

## **Listening to (and Learning from) Policy Communities**

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on

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potential for an enlarged European Union"**

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## 1. Introduction

The core aim of this paper is to listen (and learn) from policy-makers views about the options and choices involved in the mobilisation of their regions foresight capacities. The paper identifies the transferable lessons of a process undertaken by an interdisciplinary team of researchers who assessed the feasibility of establishing a Regional Foresight Lab in the north west of England<sup>1</sup>. The paper argues that the mobilisation of foresight capacity raises broader questions about the affinities between different “ways of seeing” regions future prospects. An enhanced foresight capacity needs to be located within its specific social and economic context because this both delimits and/or enlarges the scope of regional foresight.

While much greater use has been made of foresight at national level there has been no systematic attempt to link foresight to debates about regional economic, social and environmental futures. This paper draws on the lessons of a feasibility study of a Foresight Lab designed to coordinate existing expertise to create a research and policy forum that supports the generation, evaluation and application of scenarios about the range, scope and desirability of regional development pathways. The paper identifies the most relevant and potentially transferable lessons from this process by highlighting the generic problems involved in mobilising regional foresight capacity and a range of potential responses and options for regional policy makers.

An understanding of the different “ways of seeing” regional foresight and the level of affinity between these viewpoints are essential because these perspectives strongly shape the context and opportunities for the mobilisation of foresight capacity. Regional foresight is, therefore, best understood as a concept that is locally constructed, actively negotiated and temporarily stabilised in particular contexts.

Rather than searching for a singular, standardised and homogenous “way of seeing” regional foresight there is a need to develop sensitivity to how regional foresight is constructed within and between different spatial scales. The key insight is that the mobilisation of foresight capacity requires an analysis of the way in which the region is framed by its European and national context and by how major regional interests view the region and their roles in shaping its future.

The paper, therefore, argues that there are five central questions facing policy (and research) communities:

1. What is the value and relevance of a European dimension to regional foresight?
2. Where does the region fit within national foresight programmes?
3. How do regions existing prospective capacities shape the potential of regional foresight?
4. What enhanced services and new activities do regions want from regional foresight?
5. How can a mobilised foresight capacity be developed regionally?

The paper addresses these questions and provides a framework that outlines the options and choices involved in developing a regional foresight process that is relevant and sensitive to its context. The paper is divided into 6 sections. Section 2 and 3 review the relations between regional foresights and its wider European and national context. Section 4 examines the role of regions existing prospective capacity in shaping regional foresight. Section 5 outlines the enhanced foresight capacities identified by regional policy makers. Section 6 provides a case study of how these needs could be met in a Regional Foresight Lab.

## 2. Diversity of European Perspectives on Regional Foresight

A European initiative with an explicit commitment to mobilise regional foresight capacity raises questions about the relationship between two ways of seeing regional foresight. The first concerns a top-down perspective looking from Brussels on to the diversity of regions in Europe and the assumptions made about regions interests in regional foresight. The second perspective looks backwards from the regions up to Brussels and the expectations and motivations that regions might have of Europe. There is, however, relatively weak understanding of the level of affinity between these different “ways of seeing” foresight. It is, therefore, important to begin to understand how these ways of seeing are currently constituted and what opportunities there are for exploiting potential affinities between different viewpoints.

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<sup>1</sup> Regional Foresight Lab: A Feasibility Study, Report for the Office of Science and technology, DTI, London, 2001. The feasibility study, undertook a review of the region in national foresight and future initiatives and a more detailed assessment of regional foresight deficits and needs in the northwest based on 90 questionnaires and 12 interviews with senior regional policy makers.

