

Resource Procurement Project



**Peer Support for Community
Facilities Managers**

Community Hubs@GMCVO
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Introduction

Community buildings are usually managed by a committee of volunteers, who are legally responsible for the building.

This management committee looks after all or most aspects of running the building, including maintenance, bookings, keeping up with legislation, licensing, health and safety, caretaking, cleaning, securing funds, marketing...

Often these committees are members of a local infrastructure organisation such as a Rural Community Council (mainly rural, often named ACRE), community matters federation (mainly urban), Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) or national organisation such as the Development Trust Association (DTA), British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac) or Community Matters. All these organisations provide support, training and information to community buildings managers.

Most management committees operate as single entities with help sought from relevant infrastructure organisations when it is needed. However some committees are also members of peer support networks, where they can meet, and share good practice, with members of other, local, management committees.

There are several different ways of facilitating these networks. This report looks at some examples and tries to find the best way of facilitating a network, with strategies for implementation.

Methodology

The following organisations were contacted as points of first contact:

- Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
- Community Matters
- Development Trust Association
- Bassac

These organisations gave me contacts of people already running or in the process of setting up networks. However in the case of bassac, they were not aware of any such networks.

Some internet searching also yielded examples of peer support networks, which were then contacted for more information.

All networks were asked (or their websites examined) to find out:

- The legal status of the network
- Whether they had meetings or just met informally
- Whether they shared any resources
- Whether they bought anything, as a network, in bulk
- Who, if anyone, facilitated the network
- Whether they had a website
- Whether they had paid staff
- Where possible, an evaluation of effectiveness

Results

Types of peer support vary. The most popular seems to be a separate organisation that community buildings join as members. These provide a variety of services, and are run by volunteers or by a local infrastructure organisation.

1. Separate membership organisation

- Brighton and Hove Community Buildings Network
- Community Action Dorset
- Community Council of Devon
- Hull Federation of Community Organisations
- Norfolk Association of Village Halls
- Tameside Association of Community Organisations
- Teesdale Community Halls
- Wiltshire Village Halls Association

Other types of network are:

Informal networks - where representatives from community facility management groups get together every four months or so, to have a meeting or training session. There is no separate organisation, just a network, usually facilitated by an infrastructure organisation.

2. Informal network

- Cambridgeshire ACRE
- Community Council of Lincolnshire
- Douglas Valley Community Ltd
- Stockport Community Buildings Network

Implied networks are where no network exists, no meetings are held, but a group of similar organisations are linked together as members of an umbrella organisation (such as a rural community council), and that organisation negotiates group rates for services based on the number of members they have. These groups receive the same services from their local infrastructures organisation but are not officially a network.

3. Implied network used for cost benefits

- Essex Rural Community Council
- Suffolk ACRE

Some organisations do not have any network. In the case of bassac, they had not heard of any networks that their members were part of, and in the other cases, there had once been a network but it had failed to continue when key members left.

4. Don't have anything

- bassac
- Bedfordshire Rural Community Council
- Greater Manchester Federation of Community Organisations
- Northampton

Location

The map in figure 1 shows the location of these networks. The clustering around Greater Manchester is because we were aware of these networks already. The other networks were discovered through contacting umbrella organisations and internet searching.

Figure 1 – Location of networks discussed in this report



The table below is a summary of the features of each of the networks.

Name	Separate constitution	Secretariat	Regular meetings	Informal networking	Bulk buying	Resource sharing	Website	Paid staff
Brighton & Hove Community Buildings Network	√		√	√			√	
Community Action Dorset	√	√	√					
Community Council of Devon	√	√						
Community Council of Lincolnshire		√	√					
Douglas Valley Community		√						
Essex Rural Community Council				√				
Norfolk Association of Village Halls	√	√	√	√				
Stockport Community Buildings Network		√	√			√		
Suffolk ACRE					√			
Tameside Assoc. of Community Organisations	√		√	√		√		√
Teesdale Village Halls Consortium	√		√		√	√	√	√
Wiltshire Village Halls Association	√	√			√		√	
Hull Federation of Community Buildings	√		√			√	√	√
Cambridgeshire ACRE		√	√	√				

The following text gives more detail about each feature mentioned in the above table.

Separate Constitution

Over half of the networks are independent organisations with their own constitutions.

This entails extra work for volunteers, as at least three volunteers need to be committee members.

At least two of these organisations are registered as charities, namely Tameside Association of Community Organisations, and Norfolk Association of Village Halls.

Secretariat

Over half of the networks have a secretariat service provided by either the local Rural Community Council or the Local Authority. This normally entails organising and publicising meetings, minute taking and distribution, and being a link between members.

The only network that has the Local Authority as their secretariat provider has alienated at least one member as the network is no longer seen to be independent.

