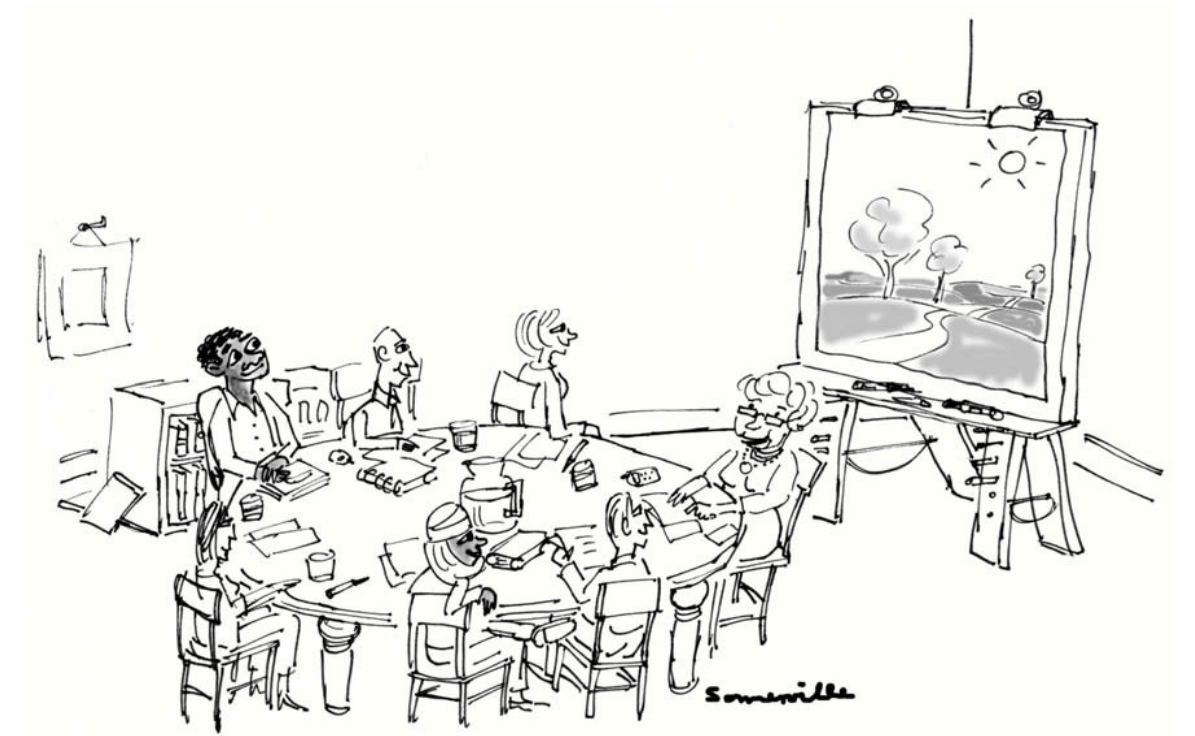


Making great interagencies, networks and forums



A resource and information kit

Western Sydney Community Forum
Revised 2008

Other information resources and toolkits

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Making great interagencies, networks and forums



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Special acknowledgement to Christine Eastman, who coordinated the original project for WSCF in 2005

About Western Sydney Community Forum

Western Sydney Community Forum is the peak regional body for community organisations in Western Sydney. We work towards achieving social justice outcomes through resourcing, research, advocacy, action, education and development in the community services sector. Our projects and activities aim to build a sustainable, well-informed, resourced and networked sector with opportunities for meaningful participation in policy and program development.

For more information about WSCF, or to become a member please go to the: Western Sydney Community Forum website: www.wscf.org.au

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Bobo, Kimberley A., (2001), *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy manual for activists*, Seven Locks Press, California.

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Websites

Community Builders <http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au>

Local Community Services Association <http://lcsa.org.au>

Management Support Online <http://www.managementsupportonline.com.au> (you have to subscribe to use this service)

Communitynet <http://www.tricomm.org.au/communitynet>

Community Building Resource Exchange <http://www.commbuild.org>

Community Development Exchange <http://www.cdx.org.uk>

Effective Meetings <http://www.effectivemeetings.com/>

VolResource - information for voluntary and community organisations
<http://www.volresource.org.uk/index3.htm>

Nonprofit Governance & Management Centre <http://www.governance.com.au>

The Association for the Study and Development of Community Capable Community
<http://www.capablecommunity.com>

The Learning Communities Catalyst <http://www.lcc.edu.au>

Our Community Management and Training section
<http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/management>

World Bank Poverty Net <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty>

Useful Resources



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Before you start

Although this kit has been produced to give you an idea of the essential components of an effective interagency, network or forum, these suggestions would not make any difference without the effort, commitment and enthusiasm of you as a worker in this sector.

During the research for this resource kit, some people said that the groups they belonged to were effective. These groups achieved outcomes that they were proud of, the members readily and enthusiastically participated in them, the members had common goals, and meetings were consistently attended. The main difference between these effective groups and those that were not as effective was that the members as individuals and as a team had ownership, active roles and had responsibility in the effective running of the meetings.

It is your contribution, as with everyone else that will make any group effective. Without committed workers that are able to take on tasks and roles in these groups, no amount of suggestions or planning will make a group work.

This kit has received very good feedback and we have decided to reprint the kit with some updates. You will find minor changes between 2005 and 2008 versions.

- ◆ **Encouraging people** is also essential. Someone may look as if they would like to say something but something is holding them back; in that case encourage them to speak out. Alternatively you could be faced with a group of people who are silent. Encouragement may mean the difference between having a decision made or not.
- ◆ **Picking up on the mood** of the group is a great way of getting the group out of a mistrust stage and into a bonding stage. If things are going right it's helpful to hear someone saying about how happy they are with the latest decision.
- ◆ **Compromise** does not have to mean a negative outcome. In a communication setting, sometimes we have to acknowledge that we aren't going to have a say when we want to and maybe we need to let someone else have a go.
- ◆ **Using humour** effectively can lighten up the mood, but you must make sure you are doing it in a way that is not getting people sidetracked.

Making decisions

Your decision making abilities will generally rely on the accepted method adopted by your group, for example it may be the norm to get a majority vote on things that will affect the group. Alternatively for things such as ideas from members that need some kind of action, it may only take a couple of people to decide to take on the issue. In any case, you need to all be aware of the method of making decisions that your group adopts and you also need to acknowledge that there will be different methods for different decisions.

