



How Sustainable Eastside and ISIS Managed a Successful Knowledge Exchange Partnership

The ISSUES Project

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 in 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, fed back observations and findings, provided an evidence base for some sustainability related aspects of development including evidence-based technical information (i.e. on utility infrastructure, land use mapping, and biodiversity issues) and also provided formal training to ISIS. In return, ISIS provided access to their staff for interviews, to project team meetings and plans, and to other practitioners in the field.

>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.

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.

Through the information exchange, 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 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 grounded its observations and analysis in practitioner experience rather than 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 university 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 *ISIS* and the firm's stakeholders *igloo*, in 2011.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

'We hoped by mixing with them 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 equal amounts to gain from the exchange and each was very keen to gain access to the other's world in order to alter their perspectives and to further their understanding of themselves and each other. This 'access all areas' approach allowed instilled trust and allowed both parties to validate their expertise in, and in the case of *ISIS*, commitment to, sustainable development, which created new development opportunities for *ISIS* and informed new research questions for the researchers.

'Developers trade in product; academics trade in knowledge'

Lombardi, Finkill, Rogers (2008)

Both the practitioners and academics agreed that crossing the sector divide did not come without its difficulties, particularly with regards to communication and temporal differences and the treatment of knowledge. Each side had to learn how to communicate effectively in an alien environment and thus the partnership would not have been possible 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 as necessary 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'