Regular meetings

Most networks have regular meetings. Some are every quarter, some are bi-monthly. These are attended by those whose other commitments allow. Those I spoke to all said that they consciously try to avoid meetings becoming a “talking shop”, but this does happen occasionally.

Often speakers attend who can give up to date information about a particular topic, which is a good incentive for people to attend.

Informal networking

In between meetings there is some networking between members. This is not documented, so is difficult to report on. Networking is facilitated by the existence of a website where contact details can be published, although many networks are not users of the internet.

In networks where there is a secretariat provided by someone who is also a Village Halls Advisor or other community building expert, this informal networking is facilitated on a case-by-case basis.

Bulk buying

The three occurrences of this are Suffolk ACRE, Teesdale Village Halls Consortium and Wiltshire Village Halls Association, who all provide insurance through group schemes. Suffolk ACRE has no other networking opportunities, although the village halls adviser provides training and advice to members of ACRE. Teesdale and Wiltshire offer other opportunities to members.

Douglas Valley Community would like to introduce bulk buying but have not had the resource to promote and organise it.

Resource Sharing

This happens sporadically where it does occur. In Dorset, halls can contact the Village Halls Advisor (who works for Dorset Community Action and provides the secretariat for the network) who will publicise any resources that are offered or wanted.

In Stockport, during network meetings, halls occasionally mention any furniture that is surplus to requirement.

In Teesdale, members are invited to email a member of staff if they have resources to share. The network itself owns some resources which are available to members to borrow, such as projectors, a set of laptops, sound systems, display boards etc.

Brighton and Hove have a laptop and printer to share, and have bought sets of Community Matters publications so all halls have access to them.

Tameside Association of Community Organisations bought printing equipment which members can use for free, such as printer, folder, stapler etc. Members pay for consumables and this is well used for producing newsletters. They also have display equipment which members can borrow.

Website

Only four of the networks have a dedicated website.

Teesdale Village Halls Consortium has paid staff who can update the website.

Brighton and Hove's website stopped being updated when their paid worker left. Hull Federation of Community Buildings has a website that is updated regularly.

Wiltshire Village Hall Association's website was created and is maintained on a voluntary basis by a member who is also a website designer.

In addition, Essex RCC is updating their website so that all their community building members have their own page, and will be able to contact each other more easily.

The sites are/were used to promote the halls, act as a notice board for members, and as a source of information for members.

The groups that don't have websites are often mentioned, with appropriate contact details, on the website of the organisation that provides the secretariat service.

Paid Staff

Only two of the networks have paid staff. Teesdale Village Halls Forum has three members of staff. The Consortium has several funded projects.

Tameside Association of Community Organisations is a local federation of Community Matters. It has limited funding and its consultant works as a volunteer. Admin staff are paid, funding is from local authority grants which are dwindling.

Other networks have a secretariat service, and in Wiltshire a proportion of the membership fees are donated to the provider of the secretariat in consideration of this service.

Funding

Several of these networks are in the process of starting up, or have been running for less than a year. Others have been running for years. Some networks have had funding to set themselves up. Douglas Valley Community Ltd has European funding (ERDF) and Devon RCC has funding from the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Tameside Association of Community Organisations and Greater Manchester Federation of Community Matters have both had funding from their local authority in the past, but this has now stopped and their future is in question. In fact the Greater Manchester Federation is no longer active, and is considering merging with the Tameside organisation.

Other organisations charge membership fees which are used to pay for running costs such as administration, and one network contributes their membership fees to the organisation that provides their secretariat service.

Revenue funding for networks such as these can bring benefits such as dedicated staff, promotional materials etc. However funding is time limited and the networks do not usually have the means to be self sustaining. Teesdale Village Halls Consortium run several funded projects which bring in some money.

Recommendations

The purpose of this report is to find the most effective way of facilitating peer support. The following paragraphs form our recommendations for a new network.

Not time-consuming

From talking to members of networks and facilitators of networks, one of the main factors for running a network is time. Volunteers who already manage a building are very busy and often do not have time to go to additional meetings, especially where those meetings are seen to be a talking shop or opportunity to share problems with no solutions. Meetings with a speaker on a topical subject are more popular than general networking meetings.

Recommendation: *the network should ensure that meetings have an aim and do not degenerate into general discussion. If possible minutes of meetings should be available to those members who cannot attend.*

Legal structure

If a network becomes a new organisation, this entails the creation of a new committee and the extra duties for several people. However if the network wants to apply for funding, a committee will be necessary. Unless the network has a legal duty to register as a charity this should not be done.

Recommendation: *unless the network wishes to apply for funding, it is not recommended to make the network into a separate organisation. An informal network is all that is necessary.*

Lead organisation

Many networks are set up by local infrastructure organisations, either as separate organisations, as new projects, or as informal networks. These lead organisations can be rural community councils, local councils for voluntary service, local federations of Community Matters, and regeneration organisations. For the purpose of this research, it will be assumed that a lead organisation will be involved in any implementation of a new network.

