Fact Sheet

APRIL 2011

Networks and networking: how four community food and health initiatives are developing networks

Sharing information and experiences between community food and health initiatives and others, including agencies, funders and decision makers, is becoming increasingly important in the motivation to achieve change for communities.

Communication, co-operation, and sharing resources are key benefits to coming together with others doing the same as you. Developing networks is key to the success of joint efforts and this fact sheet seeks to explore and explain how others are doing it.

Who is networking?
This fact sheet highlights examples of four networks:

Community Retailing Network (CRN)
CRN supports small communities to sustain existing local shops through community ownership and helps set up new ones. Community shops deliver essential services and social functions particularly in **remote and rural** communities in Scotland. Members are involved in selling food and other necessities. The CRN supports opportunities to network nationally and regionally to share knowledge and good practice with others involved in, or interested in community retailing.

Community Food Networks NHS Forth Valley (CFN)
Community Food Development Workers (CFDWs) based within NHS Forth Valley

work with the **local community** to assist people, particularly those on low incomes, to address their food and health needs and develop their skills, confidence and knowledge to eat more healthily. The CFDW team co-ordinate three networks in Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannanshire, 'to give groups and organisations interested in food and health activities an opportunity to share what they are doing, share best practice and most of all network with each other'. Network members include community groups, voluntary organisations and local people who are interested in food activities.

Edinburgh Food and Health Training Hub (EFHTH)
EFHTH assists the people of **Edinburgh** to increase their knowledge of basic nutrition and skills to cook healthy food. The hub is managed by a consortium of five organisations. The network supports trainers, front line workers and community organisations to ensure food and health training and learning is efficient, targeted and accessible. Network members use the hub to seek advice and resources and develop collaborations with partners to deliver activities.

Growing Communities in Scotland (GCiS)
GCiS is a Big Lottery funded partnership between the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG), the Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI) and Trellis, with the aim of providing support,

advice, networking opportunities and training to **community and therapeutic gardening projects across Scotland**. The partnership employs seven field workers in different parts of the country, who provide expertise, advice and support to the networks and network members and other initiatives interested in community and therapeutic gardening.

Getting started

Whether you are developing a network for the first time, or strengthening a current network, there are a few points to consider:

- Identify who will develop the network.
- Map contacts and local groups in your community.
- Map interaction between groups to plan who you want to engage in your network.

All four networks are led by workers whose role is to co-ordinate networking activities or who have identified that networking is beneficial. They all used existing contacts and links to begin with and then targeted and encouraged others to participate.

Try not to be put off if your network starts small. It will grow as it develops.

Doing 'networking' differs according to the needs and purpose of each network. New networks might have to try a range of different approaches to find a method of engagement that meets everyone's needs effectively.

This is an example of how one network engaged with others in their area:

EFHTH undertook a mapping exercise using the consortium's existing contact lists to identify community groups in Edinburgh that were delivering or would like to deliver food and health activities. Primarily this activity helped EFHTH gain an understanding of who was who in communities and who was thinking about food and health activity. They also learned if or what food and health

training was already being carried out and how they could support it.

The five organisations in the consortium cover different sections of the city of Edinburgh. The hub co-ordinator also wants to establish links within local strategic plans in Edinburgh. The Hub co-ordinator aims to attend Neighbourhood Partnership (NP)[1] health and wellbeing sub-group meetings, attending six on a regular basis, with consortium members attending others. These are groups working to improve the quality of life in each NP area and are co-ordinated through a local community plan. The hub co-ordinator's and consortium members' attendance and involvement in these meetings has helped to promote the hub, stimulate activity and circulate information between sub-group leads and local hub groups.

Bringing your network together

The development of networks is strengthened by opportunities to come together. All the networks included in this fact sheet plan regular events: every two to three months or one or two per year or depending on the network's capacity. The networks interviewed work to a timeline to plan and develop network events. Planning for events can vary from six weeks to three months in advance depending on their size and duration, eg. a few hours, half a day or a full day.

