

OPEN



openproject

Summary
Document



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THE OPEN PROJECT IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

OPEN - promote and support open method of coordination for strengthening social inclusion and social protection – was a two year project which ran from February 2009 until January 2011. It was funded under the PROGRESS Programme of the European Union's Directorate General of Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity. It was aimed at strengthening the EU's contribution in support of Member States' commitments and efforts to create more and better jobs and to build a more cohesive society.

OPEN seeks to enhance the bottom-up approach to policy development, through the promotion of an Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on issues around social protection and social inclusion. This involves all the relevant stakeholders at any level, both from the private and public sector.

It aims to raise awareness on social exclusion issues by:

1. strengthening the dissemination and circulation of information between individuals, disadvantaged people experiencing social exclusion, public and private organisations working in the social field, politicians and decision-makers, journalists and the media.
2. fostering dialogue between social policy organisations and decision makers at local level and reporting the experience, analysis and results at a transnational level to support the exchange of best practice and possible solutions to social inclusion.

Originally sponsored by the West Midlands Regional Assembly with a view to informing regional strategy and steered by the European Social Cohesion Group. In the West Midlands, OPEN engaged with some 300 grass-roots organisations.

Although no longer able to feed grassroots perspectives into the now abolished regional strategy, the OPEN project has proved valuable in making connections, sharing best practice and starting dialogue between partners at all levels as well as providing a useful platform for frontline organisations to consider the nature of the Big Society agenda in England.

Details of the project can be found: www.the-open-project.eu

What is OPEN?

OPEN refers to the Open Method of Communication (OMC) which the European Union adopted in 2000 to improve the development and implementation of social policy across Member States. As well as for its own sake, tackling social issues is seen by the EU as an important dimension in meeting Europe's Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Employment and, more recently, the Europe 2020 Strategy which includes among its seven flagship themes:

Providing a "European platform against poverty" to ensure social and territorial cohesion such that the benefits of growth and jobs are widely shared and people experiencing poverty and social inclusion are enabled to live in dignity and take an active part in society"

In short, the overarching objectives for the OMC are:

- The promotion of social cohesion and equal opportunities
- The interaction with Lisbon objectives for greater economic growth and more and better jobs
- The strengthening of good governance, transparency and involvement of the stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies

The OMC was intended to be different to the formal legislation and regulations approach that might be said to characterise the EU's traditional "Community action". As Europe has no legal responsibilities or "competencies" over social matters a softer, voluntary approach was developed in the OMC - to create an "open" dialogue involving different levels of administration, providers, beneficiaries and their representative organisations.

At an EU level, the member states agreed objectives and indicators, and then produced national strategies and reports forming a Joint Council and Commission Report on Social Protection and Inclusion. The third stage is in-depth analysis and mutual learning on priority themes. The relevant reports can be found at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=750&langId=en>

With the OMC running for the best part of 10 years the OPEN project was set up to assess how it had been used and its strengths and weaknesses.

Running from 2009 to January 2011, the OPEN project looked at the regions of Saxony in Germany, Marche Region in Italy, Aragon in Spain and the West Midlands in England. The partner organisations in those regions tested how well the OMC was known, how it was viewed and whether it was used in their areas, and collectively fed-back their findings to the European Commission.



The OPEN project partners

The OPEN project partners are drawn from four different countries, with different administrative and governance structures and operating in their own particular circumstances. They are:

- Marche Region - Social Policies Unit (Lead Partner) - Italy
- Saxony State Ministry of Social Affairs and Consumer Protection - Germany
- Aragonese Federation of Municipalities, Regions and Provinces (FAMCP) - Spain
- West Midlands Councils - England (assuming role from West Midlands Regional Assembly upon its abolition)

When the project started the four regions all had some formal responsibilities for socially policies. In Spain, Germany and Italy regional government is well established with relatively clear boundaries between the roles of local, regional and national government.

Although regional governance in England was much more informal and fluid than in much of the Continent, there was a legal requirement for an Integrated Regional Strategy covering, among other things, planning, housing, skills and economic development. It was intended that the OPEN project would help facilitate "bottom-up" engagement in the strategy - ensuring it would be informed by a strong grass roots and social perspective.

With the incoming Coalition Government removing the regional tier of governance and strategies, the context that OPEN was working in changed dramatically. However, the Project still proved valuable in developing networks, facilitating discussion and awareness around the social agenda including the implications of the Government's Big Society initiative.