Recommendation: *Any local infrastructure organisation can set up a network.*

Funding

After a brief search it seems that funding for this kind of network is unlikely to be found from trusts, lottery and other larger funds. However organisations like Community Foundations have small grants which could be used to set up the network. Some local authorities have start up funding for new organisations.

Recommendation: *The lead organisation should approach their local community foundation about start up funding.*

Staff

In an ideal world a member of staff would be dedicated to a network. However funding for a member of staff is unlikely to be sustainable. In Teesdale three staff are supported by several projects. Unless the network organisation has projects or trades, it is unlikely that employing staff is feasible in the long term. Employing a member of staff in the short term is not advised, as members will start off by relying on this person whose job is eventually going to disappear

Recommendation: *unless there is sustainable funding for salaries, employing staff is not advised.*

Secretary and minutes

In many cases the local infrastructure organisation provides a secretariat service, as a part of their wider work. Other networks rotate the duty of taking minutes between their members.

Recommendation: *if the lead organisation is not providing a secretariat service, the duty of taking and distributing minutes should be rotated between members.*

Use of Internet

Those networks that have a webpage find it useful to share documents and publicise themselves. However many community building managers do not use the internet and would require considerable training. The other consideration is that someone would have to maintain the site so that it stays relevant and useable. This would need to be a committed volunteer or a paid staff member.

An alternative to a website would be an e-group. These require only the use of email which is less onerous on those who are not internet literate. There are many classes for people wishing to learn to use e-mail and this could be used alongside meetings.

Recommendation: *networks should communicate via an e-group in between meetings.*

Support Services

Inextricably linked with the establishment of a network is the identification and provision of support services. Ultimately continued membership of a network will depend upon the value of membership out-weighing the cost (in time and/or money). Access to relevant support services and programmes would sustain interest. For instance, marketing support on the practical use of the Internet to advertise facilities, services and activities should be explored as a tool for generating use and/or business. Equally, it has a role in building up a need profile for members.

Recommendation: *a mechanism should be identified to build the picture of members' support needs and resources identified to develop appropriate support packages i.e. membership benefits.*

Recommendation: *Network membership benefits should be clearly identified.*

Bulk buying ability

Members of three networks are already using their group status to buy cheaper services, and more are looking into this possibility. It would seem that this option is a selling point for a network.

Recommendation: *networks should be aware of, and supported to exploit, bulk buying opportunities.*

Catchment Area

Networks cover a variety of geographical spread with no single model appearing better than another. Proximity is an issue for attending meetings and would help in developing clusters providing practical peer support but these can be addressed in delivery strategies.

The network area could be set by the desire for consistent sub-regional infrastructure support, the resource source(s), political boundaries or other stakeholder input.

Recommendation: *create a Greater Manchester network with a strategy for engagement at a district or cluster of districts level.*

Strategy for implementation

1 – Identify need

Any new network must meet an existing need, otherwise it will not be used. The first step towards starting a new network is to find a need for one. There are several possibilities that have emerged from the research. The participants at the DoYouLoveYourBuilding workshop (2006) were keen to establish a network; of four networks in Greater Manchester – one has virtually ceased to exist, and one is about to lose its funding, another faces a significant reduction in funding and the fourth benefits from mainstream local authority support. The plight of these organisations does not mean that there is no longer any demand for a network, and this can be tested by speaking to the organisations concerned, and then speaking to facilities managers themselves.

2 – Quantify need

In order to find out from facilities managers what they need, some specific research will need to be done. However this could be done by a lead organisation, or an organisation that is already nominally in charge of an existing network. The research will need to cover:

- What kind of peer support will be helpful
- Whether they agree with the recommendations above
- When meetings should be held
- Topics to cover / speakers to invite
- How to make use of bulk buying opportunities
- How to share resources between members
- Geographical boundaries for the network, if any

In addition, the Centre for Facilities Management (Salford University) and the Ethical Property Foundation have conducted research into support needs.

3 – Address need

There are a number of actions implied from the research that need to fit in with the current or existing climate and require differing levels of investment.

- Consult with the four existing networks in Greater Manchester and other stakeholders.
- Find a new hosting for the DoYouLoveYourBuilding web pages.
- Organise a network event at a conference already being organised.
- Identify a programme of training/workshops and local delivery strategy.
- Identify who and what secretarial services will be available.
- Identify potential resource for bulk-buying support.
- Set up a members' e-group and/or bulletin board.
- Seek resources to kick-start the network.
- Create an interactive method for members to express their support needs.
- Identify a dedicated resource to address support needs identified.