Planning and promoting your networking event and getting people to come along require the most attention and time commitment. Two of the networks highlighted the importance of successfully advertising your event through a range of networks and contact methods such as by mail, email, phone, at local meetings and through personal contact. All networks noted that face-to-face contact is most effective, especially when you are establishing contact initially. Meeting others in this way helps to influence and develop trusting relationships. Networks also highlighted that circulating a visual and

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graphic flyer with detailed information about the event is also key to encouraging network members to participate. However, before then you need to plan a programme that is relevant, attractive and focused on learning and sharing experiences. Developing insight into what network members want out of networking forms over time. Allocating time for dialogue improves understanding of common issues, concerns and future themes.

Here are two examples of bringing a network together:

The GCiS network is supported by seven sessional fieldworkers based around Scotland and managed by a fieldwork co-ordinator. The fieldworkers know who and what is going on locally and can organise regional meetings.

Encouraging local projects to host GCiS networking attracts people to attend. Some hosts select a theme for hosting their event, which helps sustain interest and gives members an opportunity to focus on specific issues or learning. Social enterprise, food waste, funding, and planning permission for allotments are some of the themes that have been explored, and encourage an efficient use of members' time. Using images from the host's project or activities in the promotional flyer has been successful in giving participants an advance flavour of what to expect from the visit.

Local projects or speakers can be invited to cover specific topics or promote local resources, as well as answering key questions alongside experienced network members. GCiS network members hold the view that knowing who everyone is from the start and including time for discussion and networking as a whole group leads to an effective event. Having lunch together is used as a networking opportunity and providing good wholesome food is important.

Time to collect feedback about the day helps the fieldworkers evaluate and plan future events as well as gather intelligence for training and collective issues and needs.

Community Food Network meetings in Forth Valley take place in three areas: Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire. The meetings are usually held in local community venues and all have a practical element such as cooking demonstrations, exhibitions and demonstrations of resources. CFDWs also use practical group activities to collect local activity updates.

NHS Forth Valley has invested a lot of time in developing practical resources and training resources. For example, the 'How to....'[2] series of booklets were produced for anyone wanting to deliver food activities, cooking sessions or demonstrations with community groups or with individuals. The booklets include eight recipe sheets, details of equipment required, and some useful shopping tips. Some networking events have focused on practical demonstrations of how these resources can or have been used. This approach gives network members practical tips and guidance on how to plan, develop and run sessions in their communities. It also demonstrates what is possible and achievable with what is locally available. This encourages network members to share their experiences and impact. Networking lets members know who is doing what and where locally, and inspires creativity. Fundamentally skills and knowledge are cascaded down, which develops the networks ability to sustain and deliver activities for themselves.

Supporting the network
All four networks are led by workers whose role is to co-ordinate networking activities or who have identified that networking is necessary to share and learn with others to develop credibility for their activities and gain support.

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Communication within the network is essential and can be broken down into smaller tasks:

- Recording and circulating notes and feedback from meetings/events.
- Circulating information and resources.
- Updating e-bulletins and websites.

Providing access to network members through a contact or mailing list enables networks to send and receive information to and between each other *(our fact sheet 'Gathering information - the role of databases'* highlights how groups are gathering, storing and using information*).* Sharing tasks reduces individual loads and gets information out quicker.

Regular e-bulletins from FCFCG and Trellis are mailed out and used as a tool to engage with other projects that might want to get involved in the GCiS network. In Forth Valley CFDWs write up reports and circulate them to network members. Network members can pass on these reports to partners, funders, decision makers and others. Partnerships have developed from this activity, helping to develop the credibility of the network and its members, and the relevance of food and health activities. The CFDWs also post network reports and activities on their Department website.

The EFHTH co-ordinator updates and shares information from local area hubs within NP sub-group meetings. CRN members receive regular e-bulletins answering queries and updating members about legislation, funding opportunities and anything else relevant to their work. The CRN co-ordinator has found that although emails are more immediate, the most effective way to ensure members have accessed updates and get to know people is by telephone.

