

Community Network Assessment Framework

What is it?

The Community Network Assessment Framework is intended to help community networks work better for their members; with public agencies; and with each other. It is an approach to: recognising good practice; identifying areas for improvement; and measuring the progress made by community networks. In other words, it should help you:

- identify what you are really good at
- focus on the things you are not so good at
- measure how you get better over time.

It is being developed for Community Network 4 Birmingham by Chamberlain Forum and is based on the experience of community networks in Birmingham.

We hope the framework will get better over time. If you have ideas for improving it, or questions about using it, then please get in touch with us at:

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Who is the framework for?

The framework is intended for community networks to use either as a self assessment, or as part of a peer assessment (where people from other networks act as 'critical friends'). It could be used as a guide by those who would like to set up and develop new community networks.

Using the framework

The framework is based on five core values or qualities that we've identified as underpinning most community networks. They are:

- Open
- Honest
- Useful
- Inclusive
- Sustainable

The framework gives you a set of questions which are designed to help assess a community network in terms of these values. The framework also puts forward three 'standard' answers to each of these questions which you can use to benchmark your network. We have presented the standard answers in traffic light order: 'red' highlights work needs to be done; amber says 'room for improvement'; green shows you're doing very well. You can grade yourself green/amber or red/amber if you want. There is a comments and notes box next to each set of standard answers where you can record extra details or thoughts.

Explanation and definitions

To be clear about what we mean:

- community network = more or less organised and (in)formal set of links between a number of community groups and individual citizens used for communication about subjects of shared concern which may be a locality or an issue or a shared point of view etc
- open = welcoming, accessible and not 'hidden' or made difficult to approach and understand
- honest = having integrity and being accountable
- useful = having influence and enabling shared working and the sharing of skills and information
- inclusive = lacking prejudice, valuing and supporting difference and able to meet members' needs flexibly
- sustainable = having the resources, policies and intelligence to be able to manage change and carry on

Community Network Assessment Framework

Open – *welcoming, accessible and not 'hidden' or made difficult to approach and understand*

Questions	Standard Answers		Comments and Notes
1. Can people join the network?	Membership of the network is closed	Red	
	Membership is restricted to those who can fulfil certain criteria, eg, live in a particular area	Orange	
	Anyone who shares the aims and values of the network can join	Green	
2. Is there a simple process for joining, and leaving the network?	There is no established process for joining or leaving	Red	
	There is a membership process, but it takes time to complete and to update records	Orange	
	There are simple and effective processes for leaving and joining	Green	
3. Can people find out about the network easily?	No information about the network is freely accessible	Red	
	Information can be found, but it's mainly in one form, eg on a notice board	Orange	
	Information is widely available and in a range of forms, eg website; notices; newsletter; listed in directories etc	Green	
4. Is the network easily contactable?	There is no contact person or body for the network	Red	
	There is a named person and/or address where the network can be contacted	Orange	
	As well as a named person with email and telephone, the members of the network are able to act as 'ambassadors' for it	Green	

Honest - *having integrity and being accountable*

Questions	Standard Answers		Comments and Notes
1. Is there an agreed and clear understanding of what the network does and why and is this documented?	The network does not have clear aims and objectives that show others what the network is about. Members of the network disagree, or are unsure about the purpose of the network	Red	
	Members of the network have a clear idea of what the network is about, but do not have any form of statement that enables the network to be explained to other people	Orange	
	Everyone either has, or can easily get, a clear understanding of what the network stands for and does - and what it doesn't.	Green	
2. Are members open and honest in their involvement in the network?	There are 'hidden agendas' and members are suspicious of each other. The network might look a bit 'dodgy' or like a front for something else from the outside.	Red	
	Members are clear about their involvement in network activities, and how they relate to any other interests. The network is accepted as being honest from outside.	Orange	
	There is a brilliant culture of honesty and trust which helps people get stuff done.	Green	
3. Are the network and any decisions made by it transparent and accountable to its members?	Members of the network do not feel they can hold the network to account and there are no processes for doing so	Red	
	Members do find out what is going on and can find ways of contributing ideas but it can take a bit of effort.	Orange	
	Network members feel they can easily hold the network to account, and are confident in the processes for doing so.	Green	
4. Do representatives of the network feedback directly and make themselves available to members?	No one is able to represent the network - or there are reps but they rarely report.	Red	
	Network representatives report back to the network through meetings and / or newsletters / updates, but are not easily contactable	Orange	
	Either all members are empowered to represent the network OR network representatives regularly have two way communication with members using a variety of means, eg email, meetings	Green	

