

EU Connects Project Summary

BACKGROUND

The West Midlands region has a wealth of knowledge on EU transnational funding programmes but access is fragmented and there is a lack of coordination.

Analysis of regional performance in non Structural Funds reveals some areas of good performance, including a small number of interregional projects, and good engagement in R&D by a few of the region's HE institutes, notably the University of Birmingham and the University of Warwick. However, engagement is patchy, and overall performance on larger projects remains below national and EU averages.

Research carried out by the West Midlands Brussels office; West Midlands in Europe and Coventry University Enterprises in late 2005 revealed significant gaps in awareness, expertise and exploitation of results.

An on-line market survey was conducted amongst regional partners to identify needs and requirements. 58 responses were received from a number of sectors including, local authorities (29%), higher education (19%), further education (16%), Business (9%), Culture (7%) and other (20%).

The Market Survey research indicated a preference for a physical, identifiable location in the region; a need for greater awareness of opportunities, and identified gaps in key areas of, project development and management, such as bid writing and budget planning.

A common success factor identified for regions that engage more than the West Midlands is active networking and intelligence.

EU CONNECTS PROJECT PROPOSAL

The project will establish a regional resource to support the development of bids into competitive EU Funding programmes.

The objective of the centre is to provide a coordinated approach to transnational funding in the region. The centre will build the capability and capacity of organisations in the West Midlands to develop, win and manage good projects; and for the policy and practical lessons learnt from such projects to be disseminated and mainstreamed; thereby providing support throughout the project lifecycle, and completing the virtuous circle from project to policy.

It will do this by building on existing regional expertise and capitalising on contacts and intelligence from the West Midlands in Europe office in Brussels and National Contact Points for transnational funding to help connect bidders to the appropriate transnational partners.

Moreover, it will command a budget to put on partnership events, and buy in additional support where required, to enable organisations to improve the quality and deliverability of their bids. Whilst an element of the centre's work will concern awareness raising around bidding opportunities, the emphasis will lie on the provision of practical assistance in the form of project workshops.

As the project matures it will also help gather, manage and disseminate best practice & lessons learned. Where practical, it will monitor regional rates of participation in EU competitive funding streams so that its performance can be benchmarked and measured.

In the first instance, the centre will concentrate on the following European Funding Streams which have been identified in a stakeholder survey led by West Midlands in Europe, as offering the greatest opportunities for regional participation: Lifelong Learning Programme, Competitiveness and Innovation Programme, and the Interregional Cooperation Programme.

MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY

The centre will be accommodated at the West Midlands Regional Assembly's Regional Partnership Centre and will consist of three members of staff: a centre manager, a senior officer, and an administrator. It will provide support to organizations across the West Midlands.

Day to day management will be provided by the European Strategic Advisor at the Regional Assembly. The centre will report quarterly to the European International Affairs Partnership which is a partnership group of the Regional Assembly and provides the West Midlands with a single, coherent cross sector voice on European policy issues of importance to the region. The centre will also report regularly to the European Funding and Policy Group a partnership based officer group.

DELIVERABLES

It is anticipated that the centre will improve:

- the quality of bids from organizations in the West Midlands
- the success rate of bids from partners across the West Midlands
- the amount of EU funds coming into the region
- the dissemination of practical and policy lessons learned
- the profile of the West Midlands on the European Stage.

WORKING WITH APPLICANTS

For success, an applicant for transnational funding must be both willing and able to produce a winning proposal. Whilst making prospective applicants able to succeed is about providing them with tailored support packages that fill gaps in their capabilities, achieving the precursor of making them willing is about promoting EU programmes as relevant to their specific

organisational needs, and manageable as a vehicle through which those needs might be satisfied.

Following this rationale, EU Connects will design and deliver a series of separate events across the region with tailored content relevant to the needs of different market segments.

This will be complemented by the provision of added value services to help prospective applicants build better projects through discussion with programme managers and supporting experts.

This will include support around building transnational consortia. A larger annual event will also be held in conjunction with West Midlands in Europe. As the project progresses, it will also offer support at the dissemination stage, acting as an advocate for best practice from across the region and the EU.

The EU Connects project will help applicants by providing one point of contact for enquiries, capacity building, training and support.

Coordination will be provided through a central calendar of events taking place across the region and in Brussels. The coordination of such information will reduce the occurrence of duplication. All guidance, advice and events around EU Transnational funding, be they directly led by EU Connects, or by another partner in the project, will be badged with the EU Connects brand, to ensure consistency of message.

By providing support at the project initiation stage, EU Connects will support organisations to navigate the sometimes complicated application processes, in some cases redirecting applicants to more suitable funding streams with better project fit, to enable organisations to concentrate on building better projects with more likelihood of success.

PROJECT LENGTH

This is a pilot project and it is the intention of the Regional Assembly to apply for continuation funding through the Regional Competitiveness and Employment ERDF Programme to extend the project to 2013. Advantage West Midlands have indicated their support for the continuation of this project should the pilot prove successful.