

REGIONAL NETWORKS

- Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation -

Background Report 5

Prepared for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
(Neighbourhood Renewal Unit)

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This report focuses on one of the main Skills and Knowledge Programme tools: Regional Networks, delivery organisations established to promote networking for regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. It describes their development and activities, highlights lessons from their experience, and draws implications for future policy and practice – including the further development of Regional Centres of Excellence. While it concentrates on those Regional Networks supported under the NRU's National Regeneration Networks Initiative, it also draws on research relating to networks and networking funded by Government Offices in regions where there is no Regional Network.. In this, the report comments on the value of *networking* as a learning process in addressing skills and knowledge needs in neighbourhood renewal.

This is one of six background research reports accompanying the main evaluation report, “Seeking the Lessons: Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation”, all of which can be downloaded from www.neighbourhood.gov.uk. The six are:

- NRU and GO Strategies and Delivery (Background Report 1)
- Findings from the Field (Background Report 2)
- Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (Background Report 3)
- Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills (Background Report 4)
- Regional Networks (Background Report 5)
- Renewal.net (Background Report 6)

The main report contains a brief description of the overall methodological model, the project bibliography and glossary.

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1 FINDINGS

Regional Networks have been established in five regions with related networking opportunities promoted by GOs in the other regions. The Networks are playing a role in addressing needs of partnerships and individual practitioners for cross-sector learning and are placed to play a key role in the development of the new Regional Centres of Excellence (RCEs), being taken forward by the NRU, the ODPM Sustainable Communities Unit and Regional Development Agencies. RCEs are charged with fostering learning across the breadth of the Sustainable Communities policy agenda, including neighbourhood renewal.

The Regional Networks are *organisations* which enable networking to take place, provide a bridge between different professional and community interests, and promote the interests of regeneration practitioners and practice within their regions. Most have aimed to undertake a set of common functions: issue-based events and working groups; facilitating support on problems facing practitioners; organising visits and face-to-face exchange; and information dissemination through newsletters and websites.

Regional focus for networking on regeneration and neighbourhood renewal

- The experience of the longer established Regional Networks has shown the time it can take to establish their niche and profile - as actual and potential users grow to value what they provide. This is most evident in the North East where Regeneration Exchange has shown what is possible. It is a very good example of the benefits in having a core resource and focus for regeneration practice and networking at regional level. At the time of the evaluation it was too early to seek evidence of the difference the newer Networks were making in supporting the delivery of neighbourhood renewal.
- Thus far, Regional Networks have had varying degrees of success in providing a bridge between sectoral interests and in reaching wider 'communities' of neighbourhood/ regeneration partnerships, voluntary and community organisations, and (to a more limited extent) front line workers and residents. They have been valued for their independence and for providing a space for debate at a regional level. There is also some evidence to suggest that participants are more open to sharing when they come together at a regional level than they are likely to be at local level (where competition for resources and local politics can come into play).

Social capital benefits

- The Networks have provided 'social capital' benefits in terms of 'bridging' (helping participants make the links across sectors, with government bodies, etc) and 'bonding' (strengthening relationships and trust amongst participants). Many interviewees in the evaluation observed how much networking opportunities can facilitate mutual support and help participants take reassurance in recognising that they are not operating on their own.

Quality of Network activities

- Research commissioned by the Networks in the North East and North West found high levels of satisfaction in network events and reasonable levels in other services, especially from core users. The North East research highlighted issues regarding the take-up of services which need to be addressed continually as marketing challenges. These include awareness of services and potential benefits; practitioner 'lack of time' to take advantage of Network services; and fears about 'information overload'.

Evidence of impact

- Our area fieldwork in three regions provided limited data on network awareness, service take-up and impact. Few interviewees in the North West had been involved with the NW Regeneration Network (it had mainly been serving SRB partnership managers), and CRNE in the East had not been formally launched by the time of our survey work. Our interviews, however, did indicate the extent to which people value networking, though most commented in relation to networks relating to their particular professional/ sectoral interests. (There has been no Regional Network in the East Midlands, and Regeneration East Midlands, the RCE, launched in late 2004, seeks to fulfill the roles of such a Network - and more.)
- An evaluation of the individual Regional Networks was not designed as part of the Skills and Knowledge Programme, given that the earlier established Networks were undertaking their own research and saw their line of accountability more to the RDAs (as their major funders rather than the NRU/GOs). We drew on this research to the extent possible, but it did little to explore the *impact* of Network activities. (We have developed a framework for evaluating Regional Network activities in future as part of our project.)

Benefits from an NRU/ GO perspective

- Feedback from our GO interviews pointed to the value of formal networks as a dedicated resource for promoting skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal that is independent of the GO or other government agency. Several acknowledged the value in having an independent body that is not the creature of a particular sector or interest group, and a resource with the expertise to identify needs, contributors and organise events.
- Formal networks can also bring other benefits for GOs, as we found in a separate evaluation of the North West NDC Network: a ready point of contact and informal channel of communication with practitioners, opportunities for promoting collaborative projects (going beyond the networking in itself), and breaking down 'civil servant' stereotypes.
- The existing Networks also bring highly relevant experience to the table in the development of Regional Centres of Excellence, and provide a platform on which to build. They have helped to target RDA and other contributions to Network resources in meeting the neighbourhood renewal learning agenda.

Principal Recommendations

	Action by
1. Ensure that successful Regional Networks play a full part in the development of strong Regional Centres of Excellence. Regional partners need to ensure the development of a coherent infrastructure for skills, knowledge and capacity development at regional level, linked with related initiatives to improve quality of and access to evidence/ data.	NRU, GOs, Academy for Sustainable Skills
2. Build on Regional Network experience in promoting cross-sector networking opportunities across sectors and communities of practice, bringing together participants focused on particular issues and learning needs. Networking needs to go beyond swapping experience to knowledge creation and improved practice.	RCEs, Regional Networks
3. Regional Networks should give greater priority to evaluating their own services and activities, seeking evidence of impact as well as user satisfaction.	Regional Networks

2 Development of Regional Networks

2.1 Origins of support for Regional Networks

The Learning Curve endorsed the importance of networking¹, citing research (eg, ‘Policy Transfer between Local Regeneration Partnerships’ for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation²) which has shown “*that learning opportunities gained from networking are highly valued by those involved*”. However, it observed that, “*The neighbourhood renewal agenda has spawned a new type of partnership working at neighbourhood level. The broader set of skills and expertise of those engaged with these partnerships does not easily fit with existing networks, which tend to be programme or sector focused*”). It recommended support for Regional Networks³:

“...networks should enable all those delivering neighbourhood renewal to share good practice and gain support from others undertaking similar activity, regardless of sector or funding programme. They should be regionally driven, responding to regional needs. They will provide a vehicle for feedback, advice and consultation on regional and national policy issues to other bodies”.

2.2 NRU support

The Skills and Knowledge Team have built on a further report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (‘Networking across regeneration partnerships’⁴), which explored the potential contribution and value of networking among regeneration partnerships. Acting on one of the report’s recommendations, the NRU set up a two year project, the National Regeneration Networks Initiative, with a national co-ordinator (a post subsequently absorbed within the Skills and Knowledge Team). The co-ordinator’s role has been to promote the development of existing and new Regional Networks and help ensure that they encourage shared learning and experience across programmes and sectors. This has been provided on a one-to-one basis with Regional Network/Government Office (GO) contacts in each region, and through networking the Regional Networks. Feedback from these Networks suggests that the NRU’s role in this has been appreciated, and that also (in most cases) the NRU commitment had given them extra credibility with regional stakeholders at an important stage of their development.

The context for Regional Networks, however, has changed significantly during the course of the evaluation, with first, the development of Regional Centres of Excellence (RCEs) (a commitment in the Learning Curve, jointly funded with RDAs and the ODPM Sustainable Communities Unit). This has been followed by early planning for the establishment of the Academy for Sustainable Communities, the national centre for

¹ Networking may be defined as establishing, maintaining and using a broad network of contacts in order to keep a pulse on ideas, developments in policy and practice, what makes people tick, and potential mutual benefits and opportunities.

² Wolman and Page, 2000

³ The evaluation report of the North West Regeneration Network (Morton, 2003) captures the distinction between ‘network’ and ‘networking’: “*The network is the mechanism that brings people together and enables the networking to take place*”. The Regional Networks are best viewed as *organisations* created to promote sharing of experience and knowledge.

⁴ Taylor, Kinghan and Thake, 2002

sustainable community skills, a recommendation of the Egan Review (see 2.5 below). The past year has also seen the launch by the NRU of the National Neighbourhood Management Network (aimed at Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders and other neighbourhood management initiatives) and Neighbourhood Warden Regional Resource Centres (their role in part to support practitioner networks for neighbourhood wardens).