Networking can also happen independently. As the network grows network members can get together informally. Successful networking develops from the capacity, willingness and motivation of members involved and motivated to maintain it. Some networks are able to assist informal networking, eg. the GCiS partnership has made funding available through a travel bursary. This enables members to visit other groups in person to share ideas and good practice about community and therapeutic gardens and city farms.

What do network members get out of networking?

All the networks interviewed for this fact sheet expressed that there is a lot to gain from networking and all had consensus on the benefits of being involved:

- Learning about who is doing what and sharing information.
- Sharing experiences and being inspired.
- Find out about support, resources and funding available.
- Developing partnerships, collaborating on work activities and training opportunities.
- Receiving updates on policy, local actions and their implications.
- Building relationships with others who have the same or common issues and concerns

Throughout this fact sheet the networks reported that they had achieved positive outcomes from networking. EFHTH supported two local groups in the west area local hub to develop a partnership and collaborate on food and health activities. Increased engagement with other statutory agencies has led to larger organisations networking in local hub groups and developing food and health activities for the first time.

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There have also been some challenges …

The networks all had consensus on time being a big issue to overcome in order to maintain the capacity of the network. In Forth Valley demands for CFDWs time has been high. Focusing on involving others to cascade information and skills has supported community members to develop their skills, maintain and take more ownership of the network. GCiS and CRN have focused on developing regional networking as travelling time around Scotland can take days for some network members located in remote areas.

As the CRN has been more active in the last two years, network members have become more engaged with its purpose as more opportunities to network and build relationships have been developed. In the Western Isles five shops participated in the Scottish Grocer's Federation Healthy Living Programme training, giving them the opportunity to meet as a group for the first time. The delivery of a series of retail training taster sessions using remote access has also helped the shops across the network communicate and identify with each other more, as highlighted in Issue 53 of the CFHS quarterly newsletter, Fare Choice.[3]

Each community shop will operate differently according to the needs of their local community. However, learning together that the issues and processes they are dealing with are common has helped the shops to communicate with each other and has reduced isolation. Being part of a network gives access to ideas and inspiration, and invaluable peer support, as well as the opportunity to develop joint solutions to common concerns such as supply chain, training, marketing, governance and keeping up with legislation. Wider benefits and links can also arise and members of the CRN have recently benefitted from:

- Sharing information – several shops have been able to claw back thousands of pounds in corporation tax as a result of applying for dormant status.[4]

- Working with seven European partner countries through the Retailing in Rural Regions project (RRR). As well as training opportunities and networking with other countries experiencing similar decline in rural shops, shop managers have taken part in study tours to Norway, Faroe Islands, Ireland and Iceland.

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Where to get more Information

To find out more about the projects and their networks visit:

Community Retailing Network
www.communityretailing.co.uk

NHS Forth Valley Community Food Development Workers
www.nhsforthvalley.com/home/Services/healthpromotion/teams/nutrition/nut_community.html

Edinburgh Food and Health Training Hub
www.foodandhealthtraining.org.uk

Growing Communities in Scotland
www.farmgarden.org.uk/farms-gardens/your-region/scotland/524-partnerships-in-scotland or
www.trellisscotland.org.uk/GrowingCommunitiesinScotland

Sources of support

Community Chest is a small grants programme providing grants to help small community groups in Scotland sustain and develop their activities. They will consider applications for support to help build and develop strong organisations for example visits to other organisations. For more information visit www.voluntaryactionfund.org.uk/5,40/grants/community_chest

The Scottish Community Foundation has a number of different grant programmes to help community groups meet a wide range of costs. For more information visit www.scottishcf.org

Information about community food and health initiatives, their activities and any networking events are available in our newsletter 'Fare Choice' and by visiting our website

References

[1] www.edinburghnp.org.uk/about-nps

[2] www.nhsforthvalley.com/home/services/healthpromotion/teams/nutrition/nut_community.html

[3] www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/fileuploads/cfhsfarechoiceissue53-7014.pdf

[4] www.plunkett.uk.net/node2389