If people are going to be asked to make a decision that will affect the group it's important to brief everyone properly beforehand. This also goes for those wanting the group to take on a new issue. Make sure the issue is described in a way that everyone will know what they are expected to do and why. It is no good coming along to a meeting asking the group to support your case if they haven't heard about the problem and it's left up to them to decide how they are going to address it. Come along with ideas about what the group can do if they want to support the issue.

Make sure you address all the new issues at the start of the meeting, instead of at the end.

Communication strategies to assist with decision making

If you are having trouble making a decision, here are some suggestions to assist the members.

- ◆ **Clarifying or elaborating** - don't underestimate the importance of clarifying information. Sometimes this can mean the difference between a major misunderstanding and realising that two people want the same thing. Ask people to clarify.
- ◆ **Summarising information** that is presented. This might be a recap of a presenter's talk, or maybe just a summary of one person's opinion. Some refer to it as taking stock - where you are able to pull together what's been said and offer solutions if any have been given.
- ◆ **Devil's advocate** is where people consciously play out or talk about a solution that is different to the one people may be talking about. It is a way of confirming that people are actually agreeing on something with thought instead of going into it just to make a decision, or too quickly.
- ◆ **Consensus seeking** is where people have been talking about a decision for a while and it's a way of testing whether people are ready to agree on a decision.

The Effective Interagency Project



"You do good inclusiveness here."

Summary and discussion

This resource kit forms the final part of the Effective Interagencies, Networks and Forums research project conducted by Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF) between June and November 2004.

The purpose of this project was to find out what makes a successful interagency, network or forum. The findings have been used to produce a training package and this resource kit. This project used a community action research framework and conducted in-depth interviews, a discussion group and observation and participation in these groups in Western Sydney.

Research method

This resource kit was produced after consultation with members of interagencies, networks and forums in Western Sydney. During the project, 20 people from a range of agencies were interviewed in-depth; the interviews ranged in length between thirty minutes and three hours.

In addition to the interviews a focus group was held in Liverpool which nine people attended. During the course of the project, nine interagencies and forums were also attended by the project worker.

The respondents of both the interviews and the focus group represented a range of services including:

- ◆ Indigenous
- ◆ Disability
- ◆ Migrant
- ◆ Funding bodies (Government)
- ◆ Aged & Disability and Community Care
- ◆ Council
- ◆ Drug and Alcohol
- ◆ Community Development Workers
- ◆ Transport workers
- ◆ Youth Services
- ◆ Neighbourhood Centre

Conflict and dispute resolution checklist

- Recognise that there is conflict and identify the problem.
- Remove your emotional reaction as much as possible and concentrate on your position.
- Collect all the information relating to the conflict, share it and help to assess the cause of the conflict. Make sure that everyone involved understands the information.
- Identify areas of agreement and areas of disagreement.
- Propose possible solutions which will include openly sharing feelings about the conflict situation and the consequences of the proposal and explore the pros and cons of each idea.
- Find a mutually acceptable resolution without coercion.
- Carry out the agreement and evaluate its effectiveness with both parties sharing in the evaluation.
- There will be many times when the group will be in conflict over a decision. The main issues to consider, whether you are acting as a chair or a participant is to remain calm, listen to the options that people are considering and try to identify common ground.
- If the group is unable to resolve the dispute themselves, community justice centres can provide mediation for free.

As a chair or facilitator consider the following points, remembering that the objective is to get people to talk clearly about their thoughts, and then find common ground:

- ◆ Try to summarise, or ask a participant to summarise the problem, and the main differences in opinion.
- ◆ Write up the different opinions on the whiteboard.
- ◆ Ask "who is not happy with this situation?" - what seems like a majority may only turn out to only be a couple of people.
- ◆ Ask the people who disagree what they would like to change.
- ◆ Respect each person's turn to speak and don't interrupt.
- ◆ When others are speaking, don't anticipate what they are going to say, and don't formulate your return argument instead of listening to what they have to say.
- ◆ Reflect back to the group that you have 'heard' the issue correctly.
- ◆ Give up your emotional investment in the issue wherever you can.

- ◆ Have an out of body experience - remove yourself mentally from the conflict, listen as if you were an uninvolved third-party.
- ◆ Don't provide a soapbox for the troublemaker.
- ◆ Attempt to convert disruption into a constructive contribution.
- ◆ Confront the person directly.
- ◆ If all else fails separate yourself from the difficult group member.
- ◆ Learn to recognise disruptive behaviour in yourself.
- ◆ Understand that you may need to negotiate to achieve the outcome that everyone wants.

Power and leadership

Another thing that needs to be taken into consideration is power within the groups. Power is a part of every group and it can be a major problem for some groups. Diagnosing power issues within a group is sometimes difficult. Sometimes, people will take it upon themselves to be leaders when it is not called for. If this is happening, one of the most effective things you can do is to refer back to the general goals of the group itself.

It is most important that everyone within the group understands their role. This is one of the best ways to prevent power struggle issues. This does not have to entail strict enforcement of roles; rather understanding that everyone has a role to play enables a more effective use of the group's energy. We can put aside our personal preferences for what the group should do in favour of a common understanding that is assisted by preferences, but decided by the group.

What are interagencies, networks and forums for?

Interagencies, networks and forums are meetings that are comprised of representatives from a range of local service providers including government and the community sector. They are used for identifying and acting on common issues of concern, and for networking between services and are also referred to as networks or forums. Interagencies, networks and forums can be general in focus, and are usually comprised of services within a particular Local Government Area (LGA). They can also be more specific in focus, such as a community care or youth forum. In Western Sydney it is common for each LGA to have a general interagency, a community care forum, and a migrant interagency. Some areas also have indigenous, youth, disability, transport and other more specific groups.

There are mixed opinions about the main functions of interagencies, networks and forums, but a previous quantitative study by Deborah Plath¹ identified the following functions in order of how appropriate the respondents felt they were for an interagency group.

Function	Regarded as appropriate % of respondents*
Information exchange	100
Workers support	99
Lobbying / social action	98
Local area / client needs identification	93
Public relations / service promotion	91
Consultation on projects	91
Resource sharing	89
Worker education	85
Research / information collection	83
Local service / project planning	82
Planning for joint service delivery	76
Securing grants / funding	70
Program evaluation	51
Client referral	37
Case coordination	26

* Valid percentages used when cases missing

From this, the most appropriate functions of an interagency were information exchange, workers support and lobbying/social action, and program evaluation; client referral and case coordination were indicated to be not as appropriate.¹

¹ Plath, D. (1995) *Successful interagency groups, a study on the factors influencing the success of interagency groups*, Research Report No. 3, Department of Social Work, University of Newcastle.

