

Making your network a success

What makes a successful trustee network?

Trustee networks, like any other shared interest group, need continued momentum and sustained enthusiasm to thrive. Sustaining interest can be linked to several factors which are discussed in this help sheet.

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 or type of charity
- legal and/or financial issues
- the roles of particular trustees, eg chair or treasurer

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.

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. Alternatives include:

- formal structured meetings
- newsletters or news sheets
- telephone conferences. When you can't meet face to face but want to discuss a matter in a small group, telephone conferences are an effective and low-cost option
- email can be useful for one to one communication
- informal lunch meetings are a good way for smaller groups to share experience on a particular topic
- meeting at events, such as conferences whose lunch breaks can be an ideal time for a semi-formal or informal meeting
- national conferences. These might suit only the largest of networks, as they take time to organise and can involve expense.

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

Networking means making 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 trustee 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 trustee 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

Decisions on meeting topics should be made by the whole group where possible. If only a subset are keen on a particular subject, consider a sub-group meeting.

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