

Mini Evaluation of the Greater Manchester Third Sector Research Network

The Greater Manchester Research Network (GMTSRN) has been running since autumn 2008. After nearly five years, one could say that it is a somewhat established feature of the third sector landscape in Greater Manchester and anecdotally, its popularity is growing despite a harsh operating environment. The intention of this evaluation is to obtain better insight into different types of members' views about the service GMTSRN provides and whether any changes are needed in future. Time and resources are not sufficient to commission a full-fledged external evaluation of the network and in many ways this would be inappropriate, given the fairly informal nature of GMTSRN. Therefore, it was decided to conduct a survey to be filled in by a wider group of members.

General Demographics and Attendance

At the time of writing, total membership of GMTSRN stood at 63, plus one member from GMCVO (the host). When GMCVO researcher Susanne Martikke and Claire Moxham, then a lecturer at Manchester Business School, started the network in 2008, they invited a group of 5 people to begin with. That means the total membership, including Claire and Susanne, was 7. Subsequently, the membership list grew relatively quickly, but members who attended meetings have always been in the minority, compared to those who simply followed network proceedings via email and/or the Internet. However, the group of members who attended meetings kept changing, which means that over the years, quite a few members from the list have actively been involved in shaping the network.

More recently, as facilitation of the network has become GMCVO's responsibility, the number of actively involved members has grown. Notably, the initial imbalance towards academic members has now been redressed and in recent years, the network has increasingly attracted staff from the local VCS. This shows that the strategy of marketing specifically to these groups, which involved redesigning the marketing materials, has borne fruit. However, in order to sustain momentum and the mission of the network, it is necessary to maintain and possibly expand membership among academics. Similarly, a next step could be to be more pro-active about recruiting members from across Greater Manchester. Currently, most members are from the centre of the conurbation, rather than from the periphery. In light of time pressures, however, and the niche character of the network, this seems quite unlikely, unless meetings were occasionally held in other places.

Table 1 lists network members by attendance and by sector. These figures exclude the GMCVO facilitator.

Table 1

Type of attendance	Number of academic members in category	Number of VCS members in category	Number of others (i.e. consultants, museum staff) in category	Total number of members in category
Regular	4	9	0	13
New	0	7	5	12
Former regular	3	3	3	9
Interested no shows	2	1	2	5
No shows	9	10	1	20
One-off presenters	3	1	0	4
Total all attendance types	21	31	11	63

Survey Responses

Demographics

28 network members participated in the survey, which is a good response rate of nearly 50%. Compared to the overall membership of the network, the responses were weighted more heavily towards academics and consultants, whereas voluntary sector staff was comparatively underrepresented.

Table 2 – Number of Respondents by Affiliation

Academics (including retired academics and PhD students)	11
VCS staff	7
Consultants and others	10

Joining and Attending the Network

Almost all of the respondents had been members for a year or more, with five of them considering themselves founding members. There were 8 responses from relatively new members (who had joined less than a year ago).

Interestingly, respondents were nearly evenly split into three groups (7-8 respondents each) when they categorised their membership by choosing one of the following statements:

- I regularly attend meetings

- I attend selected meetings for specific reasons only
- I follow information about the network meetings via email and the Internet only

The most effective channels of information about the network in order to attract new members are email, the website, word of mouth and personal invitation, suggesting that the network manages to reach people through a variety of formats. None of the respondents had learned about the network through the flyer that is displayed in the GMCVO lobby, making this the only ineffective advertisement for the network.

Respondents were asked to give their main reason for joining the network. Reasons given were broadly categorised into the following five areas, which are listed in order of importance:

- Networking (15 responses)
- Community-university partnership working (6 responses)
- Learning (6 responses)
- Information sharing (5 responses)
- Peer support (2 responses)

Not surprisingly, the most popular reason for joining the network was networking, meeting others and having a chance to discuss freely. Considering that learning and information sharing are closely related, these areas could be combined and would then have 11 responses. It can therefore be concluded that the core expectations of the network are networking and learning in the broadest sense. Community-university partnership working and the opportunity to meet researchers from another sector is also an expectation, but clearly not as prevalent.