In September 2008 Western Sydney Community Forum conducted an online survey about the functions of the interagencies. We asked participants to tell us the three main reasons why they would attend an interagency / network or forum. The following is their response.

Functions	Response Percent
Information Exchange	78.2
Workers support	23.0
Lobbying/ social action	32.2
Public relations / service promotion	29.9
Consultation on projects	6.9
Resource sharing	36.8
Worker education	9.2
Research / information collection	12.6
Local service / project planning	25.3
Planning for joint service delivery	20.7
Securing grants / funding	3.4
Program evaluation	0.0
Client referral	4.6
Case coordination	0.0
Working on joint advocacy	12.6

This survey indicated that the three main reasons for attending interagencies / forums / networks for participants were:

- 1) information exchange,
- 2) resource sharing,
- 3) lobbying / social action; program evaluation and case coordination were ranked as not relevant.

We also asked participants if their attendance at any interagency / forum / network changed in last 12 months; **52.7% said 'yes', 47.3% said 'no'**.

- ◆ 54.1 % participants said that their attendance has changed as they do not have time,
- ◆ 29.7 % said that they get information through the internet,
- ◆ 32,4 % said that their attendance changed because of lack of structure,
- ◆ 40.5 % said lack of common purpose,
- ◆ 35.1 % said lack of social action on identified issues,
- ◆ only 5.4 % of participants said that their attendance changed due to cost of petrol / lack of public transport.

Chairing meetings

Some people seem to have the type of communication skills that make it easy to be a chair in a meeting. On the other hand, other people find it very difficult to know what to do and how to communicate in a way that is appropriate for the role. The experience gained by performing the role of chairperson is valuable, and getting that experience in a familiar group is a good place to start.

Generally, the role of a chair in these types of meetings is to guide the group through the agenda items, assist the group to make decisions, and most importantly to assist the group in fulfilling its purpose.

Remember that every member of the group has their own views about what they are doing here and what they want to do. Everyone brings along their own baggage, which includes beliefs, opinions, feelings, and desires, patterns, hopes and fears. All of these things make up your identity, and the identity of the group. This needs to be remembered and respected when chairing a meeting.

Chairing a meeting requires someone to:

- ◆ Understand the goals of the meeting and the group itself
- ◆ Keep the group on the agenda, and moving forward
- ◆ Involve everyone in the meeting, both controlling the overassertive people and drawing out the shy ones
- ◆ Making sure the decisions are made democratically

Difficult behaviour

During the course of a meeting, each person will contribute a variety of "role behaviours". Understanding these behaviours helps to identify when intervention is necessary, and help us recognise that we are responsible for our behaviours.

The following points are some strategies to deal with disruptive behaviour in groups. Although you may not feel like you know what to do, everyone has the ability to deal with disruptive behaviour.

- ◆ Make sure the group climate is cooperative.
- ◆ Change your communication in relation to a difficult person's behaviour.
- ◆ Actually point out the behaviour in others, but do so with tact and diplomacy.
- ◆ Refuse to be forced into a reciprocal pattern - don't counter abusive remarks with abusive remarks, don't get caught up in the problem yourself.

Communication in Groups



What makes a successful interagency, network or forum?

It is very hard to define what a successful interagency, network or forum is, because every group has very different needs. Every individual also has different expectations of what makes the group successful, and most often personalities influence what kind of meeting style or structure is ideal. Therefore these responses are very broad, but represent a general guide to the features that were seen in successful groups during the research project.

- ◆ It has goals and a clear purpose and is able to work toward those goals.
- ◆ The participants have identified what is valuable to them.
- ◆ There is effective leadership, and power and control is distributed throughout the entire group.
- ◆ The participants have a clear understanding about why they are there, what is expected of them and what they can do to assist the group.
- ◆ It is supportive to the individual workers, and is conducive to raising issues of importance and addressing them in a manner that is appropriate to the group.
- ◆ The participants are committed to the group, are enthusiastic and are active rather than passive participants.
- ◆ The group is able to identify when things are successful and when things haven't worked by using evaluation.
- ◆ The group is adaptive and flexible to new issues and open to different ideas.

There isn't necessarily one rule to cover all groups but if those types of things are in place, participants are getting more out of the groups.

Responses from the research

The following points represent the more common responses coming out of the research. Having said that, many responses were contradictory and were somewhat determined by the personality of the respondent.

Groups that the research participants indicated were functioning well had more complex ideas about success and effectiveness. Groups that had been running for a long time also had different ideas about what constituted effectiveness for them. Most people talk about how they feel overwhelmed by the work they are doing. This translates into feeling like they cannot take on any more tasks at the meetings.

Some people feel that it is sometimes not worth showing up because nothing ever gets done, it is hard for these people to be involved in what they think are unproductive groups.

People's ideas and expectations about what an interagency, network or forum should do vary greatly.

There was some uncertainty about who should be doing what in the groups. Some people thought it was the role of the local council worker for example, to be the convenor, minute taker and organiser. On the other hand other respondents thought that giving such control to these workers raised leadership, power and control issues.

Getting participation from everyone was seen as being important, and people weren't sure what to do with people that turned up but didn't talk or otherwise participate in the meeting.

There were general questions about the role of funding bodies at these meetings. Some people thought they should be specifically invited to one-off meetings. Others thought it was appropriate to have funding bodies present, as long as they were able to participate in the same way as the rest of the members, and not, as one respondent put it "sit there while we air out dirty laundry, not say a thing and then leave".

Working parties were generally seen to be effective, and seem to be appropriate if the interagency, network or forum has some of these features:

- ◆ The interagency, network or forum needs to address complex issues.
- ◆ The interagency, network or forum engages with a wide variety of issues.
- ◆ Many different community service types are represented such as in general interagencies.
- ◆ The interagency, network or forum is a large group (this means more than 2 or 3 people can form a working party).
- ◆ The interagency, network or forum isn't able, or is unwilling to take on or address a particular issue as a whole group, for example it might be very complex, or only a couple of members might be willing to work on it.

Some respondents were unsure about how to do basic things such as taking minutes and facilitating the meetings, which lead to people declining to offer to do those things. On the one hand, they wanted to know how to do them, but others said it shouldn't be their job anyway.