This report proceeds to describe progress in developing the Regional Networks, and the services and activities they provide. It highlights lessons from their experience to date, and raises issues for future policy and practice. In doing this it draws on our interviews with Network managers⁵ and on research undertaken for the Networks themselves⁶ and for GOs.

2.3 Progress with Network development

The Regional Networks have come from different roots and taken advantage of different funding mixes. Two (in the North East and North West) pre-dated the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Those participating in the Skills and Knowledge Team's support programme⁷ have been:

East

- Community Regeneration Network East, established in 2003, linking existing networks for SRB partnership managers and for community development workers, and establishing relationships with other regional bodies promoting networking around social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal and rural revival (website: www.crne.org.uk)

London

- London Renewal.net (established in 2002 for NDC and NM partnerships⁸ and run under contract to GOL by Shared Intelligence⁹) (www.londonrenewal.net)

North East

- Regeneration Exchange: the first of the regional networks initiated with SRB funding in 1999, dedicated to networking regeneration initiatives to promote the sharing of knowledge, skills and information network (now funded by ONE's 'single pot') (www.regenerationexchange.org/)

North West

- North West Regeneration Network¹⁰ established in 2001 (SRB-funded via NWDA) - similar in role and purpose to Regeneration Exchange.

⁵ These were undertaken at two stages in the project: October/ November 2003 and June 2004.

⁶ The Regional Networks were not subject to evaluation as part of the Skills and Knowledge Programme evaluation in the same way as the other main Skills and Knowledge tools, as (a) they are independent entities drawing on a range of other funds (notably in some cases, from RDAs); and (b) the longer established Networks have undertaken their own market research/ evaluation surveys in the past year.

⁷ All the Networks other than London have a 'regeneration' remit, wider than neighbourhood renewal per se. However, they have been encouraged by NRU and GOs to develop activities in relation to the neighbourhood renewal agenda and target groups.

⁸ Despite the similarity in title, London Renewal.net is not a part of the NRU's Renewal.net service. It differs from the other Regional Networks in having a closed membership (you have to register) relating to NDC and Neighbourhood Management partnerships. Its scope has widened in 2004, with two additional contracts from GOL to support networking amongst Community Empowerment Networks and LSPs.

⁹ Shared Intelligence also manage the National Neighbourhood Management Network, in conjunction with BURA.

South East

- SEE Regeneration (South East), launched in January 2004, funded by GOSE and SEEDA¹¹ (www.see-regen.net)

South West

- South West Regeneration Network, launched in 2003, run by the South West Forum (regional voluntary sector network) under contract to GOSW (on networking section of Creating Excellence, www.creatingexcellence.org.uk)

Variations in Network priorities and activities have emerged across the regions, depending, eg, on the availability of ‘competing’ networking opportunities, funder priorities, interests of the ‘host’ organisation/ lead body, and feedback from consultations. The development of the new - and the existing - Networks has not taken place on a greenfield site: each has had to work out and establish its niche within its each region. While opportunities for Networks are many, it typically proved difficult in their earlier days to determine priorities and develop the types of activities and services which attract significant take-up. There have been time-consuming needs for Network staff to get out and about, build relationships (and contact databases), and help ensure that the Network is viewed as relevant by different groups of stakeholders across the region. There has been a significant task in helping stakeholders appreciate what the Networks can offer, in ways that add value to other regional and national networking and learning activities – a challenge which RCEs have also had to face.

2.4 Developments in other regions

GOs in other regions have also been members of the National Regeneration Networks Initiative. Most GOs have supported some form of programme-specific ‘network’, which varied in the role and degree of involvement on the part of the GO and in the format (Table 1). Sometimes these have been simply a series of seminars, while in other cases, they have been gatherings with more fluid and open agendas, set by all concerned.

Table 1 Other GO-supported Networks

GO-supported Neighbourhood Renewal networks by region (2003/04)			
East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LSP Network ▪ LSP PMF Action Learning set 	North West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LSP Network ▪ North West NDC Network (and thematic groups)
East Midlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LSP Network ▪ Community Participation Programmes ▪ Funding Advice Workers 	South East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LSP seminars ▪ NRF LSP networking
London	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community Participation Programmes 	West Midlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Neighbourhood Management ▪ NDC Chief Executives ▪ CEN Network ▪ LSP Network
North East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LSP Network ▪ LSP Learning Network 	Yorks & Humber	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ South Yorks Regeneration Network ▪ LSP Network ▪ CEN Network

¹⁰ SRB funding for North West Regeneration Network ended in March 2004, though the Network has continued to run occasional events, eg, on Community Consultation and Working with Hard to Reach Groups in June 2004.

¹¹ This only became active in late 2004, following a hiatus after the departure of the original two members of staff.

In most cases, the GOs have continued to fund these networks in 2004/05¹². There has been some rationalisation and reorganisation, eg:

- the Leadership and Partnership Development Programme in the West Midlands now brings together management of the networks for LSPs, NDCs, neighbourhood management and Regeneration Zones linked to development activities for partnership managers (also including CEN managers)
- the Regional Learning Programme in Yorkshire and Humberside for the delivery of LSP networking, action learning, related events and news bulletins
- the incorporation of the Funding Advice Workers network and LSP networking into the work of Regeneration East Midlands (the RCE)
- the transfer of funding for the North West NDC network to the NDCs themselves and the location of the Co-ordinator at RENEW, the NW RCE

In practice, the presence of existing programme or partnership-specific networks has meant that the concern in some regions has been to promote *networking activities* rather than creating a regional networking *organisation*. For example, while scoping work in 2002 for a West Midlands Regional Network found a lack of support for an overarching network, there was interest in linking networks in the region. In East Midlands, North West and Yorkshire and Humber, there have been related mapping exercises with a similar objective as well as to inform RCE development.

2.5 Emergence of RCEs and the Academy for Sustainable Communities

The advent of Regional Centres of Excellence has been a significant factor influencing the speed and spread of Regional Network development - to the extent that the future of the existing Networks can only be viewed in the context of future RCE plans.

RCEs were first put forward in the Urban Task Force's report in 1999. Subsequently their creation were endorsed in the 2001 Urban White Paper as a means of addressing professional skills gaps in urban development (particularly in urban design), and were highlighted in the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal as a possible mechanism for delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's Skills and Knowledge programme. In 2003, ODPM placed RCEs at the centre of the drive for improving the effectiveness of regeneration and renewal in their Action Programme, 'Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future'. RDAs have been expected to play a lead role in RCE development, working with GOs as key partners.

¹² GOSW have only supported the Regeneration South West Network.

Regional Centres of Excellence: Roles

The core purpose of RCEs is to develop the skills base for sustainable community development and renewal by:

- mapping existing, and commissioning, identifying and targeting, learning provision and support, including formal training, in the regions
- assessing provision against an agreed quality standard
- supporting people/organisations to diagnose which learning best meets their needs
- direct people/organisations in the region towards suitable learning providers
- 'growing' learning provision either internally or with existing providers to fill any identified gaps
- joining up regeneration in the region, for example, between sectors or between disciplines such as built environment and social inclusion

Source ODPM

Development funding (up to £250,000 per region) was agreed for all regions in the latter part of 2003-04, to support RCEs in building capacity to deliver, particularly within their core team and steering group; and provide support for RCEs to carry out activities to strengthen participation and ownership by regional stakeholders. Activities have included projects to support implementation of RCE delivery plans; consultations; recruitment and staff costs; board development; and mapping learning provision in the region and identifying gaps. Further development funding (a total of £1m) was provided in 2004/05 more geared to *delivery* of ODPM priorities rather than of RCE establishment¹³. Approved projects with neighbourhood renewal objectives (wholly or in part) have included:

- an on-line 'expert system' – a diagnostic service (described as being like the search site, 'Ask Jeeves'), designed to act as the 'front end' of the 'virtual' RCE in the North East, NECER (plus an online database of higher education courses and modules on regeneration)
- Introduction to Regeneration programme, a buddying initiative and learning bursaries (Regeneration East Midlands)
- masterclasses and other events (RENEW, North West)
- partnership skills training (Creating Excellence, South West)
- best practice awards, graduate apprenticeships, a work shadowing programme for GOWM and Advantage West Midlands staff, and a pilot multi-disciplinary learning programme (RegenWM, West Midlands)

Most RCE bids in 2004, however, tended to stress the built environment aspects of regeneration rather than neighbourhood renewal. This reflected the predominance of a typical RDA policy interest in 'urban renaissance', and has constituted a cause for concern for the NRU who wish to ensure a holistic approach and attention to community-based renewal.