Useful - having influence and enabling shared working and the sharing of skills and information

Questions	Standard Answers		Comments and Notes
<p>1. How influential is the network? Does it have ways of linking to local public agencies and decision makers like the council?</p>	The network links to no public agencies or exclusively to one, eg just the council	Red	
	The network links to some public agencies, and has more influence than any of its members acting individually	Orange	
	The network links to all public agencies that relate to the interests of its members; it has more influence than all the members acting individually; and it is recognised by decision makers as an effective way of linking to its community.	Green	
<p>2. Does the network enable and support members to link with each other? For example through: meetings, newsletters, e-groups, websites and online communities and directories.</p>	Members of the network do not link, or communicate with each other. Members do not participate in meetings, or in online networking and communication	Red	
	The network links members but isn't very inventive about how it does it.	Orange	
	The network links members in many different ways and enables them to innovate new ways.	Green	
<p>3. Does the network enable members to work together? Is there evidence of joined up working and projects that have happened as a result of the network?</p>	There is little or no evidence of joined up activity that has been enabled through the network	Red	
	Collaboration between members has taken place, but evidence is anecdotal and joint working depends overwhelmingly on the enthusiasm of individual members	Orange	
	The network has a lot of evidence of joint working between members and actively facilitates collaboration.	Green	
<p>4. Does the network enable its members to gain skills and intelligence?</p>	Members are unaware of their different skills and know little about each other. The network lacks knowledge of members' skills and opportunities for learning.	Red	
	Knowledge, expertise and information about training courses etc are shared through the network on an ad hoc basis	Orange	
	The network is a learning network: it proactively enables members to share their knowledge and skills, and signposts members to external sources of support and training	Green	

Inclusive - *lacking prejudice, valuing and supporting difference and able to meet members' needs flexibly*

Questions	Standard Answers		Comments and Notes
<p>1. Does the network help its members to link to other community networks?</p>	<p>There is a negative view of other community networks and the network obstructs or at least doesn't help its members linking with other community networks.</p>		
	<p>The network is interested in working with other community networks if there is apparent and likely short term advantage from doing so.</p>		
	<p>Finding out about and linking with other community networks is an important part of what the network does. It helps its members make links with and join other community networks where appropriate.</p>		
<p>2. Does the network encourage diversity, and respect difference within its membership?</p>	<p>The network is dominated by a relatively narrow set of views, it is difficult for other opinions to be heard and when they are they may be ridiculed</p>		
	<p>The network enables a range of views to be heard.</p>		
	<p>All members feel able to express themselves as fully as they want.</p>		
<p>3. Is the network proactive in meeting the different needs of members and potential members, and ensuring all are able to participate effectively?</p>	<p>The network does not ensure that it is able to respond to different needs. Potential members are put off by the way the network operates. Not all members of the network are able to participate effectively</p>		
	<p>The network aims to ensure different needs are met, but does not have a consistent approach to making sure all can participate.</p>		
	<p>All members of the network feel able to participate effectively. The network has had a documented discussion about inclusivity and it takes action to ensure that members and potential members can take part effectively.</p>		

Sustainable - *having the resources, policies and intelligence to be able to manage change and carry on*

Questions	Standard		Comments and Notes
1. Is the network able to access resources when it needs to?	The network has no resources and insufficient reserves or expertise to reasonably expect to be operating effectively in 12 months time	Red	
	The network is managing but cannot always access the resources it needs easily. Securing adequate resources takes up a lot of unpaid time.	Orange	
	The network is able to access resources when it needs them by promising an attractive return on investments of time and money etc on the part of members, funders, partners etc.	Green	
2. Is the network able to change and respond to different circumstances?	The network is static and unable to respond to changed circumstances.	Red	
	The network recognises the need to develop but it is always trying to catch up with change	Orange	
	The network is dynamic, and able to evolve and change with ease. To some extent the network is setting the pace of change.	Green	
3. Does the network have appropriate systems for managing information including personal data covered by Data Protection laws?	The network has inadequate systems for managing and protecting personal data . It may be acting illegally.	Red	
	The network has systems for managing personal data and is legally compliant, but, in practice, data management is clumsy, costly or not carried out properly	Orange	
	The network is familiar with appropriate legislation governing information, and has systems that ensure data is managed effectively and efficiently.	Green	