



## How Sustainable Eastside and *Isis* Managed a Successful Knowledge Exchange Partnership

This case study highlights the successful relationship struck up between SUE's Sustainable Eastside research team and property developers *Isis*. This knowledge exchange partnership allowed *Isis* and the research team to validate and substantiate their work on sustainability, which in turn created new development opportunities for the practitioner, and informed new research questions, grants and studentships for the academics.



## SUE SUCCESS STORY

The Sustainable Eastside research team approached *Isis* to inform their research into the barriers to, and enablers of, the uptake of the sustainability agenda in the regeneration of Eastside, an area of Birmingham City Centre. Central to this project was integrating the researchers into the working practices of various decision makers active in Eastside, including planners, developers, their consultants, and the community itself.

Researchers observed *Isis* team meetings, feeding back observations and findings and providing an evidence base for some sustainability related aspects of development, including evidence-based technical information on utility infrastructure, land use mapping, and biodiversity issues. The academics also provided formal training to *Isis* in sustainability issues. In return, *Isis* provided access to their staff for interviews, to project team meetings and planning documents and to other practitioners in the field.

At one of the formal training sessions run by the Sustainable Eastside team for *Isis* in July 2007, the need for sharing knowledge and best practice within the organisation was identified; as a direct result, an internal network of **sustainability policy champions** was established by the firm.

### >Birmingham Eastside

The Sustainable Eastside research project, supported by EPSRC's SUE Plus fund aimed to explore how sustainability is addressed in the regeneration decision-making process and was active from May 2003 through to June 2008.

The team included researchers from University of Birmingham and Birmingham City University, with some support from SUE's Vivacity 2020 consortia. At the time, the Birmingham Eastside regeneration project, located in the rapidly changing socio-economic and urban environment of Britain's second largest city, was the largest city-centre redevelopment scheme in the UK.

Through the knowledge exchange partnership, both *Isis* and the research team had a chance to validate their work on sustainability and the combination of different perspectives also stimulated learning. *Isis* tapped into the evidence-based research of the universities to advance its thinking on the cutting edge of sustainability, and to validate (or disprove) assumptions about best practice. And the research team was able to ground its observations and analysis in practitioner experience, rather than just theoretical constructs, to improve applicability of its work.

For the researchers, introductions and invitations made through *Isis* enabled them to access more practitioner and policy circles, improving dissemination of the research



findings and further validating and improving their research. Involvement with the practitioners also informed new research questions which has fed into new grants and studentships.

Perhaps the greatest benefit as perceived by *Isis* has been credibility with stakeholders about its sustainability agenda. The external validation of *Isis*' efforts to lead in sustainability has demonstrably influenced public agency bodies when bidding for work. Furthermore, the benefits of the relationship with the universities and the **sustainability champion scheme** were cited in the firm's recent sustainability audit and although the policy champion scheme has since been halted due to staff cut backs at *Isis*, a reinvigoration of the scheme is planned by the firm and its stakeholders in 2011.

## KEYS TO SUCCESS

**'We hoped by mixing with the academics, their brilliance might rub off on us'**  
> Mike Finkill, *Isis* (2010)

The key to the successful knowledge exchange partnership created between the researchers and *Isis* was that each was in pursuit of the same agenda: furthering their knowledge and gathering evidence on sustainable development. Both parties had an equal portion to gain from the exchange and each was very keen to gain access to the other's world in order to gain an alternative perspective and to further their understanding of themselves and each other. This 'access all areas' approach instilled trust and allowed both parties to validate their expertise in, and in the case of *Isis*, commitment to, sustainable development. This created new development opportunities for *Isis* and informed new research questions for the researchers.

Both the practitioners and academics agreed that crossing the sector divide did not come without its difficulties, particularly with regards to communication, temporal differences and the treatment of knowledge. Each side had to learn how to communicate effectively in an alien environment. The partnership would not have been successful without the enthusiasm, flexibility and willingness to adapt of the individuals involved on both sides.

### LESSONS LEARNED

#### >Work at being a good partner

- Understand why you are entering this partnership and what you hope to gain from it
- Be willing to put time, energy and resource into the partnership
- Have the flexibility to deal with operating in a potentially 'alien environment': adapt to the different priorities, timeframes and viewpoints that your partner may have

#### >Choose your project partner with care and make sure you each understand the expectations of the other

- Understand why your partner is interested in working with you and what they hope to gain from it
- Check that they are willing and able to put time into the partnership and that you have a shared understanding of the time commitment on each side
- See what you can do to help your partner understand and operate in your world, which may seem to them to be an 'alien academic environment'