People wanted to know about conflict resolution strategies and other ways they can manage differences of opinion. Some people were concerned that a few in their group

What you can do to participate and make a difference

Being a committed and active member of your interagency, network or forum means that you will get more out of your participation, and you will be rewarded by knowing that you are making a difference. Participation doesn't have to mean taking on more than you can cope with, but it does mean that every meeting you have to contribute in any way you can.

Support the group's efforts - be committed and focus your talents and energies on the group.

Get involved in discussions - speak when you have something to say, keeping your remarks to the point and as brief as possible. Encourage others to stick to the issue.

Be creative - members will welcome innovative ideas.

Express your feelings - differences of opinion expose people to other points of view. Let others know what you think of their ideas, but don't make personal attacks.

Share your thoughts - Holding back when you have an idea robs the group of your knowledge. Have confidence in your ideas.

Take notes - brief and accurate notes can help during and after the meeting. If you have ideas while others are speaking, write them down so you can give your full attention to the speaker.

Take a positive approach - keep an open mind and look for value in member's ideas. Enthusiasm is contagious!

As a group you can:

- ◆ Identify and use common interests
- ◆ Highlight similar goals
- ◆ Generate attention and enthusiasm for initiatives
- ◆ Develop professional relationships
- ◆ Portray networking as an investment
- ◆ Come together to battle common threats

What hinders network development?

Attendance - attendance would depend on how relevant any one organisation felt the group to be. The timing and the location of meetings might make it difficult for some people to attend and therefore hinder that organisation participating.

Strength of common concern - unless there was a strong feeling about a common purpose that the group served, this would affect individual organisation's commitment and participation.

Commitment - individual organisations may vary in their view as to how relevant the network was to their work. The level of commitment would vary depending upon the support given internally by the organisation and the size and capacity of that organisation.

Resources - lack of a host organisation or a pool of money to service the network and pay for some basic expenses such as venue hire and morning tea - without these basics, some groups have to stop meeting altogether. They also need resources in the form of time spent compiling minutes and convening the group.

Agenda - commitment might be lacking if it was felt that the network was imposed and that local organisations saw no benefit in participating except out of obligation.

Balance - lack of a realistic work agenda might lead to only a few organisations participating. Contributions must be sought from both small and large organisations if the group is to be seen as being representative.

Personality of representatives - unwillingness to take time to understand how other organisations work or dominant behaviour could jeopardise the success of any network.

Competition - the strength of any network depends upon members not competing for profile but agreeing to work together and gain strength from all the membership rather than to act independently on some issues for their own gain.

were "taking over" and wanted to know ways they could redirect the focus back onto the group as a whole and not just "one or two loud mouths who don't have the interests [of the group] in mind".

Others suggested they weren't sure why they were still turning up, and they thought they could be doing their networking in other ways.

Some groups may need to recognise that they need to stop meeting altogether. This relates back to planning and evaluation, but also relates to people acknowledging that they are not necessarily compelled to turn up at a meeting. They may need to show evidence of networking, but for some this may be able to be achieved in other ways.

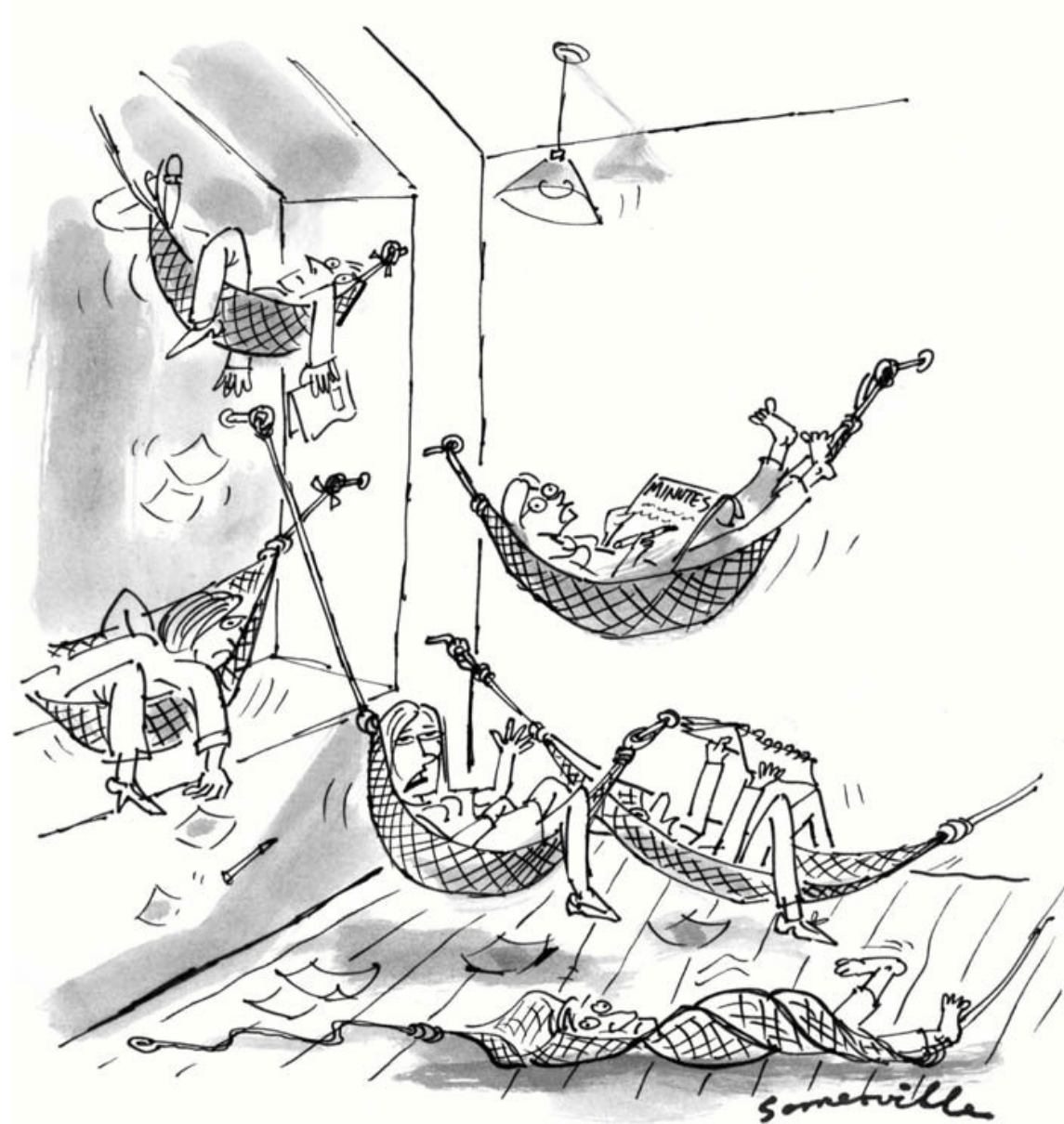
The people who seem to be most tired or cynical about these groups are the workers that have to go to a number of them each month. "You don't do this job to work; you turn up to work to go to meetings! Meeting after meeting!" one said.