First stage seminars

Each of the partners held a series of seminars on common themes, to engage frontline organisations. Within the West Midlands, sessions were held on:

- Children's rights and conditions
- Ethnic minorities and immigrants
- Family policies - decent housing for all
- Health care for the elderly
- Inclusion for people with disabilities

The events were considerable successes with over 300 grass roots organisations taking part and 36 networks established as a result.

While these seminars were of considerable "local" value, what was clear was that if the OMC is being used by the EU and between member states it is not being communicated to regional or local levels. In countries where there was awareness of the OMC, the

region's role was sometimes only seen as a burdensome, bureaucratic form-filling exercise to contribute to a national report that did not help policy development or frontline delivery.

That said, partners found that within their areas structured ways of engaging and involving grassroots organisations were being used and, consequently, there was general support for the overall OMC approach, even if the OMC itself was effectively unknown.

Best Practice

Flowing from the first stage seminars, the different partner regions worked to identified examples of good practice using the "principles" of the OMC. The structured sharing of best practice was thought to be particularly important as one of the best methods of facilitating bottom-up engagement within regions and thereby assisting convergence between Member States.

Unfortunately it was not possible to identify OMC best practice at Member State level due, among other things, to an absence of suitable official indicators and definitions at a European level. However, at a regional and local level 28 case studies were shortlisted as potential examples of best practice.

A simple scoring system using nine principles was used, with Partners unable to vote for projects from their own country.

1. Improvements to services or service infrastructure
2. Awareness raising
3. Added value for the local/regional community
4. Skills transfer
5. Transferability and potential for replication
6. Clear initial objectives, originality, relevance and innovativeness
7. Holistic design and inclusive strategies
8. Monitoring impact on beneficiaries and mechanisms for feedback
9. Compliance with EU policies and/or guidelines

The top four examples of best practice all came from the West Midlands:

Regional Homelessness Strategy

Covering the Regional Homelessness Strategy and its Implementation Group, a 2008 review monitoring its progress against its objectives found that it had been extremely successful in promoting partnership work and sharing best practice and intelligence.

Furthering the aims of tackling poverty and social inclusion, the strategy influenced housing investment including supported housing between 2008 and 2011; established successful cross-sector strategy implementation groups as a forum for change and





influence across the West Midlands; and supported projects in two sub-regions tackling worklessness and homelessness together through the Learning and Skills Council's City Partnership Programme.

Seen as a highly effective and influential body, the Implementation Group template was used by other English regions.

Activities 4U and Summer Activities

During the summer of 2009, this project provided a range of positive evening diversionary activities within the community for young people who otherwise "hang around" in the Hartshill area of North Warwickshire. Encouraging community engagement, discouraging the consumption of alcohol and reducing anti-social behaviour the project reached an average of 30-35 attendees on a Friday night and achieved a 10% reduction in the anti-social behaviour recorded by the Police on the previous year's figures.

Nishkam Civic Centre

The Nishkam Centre is part of a faith based charity that aspires to develop and empower individuals and communities so that they are able to support themselves and others in building strong families and sustainable communities.

At the forefront of advancing community and economic well-being, promoting inter-faith, intercultural, intercommunity dialogue and championing social justice and inclusion, its services include: helping make health services available and accessible to all; offering advice and guidance to those in the local community looking to get back to work; and providing a centre for Learndirect to provide the skills and qualifications people need to find employment.

Dudley's Housing Strategy for Older People

Working closely with Age Concern, a cross section of older people helped develop and implement a housing strategy for older people. Using the different experiences of men, women, owner occupiers, social rented tenants and private tenants as well as input from BME (black and minority ethnic) groups and less mobile people, the independent Care Quality Commission's report on Dudley MBC acknowledged "the housing theme group had strongly contributed to the new older people's housing strategy".

Among other results, the process has: increased awareness of housing options among older people who are not normally in contact with the council; provided direct feedback to Lifetime Homes and Extra Care Housing architects; and been used to secure funding for new schemes such as gardening services for council tenants and handyman services.

The examples of best practice are available at: www.the-open-project.eu

Second stage seminars

Where the first set of seminars brought grassroots organisations together, the second round of events had been intended create a strong connection with policy and decision-makers.