In regions where there are existing Networks, there have been concerns as to how these will relate to RCE plans: How will the Networks feature? How will they funded in

¹³ Creating Excellence (South West) www.creatingexcellence.org.uk/
Inspire East www.eastspace.net/regeneration/home.asp
North East Centre of Excellence in Regeneration www.necer.co.uk
Regeneration East Midlands www.regenerationem.org/
RegenWM (West Midlands) www.regenwm.org/
RENEW (North West) www.renew.co.uk/

future? How will their activities be branded? How might their development be jeopardised or strengthened by that of the RCE? Will RCEs reinvent what networks are doing already? Will they become part of the RCE, or have to develop more as a social enterprise supplying the RCE and other customers? The networks have been built into early RCE business plans to varying degrees (eg, Creating Excellence in the South West identified regional networking as one of its four pillars, whereas in the South East, the SEE-Regeneration Network has not featured).

In turn, the development of the Academy for Sustainable Communities has caused RCEs to question how they will fit into future policy and funding arrangements – not least because, during the period of our research, plans for this new national centre had yet to be finalised.

**Academy for Sustainable Communities
(national centre for sustainable community skills)**

Following the publication of the Egan Review, the Government made a commitment to establishing a national centre for sustainable community skills to carry forward many of the recommendations.

A Project Task Group was formed to set up the centre, the Academy for Sustainable Communities. Its members took as their starting point the Egan recommendation that the national centre should have as its aim the development of “*world class skill sets amongst all those involved in planning, delivering and maintaining sustainable communities*”. The objectives were to:

- provide a high profile national focus for skills development and research
- work with partners to provide and promote excellence in sustainable community skills development
- act as a catalyst for innovation and a focus for national and international debate on sustainable community skills issues
- act as a resource and communications hub on the sustainable communities agenda

Specific Egan Review recommendations, which overlap with interests of the Skills and Knowledge Programme include:

- promotion of generic skills in professional training and continuing professional development (CPD)
- development of occupational benchmarks
- encouragement of cross-sector working
- an on-line tool to provide access to information about sustainable communities, and councillor training.

RCE funding from ODPM has sought also to encourage joint projects, programmes or research that could form a useful basis for the National Centre to take forward.

www.ascskills.org.uk

3 Research into Networking Needs

3.1 Findings from the evaluation fieldwork

In our report on our area case study work, 'Findings from the Field' in three regions¹⁴, we explored whether interviewees were members of job-related networks outside their area, levels of participation in network and GO events, and their value. We found that 61% participated in some form of 'network', though for many this represented only very occasional attendance at professional updating events (which provided them with opportunities to network with peers). These tended to relate to specific occupational areas (eg, public health, planning, community safety, lifelong learning) where topics relate to neighbourhood renewal some but not all of the time. There have been some RDA-related networking opportunities for partnerships in receipt of SRB/ Single Pot funding, and also some regional networking of CENs.

It was clear that a minority (perhaps around 15%) were more active in their membership of networks and participation in events - individuals who put a higher personal value on the gains that networking has to offer (learning, a sense of 'social solidarity', etc). Those who had participated in network-related seminars and workshops tended to find them moderately useful. Examples of reported benefits were:

"It's reduced my sense of isolation. There's only one other person in the District with the same role as me."

CULTURAL AWARENESS WORKER (CVS)

"...saving me time and effort, avoiding duplication and maximising the benefits of good ideas"

LOCAL AUTHORITY COMMUNITY SERVICES MANAGER

"It's very good to get good practice, and it provides aversion therapy - the pitfalls to avoid. It's important to be aware of innovations, and benefits from the breadth of coverage from national and local perspectives."

EDUCATION ACTION ZONE DIRECTOR

¹⁴ This involved fieldwork in nine LSP areas (three in each of three regions: East, East Midlands and North West). At the time of the research, there was no Regional Network in the East Midlands, Community Renewal Network East was very new (and had not run any events by this point), and the North West Regeneration Network had come to the end of its SRB funding.

3.2 Findings from network-related research

These findings relate to a number of research exercises commissioned by GOs in seeking to establish need/ demands for a Regional Network in their region. For example, research in 2002 in the West Midlands (by CSR for GOWM) highlighted needs and interests in networking amongst regeneration practitioners. In an analysis of 250 survey replies, CSR found that:

- 38% respondents felt isolated in their job
- 62% felt they could contribute more if other people understood more about them and their role
- 51% find it difficult to keep up with the pace of change, policy and funding developments, etc
- 26% do not participate regularly in networks, conferences or seminars (rising to 33% for those involved in regeneration for three years or less)
- those involved with the newer initiatives (NRF, NDC, etc) expressed a stronger need for networks

The main factors motivating people to participate in networks were found to be: meeting people/making contacts (85%); getting information about changes (81%); and gaining support through sharing experiences (77%). Less significant motivations were 'try to get things changed' (66%) and 'learn how to do my job better' (61%). The most popular forms of networking were seminars (90%); meeting practitioners (86%); and visits to projects/communities (85%).

CSR concluded that there was a need for a *practical* network, concerned with project development, hands-on, and offering visits to working models. They also found that "*the 'learning' label is a turn off!*" - something which has been borne out further by the experience of GOWM more widely in their Skills and Knowledge work. (We have also encountered similar feedback in other regions.) There was no consensus in the West Midlands for the creation of an overarching network (given the complexity of existing regional/ sub-regional/ local/ thematic networks and the development of the RCE). As we note above, however, there was support to reinforce existing networks, which led to the 'Strengthening Regional Networks' project, managed by a GO secondee based part-time at the RCE. This sought to provide support to existing networks, improve links between them and make more of their potential contribution to regeneration practice. It has since been subsumed within the work of RegenWM and otherwise through the Leadership and Partnership Development programme mentioned above.

Research in 2004 in the North West and Yorkshire and Humber has cast further light on perceived benefits and costs of networking (Table 1 below). This highlighted factors which attract practitioners to take advantage of formal networks along with those which make them sceptical about the value of such networks. A common question in practitioners' minds has been: "will there be sufficient common purpose and quality to make participation in a network worth my while?" The content of the reports also indirectly provides evidence of some confusion about 'networks'; respondents to surveys and focus groups appear to have different conceptions about 'networks', what they are for and what they have to offer.

Table 1 Perceived benefits and costs of Regional Networks

	North West	Yorkshire & Humber
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ opportunity to 'think and look outside the box' - take time out from the day job ▪ facilitate dialogue and exchange of good practice ▪ vehicle for joint activities ▪ develop skills (eg. through brokered provision) ▪ lobbying and influencing decision makers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ learning resources ▪ vehicle for encouraging behavioural change (breaking down barriers) ▪ working together towards a common goal
Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of leadership, clear terms of reference, task-orientation ▪ finding the right balance of members ▪ a luxury? ▪ lowest common denominator, progress at the speed of the slowest ▪ failure to review network value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ resource intensive - especially time ▪ information/ e-mail overload ▪ members too dissimilar ▪ loss of relevance/ focus ▪ unwillingness to wash dirty linen in public

Source Community Concepts (2004) RENEW Networking Strategy

Source: URBED (2004) Scoping Study into Neighbourhood Renewal Networks

The research concluded in both regions that there was not a case for an all-embracing Regional Network. In Yorkshire and Humber there was a preference for sub-regional networking, and in the North West the notion was rejected on the grounds of the sheer breadth of regeneration activity, disparate needs amongst sub-groups of practitioners and the region's geography (it being easier to get to Newcastle or Glasgow from Cumbria than to Manchester). The conclusion for RENEW was that it should position itself alongside existing networks and potentially act as manager or administrator of these, as appropriate.

4 Regional Network Activities and Added Value

In November 2003 and May 2004, we undertook interviews with co-ordinators of the six Regional Networks to gather information about the network models (their purpose, objectives, activities, structure, resources, membership, etc); how they identify needs, promote and monitor their activities; how they link with different aspects of the Skills and Knowledge Programme; and their plans (including in the context of RCE development in their region). In this section we describe Network activities and lessons of experience, before highlighting in the next section some of the key findings from research undertaken in 2003 for Regeneration Exchange and Regeneration North West.

4.1 Range of services

Table 2 sets out the range of Regional Network activities, based on the typology produced in the JRF report. This shows common functions: issue-based events and working groups; facilitating support on problems facing practitioners; organising visits and face-to-face exchange; and information dissemination through newsletters and websites.

Table 2 Regional Network activities

	CRNE	LRN	RE	RNW	SEE-R	RSWN
Skills and knowledge support						
▪ issue-based events and working groups	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
▪ facilitating support on problems facing practitioners		✓	✓	✓		✓
▪ organising visits and face-to-face exchange	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
▪ support/advice to partnerships experiencing difficulty			✓			
▪ information dissemination: newsletter	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
▪ information dissemination: website	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
▪ signposting services	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
▪ assisting with content for Renewal.net	✓		✓		✓	✓
▪ arranging provision of training				✓		
Consultation/representation						
▪ vehicle for feedback and consultation on regional/national policy issues	✓		✓	✓	✓	
▪ advice to other bodies (eg, on regeneration issues; practitioner learning needs)	✓		✓			

CRNE = Community Regeneration Network East; LRN = London Renewal Network;
 RE = Regeneration Exchange; RNW = Regeneration North West; SEE-R South East
 England Regeneration Network; RSWN = Regeneration South West Network

Within information services, Networks have tended to stress the importance of providing timely information on funding opportunities, amongst other aspects. Their role in 'facilitating support on problems' has been primarily through providing opportunities for mutual learning. In carrying out their roles they have been anxious not to duplicate those of others: their role in 'facilitation' or 'advice' has not duplicated that of NRAs, and on training, they have avoided becoming direct providers - though they may work with others to address needs. They have planned their information services as

complementary to Renewal.net, with an emphasis on the role of network staff in helping to clarify and interpret enquirer needs.