## ***View(s) from Brussels: Mobilising Foresight Capacity***

**Although Europe is at an early stage in developing a “way of seeing” regional foresight three assumptions underpin the current perspective. First, the need for mapping the scale and scope of existing regional foresight initiatives and capacities. Second, a critical review of the conceptual and empirical evidence that regional foresight enlarges debate about technological change and improves economic performance. Finally, the development of a context for encouraging regions to accelerate the mobilisation of their regional foresight capacity. This perspective recognises the diversity of existing experience, the ambiguity of current evidence on the effectiveness of regional foresight and the dangers of developing a singular definition or standardised view of the practise of regional foresight.**

Yet what is missing from this perspective is sensitivity to the multiple “way of seeing” at a European level. Central to this is recognition that across the directorates there are quite different ways of seeing regions - as statistical units, institutions for implementing European policies, peripheral areas in receipt of special assistance and so on. While we lack a sufficiently nuanced understanding of both the construction and consequences of these views it is clear that the mobilisation of regional foresight as a European activity needs to be linked to its potential value and relevance to different directorates. For instance, how different directorates build their own understanding of the long-term development prospects of regions and their assessment of the quality and effectiveness of regions existing prospective capacities will shape their interest in an enhanced foresight capacity. Unless regional foresight is seen as a process that will address existing deficits and future needs there is unlikely to be sufficient incentive and active interest in mobilising capacity.

## ***View(s) from the Regions: Positioning in Europe?***

The second viewpoint concerns regions “way of seeing” Europe in relation to foresight. Regions have usually looked to national governments and/or their own regional resources to rather than Europe to develop their prospective capacities. This deficit needs to be addressed before significant progress can be made in mobilising regional foresight at a European level. The first opportunity concerns the changing position of regions that will no longer be in receipt of structural funds post EU enlargement. In the northwest understanding the regions prospects post structural funds was the most significant long-term foresight issue outside the delivery of the regional strategies. At the same time regional policy makers involved in foresight activities were particularly interested in the transferable experiences and practise of regions that were similarly positioned. There is thus was a context where regions could begin to see value and relevance in developing a European perspective on regional foresight both in terms of topic addressed and networks of practice.

In summary, there are evidently opportunities for developing a European agenda on regional foresight that seeks to build closer affinity between the top-down views of Europe and the bottom up views of regions. Central to this is identifying those social interests and the key issues that require a well researched, widely shared and mutual understanding of long-term regional futures. Evidently the position of regions in an enlarged Europe could be a starting point of interest to those regions losing special status and those gaining new status. Although regions will be differentially positioned in relation to these issues there is an opportunity to build frameworks and initiatives to mobilise foresight activities in preparation for this restructuring.

### **3. Disconnections between National and Regional Foresight**

The second set of issues concern the types of relations that exist between national and regional foresight. National foresight programmes and initiatives have a key role in framing the limits and boundaries of regional foresight. Regional views of the value of foresight are likely to be powerfully shaped by how regions were seen in national programmes. The visibility of regional issues in national programmes and the level of connection with regional institutions are likely to shape the scope of regional foresight in a particular context. There is therefore a need to understand how regions are positioned in relation to national foresight.

### ***View(s) of Regions within National Foresight***

Regional foresight in the UK is often seen as emblematic of practices in Europe yet at national level none of the exercises explicitly dealt with regional issues. Consideration of the roles played by regions in shaping the future are largely absent from the national foresight programme and the needs of regional policy-makers were rarely addressed. Regions predominantly function as the setting in which the proposed futures unfold and as the backcloth onto which scenarios generated by other drivers are projected. Regions are taken-for-granted features of the current round of national foresight exercise in the UK - they are omnipresent yet neglected.

Despite this story of neglect fleeting "images" of regions could be seen within a range of implicit assumptions made in the national exercises. Contradictory conceptions of the region emerge. The region is often viewed as being a site or market for sustainable development where it may represent an opportunity for the implementation of foresight recommendations. But at other times, the region is presented as a potential constraint on development and change. There is clearly significant unrealised potential for regions to become actively involved in the implementation of recommendations in their particular local contexts.

The main reason for the contradictory images of regions that emerge in national exercises is found in the complex and multi-faceted character of contemporary regions. This complexity raises particular challenges for national foresight process. Regions are simultaneously sites of poverty and exclusion and locations for economic growth and regeneration. But such local context-based attention is currently absent from foresight exercises that have a predominately national and top-down view. When regional issues are mentioned, there is no consideration of whether all regions face a common future or whether there are different alternatives. Only generic possibilities for the future are noted, implied and presumed. National foresight and futures activities have not provided a context for exploring regional issues. Even when funding was developed for a regional foresight programme this was framed as a mechanism for delivering the findings of the national programme to regions. Given the strongly aspatial view of the national programme there were considerable difficulties translating these into a regional context.