With the ending of regional working in England the focus was more on bringing the findings of the earlier thematic seminars together with beneficiary organisations and policy makers in a more informal way. Participants strongly affirmed the importance of the social agenda and the need for cross-organisation dialogue, but were concerned about how this could be secured in the new financial reality and governance arrangements.

Held in partnership with Regional Action West Midlands, as a follow-up, the second regional seminar provided a cross sector forum for a discussion on the Big Society. As Government's "big idea" is to increase the size and scope of civil society and significantly expand its role in delivering public services this was clearly of great interest to beneficiaries, policy makers and providers from across the spectrum.

Social inclusion and the media

All the partners recognised the importance of the media in helping shape public opinion on social issues. Alongside this there was concern that where reporting was superficial, sensationalistic, or taken out of context this can encourage the unfair demonising of certain vulnerable groups of people.

Looking at these issues, partner regions engaged with the media to improve their awareness and provide them with relevant information. In the West Midlands this took the form of a workshop facilitated by experienced ex BBC journalists. Using real examples, civic society organisations explored how to influence the way the media treat stories and create and proactively use their own media such as blogs and websites. As part of the exercise, participants drew up and presented stories online on a specially created website in a media friendly way using text, images, video and sound recordings.

Indicators

A final theme covered by the Project was the role of indicators. At European and member state level, the OMC is intended to lead to a voluntary convergence of approaches to social policy, with a set of 17 indicators measuring, for example; at risk of poverty rate; inequality of income distribution; healthy life expectancy; people living in jobless households; and employment rate of older workers.

Some of the other indicators such as total health expenditure per capita and projected total public social expenditures are input,





rather than output measures. These were considered to be less useful because they do not measure the impact on people, but the amount of money spent without consideration of its effectiveness.

Some partners thought that common indicators - setting measurable and transparent goals for assessing progress - were an essential part of the convergence process. However, these targets need to be sensitive to the varying circumstances of different regions, not using the same benchmarks for both “strong” and “weak” regions. A further complication was the awareness that developing indicators able to deal with the multi-dimensional nature of social issues would not be an easy task.

Findings

Perhaps unsurprisingly, across the Partner regions there was little awareness of the OMC. Nonetheless, with regions and localities already working to improve the involvement of grass roots organisations and beneficiaries in social policy there was general support for its objectives and approaches.

Despite the significant differences between partner areas, the Project has shown that it is possible to tackle common themes and identify examples of best practice - a key component of the OMC toolkit.

The focus has been bottom-up, looking at how community based grassroots initiatives can have a critical role to play in engaging with the vulnerable in society to ensure “top down” policy identifies and responds more effectively to their needs.

A better relationship between regions and “Europe”

However, the EU has not followed this approach, with regions only involved in the margins of EU policy development. A key finding from the OPEN project is the need to fundamentally restructure the OMC so that it is owned and used by policy makers at all levels, and supported by structured communication between the different levels. With regions and localities having major responsibilities for delivering social policy, the OMC should provide for their proper engagement in European policy, ensuring it is sensitive to different circumstances. The Committee of the Regions, as the EU’s representative body for regions and localities, would be well placed to champion this.

The OMC must make a real contribution to the work of policy makers, helping them make politically sensitive decisions and providing them with the tools for intelligent benchmarking. For partners, the availability of good practice provides a truly bottom-up mechanism for convergence, however, EU programmes and websites rarely provide overviews of their projects or examples of best practice accessible in a range of community languages.

Indicators and communication

The use of common indicators, not to “name and shame under-performance”, but as the basis for understanding the extent to which social issues are being addressed across Europe was seen as essential by some partners in providing a framework for assessing convergence. Nonetheless, there was recognition that although developing indicators which assist, for example, in the breaking of inter-generational poverty may be difficult they should have a critical role.

The project found that communication needs to be improved at all levels. Locally, through making sure that language, disability, cultural differences and access to information technology are not barriers to participation. At a “European” level, communications with regions needs to be improved through better involvement, feedback and the more effective use of the Commission’s websites.

As well as tackling the issues themselves, the Project looked at ways to improve the reporting of social issues in the media. Developing better working relationships with journalists, understanding and respecting the way they operate, and providing them with easily digestible information, including case studies to personalise social stories, were seen as positive ways forward.