“The information requests we get are most often best answered - indeed can only be answered - by individualised solutions. Personal contact is more suitable and essential to the kinds of specific enquiries we get. Renewal.net is useful but often doesn't meet these needs.”

REGIONAL NETWORK CO-ORDINATOR

Networks have been encouraged to promote and develop new content for Renewal.net, and foster the involvement of NRAs in Network activities. The Networks have been keen to develop their role in identifying and promoting 'what works' - and also in helping people learn from emerging practice, pitfalls and failures as well as from proven successes. The JRF report anticipated a role for the Networks in facilitating use of NRAs. The NRU decided, however, that it would be better to develop the programme only through GOs, though there could be a role for the Networks in future.

All have used the internet to disseminate information, in all but one case (CRNE) through their own independent websites rather than through Renewal.net. This reflected their desire to establish their own, distinct identity. Several Networks, however, have been involved in generating case study content for Renewal.net. Most of the Network managers have felt that they have not had enough resources to make the most of the potential offered by their web presence.

Several Regional Networks have stressed the importance of partnering with other agencies in delivering their activities, thereby extending their networks and alliances, and gaining access to the expertise and 'captive audiences' of other organisations. The Networks may also act as a hub bringing together more specific networks (or communities of practice¹⁵), or stimulating new ones to form. In the East, for instance, this includes pre-existing networks of SRB partnership managers and community development workers. In the North East, Regeneration Exchange have supported an NDC Residents Network and a regeneration partnerships training officers network. There can be an inherent, underlying tension: communities of practice can define themselves quite narrowly, and gain strength from having a limited membership base, thus excluding others. There may be a fine line for Regional Networks in promoting inclusive access, while catering for more targeted networking which offers more benefits for participants than open, one-off events.

¹⁵ “A group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis.” (Wenger 2002)

Table 3 below provides examples of innovative activities from three Networks of varying maturity:

Table 3 Regional Networks - Innovative Activities

Examples of Innovative Activities by Networks	
CRNE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 'Making the Most of Your Experience' fund: pilot programme to provide small grants enable sharing of learning and practice ▪ 'network of networks', bringing together regional stakeholder bodies with an interest in neighbourhood renewal, rural regeneration and social exclusion to explore co-ordination (eg, in events planning) and collaboration ▪ evaluation workshops intended to demystify concepts and techniques ▪ BME trainers and consultants directory (with MENTER, the BME regional voluntary sector network)
London Renewal.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NDC/NM Resident Board Members Networking Event (intended to help participants review roles and responsibilities; consider how to improve support for resident board members; share good practice in how to sustain community engagement) ▪ networking and problem solving site visits (eg, to Woolwich NM pathfinder, involving neighbourhood managers and residents, and to Aylesbury NDC, focusing on funding options and communications with local residents) ▪ London NDC conference on outcome targets and local evaluation, seeking to maximise the value of the national NDC evaluation for individual NDC partnerships
Regeneration Exchange (North East)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ masterclasses (eg, on forward strategies) ▪ extended research service (in partnership with University of Northumbria's Sustainable Cities Research Institute) ▪ research into LSP mainstreaming (case studies funded by GONE and carried out with Teesside University, intended for Renewal.net and hard copy publication) ▪ regeneration projects database ▪ Programme Interest Groups (PIGs): quarterly forums to discuss practical issues concerning regeneration programmes ▪ regional NDC Residents Forum ▪ neighbourhood renewal partnership training officers network (looking to pool knowledge and identify needs) ▪ Community Champions: regional agent for DfES small grants programme promoting skills for community regeneration ▪ study visits to/ from Netherlands and within the region

Regeneration Exchange provides a good example of a Network adapting to changed needs and circumstances, with, eg, the tailored masterclasses (eg, on forward strategies) and support for communities of practice (smaller sub-groups of the wider renewal constituency in the region). They have purposefully stressed the importance of being an 'exchange' rather than a network, playing on their role in bringing people together cross-sector, rather than being a 'network' with an exclusive membership. Regeneration Exchange also act flexibly in organising events where users come to them with specific issues, eg, in exploring the use of service level agreements. Its recent agenda has included a range of activities to help partnerships address needs emanating from performance management reviews (eg, on use of evidence) and look to the future (eg, forward strategies for SRB partnerships). They have been playing an active role in helping organisations within the region address funding gaps linked to changes in national and regional policies and the expected run down of EU funding come 2006.

The development plans of individual Networks - generally in the context of wider RCE development - include actions, eg, to:

- increase activity on neighbourhood management and mainstreaming

- explore collaboration with other networks, eg, Healthy Living Centres network
- strengthen involvement with the Regional Funders Forum (which convenes funders of the voluntary and community sector)
- make their own library resources available on-line
- foster sub-networks: eg, officer groups; community development workers
- seek more effective ways of building bridges between sectors

4.2 Aspects of Regional Network added value

While our project has not involved an evaluation of the Regional Networks directly, we have sought to explore with Network Co-ordinators aspects of Network added value, and to develop an evaluation framework which Networks can use in reviewing their own performance. (The framework is provided in Appendix A¹⁶.)

Table 4 below sets out different dimensions of Regional Network added value - drawing in particular from the experience of Regeneration Exchange (as the most developed network). They argued strongly that they have helped create culture of networking, with a unique contribution in providing a “safe space” for sharing and learning and a forum for *regional* debate, independent of particular interests. They stressed the value in having an organisation being at the hub of learning and networking for regeneration and renewal. They have acted as a hub and conduit for dissemination and learning, eg, providing opportunities for people in the region to discuss findings from the national NDC programme evaluation. They have established a position whereby people in different sectors “*know that it is the place to go to*”, though they acknowledge that the strength of this across different constituencies of interest varies (in that some groups - eg, LSP managers - have tended to see them as more to do with community-based renewal than broader aspects of regeneration).

There is some direct evidence to back up elements of this analysis (see section 6 below on Network research findings), and we have also gathered supportive, anecdotal feedback from GOs and practitioners. In various ways, comments have borne out the relevance of ‘social capital’ concepts (Putnam, 2000), in the degrees to which Networks have helped to provide bonds (between people with close interests and shared experiences working on specific problems and challenges), bridges (between people with diverse backgrounds but something common in their goals for regeneration) and links (bringing together people in differing power relationships, eg, front-line workers, residents and policy makers). Specific benefits can flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and co-operation associated with social networks. These may be characterised by a shift from an ‘I’ mentality into a ‘we’ mentality - central to building more of a common culture around regeneration efforts.

¹⁶ This was developed based on a Balanced Scorecard Model (Kaplan and Norton, 1996, with adaptation by Audit Scotland for application to Community Safety Partnerships and to Local Economic Forums). The model has four components: (1) Impact (What impact have we had? What difference are we likely to make?); (2) External Processes (How well are we engaging our target audiences and stakeholders?); (3) Resources (What resources have we used? How well have we used them?); and (4) Network Management (How can we improve our effectiveness as a network?)

Table 4 Regional Network Added Value

Aspects of Regional Network Added Value
<p>Focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>regional</i> focus on community-based regeneration/ neighbourhood renewal ▪ enabling 'communities of interest' around region-specific issues, with relative ease of coming together, beyond the 'local' (where sharing may be more difficult) <p>Forum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ providing space for regional debate (in a context where regional bodies/ infrastructure around community regeneration is not strong) ▪ independence - <i>not</i> the GO, not the RDA, etc ▪ "<i>the place to go</i>" (right people, right topics - where you can expect to find contacts, ideas, solutions, common interests - argued as a key to the definition of what constitutes Regional Network 'quality') ▪ an opportunity to "<i>join up the sectors</i>" ▪ the ability to mobilise a wide membership, to get a rapid response on key developments/ to time-limited tasks (eg, consultations on new funding arrangements) ▪ the ability to engage at local, regional and national levels <p>Learning Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ promotion of "<i>a safe space</i>" with a supportive climate for networking and mutual learning ▪ facilitating the process of networking ▪ development of trust (required for effective learning and sharing – from what has not worked as well as what has) <p>Networking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ enabling people and organisations to make connections and learn from each other (also faster and more appropriate responses to common issues and challenges) ▪ 'networking the networks' (linking subject- or programme-specific groupings) <p>Influence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ vehicle to influence policy making (eg, the Programme Interest Group on Single Pot funding in the North East claims some success in influencing the RDA on regional targetry and on funding of voluntary and community organisations) <p>Delivery/ Facilitation of Learning Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ catalyst: making things happen that would not otherwise happen ▪ ability to anticipate needs ("<i>ahead of HE and the private sector</i>" - core funding enables "<i>breathing space for development</i>") ▪ ability to identify policy/ practice issues which need a response ▪ "<i>nursery bed</i>" (able to try out ideas; work on new topics before there is a market for them) ▪ intelligence from the breadth of the network ▪ access to knowledge in other regions as part of the network of regional networks/ GOs <p>Efficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ eliminating duplication <p>Continuity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ being a constant in the region, "<i>plugging away to promote networking</i>"

We reflect, however, that much of the actual or proposed added value is not unique to Regional Networks: these benefits could relate to other organisations which provide networking functions at regional level. Thus these could include RCEs where RCEs serve this purpose directly. Overall, the evidence leads to the conclusion that it is an important role for RCEs to ensure that the networking functions of Regional Networks are undertaken in each region though *who* provides these this may vary by region. The experience of Regeneration Exchange points to the importance of developing settled delivery arrangements so that networks (and trust amongst participants) have time to grow.

