

Networking: foundations for partnership

Introduction

This guidance covers local information and networking. It is designed for use in conjunction with the related items Partnership: introduction to collaborative working, Partnership: developing collaborative working, What type of partnership?, Partnerships: checklist and Managing joint projects.

Networking can be defined as the process of communication and information exchange between two or more organisations. Bureaux have always had to network in order to deliver a good service. Some networking activities are likely to be well established and may contribute to achieving more than one objective – for example, intelligence gathering, publicising social policy work and raising the bureau's profile.

Networks may be very informal or they may have formal structures and procedures such as councils for voluntary service (see External websites).

Local information systems

The bureau must have access to comprehensive and up-to-date information about other organisations and service providers that can help in carrying out its problem-solving role. This means establishing, maintaining and developing a local information system. A local information system should also be a valuable networking tool, feeding into a database of contacts for publicity purposes and helping bureaux to scan the community for potential partnership opportunities.

A local information system should identify what relevant organisations there are in the area, what they do, what expertise they have and how they can be accessed. This will help the bureau with effective referral and consultancy.

Responsibility for local information should be clearly allocated within the bureau. The format may vary according to local needs, but information should be accessible by type of activity, client group etc., as well as alphabetically.

Maintaining local information as far as possible in electronic form will facilitate access and updating. Regular updating could be a time-consuming task. Rather than, for example, sending a questionnaire to all contacts, it may be possible to make use of other agencies that maintain directories of local organisations. Many local authorities

and councils for voluntary service (see External websites) do this; if yours does not, it may be worth suggesting. The Community Legal Service directory also provides information about local service providers and is available at:

<http://www.clsdirect.org.uk/index.jsp>

There should also be provision for updating the system as and when required – e.g. when you find out that an organisation's contact details have changed.

Publicising the service

Using publicity to raise awareness can help to develop the bureau's own network of contacts. Keep other organisations well informed about the service, so that they can enhance access by referring clients or consulting bureau staff.

There are many ways of informing other organisations about the work of the service. These might include sending out copies of the bureau's annual report, inviting them to the AGM, giving talks or establishing and publicising a website.

Be strategic about sending out information. Email distribution lists will enable you to distribute information easily and cheaply but they should be used properly.

- Do not send emails or set up distribution lists without checking that recipients wish to receive them
- Ensure that there is a mechanism for people to let you know that they wish to be removed from the mailing list
- Do not swamp people with electronic (or paper) information
- Avoid sending large documents when it may be better to offer them on request or to refer people to the bureau's web site.

Remember also that other networks and umbrella bodies in the area may produce mailings that can be used for sending out information, which will enable you to save on your postage and administrative costs.

Consulting other organisations

Seek views

Bureaux must seek the views of other organisations with a view to improving their own services.

Normal day-to-day contact with other organisations should provide some feedback. A trustee board with good community links should also help. However, formal consultation will sometimes be needed.

To do this, you will need to:

- decide what you want feedback on
- identify consultees
- carry out a consultation
- analyse the findings and
- translate them into planning objectives
- implement the plan
- tell the consultees what you have done.

Consultation methods could include:

- sending a questionnaire to community organisations
- plugging into a survey carried out by a voluntary sector infrastructure body active CLSP or local authority
- meeting directly with specific organisations that are particularly relevant to your work
- setting up a consultative or advisory group, particularly for a specific area of work.

Whatever method or methods you adopt, there are four key questions that you need to address:

- What sort of service should we be providing?
- How can users and potential users best access the service?
- How are we doing at present?
- How can we improve?

Surveys

Remember that your target audience here is different. You could adapt some of the questions, but make sure that they are relevant to organisations rather than individuals. You may want to remind people about the service's social policy role and alternatives to traditional one-to-one advice.

Note that when consulting organisations, anonymity for respondents may not be helpful – you will want to know whom they represent and you may want to follow up their comments. However, if you are extending the survey to individual members of the public, you will need the option of anonymity.

If your IT capability is good, you might consider using an online questionnaire – but make sure that there is an alternative route for consultees who lack internet access or might be uncomfortable with this method.

As with most surveys, you may have to send reminders to encourage a good return – make sure that these are polite and constructively worded.

It is important to provide feedback to consultees, and if you cannot take on board all the suggestions, explain why. This will help to ensure a good response in future as well as to build relationships generally.

Forums, groups and meetings

Participation in groups and attending/organising meetings is often a key part of networking. Bureaux may need to engage directly with established networks such as Consumer Support Networks, where Citizens Advice auditors will expect evidence of attendance at meetings. You need to participate in Community Legal Service Partnerships where they are active.

Bureaux need to connect to a range of local forums and networks, as appropriate and as resources allow. These can include local strategic partnerships, local voluntary and community infrastructure bodies, rural community councils and equalities bodies (see Useful links). You can also try to establish links with health promotion bodies (local arrangements for these vary, but information should be obtainable from primary care trusts, local health boards (Wales), local voluntary infrastructure bodies, LSPs etc.).

Participating can raise your profile and enhance your relationships with other organisations such as local authorities by enabling them to “tick boxes”.

How far you are involved in umbrella or strategic planning and consultation forums will be a matter of local judgement. Indirect membership (e.g. through a sector representative) will sometimes be appropriate. However, you need to keep informed of what these groups are doing - ensuring that the bureau does not miss out on key opportunities and feeding-in your views on matters that are important to you and your clients.

Prioritising and managing relationships

There will be far more organisations in a district or bureau's catchment area than you will have the resources to network actively with, so you will need to prioritise.

- Choose which organisations to network with
- Weigh costs and benefits (all relationships have costs, especially time costs)
- Communicate with the right person at the right level
- Much useful communication can be done by post, telephone, email and websites
- Review the cost-effectiveness of existing networking activities as well as potential new ones.

Sometimes face-to-face contact is essential. However, going to meetings and events has costs – in time, money, energy and other opportunities foregone. Avoid becoming “meeting-happy” and keep a proper balance between meetings and other means of communication.

Choose which links to prioritise. Major funders will be important. Bureaux should also prioritise links with organisations that are important to particular client groups or areas of advice – e.g. domestic violence forums, race equality councils etc. Where it is particularly important to you, take some time and trouble to build the relationship – e.g. regular meetings or telephone conferences, reciprocal training, trustee board membership, social activities etc. This will increase the chances of successful development.

Note that where there is reciprocal membership of trustee boards, care should be taken to avoid conflicts of interest.

Delegate some of the work of networking. The chief executive should have an overview, but other paid staff, volunteers and trustees will have useful contacts, skills and knowledge. For example, a benefits adviser will often be the best person to attend a welfare rights forum.

Useful links

External websites

For local voluntary and community infrastructure bodies, see National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA): <http://www.navca.org.uk/>

For rural community councils, see Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE): <http://www.acre.org.uk/>

For county voluntary councils in Wales, see Wales Council for Voluntary Action: http://www.wcva.org.uk/all/dsp_link.cfm?cat=45.

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