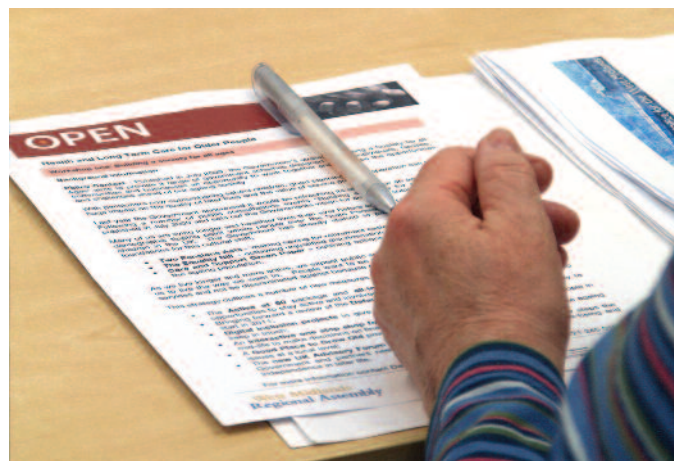
The EU has ambitious goals around the social agenda which sit alongside its economic objectives. The need to maintain focus on the social agenda during these economically challenging times was emphasised by participants in the Project. The OMC has the potential to play an important part in making sure this happens.

Conclusions

In carrying out the Project it has been clear that there is a demand from frontline groups to be more closely and productively involved in the development of social policy. Moreover, that social policy needs a strong bottom-up element if it is to be effective whether locally, regionally, nationally or at an EU level.

Within the West Midlands the rationale for the Project changed with the ending of regional strategies. Nonetheless, the Project has proved valuable in bringing together grass roots organisations with officers and policy-makers to discuss strategic and policy issues. It has been the catalyst for a number of networks and connections and raised awareness and understanding between the many participants from different organisations and sectors.

It has also shown that while there is little or no awareness of the OMC approach or its EU and national level processes, many organisations in the West Midlands have developed effective, outward-looking and inclusive ways of working.





With the sharing of best practice identified by the partners as a critical element in improving performance it is obviously satisfying that the top four examples came from organisations in the West Midlands. Clearly though, this is no time to be resting on laurels and the opportunities and challenges arising from the Big Society agenda will only increase the value of learning from what has already worked.

As part of the theme of bottom-up empowerment, as the West Midlands media seminar illustrated, is the need for socially oriented organisations to be proactive in the use of press and media. In both better controlling their own messages and understanding the way the professional media works they can do a great deal to tackle the misconceptions and negative reporting that can be so damaging to social inclusion and cohesion.

In a small way then, it is hoped that the OPEN project in the West Midlands has played a part in helping others to better serve the vulnerable and excluded in our communities.

High level recommendations

An important objective of the OPEN Project was to provide high-level feedback to the European Commission on how the Open Method of Communication (OMC) could be improved. Reflecting the views of the different partners these are set out below:

- R1. Strengthening the OMC:** The Social OMC should be strengthened by promoting a greater awareness and understanding of its underlying principles at all levels in order to help realise its full potential.
- R2. A more structured approach to the OMC:** A more structured approach to the OMC should be adopted through the development and use of more consistent toolkits to better understand social needs and change processes on a more common basis.
- R3. Improving communications:** In order to help strengthen the OMC, a communication strategy needs to be developed addressing all the barriers to communication which have been identified.
- R4. Transparency and feedback:** In order to encourage frontline empowerment there is a need to ensure greater transparency in the operation of the OMC and effective feedback of progress and outputs on a continuous basis.
- R5. Sharing Best Practice & promoting innovation:** The sharing of best practice should be recognised as a key mechanism in the operation of the Social OMC and resources should be focused on ensuring that the outcomes of the projects should be available to all.

- R6. Media responsibilities & the OMC:** Efforts should be made to engage with the media at all levels in order to encourage a proper understanding of the social OMC and the responsible reporting of the issues being addressed by it.
- R7. The role of Indicators:** A new holistic approach to the indicators should be identified.
- R8. Re-confirming the role for a 'Social Europe':** In order to re confirm and support the ongoing case for a 'Social Europe', proper arrangements should be put in place for monitoring and reviewing progress on the convergence of social policy at key stages.
- R9. The role for the Committee of Regions:** In order to promote and strengthen the role of the social OMC the Committee of Regions should be tasked with championing and managing the ongoing EU processes.

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For further information see: wmlga.gov.uk/open or contact Sherman Wong on: 0121 245 0210





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