4.3 Reaching neighbourhood renewal audiences

The Regional Networks may also serve as a channel for consultations and for promoting the interests of the regeneration sector in their region. A few have also stressed their role in bringing coherence to the work of regional partners with an interest in renewal and social exclusion. Indeed, EEDA has seen this as an important reason for supporting the CRNE.

In comparison with some other GO SKAP-supported actions, the established Regional Networks appear to have been relatively successful in reaching wider 'communities' of local regeneration partnerships, voluntary and community organisations, front line workers and residents (albeit in relatively small numbers). Regeneration Exchange has been particularly successful in this, establishing its presence in the North East (engaging Neighbourhood Management pathfinders, NDC, SRB, LSPs, voluntary sector intermediaries, etc) and has ensured that each category is "*locked into the network*" by representation on its steering group.

5 Lessons from Regional Network Experience

Our interviews with Regional Network managers allowed us to explore lessons of their experience to date, relevant to development of the newer Networks and more widely to Skills and Knowledge actions and RCE development in the regions. These include:

network development

- acknowledge the time it takes to develop a 'quality' network, characterised by high levels of use / engagement, participant satisfaction and learning. Successful networks depend on the building of relationships and trust. People need to feel comfortable that they can share their concerns openly (or alternatively that their enquiries will be treated confidentially if on a one-to-one basis)
- recognise the importance of a strong steering group, with members who are respected within their communities of interest in the region. The Networks can achieve more where they have active champions (not necessarily steering group members), who are prepared to take a lead in promoting the Network and specific Network activities.
- ensure that Network staff (and steering group members) are proactive and very good at *inter-personal* networking. This is a requirement that never ceases; there is constant need to refresh the 'membership': people move on or change roles and new people arrive. Managing the contacts database is big job in itself: eg, Regeneration Exchange has records of over 1,000 people.
- cultivate 'gatekeepers' in partnerships¹⁷:

"Partnership gatekeepers can make a difference. More open gates really do help. Some are very protective and shelter those 'inside' to an extent that can slow down development."

REGIONAL NETWORK CO-ORDINATOR

- appreciate the competing demands on people's time and the range of alternative learning opportunities they may choose. Identify what is most likely to appeal.

providing services

- design learning events for participation:

"Participants don't want to be talked at"

REGIONAL NETWORK CO-ORDINATOR

"Our events have been highly successful when input comes from those involved in partnerships and is focused on their experiences of what does and doesn't work."

REGIONAL NETWORK CO-ORDINATOR

¹⁷ The notion of 'gatekeeper' tends to emphasise controls and barriers. There are useful, more positive concepts in 'The Tipping Point' by Malcolm Gladwell (2000) which identified the importance of cultivating three categories of people if you want to bring about significant social changes through networks: 'Connectors': people who make friends and acquaintances very easily, and have casual connections with many others; 'Mavens': people who accumulate knowledge acting as information brokers, sharing and trading what they know; and 'Salesmen', people who have the skills to persuade when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing

- focus on specific (learning) outcomes. Regeneration Exchange has shifted more towards organising smaller, more targeted events, ‘masterclasses’ or ‘what works’ workshops

“You can try to run events on some topics too early. People need to have to have time to do something before they can talk about it...”

REGIONAL NETWORK CO-ORDINATOR

- provide opportunities for practical problem solving - topics which relate directly to current issues people face in their jobs and offer the prospect of solutions. There is much evidence in adult learning of participant preferences for learning from peers and from case studies, and opportunities which fit prominent work needs can be very appealing. Drawing on their experience, Shared Intelligence (who run London Renewal.net) are promoting the concept of ‘Action Teams’, short-life problem solving groups, as part of their proposals with BURA for the future programme of the National Neighbourhood Management Network
- channel interest in networking:

“Some would ‘network’ indefinitely: give them a couple of hours and they will take half a day; give them half a day and they’ll use a full day. So it’s better to structure networking around themes and objectives, like ‘understanding how the Learning and Skills Council works’ and bringing people in from LSC to explain and discuss this.”

REGIONAL NETWORK CO-ORDINATOR

- capture the learning: ask what people have gained. Produce ‘outcomes papers’ to ensure that key points are circulated more widely
- maximise the linkages with components of the Skills and Knowledge Programme (eg, promotion of NRA services; use of Renewal.net case studies in events)
- make Network resources go further by teaming up with other bodies. All Regeneration Exchange events now have a partner/ sponsor
- understand what’s involved in providing a quality service - and provide it. Network experience and research (including user interviews for Regeneration Exchange) found that success factors were:
 - ◆ maintain close contact with target audience
 - ◆ be user-centred (recognising particular triggers and pressures)
 - ◆ target information at relevant levels; be consistent in service delivery, to standards expected
 - ◆ keep promises and deadlines; and ensure that all information provided is timely and accurate.

Quality standards for events include sufficient advance notice (typically around 8 weeks); publicity with clear objectives, target audience, intended benefits and concise description of content; and skilled chairs and facilitators, and presenters who can communicate well and inspire.

6 Findings from Research on Regional Network Services

6.1 Market and user research in North East and North West

For the purposes of the Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation, we have been able to draw on market and user research and evaluation projects undertaken by Regeneration Exchange and Regeneration North West in March and November 2003 (ARK 19 and Shauna Morton Associates) respectively, and to draw out points from our area fieldwork. Both the Network research projects attracted good response rates on their postal surveys (27% and 32%), and involved face-to-face interviews and other forms of consultation as well. We highlight some key similarities and differences below, while noting that that the two surveys were designed for overlapping though not identical purposes.

- satisfaction with Network events were reasonably high: 81% were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' in the North West; 82% 'very good' or 'good' in the North East
- lower levels of satisfaction were recorded for information services, but there were quite levels of 'don't know' responses, suggesting lower levels of familiarity with the services on offer
- the North East survey found high levels of awareness of Regeneration Exchange, especially its newsletter (90%) and events (82%), though lower for 'support to networks' (62%), information and advice (60%), and training (50%) (the last not a core Regeneration Exchange function)

Overall, the analyses tend to indicate high levels of support from a core of users, and both surveys found a good spread of network users across categories of neighbourhood renewal actor, and level within organisations¹⁸.

In looking at service priorities, the North West survey found a contrast between city-based users and more rural ones: the former expressed more concern for the quality of IT access and information content; the more rural, on face-to-face contact.

The North East survey also looked at barriers to take-up of services. This confirmed a typical set which still present challenges - likely to be all the greater for newer networks. It found evidence of:

- lack of awareness of Regeneration Exchange services within delivery organisations
- lack of awareness of potential benefits
- lack of time to take advantage of the services
- people feeling that they had enough information to cope with already
- doubts amongst potential users in the quality of information and provision
- users not passing information on to others
- services not being perceived as relevant to different types of user

¹⁸ However, the subsequent research by Community Concepts for RENEW found "a low level of awareness" of the North West Regeneration Network amongst LSPs and CENs.

In both surveys there was a common theme where respondents felt that the networks could have achieved more with more resources.

Looking to future needs and priorities the surveys found common interests in *seminars and conferences* on learning from practice (from 'when things don't go right' as well as when they do) and on policy development/ putting it into practice; and *training* on monitoring and evaluation. The North East research also stressed themes of Sustainability and LSPs, while the NW stressed 'Local issues for local people'. The North East survey also found evidence of demand for training and related events in funding/ bid preparation (22%); project development/ management (24%); policy development; evidence-based strategies (27%); partnership development (28%). (Scores were 28% for evaluation strategy and 22% for monitoring systems.)

