

The South West's Regional Identity

The South West is now defined by Government Office region - and therefore covers the counties of Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

New & Older Identities

This might not be the area that other perspectives and certainly historical identities might define. It may be accurate to say that in terms of the communities involved having a sense of the 'South West' tends to strengthen as one moves westwards. At the western extremity - Cornwall - that sense of identity sometimes becomes entirely singular and is 'Cornish' rather than 'South West'. So it is in the other direction - with Wiltshire and Gloucestershire having some case for being more towards the Midlands or West as opposed to South West, while Dorset is often identified as split, with rural Dorset being the South West and Bournemouth and Poole being 'in the South' and eastwards facing.

While not labouring the issue, it is a general point worth making for the Region is not only remarkably diverse but also has, along with the North East, a population that most strongly of all the English Regions has a sense of a regional identity. It may be too close to cliché, but that identity is still formed by the singular geography of the Region and by the countryside contained in it and by the sea that surrounds it on three sides. We are still witnessing dynamics within the Region that have their roots in the nature of this identity. For example, it is apparent in the very significant problems of transport, the levels of support and pro-activity around the Countryside Alliance, and the way in which the urban conurbations have been created from the presence of the sea. There are levels of the radicalism and individuality that have been variously expressed - in Celtic links and traditions, and in religious and political non-conformity over the centuries & that are not entirely lost in today's political affiliations & community identities.

Who Defines Identities?

Such Regional identity tends to defy analysis, being in one sense 'a mess'. Any understanding and policy development that considers that it can deal with such identity on a 'silo and micro-managed' basis will have a difficult time. Similarly, organisations that are defined by such an approach may be set up to fail. The mantra of partnerships is sometimes simply proselytising collectives that may purport to work together but in fact simply maintain their discrete and often competitive operations. Just as it is wise & productive to 'listen to learners', and then it is also advisable to have an awareness of the Region's longer identity perspectives, its history, & its environmental imperatives.

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