### ***Views from Regions: Disconnected Foresight***

Because of the strongly central and top-down orientation of existing foresight capacity at a national level regions have an ambiguous relationship with foresight. The needs of regional policy makers have not often been addressed in national foresight and the results of the national programme were hardly ever used by regional strategic policy communities in their prospective activities. Even where foresight was developed regionally with relatively marginal support from the centre local initiatives (at least in early stages) were oriented around disseminating results of the national programme rather than building a distinctly regional perspective.

Yet paradoxically the absence of a regional dimension to national foresight has occurred at a time when the national state was establishing new regional institutions designed to play an enhanced role in regional economic development. This was also accompanied by a wider debate about the creation of new democratic institutions including assemblies and governments to strengthen control over regional institutions. Yet national foresight was disconnected from the centres efforts to devolve key responsibilities for economic development to new regional agencies.

This changing context for regional governance created a complex and contradictory context for regional foresight. None of the three central departments responsible for developing coordinating links with the regions had an explicit foresight mechanism with strong prospective dimensions. At the same time there was little clarity about how the new developing regional institutions would build their prospective capacities. Part of the problem is the absence of a distinctive regional agenda or prospectus within which a long term research agenda can be built around foresight. There is no simple "national" perspective (or necessarily regional) on the need for regional foresight. Instead the centre lacks a national capacity to understand the development of regions and the region themselves have an uncertain and fragmented context within which they are attempting to mobilise new prospective capacities.

In summary, the development of a national perspective on regions would involve at least three central government departments' views of the potential of regional foresight. No one central department has direct responsibility for coordinating both the techniques and content of regional foresight activities. Instead, existing expertise and diverse needs are spread across different departments. It is difficult to see how central government can develop a clear view of how it sees regions being shaped across a range of policy areas without a more effective and focused foresight capacity that begins to integrate these different ways of seeing.

#### **4. Multiple Regional Perspectives on Foresight**

The North West region focuses on the major urban conurbations of Greater Manchester and Merseyside while rest of the region is comprised of the counties of Cheshire, Lancashire and the Cumbria. Since the late 1990s a new regional governance framework has been developed for the region that has been important in promoting different ways of thinking about the future. The most significant three regional institutions and strategies are: the North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA) created in April 1999 to set a co-ordinated economic strategy for the region; the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA), the lead agency in preparing a major regional land-use planning framework; and the Government Office for the North West (GONW) responsible for coordinating national policies in the region. In addition there are over fifty other regional strategies that supplements this triumvirate of key regional documents.

This complex and fragmented framework, highly distributed across multiple organisations and agencies, shapes the context within which regional policy makers undertake futures thinking. In current practice the main purpose of foresight and futures activities is the production of a common vision— usually designed to sign up agreement on the generation of a future for a place, sector or theme. Most respondents felt that their organisations had sufficient futures capacity and expertise to develop a consensus that was sufficiently broad to enrol additional partners in an initiative or strategy. Thus it was often claimed in interviews that the key regional policy documents were based common assumptions and crosscutting themes:

First, there was the assertion that the regional organisations shared a common understanding of an enlarged concept of sustainable development that encompasses: competitiveness, sustainable communities and environmental objectives. It was argued that these components are interlinked and not contradictory. Yet there is no regional framework for critically assessing the affinities and interconnections between multiple and overlapping regional policy and strategy documents, each with their own institutional, spatial and sectoral foci.

Second, it is asserted that there is shared understanding of the need to ensure that economic growth is combined with social progress. Social inclusion and competitiveness are claimed to be mutually compatible and equally important goals. Yet there is no assessment method for dealing with the resonances and dissonances between quite different spatial, technological, economic, social and environmental objectives contained within multiple urban and regional strategies.

Finally, the principles underlying the rationale behind a city-regional approach are asserted to be widely accepted, namely that balanced and polycentric urban development is important, that cities have a vital role to play in sub-regional and regional economic success. Yet there is no framework for connecting together futures thinking across city regions or between city regions and the regional level of policy development.