The North West survey tried to ascertain the extent to which the Network had brought benefits and added value. It found evidence that many respondents *considered* that it that it had - though a substantial proportion felt unable to comment (reflecting in part the youth of the network and its extension more recently to a wider neighbourhood renewal community.)

- 45% respondents were satisfied/ very satisfied that it had 'increased networking', and 43% were not sure
- 44% that it had 'linked projects and people', with 44% not sure
- 50% were confident that the network had added value; 34% were not sure; and 16% were dissatisfied
- 59% would expect closure of the network to impact on their project/ partnership

It also found that 90% respondents were 'satisfied about the need for a Regional Network' (with 25% 'very satisfied').

More generally, Regeneration Exchange points to other sources of evidence (feedback from users and partners) which illustrate how they have helped to create a culture of networking. They feel that this is working well on a *regional* basis, observing that there can be *local barriers* to effective networking where people may be less open to sharing, seeing themselves as competing with each other for resources.

6.2 Assessing Regional Network impact

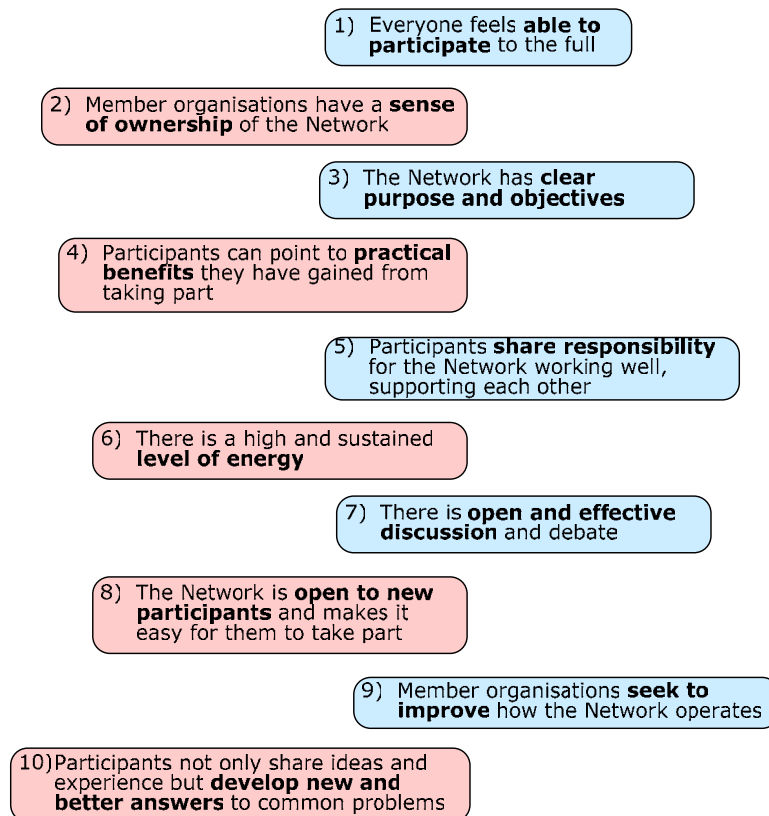
Other than these two research projects, the Regional Networks have not undertaken any evaluations - though they have expressed a strong interest in how the Skills and Knowledge Programme evaluation can support and inform their future approach. There are steps that Networks can take to facilitate future evaluation and strengthen the likelihood that their activities will lead to results on the ground. For example, current monitoring practices tend to relate to participant satisfaction (eg, for events, with speakers, venues, etc) and is not oriented to action planning. Encouraging participants to reflect on what they have learnt, what they intend to do as a result, and what will help them implement this, is a small and helpful discipline. There has been no formal follow-up of participants/ users to establish the benefits they have gained from taking advantage of Network services, changes they have made and results achieved, in line with the model we have pursued in the Skills and Knowledge Programme evaluation. Regeneration Exchange have, however, instigated one innovation, in producing a video tracking a

group of people in receipt of Community Champions funding and have plans for a longitudinal case study-based evaluation relating to a broader range of Network services.

Evidence from a programme-specific network for NDCs

There is one evaluation of a network operating at regional level funded through the Skills and Knowledge Programme via the Government Office, that of the North West NDC Network¹⁹. This involved interviews in the first half of 2004 with active network participants amongst NDC residents and officers (primarily those working on community development) and GO staff. It was timed to coincide with the NDCs taking over responsibility from GONW for funding the Network. Amongst a number of objectives, the evaluation sought to establish the 'health' of the Network (see Figure 1 below) and the extent and nature of learning gained and transferred by participants.

Figure 1 What makes a healthy network?



EDuce for NW NDC Network (2004)

¹⁹ D.Johnstone (2004) Evaluation of North West NDC Network (GONW/ NW NDC Network, unpublished)

North West NDC Network Evaluation Findings

The evaluation identified Network **strengths** as:

- the extent to which it has fostered relationships amongst participants and sharing of experience
- its role as a vehicle for engaging residents and officers across the NDCs, and with the Government Office, promoting greater learning and mutual understanding than would otherwise have been the case. (This compares favourably with other GO-funded networks in other regions, with the closest equivalent being the residents network run by Regeneration Exchange focusing exclusively on residents, and not - so far - providing a bridge with NDC staff and the GO.)
- providing a platform for the development of thematic activities, addressing evolving needs within NDCs for greater and more in-depth attention to delivery issues. It has also provided scope for a range of collaborative activities, including attracting resources from DCMS and the Football Association for the North West Street Games in 2003.

Network **weaknesses** were:

- limited 'new' knowledge created and little direct evidence of transfer of ideas and learning from Network events
- a lack of strategic direction (vision, mission, objectives, scope to add value) and insufficient support and guidance from the Network Steering Group for the Network Co-ordinator
- earlier events which helped to develop a 'talking shop' image in the eyes of other staff and residents in some NDCs

Some criticisms reflect personal preferences for network events - in contrasting ways which demonstrate the *"impossibility of pleasing everyone all of the time"*.

Keys to improving how the Network functions and to gaining more value from its activities were identified as:

- the adoption of a more strategic role by the Network Steering Group
- a clearer and consistent focus on maximising the difference that the Network can make
- strengthening line management and support for the Co-ordinator, basing the post with the RCE
- introducing a longer planning cycle for Network events
- designing events to increase their potential for learning new things and better ways of doing things, and the prospects of participants putting these into practice
- identifying a set of Network projects for the Co-ordinator to undertake which meet common priorities
- continuing the development of thematic forums, provided they continue to meet participant needs
- evaluating Network activities, with some simple measures of Network performance, which will give confidence that the Network continues to be worth the resources devoted to it

Network participants identified key themes for future Network activities as mainstreaming, community engagement, and NDC organisational sustainability, along with a continuing focus on neighbourhood delivery themes. They recognised that these themes could effectively be interwoven in events on specific topics: eg, a fear of crime event could especially address involving the community.

7 Regional Network Contribution to the Skills and Knowledge Programme

7.1 Value to GOs and regional partners

Feedback from GOs as part of the Skills and Knowledge Programme evaluation has pointed to the value for the GOs themselves and for other regional partners in having a dedicated resource promoting skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal that is not the GO or other government agency. They have seen value in having an independent body that is not the creature of a particular sector or interest group, and a resource with the expertise to identify needs, contributors, and organise events. The ability of Regional Networks to provide a bridge between sectors may be viewed as important, as is flexibility to respond to needs as they emerge (where GOs may not have the resource to do so directly). GOs may rely on Regional Networks as a vehicle for helping people keep in touch, for communications and consultations. Again, however, these are roles which RCEs can play - whether or not there is a 'Regional Network' as such within their region.

In the North West, the GO had not found its relationship with the North West Regeneration Network a fruitful one, taking the view that this pre-existing Network had not responded sufficiently well to the GO's neighbourhood renewal agenda. In contrast, GO staff were very supportive to the North West *NDC* Network, with which the GO had been closely involved since its inception. The evaluation of the NDC Network found that GO staff saw value in this network in:

- providing a ready point of contact and informal channel of communication with NDC residents and officers
- highlighting the potential of NDCs to achieve more through collaboration (learning and projects)
- offering a creative sounding board (eg, use of the Housing Network to explore how to make Housing Market Renewal work)
- gaining intelligence about what is happening on the ground: successes, pitfalls, etc
- overcoming the isolation that residents and officers in NDCs can feel
- breaking down 'civil servant' stereotypes, and improving how everyone relates to each other

This NDC Network was also viewed as useful in helping to bring together particular groups within NDCs, eg, finance or human resources managers, to address common interests (eg, action in bringing together finance officers to discuss the implementation of System K monitoring software and claims procedures). There were views that GONW could make more of its relationship with the Network (eg, in informal consultations, providing updates on policy developments, and ensuring that new staff are introduced and inducted effectively).

