

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Your local county voluntary council



3. Working with others

3.6 Networks

This information sheet serves as an introduction to networks. Participation Cymru has also produced a toolkit on setting up or reviewing a network, which is available from <http://www.participation.cymru>

Networks are groups of like minded people who meet to discuss a common theme or subject. They can facilitate the inclusion of a number of varying sectors (Third, public and private) and work across geographical areas (e.g. a county or region), or special interests groups (e.g. faith, gender).

Networks can also be used as a safe environment to test skills or tools gained from training in order to get constructive feedback and gain confidence.

Where to begin

Before you start to set up a network, you should find out what others, if any, exist in your area. You can use resources such as your local public library, local authority and local county voluntary council as sources of information. If there is no network already existing, you should work out if there is really a need for one. Establishing proof of need will be particularly important if you intend to seek external funding to run and manage the network. Finally, you should think about how you intend to contact potential members and ask them to come to the first meeting. You will need to think carefully about advertising the first meeting, as it will need to seem interesting and valuable if you are to encourage people to attend.

Consider the new network's needs

The new network will need some resources, and it is important to be aware of what these might be at the outset, so that the network can plan to accommodate them from the very start. Needs might include:

- **Administrative support.** For example, someone to manage the contact list and ensure it is kept up to date. Contact information should ideally be the home address of each member. If information is sent to the organisation's address it may not reach the member in time. Think through data protection issues when considering how you will manage this information.
- **Meeting spaces.** Your local county voluntary council may have a room for hire. The group may be able to meet in the premises of one or more network member. Consider rotating the meetings to different locations if possible.

- **Money.** You may need to pay for room hire, speakers, refreshments etc. However, other options include the use of free meeting spaces, and offering services in kind. If you do need to raise money, consider charging membership fees but remember that fees may be a deterrent for some people, and be aware that managing money will need administration.
- **Active members.** Strong networks draw on a pool of active and keen members for ideas and to do the work of keeping the network thriving. Consider how the new network might cultivate these from the outset.

The first meeting

The first meeting could be an open meeting, to which you invite particular potential members, or one to which you invite those you wish to form the core of the network. Either way, it is a good idea to have done a few things in preparation. Some important preparatory activities are:

- **Prepare a structure for the meeting.** During its first meeting the new group will start to form. You can help the process by presenting the key questions the group needs to answer. These should cover areas like:
 - What is your network about?
 - Who is it for?
 - How will the members benefit?
 - How will the network function? e.g. meeting frequency, meeting times.

You should have a set of headings ready to discuss and be prepared to make notes including action notes for distribution after the meeting. Your local county voluntary council can help you organise your thoughts.

- **Be ready to listen to ideas and suggestions.** The people who attend the first meeting will have their own ideas about how it should function and move forward. As soon as the group gets together for the first time it will develop its own characteristics and grow in an organic way. You should allow the network to take on its own characteristics.
- **Be in a position to collect names and addresses.** The details you gather from the first meeting will form the core of the network's mailing list. A piece of paper that goes around the meeting and allows individuals to fill in their details is the easiest way to do this. You could ask for their areas of interest and/or knowledge on this piece of paper, to help build an early picture of the reach and expertise the network could have.
- **Look out for people who might be key players.** The network, which forms, will need keen, enthusiastic people to keep it running. Look out for these at the first meeting, and consider approaching them a few days after the meeting to discuss their willingness to take on roles.

The kinds of functions the network might require include:

- membership list manager
- venue organiser
- newsletter writer/communicator
- meeting organiser

These roles do not have to be fixed and assigned to a particular individual, but they do need to be performed, so finding someone prepared to take them on for the first few meetings will be very useful.

Communication

Network members are not obliged to attend every meeting; some people may choose to attend only the sessions that are relevant to them. However everyone should be sent notices and minutes of each meeting, so that they know what is going on and what has happened at meetings they have missed. One person should be delegated the responsibility for this task, to ensure it is done regularly.

If possible dates, venues and topics should be set several meetings in advance, to give members plenty of notice for making space in their diaries. This can be done in a variety of ways, including email if all members have access to email.

What makes a successful network?

Networks, like any other shared interest group, need continued momentum and sustained enthusiasm to thrive. Sustaining interest can be linked to several factors such as:

A shared interest

Networks are gatherings of people that have a shared interest. That interest can vary over time, but it is important that the network recognises and serves the interest. The interest could be based around:

- geographical location
- client group
- legal and/or financial issues

A flexible approach

Some networks are successful using only one type of structure, for example regular formal meetings with guest speakers, and question and answer sessions, or once a month afternoon sessions involving informal discussion on subjects of shared interest, or ad hoc meetings as issues arise.

Other networks mix and match meeting structures, calling in external people when required, but using members' expertise where they can or network may be virtual e.g. e-mail or video conferencing.

There is no particular strategy which works best. The key is to be flexible, and use approaches which best suit your network and its needs.

A stated purpose

It is important that a network has a clearly stated set of aims, which is revisited from time to time and revised if necessary in the light of the network's organic change. You may also feel it is appropriate to have a code of conduct, covering such issues as appropriate behaviour and confidentiality.

An annual review in which the network's achievements of the year are remembered, and statement of aims and codes of conduct affirmed is a good way of renewing the network. This could be coupled with a social event.

A network needs resources

The core of a network is its people and its enthusiasm, but a successful network needs other kinds of resources too. These include:

- physical resources, for example, meeting space
- human resources, for example, people to move the group forward and take on defined responsibilities
- material resources, for example, statements of aims and a code of conduct

All these can be free or cost money to produce. Those that are paid for aren't necessarily better. Consider what's appropriate for your network, and what resources its members have to offer or could make available through their own contacts.

Networks are about networking

Networks can provide an opportunity to share good practice, as well a way to share problems and solutions. It is important to make the most of the knowledge and experience of network members. Strategies for achieving this include:

- Always ensure network members have opportunities to get together with each other informally. Try to devise mechanisms that enable them to learn about each other – for example share a membership list which states their role(s), and any areas of knowledge or experience they are prepared to share.
- Encourage the use of internal expertise. When having a meeting on a particular topic, consider asking a network member who knows about it to speak, rather than recruiting someone from outside the network.

Consult the membership

If they are to thrive networks need to meet the needs of their members. These needs can be identified by regular consultation. If a network is relatively large, and members do not attend all meetings, consider a short written survey to gauge opinions. And always make it clear you are ready to listen to the views of members inside and outside of meetings.

Let the group decide

Ownership of the network belongs to the members and as such the meetings should be run co-operatively with everyone expected to contribute. Decisions on meeting topics should be made by the whole group where possible. If only a minority is keen on a particular subject, consider a sub-group meeting.

Further information

Participation Cymru

A toolkit on setting up or reviewing a network is available from www.participation.cymru

Small Charities Coalition

<http://www.smallcharities.org.uk/>

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

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