

Purposeful Regional Development in Swansea Bay. The case of 4theRegion.

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Regional development is a widely discussed issue that explores reducing regional disparities through wealth creation, employment, or developing organic growth. Research on regional development covers numerous themes, including networks, clusters, entrepreneurial ecosystems, triple helix, smart specialisation, or city regions, however, it is acknowledged that no one-size-fits-all approach exists. Indeed, regions vary widely according to patterns of geographic, demographic, economic and cultural characteristics. The UK is recognised as the country with the largest disparity between its richest and poorest regions in Europe, with parts of Wales among the least prosperous in the UK. This paper aims to investigate the specific approach taken by 4theRegion, an independent community-focussed membership organisation, to regional development in the Swansea Bay region. We present a detailed case study of the methods employed by 4theRegion to engage with local stakeholders to promote the growth of local businesses and ensure that a localised focus is given to regional development in the area. The networking approach of the case study bridges links between local enterprises, policymakers and practitioners to develop and support opportunities for purposeful business, community-based asset development and sustainable growth within the region, based on its social purpose and underpinned by the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

The case study is comprised of multiple research methods aimed at developing a holistic understanding of 4theRegion, its approach to regional development, and its impact on the community. Three independent research phases are conducted in a sequential design, with data collected and analysed separately, before being triangulated for further interpretation. Initially, secondary data was gathered on 4theRegion's policies and practice through a document analysis. Data was sourced from the 4theRegion website, including 28 videos and 25 articles relating to the organisation. Secondly, interviews were conducted with the two directors of the company to develop an understanding of the approach of 4theRegion to regional development, as well as its values. Finally, interviews were conducted with 10 representatives of member organisations of 4theRegion to add further depth to knowledge of the contribution of 4theRegion and its network in supporting opportunities for regional development across the city region.

Research findings contribute to knowledge about how local stakeholders can be involved in supporting regional development initiatives through a collaborative approach. The networking method taken by 4theRegion underlines the localised approach to supporting development within the region. This is significant as regional development literature acknowledges that place-specific policies are relevant, and the Swansea Bay region is characterised by a combination of urban and rural areas, structured across 4 local authorities. While the case study presents a bottom-up approach to regional development, local government would be a valuable local stakeholder to engage in the network, and regional and national governments would make a valuable contribution in ensuring that such local networks could be facilitated to ensure effective engagement across stakeholder

groups. A unique characteristic of 4theRegion's approach is its social purpose supported by the principles of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, which promotes prosperity, resilience, equality, health, cohesive communities, cultural vibrancy and global responsibility.