7.2 Contribution to the Skills and Knowledge Programme

The Regional Networks have made contributions which have reinforced the delivery of other Skills and Knowledge tools - though this has not always been straightforward (eg, the London Renewal.net website was developed independently of the national Renewal.net site):

- Renewal.net:
 - ◆ CRNE web pages as the regional Renewal.net pages
 - ◆ very active promotion by Regeneration Exchange, with extensive use of Renewal.net case studies in planning events and managing information services
- Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers in some regions have been invited to Network events, and could be used as event facilitators (as used, eg, by GONW in their LSP networking event on floor target action planning in March 2004). Networks might also host networking events for NRAs, GO staff and partnerships. (This role is being fulfilled in the case of the East Midlands by the RCE.) Networks have also signposted partnerships to their GO for possible NRA assignments, and have themselves offered to play a role in helping to set up such projects, including, potentially having access to the NRU's NRA database²⁰
- Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills Programme: Networks have publicised the programme through their events, newsletters and on-line events calendars

²⁰ This was proposed originally in the North East, before the NRU decided to administer NRA assignments centrally. NRAs have also been used on specific Regional Network assignments (eg, in framing consultancy briefs).

8 Regional Networks: conclusions and recommendations

8.1 Role of Regional Networks as part of the range of Skills and Knowledge support

It has not been the task of our evaluation to assess directly the impact of the Regional Networks, given the recent origin of most and the fact that a large part of their funding has come from other sources (notably RDAs) than the NRU. We observe the progress that has been made in the last two years in developing these Networks, with five in place and relevant action in other regions, alongside the development of RCEs.

There is **evidence of value and user satisfaction** in the services of the established Networks, and interest in networking opportunities in other regions. We can conclude that, from an NRU perspective, the Networks have provided a vehicle for learning about how best to promote regional networking, and helped to establish expectations about how RCEs can and should assist the delivery of skills and knowledge for Neighbourhood Renewal. There is important learning for RCEs themselves, not least in how the Regional Networks can help RCEs avoid reinventing the wheel. The case of Regeneration Exchange in particular demonstrates the potential value of having a regional body dedicated to networking and learning for neighbourhood renewal - though this role can be played by RCEs, provided they ensure that cross-sector, cross-programme networking is facilitated and there are effective channels for feedback, advice and consultation on regional and national policy issues. How the individual Regional Networks develop in future is in part dependent on RCE plans, and how the Networks themselves are able to influence these. There will be other opportunities, eg, in promoting networking in the voluntary and community sector (linked to Home Office funding for the voluntary and community sector infrastructure) and in other areas of RDA policy where they may develop a role.

The **concept of an overarching 'Regional Network' has not proved sufficiently persuasive in all regions**, which undermined the original concept of a *national* network bringing together one in each region. This meant that the NRU could not look to Regional Networks as a group covering the country to fulfil specific tasks in delivering the Skills and Knowledge programme agenda. In principle, the NRU might now look to RCEs in this way, though we note that, on the basis of current plans, not all intend to give high priority to the neighbourhood renewal agenda, and not all will have the capacity in-house to manage delivery of Skills and Knowledge Programme interventions.

8.2 Reaching different groups of participant

Overall **the Networks have had more to do with community-based regeneration rather than the full breadth of regeneration**, reflecting roots in responding to the needs of SRB partnerships. They have had limited connections with built environment aspects of regeneration - a bridge that RCEs are intended to strengthen. Network Co-ordinators have noted how the two dimensions can seem like different worlds,

characterised by distinct cultures and attitudes, eg, towards community engagement²¹. The Egan Review, however, argued for a more holistic approach to be driven by a national centre (the Academy for Sustainable Communities) and RCEs, and there are policy developments which have been encouraging a coming together. These include the role given to LSPs in establishing Local Development Frameworks and the new onus on developers to consult when developing planning proposals.

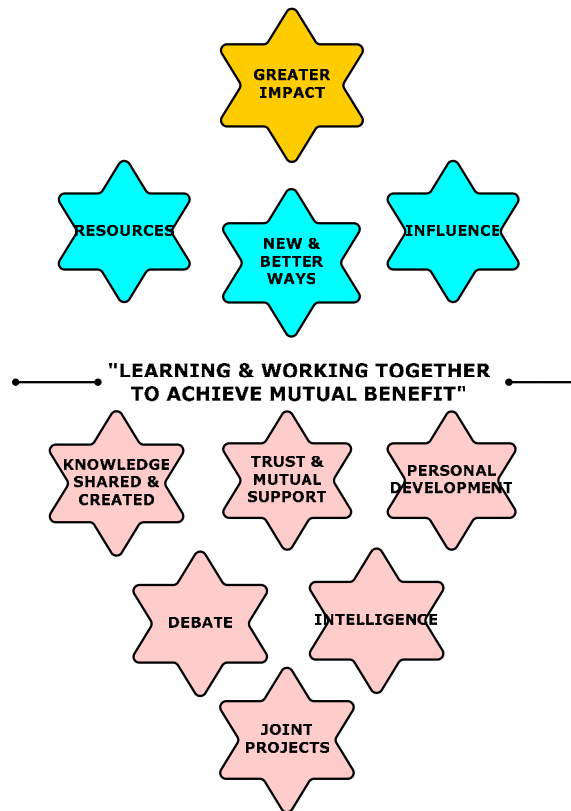
To date, the Regional Networks have also been more concerned with networking practitioners (mainly in operational roles, eg, in neighbourhood renewal/ SRB partnerships) than with engaging more senior managers and staff from mainstream services/ agencies. In most regions, networking of LSPs has been organised separately, promoted directly by GOs (organised by GOs or by consultants). Councillors have been little involved. In some cases there have been efforts to involve residents - with most progress being made in the North East (a resident-only NDC network supported by Regeneration Exchange) and the dedicated North West NDC Network. London Renewal.net has been successful in engaging officers, and had to devote extra attention to how to involve residents. It will be an **important role for RCEs** in future (working with Regional Networks in the relevant regions) **to ensure that the full breadth of cross-sector networking occurs**, involving the full range of potential participants.

8.3 Evaluating Network Benefits and Impact

Networks should give greater priority to evaluating their own activities, seeking evidence of impact as well as user satisfaction. Appendix A provides an evaluation framework, developed with the Regional Networks, while Figure 2 sets out types of potential benefits from Regional Networks.

²¹ URBED (2004) in their report for GOYH on regional networks raise a related concern: “*The RCE relates to a different world – a ‘renaissance’ world, whereas social inclusion relates to supporting individuals, basic skills, employment, racism, civic issues, etc – made up of lots of agencies, voluntary sector and individuals. The RCE doesn’t bring that focus, and although people insist that the two areas are closely related, it is difficult to think that they are going to fulfil the same function. It would be quite a leap for the RCE to be connecting people to opportunities as opposed to ‘area renewal’, focussing on the built environment. But two separate networks would be unproductive as often they will involve the same people*”.

Figure 2 **Types of Network Benefit**



Above the line relates to where Networks should be adding value, in helping to bring about results that would not otherwise happen, bringing more resources and influence to bear through collective effort, transferring the shared knowledge in adopting new and better ways of doing things, and making a greater impact. This must be a strong focus for future evaluation of Networks (and indeed, RCEs). There is limited current evidence relating to these types of outcome.

Below the line are benefits which Networks can facilitate: trust and mutual support, debate, sharing of knowledge and intelligence, personal learning and development - and also joint projects, where participants not only seek to share but to take collaborative action (as in the case of the North West Street Games). These may be expected to enable the added value above the line. The research on Networks to date provides evidence of these process benefits, especially around trust and sharing.

8.4 Knowledge sharing or knowledge creation?

The experience of the Regional Networks very much stresses their (potential) role in providing a means for fostering trust and mutual support - though this tends to be primarily in the case of 'communities of practice' - particular groups of people with common interests in networking and learning together (eg, regeneration programme managers). Some of the main reported benefits relate to coming together with peers (and overcoming the work isolation some feel), though it is open to question how much the sharing has led to greater application of this knowledge to common problems and challenges (what people may or may not do after they have been to Network events).

This is key to the extent to which the Networks make a significant contribution to the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. We note with interest that Creech and Willard (2001) in their review of knowledge networks in international development stress the notion of 'network advantage': "*joint value creation by all members within the network (moving beyond the sharing of information to the aggregation and creation of new knowledge)*". Their work raises a set of **questions about how best to achieve this synergy in creating 'new knowledge'**, including different models for capturing, sharing and developing knowledge and transferring this to practice. More significant gains can be identified where members of communities of practice have pursued joint working which goes beyond the knowledge sharing into collaborative projects, influencing policy or funding arrangements, etc - and there are cases where Regional Networks have helped this happen.

8.5 Network futures

The ODPM priority now lies with RCE development and the Academy for Sustainable Communities rather than Regional Networks per se, though there is a continuing interest within the NRU in the role of these Networks, as part of RCEs (eg, in the South West) or providing RCE services (eg, in the North East).