In summary, although respondents often asserted that there were close affinities between multiple regional strategies they also acknowledged the significant weaknesses in prospective capacities. Respondents felt less confident that they did not have the capacity and techniques to develop and test multiple futures nor did they have the expertise to examine the affinities between different views. Most organisations used their capacity internally rather than building an understanding of others view of the future. This seems to be particularly problematic given the complexity of the regional policy framework in the North West.

#### **5. A Regional View of Anticipated Needs**

The research built a detailed understanding of the support that policy makers in the North West felt they needed in order to improve foresight activities. Emphasis was placed on giving respondents the opportunity to identify priority areas for future development within and outside their organisation. Overall, questionnaire responses reveal a strong desire for actions to strengthen the capacity of regional foresight. Respondents identified five unmet requirements that would improve the quality and effectiveness of foresight activities:

- Create new indicators and better ways of using and analysing changes to build a deeper understanding of current, possible and desirable changes, dynamics and trends.
- Build an understanding of the practices, strategies, perspectives of other organisations, possibly involving case studies of best practice in organisations and sectors with similar perspectives and addressing similar problems.
- Provide specific data, analysis, studies, research, forecasts and scenarios developed for the North West region.
- Undertake studies of the implications of national, international and even global futures studies for regions in the North West.
- Improve the capacity for using futures and foresight methods and techniques and develop new visualisation methodologies with computer mapping and modelling.

No regional or national organisation currently deals with these identified needs. If this gap were to be filled, a key role for a regional foresight capacity would be to develop new services and extend foresight capacity. This would require a significant investment in new research and organisational capacity to develop a network that can link fragmented islands of expertise and knowledge together; by building a bridge between the academic research and the policy environments by forging cooperation among different sectors in terms of information, knowledge and expertise sharing at the regional level, and developing an interface between multiple scales of activity.

In summary, respondents argued that there is a requirement for a Lab that can:

1. Collaboratively bridge the gap between those concerned with regional strategy and the many and diverse organisations that help shape and implement the multiple actions that strategy identifies.
2. Develop a network for bringing together expertise and data resources, sharing experiences and practices, transferring skills and techniques between regional stakeholders, so that they can gain access to information and research vital to their strategic interests, and better coordinate their activities and understanding of each other's aims and capabilities.
3. Conduct research that will strengthen those aspects of regional development that are important to the steady growth of the economic, environmental and social competence of the region drawing upon the capabilities of the stakeholders in the region, particularly those of the region's universities and research institutions public and private.

#### **6. The Regional Foresight Laboratory**

Regional policy makers identify specific needs for improving the quality and effectiveness of foresight that need to be addressed by an enhanced regional foresight capacity. The Regional Foresight Lab is a process designed to inform strategic decision-making and enhance networks of knowledge exchange in both business and policy communities. By bringing together stakeholders and experts to explore the consequences of present decisions and policies in the light of possible events and trends and to examine alternatives and understand each other's strategies, foresight sets out to inform the choices being made in the region, and about regional futures. The core aim of the Lab is to build new collaboration between regional stakeholders, including the HEIs, businesses and policy communities, to significantly enhance the region's capability to anticipate, evaluate and shape its medium to long-term future through three objectives:

1. To enhance the policy community's capacity to analyse development issues, with particular focus on the medium to long-horizon, the effectiveness of regional decision-making and to identify, clarify and where feasible, resolve conflicts between competing regional futures.
2. To enhance business and business intermediaries' capability to assess the economic, social, environmental and technological issues confronting the region, increase the effectiveness of innovation systems, and build strategies for enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of businesses.
3. To create enhanced tools and techniques for business and policy communities that give them the capability to identify key trends, issues and strategies; illustrate, simulate and visualise changes; and, evaluate the benefits, feasibility and potentials of different futures.

There are three components to the Lab's infrastructure. First, the Physical Lab will bring the core collaborators and users together in facilities equipped with the IT required for networking, group work, visualisation and simulation, research support, and preparation of presentations and written outputs. Training, workshops, seminars and conferences will take place at the Lab, and at the premises of users. Second, the Virtual Lab will support and extend face-to-face contact by establishing a Web presence that: links to other regional and national websites; acts as a "shop front" to the services of the Lab; supports intranet facilities for teams who are working together; enables the rapid publication and dissemination of provisional and final results, and the capturing of feedback from users. Finally, a knowledge network of relevant research, academic, teaching and regional affairs expertise of central importance to the business and regional policy communities will be developed.