Summary

Although there was a large and sometimes contradictory difference of opinion between respondents, the general characteristics of the more successful groups were that they were organised, they had a clear purpose, they used planning to identify and prioritise issues to address, they also used evaluation and their members were committed to the group.

The other key result from this research was that every group has different needs and challenges. This resource kit provides an overview of some general tools you may want to try, but does not attempt to address specific issues. Generally speaking if your group is having difficulties, the more planning and evaluation you do as a group, the easier it is to deal with challenges as they arise.

Planning and Evaluation



"Whoever hatched the idea, full marks for lateral thinking, but I don't think our Planning focus is measurably sharpened by holding our meetings in hammocks."

Cooperation

- ◆ access to resources, information, ideas, expertise
- ◆ coordination of activities
- ◆ combined planning for community needs
- ◆ problem solving

Learning

- ◆ information sharing, checking, comparing
- ◆ collective wisdom, common sense
- ◆ access to good ideas and different perspectives
- ◆ creativity and innovation

Interagencies, networks and forums and networking

Not only do these groups provide a space for networking, but they are a great way to develop generic skills such as public speaking, organisation, negotiation, delegation, team work, cooperation, leadership, following.

- ◆ Successful networks can be assisted by a larger organisation supporting the process or the development of resources and personnel to support forums and networks.
- ◆ An interagency, network or forum can often be the starting point for new ideas and projects.
- ◆ In an environment of lone workers, the network can be a lifeline.
- ◆ Interagencies, networks and forums can provide motivation for a group or individual and can revitalise work as ideas, good practice and resources are shared and encouraged.
- ◆ Networks can provide a focus for improving services and can be a link to involvement in wider initiatives for community participation.

What is networking and why is it important?

Many of us attend interagencies, networks and forums on a regular basis. Some workers say that their work life seems to be in meetings! We have come to accept that meeting people is the standard and a valuable way to network, and it's often the easiest way to meet a number of people that do work in a similar area to you but aren't able to communicate on a regular basis.

However, what seems to have happened with some groups is that people are turning up to these groups for no reason other than 'to network', or because "that's what people do". The meetings become very passive and people slowly forget why they are turning up in the first place. There is some hope that things will change and start being more useful or assist us in networking better, but no one does anything about it and as a result, people become cynical about the role of networking in the community sector. We need to take some responsibility to get change happening around this issue. At the same time, we need to remember the positive side of networking, and the potential value it can bring to individual workers and organisations.

Networking is the process of making, maintaining and using links with others. It facilitates formal and informal communication and cooperation. Networking promotes establishing and using connections across organisational and community boundaries. It is the process of developing trust, understanding, mutuality and respect. Networking builds relationships through conversation, exchanges and joint activity, and encourages the sharing of information, ideas and resources³.

Through networking, we can work towards the following goals,

Support and solidarity

- ◆ helping out with temporary difficulties
- ◆ providing colleagues for isolated and solo workers
- ◆ challenging 'bad' practice and injustice
- ◆ campaigning on common issues

Empowerment

- ◆ collective voice, lobbying
- ◆ developing and demonstrating alternatives
- ◆ influencing policy and local decision-making

³ Adapted from Standing Conference for Community Development, [2003], *Community Development Practitioner's Guide to Networking*, [online, available from] <http://www.cdx.org.uk/networking/resourcepack.htm>

Why is planning and evaluation useful?

The following pages contain some useful tools to assist with evaluation and planning.

As with other organisations, strategic planning is an extremely useful tool for interagencies, networks and forums. Those groups that use planning as a regular part of their calendar have reported it has helped them significantly. Planning is also useful because it enables the group to identify and prioritise the issues that they want to address, it provides direction and focus and gives all the participants a chance to have their voice heard and offer suggestions for change.

Similar to planning, many successful groups use evaluation as another tool to determine how effective the group has been. It is helpful because you are able to identify what is successful in the group and what isn't working so well. The key is that it needs to be done in a structured way so that everyone can have their opinion heard and participate. Going through an evaluation process is also helpful when your group is finding it increasingly hard to stay together. Some groups have used the evaluation process to identify that they don't need to continue meeting.

Planning session checklist

It is useful to get outside assistance from a neutral facilitator when you are doing a planning and evaluation session. If that is not possible, here are some steps you may like to follow. This kind of session works best by brainstorming as a group, but it may be adapted into a survey format. Don't forget to keep a record of your planning process as you go so you can refer to it in subsequent meetings throughout the year.

1. Plan for planning. Encourage people to bring along issues that they would like the group to address for a few meetings before the planning session. This way people are not put on the spot on the day.
2. Make sure everyone is clear about what you are doing as a group and what your focus and identity is. Without a clear identity it's hard to know what you should and could be doing.
3. Review what the group has achieved over the past 6 or 12 months - what worked and what didn't.
4. Identify what you would like to do and what issues you would like to address as a group in the coming year (or six months).
5. Identify what is going well and what challenges you have encountered.
6. Determine how you will address the issues raised and if you are able to address them in the first place.
7. Prioritise the issues you have listed. Some people use the 'circle of concern, circle of influence' method, prioritising the issues that you are able to influence before the issues you are concerned about but are not able to control.
8. Work out who is going to work on the issues and in what time frame.
9. Anticipate any problems or challenges that may arise so you have some idea about how to address them.
10. Work to the plan, being flexible if necessary and evaluate again after a set time (six or twelve months is usual).

Networking



Meeting equipment checklist

- Agendas
- Minutes from last meeting
- Attendee list (to be filled out)
- Extra handouts
- Tea, coffee, milk, juice, sugar, water
- Teaspoons, cutlery, plates, cups
- Urn or kettle
- Food
- Pens and pencils
- Writing paper
- Name tags
- Masking tape
- Blu-tack
- Paper squares for brainstorming
- Flip chart stand
- Extra flip chart paper or butchers paper
- Markers
- Whiteboard markers
- Transparency markers
- Overhead projector
- Extension cords
- Camera and extra memory card / battery
- Paper clips / stapler
- Scissors
- First aid kit
- Wiping cloth / paper towel

Evaluate your meeting

Use these suggestions to get an indication about what areas your group may need to change. There is no wrong way of doing things, you can simply use this as a way of stimulating discussion and thought about what you would like your group to be like.