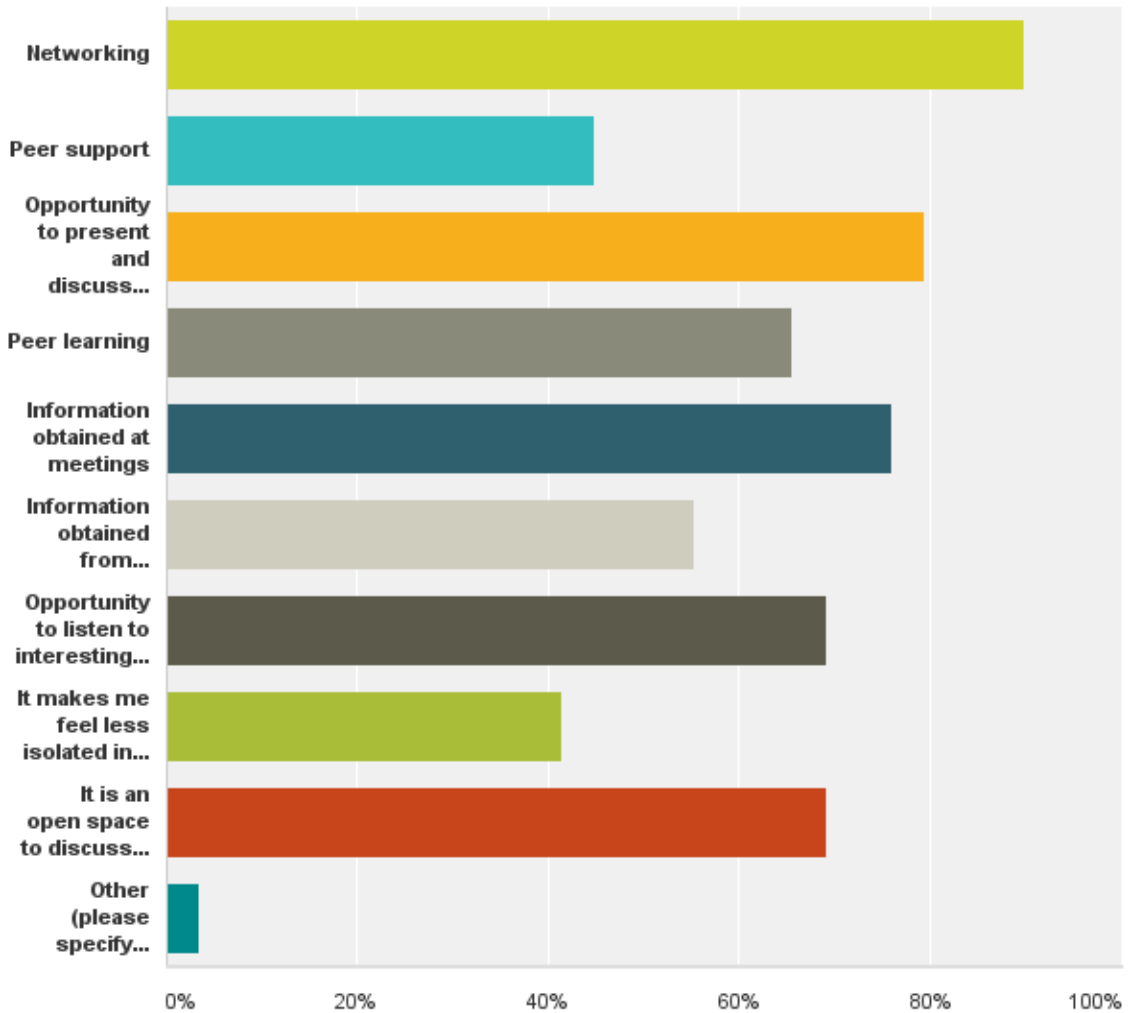
In terms of change over time, it turns out that reasons for membership are surprisingly stable. Occasionally, they seem to have become more specific based on the experience of attending the sessions.

So what?

Apart from the original reasons for joining the network, members also benefited from being involved in other ways. Please see the chart below for an illustration.

Q9 What else does the network provide that you value? Tick all that apply.

Answered: 29 Skipped: 0



This chart suggests that being involved in the network has multiple benefits for participants; however, the emphasis is clearly on networking, information sharing and discussion. Nevertheless, when compared to the original reasons for joining the network, it is worth highlighting that peer support plays a more significant role here and that attendance of network sessions appears to reduce the sense of isolation many lone researchers feel. It is quite encouraging seeing that information conveyed in

newsletters/meeting notes is well-received, as well as information shared during meetings.

The responses to the question “What do you like most about the network?” showed the importance of the network’s informality in order to facilitate the types of things people value about it. On the flip side, some respondents thought that proceedings may be a bit too informal in the sense that there is a lack of focus and a rather high turnover of people. However, it is noteworthy that a third of respondents did not have anything to criticise and that lack of focus and high turnover might well be rooted in the fact that network membership and attendance is quite diverse, something that attendees valued about the network. Other features that people liked least about the network included the timing of sessions (4 responses). Criticisms that concerned accessibility should be taken seriously, even though they were only raised by one person respectively: firstly, one respondent noted that “We struggle to be sensitive to a)the range of experience, b)the newness of occasional attendees” and another observed that “Guest speakers ... do not really understand the audience.”

Nevertheless, when it came to their readiness of recommending the network to someone, all 28 said they would.

Suggestions for future development of the network included the following:

- More about new/novel research methodologies that are especially pertinent to engaging with VCS service users
- Avoid over-formalisation, even if more funds became available, except to free more time for SM
- Structure the balance between presentations and discussion but include 10 minutes of semi-structured informality.
- Connect with national and European networks
- Promote the network so more people would join it
- Be practical. Conduct research with people affected negatively by Welfare Reforms providing them with the means to evidence their experiences more effectively.
- In minutes, say who people are and where they're from, not just names.
- Get people to agree to share emails so there can be communication outside the meetings.
- Published terms of ref for group.
- Make the principal event at meetings a visiting speaker, with less time devoted to personal updates. That doesn't mean information couldn't be exchanged but at the moment a great deal of time is taken in "going round the table".
- More interactive sessions; some sort of planning sub group to tighten up sessions
- The concept of "good enough" research by third sector organisations

- Would be beneficial to have a stable group of attendees so that a plan for the year could be established with different members responsible for taking the lead. Not sure what to do to encourage this.

The main themes here seem to be about agreeing a format for meetings, formalizing the process of picking themes and introducing more of an element of planning, as well as making the purpose of the group more transparent.