#### ***Building Foresight Capacity***

The Lab aims to spread and develop leading edge methods, techniques and practices based on three processes identified by regional users. First, enhancing the quality and effectiveness of foresight. Regional practitioners identified the need to share their accumulated knowledge about methods and results of futures thinking. But there is little guidance for practitioners and users as to what counts for quality control in foresight. The Lab would identify the key components of quality in regional foresight – for example, in the organisation of networks and the pooling of knowledge within them - to bring about an improvement in the standard and effectiveness of applied foresight in the business and policy community.

Second, developing relevant tools and techniques. A new wave of methodological development is apparent in foresight that needs to be tested and applied in a regional context. This includes tools and methods for: developing regional and sub-regional scenarios, improving participatory and interactive processes, creating new economic models, enhancing decision-making through visualisation and modelling, increasing ideas generation and capturing ideas “on the fly”, visualising complex data and results, and synthesising bodies of knowledge. The Lab will establish and codify good practice in the choice, design and use of established and emerging methods of foresight, to more effectively anticipate and shape long-term regional futures, and inform and mobilise decision-makers.

Finally, comparing national and international practices. Foresight processes have been better developed and embedded in a few competitor regions and cities (e.g. in Catalonia, Rhone-Alps, Lyon). These involve close engagement between HEIs, NGOs corporate and policy decision-makers in building a critical, reflective and shared understanding of their region’s long-term futures. The development of such knowledge and social networks contributes very significantly to improving the competitiveness and levels of innovation in regional economies. The Lab will develop existing national and build new international networks, to establish and learn from international experience in foresight to support the development and dissemination of good practice.

### ***Regional Foresight Services***

The most effective linkages between the HEI and user community comes through a sustained process of interactive learning that requires ongoing contact and dialogue in three contexts. First, the coordination and networking of existing knowledge. The feasibility study identified a need to create new networks that build a map of the location of existing foresight expertise, ensure relevant practices and knowledge are widely shared, and identify the gaps in current provision. This involves the development of master classes, workshops, seminars and web based discussion groups. These networks are designed to learn from the experiences across public, private and voluntary sectors in the North West; from other regions in the UK and internationally, and from high-level contributors in central government and the corporate sector.

Second, the production of new regional knowledge. Corporate and regional policy communities are acutely aware of the limits in existing knowledge and have identified a need to develop a new knowledge base to accelerate the enhancement of the region’s own foresight capacity. The Lab will develop new knowledge in three contexts. First, an ongoing programme of interviews with senior corporate and policy users will establish foresight requirements and provide inputs to the work programme. Second, an Exchange Programme will enable researchers with relevant expertise to undertake project-based work with user communities and also support user placements in the Lab. Finally; individual foresight projects will focus on regional priorities, and seminars and conferences on regional issues.

Finally, the Lab will evaluate the impact of knowledge transfer activities. The Lab will apply the benchmarking tool developed for HEFCE that is designed to assess improvements in the strategy, performance and outcomes of HEI-regional engagement.<sup>1</sup> The results of the evaluation programme will shape the development of new research programmes designed to address gaps and unmet needs.

In summary, a region is able in the context of a feasibility study to develop an understanding of existing deficits, anticipated needs and strategic requirements of an enhanced regional foresight capacity.

#### **7. Conclusion**

The key finding of this paper is that mobilising regional foresight capacity requires a sensitivity and in-depth understanding of context. Key to this is:

- A sensitivity to different ways of seeing foresight identifying the conditions under which mobilising regional capacity may be relevant to different types of region within a European context and framework.
- An understanding of the complex relations that regional processes can have with their national programmes and the implications of these for the design and implementation of regional programmes.
- An analytical framework that allows policy-makers to map there existing regional foresight capacity in order that an enhanced foresight capacity is routed within the governance context.

A process for identifying the types of services and activities regional policy communities want from a regional foresight process and illustrate how these can be provided regionally.

