



What is Networking?

Networking is a means by which people and communities can share information, skills and experience for their mutual benefit. This may be through informal contacts, arranged by individuals or groups or it could be through a formal networking structure.

Why Network?

Networking is an important part of good community development practice. Community development seeks to encourage people to work together in equal and democratic ways in order to develop collective solutions to common problems and issues. Networking helps to establish good working contacts and positive working relationships between people, groups and organisations. Building on and nurturing these relationships brings mutual benefit. Networking takes place when people use their connections to exchange ideas, opinions, information, experience and resources.

Networking:

- Creates opportunities for people to find ways to work together, share resources.
- Builds knowledge and awareness of who is doing what and combats duplication.
- Enables people to maintain their own identities, while at the same time working together across organisational and identity boundaries.
- Helps to generate new ideas and ways of tackling issues that may not previously have been considered.

- Helps to promote confidence and motivation.

Participation is key to good networking practice. Increased participation in networking activities allows the opportunity to identify and explore more effective ways to share experiences and learning.

Participation in networking also enables groups to identify ways of working together in partnership. By working in partnership, groups can focus on a common goal and build a collective voice around a particular issue.

There are, of course, challenges which need to be taken into consideration when planning to network. These include:

- Having sufficient time and resources to actually undertake networking, without taking time and energy away from what you consider to be the main business or over-burdening those involved.
- The possibility of being over-awed by long-established, 'successful' group/projects.
- A fear that independence may be lost or indeed, potential resources, by joining with others.
- Running the risk that the focus of the work or the needs of the area will be lost amongst a myriad of new ideas and innovations, which may not be relevant or transferable back to the community.

Formal and Informal Networks

A Network is a structure that enables a group of people, organisations or projects to communicate and build relationships with one another.

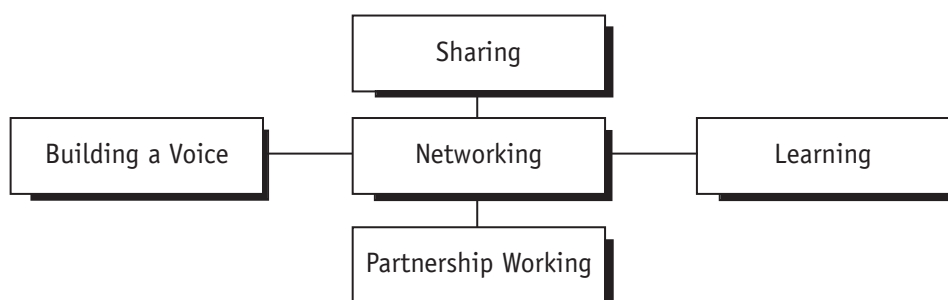
Informal Networks are the main ways in which information flows between people and communities. For example, chance meetings at schools, shops, church, local events, etc.

Formal Networks are developed to help the sharing of information and co-operation between people. For example, community groups from different areas meeting together, people with a common area of work.

Starting To Network - Activity

Networking is a great way to develop positive relationships within any group that will be carried through to work practices. If networking is a new concept for a group and especially if the group is quite new, the following activity is a good starting point.

- In pairs, encourage group members to share, why they have chosen to join the group, what they hope to see for the group and what they would like to see for the community. Ask each pair to record some of the main views, issues or ideas.
- Ask the each pair to join with another pair and share their notes. Are there things each pair has in common? Are there a number of different views/issues/ideas? Are there any surprises?
- Now the whole group can come back together and share what they have learnt from each other.
- Allow time for reflection and discussion.





This activity can be usefully followed up with a similar one that encourages group members to share information about themselves – previous experience, skills they feel they can offer, roles they have filled. Again this encourages people to learn more about each other, find out what they have in common and perhaps, more importantly, begin to respect some differences too.

Building Networking Practice

The process of networking takes place through a variety of different means. Any activity that helps to promote two way communication and build working relationships will assist effective networking. Often this can happen by accident, but the outcome will be much more effective if the practice is built into every day work.

Ways to Network - Activity

In your group, take some time to brainstorm the ways in which the group can network. Remember that a brainstorming exercise is a way of generating ideas and that at this early stage, all ideas should be welcomed. Discussion and debate can occur afterwards. At this stage it is best to get many varied contributions. Flip chart paper, marker pens should be available along with someone to write up all of the ideas. Encourage people to call out their ideas as they come to mind and record them – keep it to one or two main words.

Below are some ideas to get started but there are many more.

Join local umbrella organisation
Invite speakers to your meetings
Invite other groups and agencies to your AGMs
Produce an information leaflet about your group
Develop a newsletter

Who to Network with

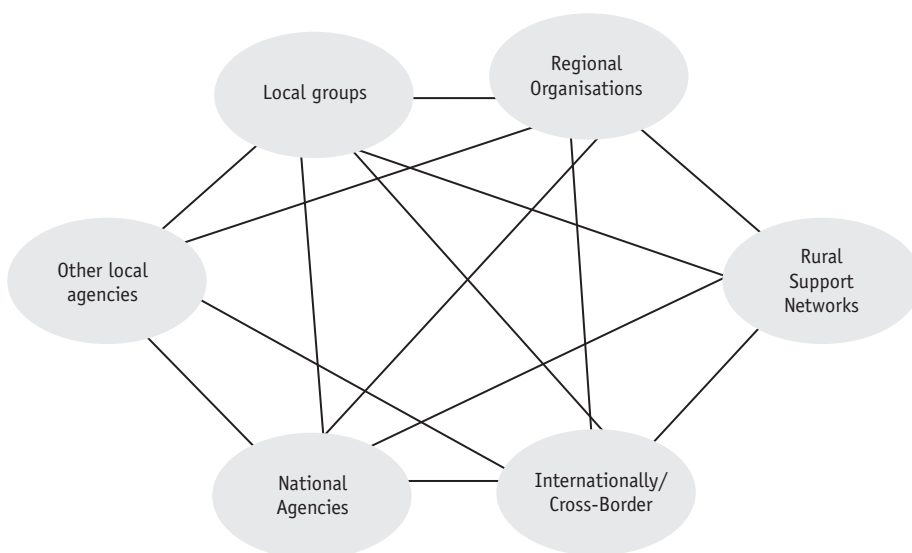
Networking can take place at a variety of levels. Investing time in networking can be worthwhile, interesting and, most importantly, beneficial for a group and its work. While the levels at which networking can place have been outlined below, it is important to identify clearly the specific groups/agencies/organisations/government departments which the group wishes to network with. It also important that the group is clear as to why it wishes to network with the contacts on this specific list.

Practical Considerations

There are a number of practicalities which should be taken into consideration when engaging in networking. Some of these

are listed below but the list is not exclusive. It will be helpful to think about them in advance of networking or for an emerging network to consider before establishment.

- Who will you contact?
- How will you let people know?
- Where will you meet – accessibility, neutrality?
- What will you talk about?
- Whose support do you need?
- What do you want to achieve?
- What role will you have?
- How will any costs be met?



Get involved in other local events
List the key organisations, agencies relevant to your work and keep them informed of what you are doing
Organise joint events with other groups
Your suggestions.....