on GOSW's contribution). Cross Office coordination is vital and we have the capability to respond to a major incident whenever necessary. In fact, GOSW has the largest number of trained staff within the GO network.

To ensure we carry out our three key roles to maximum effect, we have set up a new Continuous Improvement Team managed by Liz Carter and Darren Hall. This will help us improve communication and cross-office working and will drive delivery of our key priorities.

And finally...

This survey will be used to shape the future direction of GOSW.

I hope you have found this information useful.

Yours sincerely

Jon Bright