Every group needs:

- ◆ Unity and rapport,
- ◆ Clear goals,
- ◆ Focus,
- ◆ Motivation,
- ◆ Clear roles and responsibilities.

Unity - your group needs to have strong group feeling and a common purpose. You need to get to know members of your group, both professionally and personally. A strong group means the members are able to support each other.

- ◆ Hold a get to know you meeting, where members can talk about themselves and their work in more detail than usual.
- ◆ At the start of each meeting, when members are introducing each other, get everyone to say something about themselves, e.g. I love my job because...
- ◆ Identify what you all have in common and use that to form your group objectives.

Motivation and enthusiasm - it is essential that each group has motivated members. This means that the whole group can be involved in decisions and tasks. It also means that if there are any challenges it's easier to solve them as a group. The motivation of group members makes it easier to identify appropriate issues and tasks for the group to pursue; it also means less member turnover.

- ◆ Have a party! At the end of the year it's good for the group to do something creative as a re-energising activity.
- ◆ Try to get to know the group members better, sometimes workers are just too burnt out to be able to contribute. Supporting other workers is one of the main functions that interagencies, networks and forums provide.
- ◆ Try something new in each meeting. Give your agenda a makeover, start some working groups to deal with specific issues or start meeting in a different place. Sometimes the act of changing can assist the whole group with their motivation.

- ◆ Don't underestimate the importance of the tea break - it's where people can build rapport, or simply catch up and have a chat. For some workers, the local interagency, network or forum is the only place they can meet other workers.

Focus, goals, and clear roles - not only do you need these, but the whole group has to agree to the objectives of your group. It's no use if one or two people are clear about what they want, but the rest of the group thinks otherwise.

- ◆ When you do your planning, make sure everyone is happy with the issues you identify you would like to work on.
- ◆ Ensure that your goals and the roles of your members are in your terms of reference.
- ◆ Make sure everyone is clear and agrees with their expected roles and responsibilities as interagency, network or forum members.

Meeting room checklist

- Contact person
- Cost
- Size and shape of space
- Wheelchair accessibility, including access to refreshments, restrooms, car park/public transport
- Are signs needed to direct people to rooms?
- Electrical outlets
- Microphone outlets if needed
- Acoustics - minimum noise and disturbances
- Rest rooms
- Stairs or elevators
- Heat / cold regulation or ventilation
- Near public transport
- Parking facilities
- Lighting / dimmer switches
- Wall space for hanging flip chart sheets
- Location of telephone and number for conference calls
- Number of tables and chairs
- Any set up needed before the meeting?
- Design for best set up of table and chairs
- Space to put papers and brochures
- Any break out space?
- Is there a first aid kit?
- Space for preparing and serving refreshments
- Access to hot water for tea / coffee
- Any AV equipment / electronic whiteboard needed
- Will anyone be there to help with problems?
- Is this the right place for the meeting and is it inspiring?

Welcome new members

It's very important to make people feel welcome at your meeting. This is really important to new members especially. New members have a hard time understanding what their place is within the group, who everyone is and how they are expected to participate. One method of doing this is a partnering system, where new group members sit next to a person that introduces them to others, assists them with understanding the group itself and generally helps to encourage the new member to participate. The idea is to try and avoid the situation where new members leave the meeting not knowing who anyone is, why they are meeting or what they can do.

Create an induction kit for new members of the group.

Include:

- ◆ Your terms of reference - make sure you use friendly, inclusive and welcoming language. Don't make more rules or bureaucracy than necessary.
- ◆ A brief outline of the group and its history.
- ◆ Copies of recent minutes.
- ◆ Contact details of the organising committee or key contacts.
- ◆ A calendar of meeting dates, times and venues.
- ◆ Details of working groups (if your group has them), including dates and times and recent issues discussed.
- ◆ Include some good news stories or positive things that your group has achieved recently.

Once you have developed your induction kit, make sure you have a strategy for managing it. For example one of the organising committee, or the convenor could have it on their computer, which would make it easy to email new people after the meeting. Don't forget to get new member's contact details.

Case Study taken from Community Resource Network

Blacktown Combined Interagency Evaluation [2007-2008]

Background

The Blacktown Combined Interagency is a forum for workers from agencies across the human services spectrum working in Blacktown (i.e. government and non-government). The Interagency's principal activities are presentations from guest speakers, information-sharing about services, networking and advocacy. It meets monthly and is coordinated by Community Resource Network, a sub-regional peak organisation for local community services, with the support of Blacktown City Council.

Research questions

The purpose of conducting an evaluation was to answer four key questions:

- ◆ What needs are local workers and agencies trying to have met by attending the BCI?
- ◆ How well is the BCI performing at meeting these needs?
- ◆ How well is the BCI performing at meeting Community Resource Network's Strategic Plan commitments to support and strengthen the local human services system?
- ◆ How can the BCI be improved to make workers who attend better off by giving them more of what they want?

Evaluation process

The evaluation process involved the following steps:

- ◆ CRN asked workers attending annual BCI planning and evaluation discussion a series of questions about why they attend the interagency and whether or not they get what they want from attending.
- ◆ Answers were clustered into themes and workshopped in focus groups as part of the same session.
- ◆ Using the outcomes from focus groups, CRN developed performance measures and data collection tools to collect the data needed to measure how effective the interagency had been against the identified performance measures.
- ◆ CRN developed a survey which was conducted by phone with a large sample drawn from the Interagency's consolidated attendance list. The results of this survey were aggregated, interpreted and written up in an Evaluation report.

Findings

Respondents reported that attendance at the Blacktown Combined Interagency had generated a range of positive outcomes including:

- ◆ 78% of those who made presentations about their service reported generating referrals to their service
- ◆ 83% reported that attendance helped them to strengthen or improve the service they offer their clients
- ◆ 87% reported that they either sometimes, usually or always used information learned at the interagency to make service improvements

Further information

Workers evaluating interagencies for which they are responsible and interested in finding out more about the performance measures, Evaluation Framework (including Results-Based Accountability quadrant used to develop performance measures) or Final Report should contact Community Resource Network at (02) 9832-4762 or admin@network.crn.org.au

Self assessment tool for interagencies

Western Sydney Community Forum has developed a 'self assessment tool' for interagencies in 2007 and has been used by some convenors.



