

Values that add value

CONSULTANTS NEED TO PROVE THEY CAN BRING SOMETHING EXTRA TO THE REGENERATION PROCESS MORE THAN EVER BEFORE. ANITA PATI REPORTS

Perhaps it's an inbuilt job requirement but regeneration consultants remain upbeat about work opportunities, despite the financial gloom. The banks may hang their heads while the economy founders but the sustainable communities agenda appears more important than ever. Fresh thinking is required to get us out of this mess, consultants say, to bring a clearer, more holistic approach after years of rampant short-sightedness.

'Despite the economic downturn, potential cuts in public spending and redundancies on the public sector horizon,' says Caroline Masundire, associate director at consultancy Rocket Science. 'I predict that external consultancy services will still be needed to support organisations through these troubled times.' A calm outsider, she says, can help smooth the tumult, if anything. 'New statutory duties, lack of internal capacity and expertise, staff turnover, deadlines and the constant change organisations are operating in, will continue to create the demand for external support.'

Of course, the sector is not immune to the current climate. One trend noticed by Karen Dyson at CAG Consultants is the increased competition in the sector

since the recession halted big building developments. 'The biggest change is that the largest companies [like Capita], are going for smaller scale jobs that they wouldn't have bothered with before. It might be the companies that would be doing physical regeneration are now moving into regeneration of neighbourhoods,' she says.

But this is not deterring smaller players, least of all CAG whose order book, Ms Dyson says, is healthy. Right now, she says, consultants can save cash-strapped commissioners money. 'It can be more cost-effective to use a consultant than employ a member of staff, particularly as there's no need to meet redundancy costs, sick pay, holiday pay, etc,' she says. 'This might be particularly relevant in a recession. Also, clients know they are paying for a dedicated amount of time in which the work will be done.'

Clients value the objectivity consultants can bring. For instance, Accord Housing Association, which uses regeneration specialists within consortia rather than commissioning directly, appreciates this. Alan Yates, director of regeneration, says: 'Consultants act as a third party coordinator and can bring external expertise and guidance to a steering group or project delivery team which ▶

WM Enterprise – engaging young people

WM Enterprise (WME) was commissioned by youth volunteering charity V to undertake a review of its grant programmes between 2006-2008.

V was created following the recommendations of the Russell Commission's report, which called for a step change in youth volunteering in diversity, quality and quantity.

The evaluation focused on providing evidence to demonstrate the impact of

V's grant programmes and a key requirement was the involvement of young people within its overall methodology. WME therefore established a Youth Evaluation Panel (YEP) at the outset, engaging nine young people aged 16-25.

The panel helped ensure WME used methods that would engage young people, created a balance of control over the research and made sure the research team was accountable to young people.

The YEP worked closely with the evaluation team and members were involved in many aspects of the research. They were fully involved in the evaluation 'journey'.



Volunteers who formed the vanguard as the charity V was launched in 2006

The YEP went through a timetable of planned activities that were based around five day-long workshops covering subjects such as 'collating findings and developing recommendations' where ideas were discussed. The panel also 'youth proofed' various documents within the evaluation such as questionnaires, focus group guides and the final report.

As well as helping to shape the research, there were lots of benefits for the panel members. They got to see how a firm

like WME works, how an evaluation is undertaken and some of the barriers that have to be overcome. Each member had a mentor from the evaluation team as well as a mini personal development plan – ensuring they gained maximum benefit from their involvement.

'The development of the Youth Evaluation Panel meant that young volunteers were at the very heart of the evaluation and were involved throughout,' says a spokesperson for V.

'As well as being in keeping with V's overall ethos for youth involvement it also ensured that young people had a real say in the overall findings and recommendations.'

might otherwise be either slightly inward-looking or which may lack the full range of skills and expertise required for the project in hand.'

Regeneration consultants are worth it in other ways, says Ms Dyson: 'They're valuable as a way of managing risk in an organisation. Where there are a number of options, consultants can test these out, exploring things like cost, sustainability, partner engagement and community responses for each option. It may then also be handy to have a consultant to blame if things do go wrong!'

As if this weren't good enough reason to scoop out the coffers, they provide a buffer between potentially abrasive parties. 'Consultants can help 'reach the parts that others cannot reach,' she says. 'For example, voluntary sector organisations might be more willing to be frank and open with an independent consultant than they would if they were speaking directly to the local authority that funded them.'

'And evaluations are likely to be more realistic and effective at identifying lessons learned if they are done

GFA Consulting – maximising the impact of LSPs

Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands (IEWM) – the regional improvement agency – was concerned that the full potential of the area's local strategic partnerships (LSPs) was not being realised.

LSPs had been operating for some years but were still facing major challenges in establishing their capacity to deliver. Support mechanisms were not adequately tailored to need, joined up or fully effective and LSPs were not fulfilling the role of operating as local 'improvement hubs'.

IEWM designed a programme of support for the region's LSPs and commissioned GFA Consulting to deliver it.

The result of this partnership was Learning

to Deliver (L2D) – a multi-layered, integrated programme of support. In only its second year it has stimulated changes in the way LSPs and their partners are approaching their tasks. Some are starting to question the role of the LSP: if they are not delivery agents, what are they?

And IEWM, through L2D, has established online and face to face opportunities for government office, Audit Commission, the regional development agency and IEWM's relationship managers to discuss progress and performance.

LSP coordinators say the programme is having a positive effect on their work and the impact is also starting to be seen in local area agreement (LAA) outcomes. L2D is now

helping each locality to develop its own integrated improvement system.

David Galliers, IEWM's assistant director for LAA support, says: 'By working with GFA, who have managed a consortium of 12 different consultancies, we have been able to utilise a range of national experts in a flexible and responsive way.'

'We have adopted an open book approach which has produced an added element of creativity and dynamism to our joint work that is often not present in traditional contractual arrangements. IEWM, GFA and the rest of the delivery team believe that our approach has produced a unique and effective approach to LAA support.'

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