There is a range of issues for Regional Networks (and their partners) to resolve, not least concerning roles, funding and branding in the context of RCE development. Solutions have to be found for successful Networks, such that core activities attract longer term security of funding, avoiding having to depend entirely on individual project funding. This is not to say that Networks should not be entrepreneurial in their development, but that there is a **case for some strategic (ie, core rather than project) funding** to support their role as part of the regional infrastructure for learning, skills and capacity building.

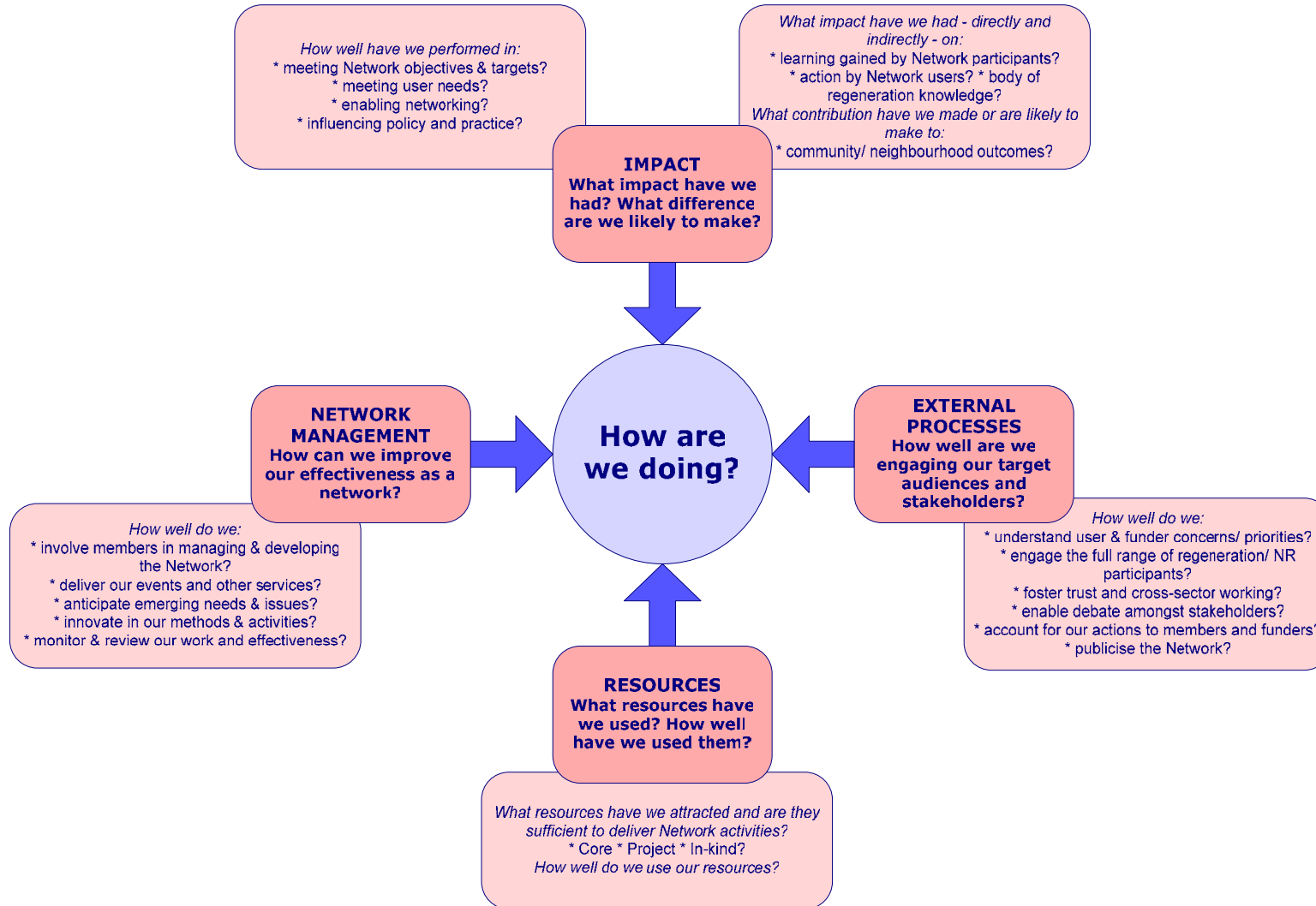
There is also a case for government funding explicitly to provide for *inclusive* participation, which has been a feature of Regional Network activities to date. This has been enabled by running events at no charge to participants. Given resource constraints in government funding, **future business models for Networks may need to combine charges for events and other services with access to bursaries or other cross-subsidy to keep costs low for voluntary and community sector participants.**

From a policy perspective, there is also a need to consider adequacy of resources (an issue raised in the research for the North East and North West Networks). Creative thinking is likely to be necessary in each region, in order to make best use of resources available. RCE development is encouraging this to varying degrees (eg, with some plans to integrate regional observatories²² or bring them closer to the RCE orbit). How resources are deployed as part of the NRU's SELD²³ (Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery) project are also relevant, as a means to building critical mass around regional capacity building and knowledge management activities. More broadly, there is a **need for regional leadership bodies (GOs, RDAs and Regional Assemblies) to consider how best to make use of regional resources on capacity building and evidence** in building a coherent regional infrastructure in support of improved delivery.

²² Regional Observatories have been established in each region, supported by the RDA. Their role is to enable access to key regional data and intelligence across a range of economic, social, and environmental issues (www.regionalobservatories.org.uk)

²³ SELD has been developed by the NRU R&D and Skills and Knowledge teams to provide specialist advice and services to promote the use of evidence in neighbourhood renewal.

Appendix A Evaluation Framework for use by Regional Networks



THEME	POSSIBLE INDICATORS	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE SOURCES
1 IMPACT		
1.1 How well have we performed?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ in relation to specific Network objectives, priorities and targets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ as set out in Network business plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network business plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ meeting user needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ user satisfaction (services - events, information services, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records ▪ user survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ enabling networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ event attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ self-report/ feedback from participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ influencing policy & practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ changes/ improvements made by GO, RDA, etc as a consequence of issues raised by Network users ▪ Network representation on regional bodies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ feedback from GO, RDA, users, etc
1.2 What impact have we had - directly and indirectly - on:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ learning gained by Network users? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 'distance travelled' - knowledge, confidence ▪ contacts ▪ learning passed on to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ self-report/ feedback from participants ▪ user survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ action by Network users? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ extent of contacts, sharing, etc outside Network events ▪ examples of learning applied to, eg: improved use of evidence; innovation in strategies, projects & processes; joined up working; mainstreaming; inclusive working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ self-report/ feedback from participants ▪ user survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ body of knowledge in regeneration practice? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ action learning workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ event outcome reports ▪ Renewal.net contributions
1.3 What contribution are we likely to make to neighbourhood renewal/ community outcomes?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ how are Network activities helping to bring about change and improvement? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ number & type of events, issues tackled - relevance to critical topics and requirements in achieving neighbourhood renewal/community outcomes ▪ actions by participants intended to achieve neighbourhood renewal/ community outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records ▪ feedback from participants
2 EXTERNAL PROCESSES		
2.1 How well do we:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ understand user and funder concerns/ priorities? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ formal and informal consultation exercises ▪ market research/ user surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ formal and informal consultation exercises
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ engage the full range of regeneration/NR participants? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ participants/ users by sector, group and location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ foster trust and cross-sector working? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ spread of participation across sectors/ interest groups ▪ perceived common purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records ▪ feedback from participants

THEME	POSSIBLE INDICATORS	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE SOURCES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ enable debate amongst stakeholders? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ user satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records ▪ feedback from participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ account for our actions to users and funders? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ formal reporting and consultation activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ annual & project reports, etc
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ publicise the Network? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ implementation of Network marketing/ communications plan (paper-based; web-based; face to face promotion) ▪ awareness of Network amongst target audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records ▪ coverage of Network activities by other organisations ▪ Network mailing lists
3 NETWORK MANAGEMENT		
3.1 How well do we:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ involve members in managing & developing the Network? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ time of volunteers to Network management & development ▪ numbers of practitioners active in Network management, development and delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ deliver our events and other services? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ quality standards (ensuring services are delivered in the right format, the right places, the right mediums, at the right time - in ways which maximise take-up, participation and learning) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ anticipate emerging needs & issues? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ user satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network self-assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ innovate in our methods & activities? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ user satisfaction 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ monitor & review our work and effectiveness? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ monitoring and evaluation undertaken 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records
4 RESOURCES		
4.1 How well do we attract and use resources?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What resources have we attracted and are they sufficient to deliver Network activities? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ core & project funding ▪ in-kind support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network business plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How well do we use our resources? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ resources consumed in specific activities (eg, seminar organisation) ▪ quality costs (costs of rework, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Network records ▪ examples of resources shifted to higher value activities