Self assessment tool for interagencies

	Group members are happy and clear about it	Group members think that this needs to be reviewed/ improved
Name		
Aim		
Terms of Reference		
Venue & Refreshment		
Attendance		
Information Flow		
Preparation for Meetings		
Working Groups / Sub-Committees		
Group Morale		
Planning		
Outcomes for last 6 or 12 months		

Information share template

Distribute this before the meeting and on the day. If you have pamphlets or documents you would like to include, email them to the convenor of the group.

Name:
Organisation:
Contact details:
Information share details:

Coping with information share

At most interagencies, networks and forums, there is a period of time set aside so that people can tell the other participants what has happened in their service, what's coming up, and what's on. This could include details of the team's progress, availability of places at a service, or a policy paper out for discussion. In principle it's done because interagencies, networks and forums are sometimes the only place where service providers can gather, get support and find out about other services. The nature of the network itself enables a variety of workers to gather that would not normally have access to the same information in their daily work.



There are a variety of ways that info share can be done:

- ◆ Allocate a specific time on the agenda for sharing information and try not to let it run too long.
- ◆ Do the info share at the end of the meeting.
- ◆ Instead of info share have good news stories and distribute the info share with the minutes - ensuring the minutes go out soon after the meeting.
- ◆ Prioritise the information - the important info can be shared at the meeting, other info can be distributed with the minutes.
- ◆ If it's a problem with the minutes and recording the information, ask people to write their info share on a separate piece of paper and attach that to the minutes.

On the next page are suggestions about what to put on an information share sheet, it has been adapted from the Blacktown Combined Interagency. Some groups use these so that the minute taker doesn't have to record the info share. Your group will need to decide what is best for it, as some groups cope well with only written information share, whereas other groups work well with information share as a main part of the agenda. Remember that the main emphasis is to make it easy to share information and easy to distribute it. Also if possible put the focus on being able to email your minutes or upload them to the web for ease of access and distribution, and to save time and money.

Meeting Ingredients

Being able to hold a proper meeting is the essential element of the successful interagency, network and forum. If your meetings are well prepared, focused on planning for action, and facilitated in an efficient yet involving and upbeat manner, they help strengthen your group. It is impossible to make a useful and productive group when the meetings are poorly planned and run, and don't have any focus.



Organising committees

Every group needs to have more than one person who is responsible for organising the meetings. Some groups call these people the executive group, the steering group or the reference group. For example a small group of up to ten members might have two or three people as the organisers. A large group of forty might have eight members on the steering group.

- ◆ Do not just rely on one person to organise the group. If they leave or need assistance it is very hard for the group to know what to do, or where information is found.
- ◆ Try to get a variety of members involved in a steering committee. It is really useful for members of community agencies to be included - this encourages a better sense of ownership and helps to distribute power between different agencies. For example you might like to include the local development worker/s, a representative from government and some service providers.
- ◆ Make sure you distribute the contact details for the organising committee to all the members of the interagency, network or forum. Also make sure that the key contact person or people are listed publicly in any directories, and with the local council. This enables new members or other workers to easily contact you.
- ◆ Also make sure your key contact people are listed in the new worker's kit - see below for more details about what else to include.

Examples of executive group responsibilities

- ◆ Developing the agendas
- ◆ Facilitating the meeting
- ◆ Distributing the minutes and administering correspondence
- ◆ Planning for guest speakers and special meetings
- ◆ Inviting guest speakers
- ◆ Updating mailing list
- ◆ Facilitating information distribution
- ◆ Organising venues
- ◆ Advocating or organising to advocate to address the needs arising during meetings
- ◆ Initiating events / projects
- ◆ Establishing / participating in working groups

Sample terms of reference

Although this is a very simple terms of reference, this example is useful because it provides the information needed in a positive format whilst still including the key information of group values and aims.

Community Learning Strategic Forum terms of reference²		
Core Values		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Task focused ◆ Making a difference ◆ Coherent ◆ Looking at what is relevant 		
Ways of Working		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Meetings to take place every two months, with an additional city-wide open event once a year ◆ An operation/Chair's group (no more than 5 people) will meet 14 days before each meeting to agree agendas and organise meeting programme ◆ Setting up task based groups to carry out time limited work on identified priorities ◆ Informing and advising the area Learning Partnership in relation to community learning 		
Aims		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To monitor community learning outcomes to inform planning ◆ To agree collaborative working procedures and processes to enhance access and progression opportunities through community learning ◆ To raise the profile of community learning to help widen participation and establish a proactive learning culture 		
Membership		
Organisation	Representative	Contact Details

² Example take from <http://www.bristol-lea.org.uk/>

Sample terms of reference - outline

This example is taken from the South West Sydney HACC Forum, but you can use it as a guideline for creating your own. There is a different terms of reference sample on the following page.

1. Name of group
2. Area that group covers (Local Government Areas / State etc)
3. Background - a brief history of the group, why it started meeting and any significant changes
4. Aims - a brief vision statement or statement of purpose
5. Objectives - points that are used to clarify the role of the interagency, network or forum
6. Membership - who membership is open to
7. Role of members - what is expected of members
8. Executive group responsibilities
9. Meetings - when meetings are held and where
10. Reports - if any reports are required and how they are handled by the group
11. Also include any other items that are relevant for the group, e.g. HACC planning meetings.

Agendas

You must have a good agenda as it reflects the 'personality' of the group itself. People have commented that upon turning up to a group for the first time it was very hard to get an idea about what the group was like from the agenda, and they didn't know where they could contribute. They consequently left feeling like they didn't know anything about the group or their role in it.

A good agenda means not being too rigid, being flexible about what kinds of things are on it, and welcoming new additions. Some groups organise their meeting into different issue groups, and others organise a bi-monthly working party meeting alternating with a meeting about specific community issues where guest speakers are invited to speak about that topic.

Sample agendas

Agenda example one - taken from the Blue Mountains Interagency: This provides a variety of different items to be included in the meeting whilst providing structure. This example is also flexible enough to allow guest speakers or other ad-hoc items. This group used a whiteboard to write the agenda up at the start of the meeting and the interagency participants then added items on the day.

Agenda example one

9.30	Welcome and introductions / Apologies ATSI News Multicultural Projects New Projects Good News Stories
11.15	Project Updates
11.30	Morning Tea [Guest speaker] Campaigns / Issues Training / Resources Funding / Grants
12.30	Info Share Close

Agenda example two - This group holds two types of meetings, alternating each month. This agenda is adapted from the South West Sydney HACC Forum. In the first month there is a general meeting, focussing on guest speakers, reports, and information share. These meetings are usually themed to give focus and direction, for example one month was focussed on dementia support and three guest speakers working in that area gave short presentations about their service. Every other month there is a working party meeting, which concentrates on small groups working with specific issues. The working parties are formed when the group does its yearly planning.

Agenda Example Two

Month One		Month Two	
9.30	Introductions / Apologies	9.30	Introductions / Apologies
9.40	Guest Speakers		Meeting breaks into working parties
10.30	Morning tea	11.30	Finish
10.40	Minutes previous / Business arising		
10.45	New business		
	Reports (keep to a couple of min's each)		
	DADHC report		
	HACC Development Officer's report		
	Working party reports		
	Formal correspondence		
11.15	Other business / Information Share		
11.30	Finish		

Creating a terms of reference

A Terms of Reference is a guiding statement that is used as a clear summary of the background, roles, responsibilities and purpose of an interagency, network or forum. Not all groups need a terms of reference, but they can be very helpful. They are different from a vision or mission statement because they contain definite aims and objectives of the group, whereas a vision statement usually contains the guiding principles of the group and may be included within the terms of reference.

- ◆ Make sure you use friendly welcoming language in your Terms of Reference; you want to give a good impression about your group and represent the personality of your group while still remaining professional.
- ◆ You don't have to be rigid in the details of the meeting, instead try to include everything that needs to be in each meeting while allowing some flexibility.
- ◆ Make sure you get a few people working on the terms of reference if the entire group can't do it. One person creating it can sometimes lead to problems if group members disagree with what has been written.
- ◆ Although it is tempting to put in hard and fast 'rules' for all the group members to follow, doing so means that some people might feel excluded or alienated.

On the next page is a sample blank terms of reference. You can use this to make your own, or use the parts of it to create a different one, but remember that this will contain the guidelines for your group and will also be a document you can use for evaluation, so it's worthwhile making something which has some structure and meaning.

Sample minute template

This is a very basic minute template that is easy to use. Your group might decide your minutes need more detail, if so, make sure that the template is self-explanatory and you use the same one each meeting.



[Group Name] Minutes				
Date of Meeting:		Chairperson:		
Venue:		Minute taker:		
Time:		Minutes distributed on: [date]		
Present: [who was at the meeting]				
Apologies: [who was unable to come and informed the convenor]				
Agenda Item	Main points of discussion	Action	By whom	When

Minutes

Taking minutes is one of the best ways to gain valuable experience at your interagency, network or forum. They help encourage a sense of ownership and belonging, are great transferable skills and give people more confidence to try out other roles within their group.

Send minutes out as soon as possible after the meeting - this way people will remember what was said and are much more able to act on decisions made. Although this may be difficult, any later than a couple of days after the meeting means that people will have forgotten what was actioned and won't be able to work effectively with the group.

- ◆ Make it as easy as possible for everyone to take the minutes.
- ◆ Some people are deterred from taking minutes because they feel they are too hard. It's important to make a minute template so that everyone who has a go is easily able to use it.
- ◆ Also have the minute taker worked out in advance, to stop those uncomfortable silences when the convenor asks, "Who wants to take the minutes?"
- ◆ If you have some sort of organising group, they could take it in turns, or it may be useful for everyone to take turns.
- ◆ New members of the group should be added to the list of minute takers as well.
- ◆ Many groups are successful with a rotating minute taker, but you will need to work out what's best for your group.
- ◆ People who have never taken minutes can develop their skill by taking a shadow copy alongside the official minute taker and comparing and discussing and can then have someone check their first couple of official minutes.
- ◆ Don't write up what was actually said; instead write 'reported speech' eg "It was decided that person A and B will write a letter to the newspaper by Friday the 1st February."

Use the same template for each meeting, that way it's easier for less experienced minute-takers to know what needs to be recorded. Work out with your group what you'd like to use the minutes for, and then decide upon a template. Your minutes may only have to reflect the decisions made in the meeting. On the other hand some groups like to have a more detailed description of what was discussed. Either way the group needs to decide what their minutes should include and adapt their template to suit that.

Minutes should include:

- The time, date and place of the meeting
- The names of those present and apologies for absence
- All items that were discussed - follow the agenda
- The conclusions, actions and decisions made
- The names of those responsible for actions
- (In some cases) the main points or steps leading up to the decisions
- The date time and location of the next meeting

Distributing your minutes

These days it's very easy to email your minutes to the group members. This can be very time consuming for the person whose job it is to chase up workers whose email addresses have changed. Emailing minutes also becomes problematic if members are getting a lot of emails because it contributes to information overload. Some groups use an online resource such as Communitynet <http://www.tricomm.org.au/communitynet> to 'hold' their minutes.

Communitynet is a website for the community sector where people can share news and information about events, conferences, workshops, training, funding, employment and web links. It also has the ability to store documents such as minutes, agendas and reports for interagencies, networks and forums.

A resource like this is useful because:

- ◆ Members and non-members know where they are, and they are easily accessible
- ◆ The minutes are able to be kept for a long time and are in the same place each month
- ◆ It enables members of other interagencies, networks and forums to network with you
- ◆ It avoids one person having to chase up email addresses
- ◆ It reduces the amount of emails coming to inboxes and enables workers to have more control over what information they are accessing
- ◆ It makes your group more accessible - people that haven't attended can know about the meeting

Instructions for using Communitynet:

1. Open <http://www.tricomm.org.au/communitynet> in your web browser.
2. Click on the "Submit Item" box on the right hand side of the screen (it says "click here").
3. Click on "upload an item".
4. Click "browse" and select the document you want to upload from your computer, click "OK". The name of the document will appear in the "select a file" box. Click "upload". The upload time will depend on the size of the document and your internet connection speed.
5. Once the document has been uploaded, it will show as "uploaded" and you will be prompted to "click here to proceed".
6. Type in a name for the document under "Name" - make sure that both the filename and the name are similar and descriptive e.g. Parramatta Interagency minutes September 2004. You can also select a category and subcategory from the pull down menu.
7. Click "Submit".

For more information go to the Communitynet site, call Silvia on (02) 4721 1866 or email silvia@tricomm.org.au